

G. E. Moore, "Is Existence a Predicate?",  
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II.—By G. E. MOORE.

I AM not at all clear as to the meaning of this question. Mr. Kneale says that existence is not a predicate. But what does he mean by the words "Existence is not a predicate"?

In his second paragraph, he says that the word "predicate" has two different senses, a logical sense and a grammatical one. If so, it would follow that the words "Existence is not a predicate" may have two different meanings, according as the person who uses them is using "predicate" in the logical or the grammatical sense. And I think it is clear that he means us to understand that when *he* says "Existence is not a predicate," he is using "predicate" in the logical sense, and not in the grammatical one. I think his view is that if anyone were to say "Existence is a predicate," using "predicate" in the grammatical sense, such a person would be perfectly right: I think he holds that existence really is a predicate in the grammatical sense. But, whether he holds this or not, I think it is clear that he does not wish to discuss the question whether it is or is not a predicate in the grammatical sense, but solely the question whether it is so in the logical one.

Now I think it is worth noticing that if we assert "Existence is a predicate," using "predicate" in the grammatical sense, our proposition is a proposition about certain *words*, to the effect that they are often used in a certain way; but not, curiously enough, about the word "existence" itself. It is a proposition to the effect that the word "exists" and other finite parts of the verb "to exist," such as "existed," "will exist" or "exist" (in the plural) are often the predicates (in some grammatical sense) of sentences in which they occur; but nobody means to say that the word "existence" itself is often the predicate of sentences in which it occurs. And I think Mr. Kneale implies that, similarly, the proposition which anyone would express, if he asserted "Existence is a predicate," using

“predicate” in the logical sense, is again equivalent to a proposition, *not* about the word “existence” itself, but about the word “exists,” and other finite parts of the verb “to exist.” He implies that “Existence is a predicate,” with this use of “predicate,” is equivalent to the proposition that the word “exists,” and other finite parts of the verb, often do “*stand for* a predicate in the logical sense.” It would appear, therefore, that one difference between the two different meanings of “Existence is a predicate” is as follows : namely that, if a person who says these words is using “predicate” in the grammatical sense, he is *not* saying that the words, “exists,” etc., ever “*stand for* a predicate in the logical sense” ; whereas, if he is using “predicate” in the logical sense, he is saying that they do (often, at least) “*stand for* a predicate in the logical sense.” What Mr. Kneale himself means by “Existence is not a predicate” is apparently some proposition which he would express by saying : “The words, ‘exists,’ etc., never *stand for* a predicate in the logical sense.”

What I am not clear about is as to what is meant by saying of a particular word (or particular phrase) in a particular sentence that it “stands for a predicate in the logical sense” ; nor, therefore, as to what is meant by saying of another particular word in another particular sentence that it does *not* “stand for a predicate in the logical sense.” Mr. Kneale does, indeed, tell us that a “predicate in the logical sense” is the same as “an attribute” ; but, though I think that the meaning of the word “attribute” is perhaps a little clearer than that of the phrase “predicate in the logical sense,” it still seems to me far from clear : I do not clearly understand what he would mean by saying that “exists,” etc., do not “stand for attributes.” But, from examples which he gives, it is, I think, clear that he would say that in the sentence “This is red” the word “red,” or the phrase “is red” (I am not clear which), does “stand for an attribute” ; and also that in the sentence “Tame tigers growl,” “growl” so stands, and in the sentence “Rajah growls,” “growls” does. It is, therefore, presumably some difference between the way in which

"exists," etc., are used in sentences in which they occur, and the way in which "is red" (or "red") and "growl" and "growls" are used in these sentences, that he wishes to express by saying that, whereas "exists," etc., do *not* "stand for attributes," these words in these sentences do. And if we can find what differences there are between the use of finite parts of the verb "to exist," and the use of "is red," "growl" and "growls," we may perhaps find what the difference is which he expresses in this way.

I.—It will, I think, be best to begin with one particular use of "exist"—the one, namely, which Mr. Kneale illustrates by the example "Tame tigers exist." He clearly thinks that there is some very important difference between the way in which "exist" is used here, and the way in which "growl" is used in "Tame tigers growl"; and that it is a difference which does not hold, *e.g.*, between the use of "scratch" in "Tame tigers scratch" and the use of "growl" in "Tame tigers growl." He would say that "scratch" and "growl" both "stand for attributes," whereas "exist" does not; and he would also say that "Tame tigers exist" is a proposition of a different *form* from "Tame tigers growl," whereas I think he would say that "Tame tigers growl" and "Tame tigers scratch" are *of the same form*. What difference between "Tame tigers exist" and "Tame tigers growl" can be the one he has in mind?

