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BEGINNING AND CEASING TO EXIST

I

Frege and Russell held the view that existence is a second-level predicate. We can ask whether there are tame tigers or pink elephants, for the logical form of such sentences is 'Is such-and-such a concept instantiated?' However, it is nonsensical, in Russell's view, to ask of particulars whether or not *they* exist. Russell believed that the only possible answer to the question 'Which things exist?' was 'Everything!' Existence, in his view, would be at best a trivial property.

Negative existential propositions, on the Russellian view, cannot be construed as ascribing non-existence to a logical subject. The Russellian analysis of an existential proposition such as '*A* exists' is to represent the grammatical predicate 'exists' by the existential quantifier, while the ostensible subject of the proposition *A* is treated as a first-level predicate. This well-known analysis avoids the paradox of reference which follows from treating negative existential propositions like '*A* does not exist' as though they were really about something which the grammatical subject *A* actually stands for. This would involve the absurdity of supposing that *A* stood for something and then claiming that there is no such thing.

The negative existential form, then, leads to the refusal to allow that 'exists' is a genuine logical predicate because it would rule out the possibility of a logical subject. However, Geach has argued that there is a case in which affirmations of existence are non-trivial; namely, when the existence claim is temporal, as when we say something has begun or ceased to exist.[1] Such cases do seem to introduce a sense of existence in which it is treated as a property of an individual, since the subject of a temporal existence proposition *is* a proper logical subject. If there were no such predicative sense of 'exists' then as Wittgenstein pointed out,[2] we would be unable to say 'Mr NN is dead', when this proposition is understood as one about an individual denoted by the name 'NN'. Although death may strike the bearer of a name we are not deprived of a subject of predication, for the reference does not die.

Negative temporal existential propositions raise no paradoxes of reference because as Aristotle pointed out,[3] and Geach has reminded us,[4] names carry no time reference. The name of an individual can be used to name that individual even after it has ceased to exist. The situation with regard to the future denizens of the world is, however, different, and it has been plausibly maintained that future 'individuals' cannot legitimately be regarded as individuals at all. There is, *prima facie*, an important asymmetry between the past and future with respect to the existence of individuals, which is reflected in the fact that we are quite prepared to accept the names of individuals who no longer exist as substitution instances of quantified propositions, but hesitate to accept the 'name' of a not-yet-existent individual as a legitimate substitution. Thus — ignoring tenses — we might accept 'Socrates' as providing a legitimate substitution instance for 'Some philosopher is bald', but feel at a loss to allow that the name of a not-yet-existent philosopher might be a legitimate substitution. The difficulty is of course that of making any sense at all of naming the not-yet-existent.

There are some well-known problems about existence which I mention in passing in order to get them out of the way. These concern the existence of fictitious and abstract objects. Philosophers have often introduced a substandard sort of existence, sometimes called 'being', which is accorded to such objects; and which is to be distinguished from the meatier sense of existence of the nonfictituous nonabstract sort. Temporal existence, which principally concerns items which exist at some times but not at all times, does not concern fictitious or abstract objects.

In fact the nontemporality of a nonabstract object is both necessary and sufficient for its being fictional. To say that Pegasus does not exist entails that there is no time at which he exists. This is just to claim that Pegasus is not the name of an object in the real world. This manner of speaking has led some to suppose that Pegasus is somewhere else, perhaps in some nonactual but possible world. But this is wrong: 'Pegasus' does not successfully refer to a possible object; it pretends to refer to a real object. Fictional items, then, are nontemporal. The nontemporality of nonabstract items is also a necessary condition for being fictional; otherwise there would be some time at which the item would exist and so could be properly named.

Abstract objects are also nontemporal. The sense in which an abstract item can be said to exist is timeless because abstract items are neither subject to change nor the sorts of thing which can come to be or perish. This is

reflected by our talking about them in a language which pays no attention to tenses. Although the use of tenses in analytic propositions is not nonsensical, as is often supposed, it is certainly one which is idle.

