

Meaning, Truth, and Existence

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Introduction: the Philosophy of Language

I am a philosopher of language; my research concerns linguistic meaning, the truth (or falsity) of things we say, and the existence of ordinary things (like cabbages and kings) which we talk about. The aim of this paper is to introduce you to some philosophical puzzles surrounding the relations between these notions.

What is the philosophical interest of language? Philosophers have always been interested in the nature of reality and in our knowledge of it – and indeed in the relations between mind and world more generally. A full philosophical theory of the workings of a language will explain:

- (i) the relations between expressions of the language and entities in the world; and
- (ii) the relations between expressions of the language and the understanding that competent speakers have of them.¹

Thus, the philosophy of language aims to give an account of the cognitive relations in which human beings stand to the world surrounding them; moreover, the focus on language promises to make these traditional philosophical problems more tractable since (a) we can divide the task into (at least) two distinct components; and (b) linguistic expressions have relatively clear syntactic (i.e. grammatical) properties which mental items like thoughts do not obviously possess.

It will also be worth noting one further point about the philosophical interest of language. Philosophers – from Aristotle, to Kant, to Mill² – have always been interested in logic. Logicians want to know which arguments are valid, and which are invalid. The criterion they use for determining this is the following:

- An Argument is valid if and only if it is impossible for the premises of the argument to be true while the conclusion of the argument is false.

But arguments are expressed in language, so understanding how language works – and in particular, how it relates to the world, and what the world must be like for sentences to be true – will help us to get a grip on which arguments are valid.

Puzzles Concerning Names

Consider the following argument:

- Premise 1: Superman flies
- Premise 2: Superman is Clark Kent
- Conclusion: Clark Kent flies

Is it logically valid? The answer to this question is uncontroversially, “Yes”. Imagine that we want to sort the things there are into two categories – those that fly and those that don't. If the first premise is true, then we'll put Superman on the side of the things that fly. But then, if the second premise is true, we can't find Clark amongst the remaining things – we've already classified him when we dealt with Superman. So the conclusion has to be true too – Clark is in the camp of the flyers.

¹ See Evans, Gareth and McDowell, John Henry (1982), *The varieties of reference* (Oxford: Clarendon Press) for an approach to the philosophy of language recognizing these two aims.

² See, e.g., Kneale, W. C. and Kneale, Martha (1962), *The development of logic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).

Now consider a second argument:

- Premise 1: Lois Lane believes that Superman flies
- Premise 2: Superman is Clark Kent
- Conclusion: Lois Lane believes that Clark Kent flies

Is this argument valid? This issue is controversial.

The Superman stories seem to provide us with grounds for thinking that this argument could have true premises and a false conclusion. For it seems that the stories depict a world in which Lois believes Superman flies, Superman is Clark Kent, but Lois *doesn't* believe that Clark flies. However, the appearance that the conclusion of our argument is false may be misleading. Maybe deep down Lois *does* believe that Clark flies. Whether this is so depends not only on Lois' psychology but also on what exactly the meaning of the sentence "Lois Lane believes that Clark Kent flies" is. In particular, it depends upon (1) whether the meaning of the name "Clark Kent" is just the guy, Clark Kent – which is to say Superman; and (2) how the verb "believes" combines with other expressions.

Let's focus on the first of these points, (1). Suppose that we use the name "Superman" to refer to a certain guy. Then plausibly the meaning of "Superman" is that guy. We can then imagine performing a classification as we did in the case of our first argument – but this time we want to sort all the things according as whether or not Lois believes them to be flyers. When we get to Superman, we have to class him amongst the things of which Lois believes that they fly. By the second premise, we can't find Clark amongst the remaining items; he is already in the camp of things which Lois believes to fly. So the conclusion is true after all. Or, at least, so some argue.