(1) That there is a difference between the way in which we use "exist" in the former sentence and "growl" in the latter, of a different kind from the difference between our usages of "scratch" and "growl" in the two sentences "Tame tigers scratch" and "Tame tigers growl," can, I think, be brought out in the following way.

The sentence "Tame tigers growl" seems to me to be ambiguous. So far as I can see, it might mean "All tame tigers growl," or it might mean merely "Most tame tigers growl," or it might mean merely "Some tame tigers growl." Each of these three sentences has a clear meaning, and the meaning of each is clearly different from that of either of the two others. Of each of them, however, it is true that

the proposition which it expresses is one which cannot possibly be true, unless some tame tigers do growl. And hence I think we can say of "Tame tigers growl" that, whichever sense it is used in, it means something which cannot possibly be true unless some tame tigers do growl. Similarly I think it is clear that "Tame tigers exist" means something which cannot possibly be true unless some tame tigers do exist. But I do not think that there is any ambiguity in "Tame tigers exist" corresponding to that which I have pointed out in "Tame tigers growl." So far as I can see "Tame tigers exist" and "Some tame tigers exist" are merely two different ways of expressing exactly the same proposition. That is to say, it is not true that "Tame tigers exist" might mean "All tame tigers exist," or "Most tame tigers exist," instead of merely "Some tame tigers exist." It always means just "Some tame tigers exist," and nothing else whatever. I have said it is never used to mean "All tame tigers exist," or "Most tame tigers exist"; but I hope it will strike everyone that there is something queer about this proposition. It seems to imply that "All tame tigers exist" and "Most tame tigers exist" have a clear meaning, just as have "All tame tigers growl" and "Most tame tigers growl"; and that it is just an accident that we do not happen ever to use "Tame tigers exist" to express either of those two meanings instead of the meaning "Some tame tigers exist," whereas we do sometimes use "Tame tigers growl" to mean "All tame tigers growl" or "Most tame tigers growl," instead of merely "Some tame tigers growl." But is this in fact the case? Have "All tame tigers exist" and "Most tame tigers exist" any meaning at all? Certainly they have not a clear meaning, as have "All tame tigers growl" and "Most tame tigers growl." They are puzzling expressions, which certainly do not carry their meaning, if they have any, on the face of them. That this is so indicates, I think, that there is some important difference between the usage of "exist" with which we are concerned, and the usage of such words as "growl" or "scratch"; but it does not make clear just what the difference is.

I think this can be made clear by comparing the expressions "Some tame tigers don't growl" and "Some tame tigers don't exist." The former, whether true or false, has a perfectly clear meaning—a meaning just as clear as that of "Some tame tigers do growl"; and it is perfectly clear that both propositions might be true together. But with "Some tame tigers don't exist" the case is different. "Some tame tigers exist" has a perfectly clear meaning: it just means "There are some tame tigers." But the meaning of "Some tame tigers don't exist," if any, is certainly not equally clear. It is another queer and puzzling expression. Has it any meaning at all? and, if so, what meaning? If it has any, it would appear that it must mean the same as: "There are some tame tigers, which don't exist." But has *this* any meaning? And if so, what? Is it possible that there should be any tame tigers which don't exist? I think the answer is that, if in the sentence "Some tame tigers don't exist" you are using "exist" with the same meaning as in "Some tame tigers exist," then the former sentence as a whole has no meaning at all—it is pure nonsense. A meaning can, of course, be given to "Some tame tigers don't exist"; but this can only be done if "exist" is used in a different way from that in which it is used in "Some tame tigers exist." And, if this is so, it will follow that "All tame tigers exist" and "Most tame tigers exist," also have no meaning at all, if you are using "exist" in the sense with which we are concerned. For "All tame tigers growl" is equivalent to the conjunction "Some tame tigers growl, and there is no tame tiger which does not growl"; and this has a meaning, because "There is at least one tame tiger which does not growl" has one. If, therefore, "There is at least one tame tiger which does not exist" has no meaning, it will follow that "All tame tigers exist" also has none; because "There is no tame tiger which does not exist" will have none, if "There is a tame tiger which does not exist" has none. Similarly "Most tame tigers growl" is equivalent to the conjunction "Some tame tigers growl, and the number of those (if any) which do not growl is smaller than that of

those which do"—a statement which has a meaning only because "There are tame tigers which do not growl" has one. If, therefore, "There are tame tigers which don't exist" has no meaning, it will follow that "Most tame tigers exist" will also have none. I think, therefore, we can say that one important difference between the use of "growl" in "Some tame tigers growl" and the use of "exist" in "Some tame tigers exist," is that if in the former case we insert "do not" before "growl," without changing the meaning of "growl," we get a sentence which is significant, whereas if, in the latter, we insert "do not" before "exist" without changing the meaning of "exist," we get a sentence which has no meaning whatever; and I think we can also say that this fact explains why, with the given meaning of "growl," "All tame tigers growl" and "Most tame tigers growl" are both significant, whereas, with the given meaning of "exist," "All tame tigers exist" and "Most tame tigers exist" are utterly meaningless. And if by the statement that "growl," in this usage, "stands for an attribute," whereas "exist," in this usage, does not, part of what is meant is that there is this difference between them, then I should agree that "exist," in this usage, does not "stand for an attribute."