Temporal items, in paradigm cases at least, can cease to exist, and such items are of the nonfictitious nonabstract sort. Neither fictitious nor abstract items can be said to begin or cease to exist; to have ceased to exist entails having existed, and fictitious items never did. (In some cases we may have been mistaken, but that's *another* problem.) Similarly, in the case of abstract objects the notions of beginning and ceasing do not apply. Ceasing to exist, then, is apparently a sufficient condition for being a nonfictitious nonabstract object. It may not, however, be necessary; it might be that some concrete particulars, perhaps the universe or indestructible atoms, are sempiternal. From this point I will ignore abstract and fictional items and concentrate on problems of existence which are associated with enduring material particulars. Material particulars, which I shall take to include persons, are the obvious examples of things which are said to begin and cease to exist.

Although it seems clear that we talk of such individuals beginning and ceasing to exist, this is not the sense of 'exists' that is associated with the existential quantifier. In the Russellian scheme, because the variables of the quantifiers are taken to range over everything, beginning and ceasing make no sense. Where 'existence' includes everything that there is, there is obviously no possibility of further additions. The universal domain on the Russellian view is complete and static. This point is worth looking at a little more closely.

How would we express the fact that something has ceased to exist in Russell's scheme? For example, how would we say that someone ceased to exist between t_1 and t_2? Take $\emptyset x$ to be 'x is a man'. The first formula which suggests itself is:

(1) $(\exists x)(\emptyset x \text{ at } t_1 \ \& \sim \emptyset x \text{ at } t_2)$.

But this does not say someone has ceased to exist: it says someone (or something) has ceased to be a man. And in general, where $\emptyset$ stands for an essential predicate, the formula tells us that some individual has undergone a type-change. And (1) is even worse for the case of starting to exist: there it tells us that something *has become* a man. This I will come back to. It seems that instead of (1) we require something like:

(2) $(\exists x)(x \text{ exists at } t_1 \ \& x \text{ does not exist at } t_2)$.

But how are we to understand 'exists at t'? Existence at a time, or indeed *any* dated property, is not something which can be acquired or lost; it simply applies timelessly or it does not. But apart from this, the formula clearly presupposes the intelligibility of forms like $(\exists x)(x$ does not exist at $t)$. This clearly involves a sense of 'exists' which is predicative, in addition to the sense expressed by the quantifier. So if it is claimed that the existential quantifier sense exhausts the concept of existence, then there is no room in the account for beginning and ceasing to exist.

This clearly substantiates Geach's claim that we must introduce an additional predicative sense of 'exists' if we are to talk of individuals beginning and ceasing to exist. On Geach's account we are to treat 'exists' as predicative if auxiliaries like 'begin', 'cease', and 'continue' are associated with it. This is curious: Geach proposes that we treat 'exists' as ambiguous because of the presence of these auxiliaries. But the auxiliaries, rather than qualifying 'exists', have produced a change in logical type; for as Dummett has pointed out such is the difference between a quantifier and a first-level predicate.[5] Dummett thinks that this alone shows that Geach's 'two senses' account is wrong. If it were true that 'exists' is equivocal, as Geach claims, the way in which the two senses are connected would be utterly mysterious. What could be the connection between senses which differ in logical type?

Dummett's argument is odd as it stands. It cannot be that there is any *general* difficulty about there being a connection between quantifiers and predicates; that happens all the time. What is wrong is not just there being a difference in logical type; but that this conflicts with another connection, viz. the assumption that the predicative sense of 'exists' is a restriction on the totality of things which exist without temporal qualification. That is, we cannot hold that (a) the existential quantifier is tenseless, (b) there is a predicative temporal sense of existence, and (c) the present tensed form of (b) specifies a subclass of what *exists* (tenseless). Temporal existence cannot be construed as a property which distinguishes some individuals from a wider totality of individuals timelessly conceived as the totality of existents *tout court*.