Puzzles Concerning Existence

Before finishing I want to introduce you to two arguments which aim to prove existence claims and which I find problematic.³ The first is the Ontological Argument for the Existence of God. It has been advanced by a number of philosophers – including, notably, Anselm and Descartes.⁴ It runs as follows:

- Let "God" be a name for the perfect being
- Premise 1: The perfect being has all the perfections
- Premise 2: Existence is a perfection
- Conclusion: The perfect being has existence; in short, God exists

Before you run out to spread the good news, note that this argument "proves" too much. For consider the following parody:

- Let "Awesome" be a name for the perfect mountain
- Premise 1: Awesome has all the perfections (appropriate for a mountain)
- Premise 2: Existence is a perfection (appropriate for a mountain)
- Conclusion: Awesome exists

Of course, noticing that an argument is no good isn't sufficient: we need a diagnosis. The most significant response to the ontological argument has been advanced in one form or another by Hume, Kant, Frege, Russell, Quine, and others: it involves a theory about the nature of existence.⁵

³ I could, in addition, give you an argument for the existence of Superman; but due to limitations of space I'll leave you with just the two (arguably more philosophically significant) cases below.

⁴ See Oppy, Graham, "Ontological Arguments", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2009 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2009/entries/ontological-arguments/>>.

⁵ See Miller, Barry, "Existence", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2009 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2009/entries/existence/> for an attribution of this view to Hume, Kant, and Frege; and see

These philosophers deny the second premise of the ontological argument (and its parodies); they claim that existence is not a feature of objects at all (let alone a good one)! Indeed, on this theory, to say, for example, that electrons exist is just to say that something is an electron – or perhaps more colloquially, that there are electrons; and to deny that unicorns exist is just to say that nothing – none of the things there are - is a unicorn.

This theory of existence, however, gives rise to a final style of ontological argument which I find problematic. Consider:

- Premise 1: “2 and 3 are prime numbers” is true
- Premise 2: If “2 and 3 are prime numbers” is true, then so is “2 and 3 are numbers”
- Conclusion 1: “2 and 3 are numbers” is true
- Premise 3: If “2 and 3 are numbers” is true, then so is “There are numbers”
- Conclusion 2: “There are numbers” is true
- Premise 4: “There are numbers” is true if, and only if, numbers exist
- Conclusion 3: Numbers exist
- Premise 5: Numbers, if they exist, are abstract objects – that is, objects with no spatial or temporal location and therefore no causal powers
- Conclusion 4: Abstract objects exist (e.g., the numbers 2 and 3)

Now, this argument poses a challenge for me, because I like mathematics – I think it is useful and reveals truths. Thus, I find no flaw with the reasoning up to Conclusion 2. On the other hand I don't like abstract objects – in fact, I don't think there are any. Accordingly, I reject Conclusion 4.

The most obvious culprit here is Premise 4;⁶ but recall that it is motivated by the theory of existence which helped us to dispense with the ontological argument. Despite this, in my D.Phil. thesis I claimed that “there are numbers” is not always synonymous with “numbers exist”, and so it is not the case that this sentence is true if and only if *numbers exist* – at least, not in all speech contexts. Crudely speaking, the idea is that just as the word “I” refers to different people depending on who uses it, so too the phrase “there are” means different things as used on different occasions. This allows us to say that it means *there exists* when used in the context of metaphysical investigations – and hence to deny the validity of the Ontological Argument – yet it is used more loosely in other contexts, including those at play in mathematics departments. So that's my diagnosis of this argument: premise 4 is false – “there are numbers” is true as used in mathematics even though numbers don't exist.



Russell, Bertrand (1905), 'On Denoting', *Mind*, 14 (56), 479-93, and Quine, W. V. (1948), 'On What There Is', *The Review of Metaphysics*, 2 (5), 21-38 for first hand advocacy of the advantages of the view in question.

⁶ When I presented this material at the Subject Families Event Alberto Behar asked why we should accept premise 5. This is a good question. The answer is that rejecting it in this case won't obviously help, since we could run an analogous argument concerning the existence of sets – and there are simply too many of these (according to contemporary set theory) to regard them as being any sort of concrete material object. Thus denying premise 5 in the set-theoretic case is implausible; and we should seek an analogous solution here in connection with number theory.