But is it really true that if, in the sentence "Some tame tigers exist," we insert "do not" before "exist," without changing the meaning of "exist," we get a sentence which has no meaning whatever? I have admitted that a meaning *can* be given to "Some tame tigers do not exist"; and it may, perhaps, be contended by some people that the meaning which "exist" has in this sentence, where it is significant, *is* precisely the same as that which it has in "Some tame tigers exist." I cannot show the contrary as clearly as I should like to be able to do; but I will do my best.

The meaning which such an expression as "Some tame tigers do not exist" sometimes does have, is that which it has when it is used to mean the same as "Some tame tigers are imaginary" or "Some tame tigers are not real tigers." That "Some tame tigers are imaginary" may really express

a proposition, whether true or false, cannot I think be denied. If, for instance, two different stories have been written, each of which is about a different imaginary tame tiger, it will follow that there are at least two imaginary tame tigers ; and it cannot be denied that the sentence " Two different tame tigers occur in fiction " is significant, though I have not the least idea whether it is true or false. I know that at least one unicorn occurs in fiction, because one occurs in " Alice Through the Looking Glass " ; and it follows that there is at least one imaginary unicorn, and therefore (in a sense) at least one unicorn which does not exist. Again, if it should happen that at the present moment two different people are each having an hallucination of a different tame tiger, it will follow that there are at the present moment two different imaginary tame tigers ; and the statement that two such hallucinations are occurring now is certainly significant, though it may very likely be false. The sentence " There are some tame tigers which do not exist " is, therefore, certainly significant, if it means only that there are some imaginary tigers, in either of the two senses which I have tried to point out. But what it means is that either some real people have written stories about imaginary tigers, or are having or have recently had hallucinations of tame tigers, or, perhaps, are dreaming or have dreamed of particular tame tigers. If nothing of this sort has happened or is happening to anybody, then there are no imaginary tame tigers. But if " Some tame tigers do not exist " means all this, is it not clear that " exist " has not, in this sentence, the same comparatively simple meaning as it has in " Some tame tigers exist " or in " No tame tigers exist " ? Is it not clear that " Some tame tigers do not exist," if it means all this, is not related to " Some tame tigers exist," in the same simple way in which " Some tame tigers do not growl " is related to " Some tame tigers growl " ?

(2) There is, I think, also another important difference between this use of " exist " and the use of " growl," which may be brought out as follows.

Mr. Russell has said\* "When we say 'some men are Greeks,' that means that the propositional function ' $x$  is a man and a Greek' is sometimes true"; and has explained just previously that by "sometimes true" he means "true in at least one instance." With this explanation of what he means by "sometimes true," I do not think that his statement as to the meaning of "Some men are Greeks" is strictly correct; since I think that the use of the plural implies that " $x$  is a man and a Greek" is true in *more* than one instance, that is to say, in at least two instances. Let us suppose that he would accept this correction and say that what "Some men are Greeks" means is not, strictly, that " $x$  is a man and a Greek" is true in at least one instance, but that it is true in at least two. He has further implied (p. 158) that to say of a propositional function that it is true in at least two instances is the same thing as to say that at least two "values" of it are true; and he has told us (p. 156) that the "values" of propositional functions are propositions. With these explanations, his view would appear to be that what "Some men are Greeks" means is that at least two propositions, related to the propositional function " $x$  is a man and a Greek" in some way which he expresses by saying that they are "values" of that function, are true. Now I cannot imagine what sort of propositions would be "values" of " $x$  is a man and a Greek," except propositions of the following sort. There are propositions which we express by pointing at (or indicating in some other way), an object which we are seeing (or perceiving in some other way) and uttering the words "This is a so and so" (or equivalent words in some other language). Let us suppose that the kind of propositions which would be "values" of " $x$  is a man and a Greek" would be propositions of this sort, where the words used were "This is a man and a Greek." Mr. Russell's doctrine would then be that "Some men are Greeks" means that at least two different true propositions of this sort could be made: that there must have been at least two different objects at which

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\* *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*, p. 159.



a man might have pointed and said truly "This is a man and a Greek." And, if this is his doctrine, it seems to me to be true. Surely "Some men are Greeks" cannot possibly be true, unless there are at least two different objects, in the case of each of which a man might have seen it, pointed at it, and said with truth "This is a man and a Greek" ?