Temporal existence is apparently a property which individuals acquire and later lose. But there are serious difficulties in providing a satisfactory account of the acquisition and loss of this property. Though we frequently talk of things beginning and ceasing to exist, it is not easy to construe this on the model of gaining and losing a property. I will discuss the problems of

providing a satisfactory account of beginning and ceasing to exist respectively in Parts II and III below.

II

Beginning to exist cannot be the acquisition of a property if there is no such property as temporal existence, or if it is a property which cannot be acquired. Dummett argues that *because* it makes no sense to speak of it being acquired it makes no sense to speak of temporal existence as a property. This is unsatisfactory: if temporal existence were not a property for *this* reason, it would follow that no essential property is a property, for essential properties are coextensive with, and so can be no more gained or lost than temporal existence. And other properties, such as the property of being red-or-not-red, *prima facie,* cannot be acquired or lost either.

But even if temporal existence *is* a property it makes no sense to talk of it being acquired, for there is nothing which could be said to acquire the property. A property can only be acquired by something which formerly lacked it; that is, the acquisition of a property is always a change in something. But if something really begins to exist then there is nothing which can be said to have come to exist. The objection to something coming to exist which we face here is an ancient one, and it is reported in Aristotles *Physics*: "what is cannot come to be (because it *is* already), and from what is not nothing could have come to be (because something must exist as a sub-stratum)[6]". This objection is directed against the possibility of a thing *coming to exist* for the apparently decisive reason that something has to exist already to come to be anything. Coming to be is always coming to be such-and-such, which just amounts to acquiring a property; there is no case of just coming to be.

However, Prior has argued that this does not tell against the possibility of something *starting to be.*[7] Starting to be, unlike coming to be, is not to be viewed as a *change.* This Prior thought at once raised another problem, namely that beginning to exist is then construed as a very stark process. Prior seems to have wanted an account in which temporal items are eased gradually over the threshold of existence, as it were; but I suspect there is no way in which this can be done. The misgivings which Prior felt about the starkness of starting to exist arise because, "roughly, countable 'things' are made or grow from bits of stuff, or from other countable 'things' ".[8] But the search for

an account of gradually starting to exist would be a vain one: how could starting to exist be described as a cumulative growth-like process? Growth and change apply to individuals which already exist, but there is no step-wise process by which something becomes a logical subject. The status of an existent is all-or-nothing since a partial logical subject just makes no sense. There is just no choice between treating starting to exist as a genuine though stark phenomenon and rejecting it altogether.

One way in which the starkness of starting to exist is apparently avoided or mitigated is by introducing some artificial substratum which enables starting to exist to be described on the more tractable model of change. An example of this is to grant temporal items some ontological status as merely possible or future objects prior to their actually starting to exist. (Something like this seems to have been presupposed by the medieval doctrine of amplia-tion.) Instead of something being launched into existence, the account is rather of a possible object becoming actual, or a formerly-future individual becoming present. Such accounts are otiose and objectionable: possible but nonactual objects are not a category of objects, but no objects whatsoever. They cannot be invoked as logical subjects so as to squeeze the account of starting to exist into the less problematic guise of change.

Any account which holds that the totality of existents is fixed and static, and denies that the domain of items to which we may refer changes and is extended with the passage of time, will hold that reference to future 'individuals' is perfectly legitimate, even though it may be conceded that there are epistemic difficulties in finding the truth of many propositions which concerns such 'individuals'. Once this Russellian account of existence is accepted there is no room left for a genuine case of starting to exist. On the Russellian view, objects, if they exist at all, can be referred to at any time. This, I think, does not take 'starting to exist' seriously enough. But if we are to admit that individuals start to exist, there must have been times when they did not exist. How can we reconcile 'A did not exist' with the claim that before A existed there was nothing at all for there to be any facts about?

An important solution to this difficulty was developed by Prior from Aquinas' account of the creation of the world.[9] Aquinas argued that it is not the case that there *was* something which was brought into being, since this would amount to attributing existence-before-it-existed to that thing; though *there is* something which then started to be. Similarly, according to Prior, we can construe the starting to be of an individual not as 'Once A's non-existence

was the case, and now it exists', but as two contrasting *present* facts; namely
'It *is not* the case that A was, but it *is* now the case that A is'.[10] It is only by
taking careful note of the tense in 'It is not the case that A was' that we can
make sense of A's starting to be. The Russellian view, which does not
recognize tense distinctions, is unable to distinguish between 'It *is* not the
case that A existed' and 'It *was* not the case that A exists'. It is just this
distinction which is essential to an account which takes an individual's
starting to exist seriously. This involves a phenomenon which might be
called retrospective reference, which is a referential counterpart to Ryle's
notion of retrospective verification.[11] Just as the past tense of 'You were
right yesterday about today's sea-battle' is a makeshift, so it is when we
"project" names to times before their bearers existed. It is a fact about
Julius Caesar, for example, that he did not exist in 200 BC; but it is not
right to say that in 200 BC there was then a fact which could have been
expressed by the sentence 'Julius Caesar does not exist'. At that time there
was not even *this* fact about him. Only after he started to exist was there
this fact about his former non-existence. Prior's account is important; it
shows that if we take careful note of tenses, and only if we do so, we can
explain how it is that an individual started to exist — which entails that there
were times when it did not exist — without the awkward consequence of sup-
posing that it had any mode of being at those times.

Starting to exist, then, cannot be construed as the acquisition of a
property since we lack a subject which could be said to acquire that property.
We can, however, satisfactorily account for starting to exist without that
model; but I think it must be accepted that starting to exist is an inescapably
stark phenomenon.

III

C. J. F. Williams has put forward the thesis that "to predicate something of
an object is to presuppose the existence of the object at the time at which the
predicate is said to hold of the object".[12] Williams claims that this does *not*
commit him to the thesis that 'Mr NN is dead' cannot express a proposition
because only what exists now can be named. The claim is not that the
individual must exist at the time at which the predication is made, but that
it exists at the time at which the predicate is said to apply. However, the
thesis still commits Williams to the undesirable conclusion that 'Mr NN is

dead' will not express a proposition; not because the *name* is unavailable, but because '... is dead' *is* a predicate which can apply only outside the life-span of its subject.

Williams' thesis leads him, he admits, to "a thoroughly uncomfortable if not ludicrous position ... that no sense can be made of *ceasing to exist*".[13] This seems a very good reason for rejecting Williams' thesis, since we clearly want to, and do, claim that individuals *have* ceased to exist. And it seems further that there *are* predicates — ones involving what Geach has called 'Cambridge' changes[14] — which *do* come to be true of individuals outside their life-spans. For example, Bertrand Russell cannot get any fatter; but he can still come to be admired, and perhaps can become a great-great-grand-father. I think that such propositions should be taken at face value as ones which are about Russell.

Williams is unhappy about following Geach's approach of allowing a predicative 'present actuality' sense of 'exists' in addition to the sense associated with the existential quantifier. What worries Williams is that the allegedly predicative sense of existence treats 'ceasing to exist' in the same way as 'ceasing to play golf'. And his worry about this is that something can become true of an individual only if the individual exists. Ceasing to exist cannot be a change, in Williams' view, because we lack a subject of which it can become true. There is here an obvious parallel to the case of starting to exist; like that case the difficulty arises from the lack of a subject. But the similarity is only partial: on Williams' account we can say of Mr. NN, after he has ceased to exist, that he *did* exist; but we are not committed to claiming that we could ever have said of Mr NN that he *will* exist. And although Williams' thesis will prevent him from saying that 'Mr NN is dead' is *about* Mr NN, it will allow him to say 'Mr NN was alive, and now there is no longer such a person'. Here the negative existential component is construed as a general proposition which is not directly about Mr NN at all; but there are many — including myself — who will not be satisfied with this manoeuvre.

The items which we can pick out and refer to by the use of names are usually items which exist at some times but not at all times. But it is not necessary for reference that the item still exist if it is to be referred to; though if it does not exist now it must have existed at some earlier time. We can — *pace* Williams — make predications about individuals outside their life-spans, and some things can even become true of individuals outside their

life-spans. A detenser in the style of Russell might try to claim that future individuals are nameable. He might point out, for example, that we already know the names of the next ten Atlantic cyclones. The short reply to this is to insist on a distinction between having a name *of* something and having a name *ready for* something.[15]

Names carry no time reference in the sense that temporal considerations have no relevance to a name's denoting its bearer. This does not mean that the bearer exists at no time, or that it exists equally at all times. An individual which has been named can be referred to at times when it does not exist, and it is this temporal indifference which enables us to entertain conjectures about individuals in relation to times when they do not exist. To ask whether someone might have been born earlier is not to ask whether he might have existed-before-he-existed. It would clearly be absurd to suggest that in such cases we are 'projecting' the *existence* of an individual to times when it did not exist. Conjectures can be entertained in this manner with respect to the future as well as to the past, and the possibility of considering the individual in relation to times when it does not exist means that the starting to exist of an individual can, in a curious sense, create new logical possibilities for the past. For after an individual has started to exist we can entertain 'possibilities' − which are temporally excluded of course − which relate that individuals to earlier times.

There are two important conclusions which follow from taking the idea of an individual beginning and ceasing to exist seriously. First it follows that we cannot ignore tenses. The thesis that there can only be facts about an individual after it has started to exist − including the fact that there were no facts about it earlier − is one which is simply unavailable to a timeless metaphysic. Such an atemporal perspective results from the adoption of Russellian tenseless descriptions. If one does adopt such an atemporal perspective it is impossible to take seriously the idea of something beginning to exist. It is only if we distinguish between the present holding of a past fact and the past holding of a present fact that we can take '*A* began to exist' and '*A* did not exist' both at face value as expressing facts about *A*. Secondly, as Williams' argument bears testimony, we can't make any sense at all of ceasing to exist unless we admit a predicative temporal sense of existence.[16,17]

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NOTES

[1] P. T. Geach, 'Form and Existence', in *God and the Soul* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1969), pp. 53–60.

[2] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe (Blackwell, Oxford, 1953), Part I, Section 40.

[3] Aristotle, *De Interpretatione*, 16a19–20.

[4] Geach, *Reference and Generality* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1962), Section 25.

[5] M. Dummett, *Frege: Philosophy of Language* (Duckworth, London, 1973), p. 386.

[6] Aristotle, *Physics*, 191a30–32.

[7] A. N. Prior, *Past, Present and Future* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1967), p. 139.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 174.

[9] Aquinas, *De Potentia Dei*, Q. 3.

[10] Prior, 'Identifiable Individuals', in *Papers on Time and Tense* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1968), pp. 73–4. Prior also distinguishes between the present holding of a past fact and the past holding of a present fact in *Time and Modality* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1957), pp. 33–5.

[11] G. Ryle, *Dilemmas* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1954), pp. 19–20.

[12] C. J. F. Williams, 'On Dying', *Philosophy* 44 (1969), 223.

[13] *Ibid.*, p. 229.

[14] Geach, 'What Actually Exists', in *God and the Soul*, pp. 71–2.

[15] For the longer reply see my paper 'The Generality of Predictions', *American Philosophical Quarterly* (forthcoming, Vol. 18, No. 1, January 1978, pp. 15–25).

[16] For an important discussion of 'temporal existence' see Dummett, *op cit*, pp. 387–90.

[17] I am especially grateful to Genevieve Lloyd for comments and criticism.