On this view "Some tame tigers growl" means that at least two values of " $x$  is a tame tiger and growls" are true ; and this means that there are at least two objects, in the case of each of which a man might have seen it, pointed at it, and said with truth "This is a tame tiger and growls." Now in this sentence "This is a tame tiger and growls" it is clear that, except for the difference consisting in the fact that "growls" is in the singular and "growl" in the plural, the word "growls" has the same meaning as has the word "growl" in "Some tame tigers growl." We can say, then, that one feature about our use of "growl" is that, if we consider a "value" of the propositional function which is such that "Some tame tigers growl" means that at least two values of it are true, then the singular of "growl" can be used, with the same meaning, in the expression of such a value. And perhaps this may be part of what is meant by saying that "growl" "stands for an attribute." It may perhaps be meant that to point at an object which you are seeing, and utter the words "This object growls," is significant—that the words and gesture together do really express a proposition, true or false.

But now consider "Some tame tigers exist" : is the same true of "exist" in this sentence ? Mr. Russell says\* : "We say that 'men exist' or 'a man exists' if the propositional function ' $x$  is human' is sometimes true." And he goes on to protest that though the proposition "Socrates is a man" is "*equivalent*" to "Socrates is human," it "is not the very same proposition." For my part I doubt whether we ever do use "is human" in such a way that "Socrates is human" is equivalent to "Socrates

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\* *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*, pp. 171-2.

is a man." I think Mr. Russell is using "is human" in a very special sense, in which nobody but he has ever used it, and that the only way of explaining how he is using it is to say that he is using it to mean precisely that which we ordinarily express by "is a human being." If this is so, and if we are allowed to distinguish, as I think we ought, between "men exist" and "a man exists," and to say that "men exist" means, *not* "' $x$  is a human being' is true in at least one instance," but "' $x$  is a human being' is true in at least two instances," then I think his doctrine is true; provided, again, that we are allowed to regard the sort of propositions which we express, *e.g.*, by pointing at an object which we are seeing and saying the words "This is a human being," as being those which are values of " $x$  is a human being." Surely "Human beings exist" can be true if, and only if, there are at least two objects, such that, if a man were to see and point to one of them and utter the words "This is a human being," he would be expressing a true proposition by what he did?

Now, if this is right, we see at once that the use of "growl" in "Some tame tigers growl" differs from that of "exist" in "Some tame tigers exist," in the respect that, while the first asserts that more than one value of " $x$  is a tame tiger *and growls*" is true, the second asserts, *not* that more than one value of " $x$  is a tame tiger *and exists*" is true, but merely that more than one value of " $x$  is a tame tiger" is true. Owing to this view of his that "Some tame tigers exist" means the same as "Some values of the propositional function ' $x$  is a tame tiger' are true," Mr. Russell has been led to say\* "Existence is essentially a property of a propositional function" and (p. 196) "It is of propositional functions that you can assert or deny existence" and (p. 197) that it is a fallacy to transfer "to the individual that satisfies a propositional function a predicate which only applies to a propositional function"; so that, according to him, existence is, after all, in this usage, a "property" or "predicate," though not a property of individuals, but only of propositional functions! I think

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\* *Monist*, April, 1919, p. 195.

this is a mistake on his part. Even if it is true that "Some tame tigers exist" means the same as "Some values of ' $x$  is a tame tiger' are true" it does not follow, I think, that we can say that "exist" means the same as "is sometimes true," and "some tame tigers" the same as " $x$  is a tame tiger" : indeed, I think it is clear that we can not say this ; for certainly " $x$  is a tame tiger' exists" would not mean the same as "Some tame tigers exist." But what I think does follow from this interpretation of "Some tame tigers exist" is another thing which Mr. Russell himself holds, namely, that if a proposition which you express by pointing at something which you see and saying "This is a tame tiger," is a "value" of " $x$  is a tame tiger," then if, pointing at the same thing, you were to say the words "This exists," and, if you were using "exists" merely as the singular of "exist" in the sense in which it is used in "Some tame tigers exist," what you did would not express a proposition at all, but would be absolutely meaningless. That is to say, there is between "Some tame tigers growl" and "Some tame tigers exist," not only the difference that, whereas the first asserts that some values of " $x$  is a tame tiger *and growls*" are true, the second asserts only that some values of " $x$  is a tame tiger" are true ; there is also the further and more important difference that, why the second asserts only that some values of " $x$  is a tame tiger" are true, is not because we happen to use "This is a tame tiger" to mean the same as "This is a tame tiger *and exists*," but because by pointing and saying "This *exists*" we should express *no proposition at all*, so long as we were using "exists" as the singular of the use of "exist" with which we are concerned, whereas by pointing and saying "This growls" we certainly should be expressing a proposition, even though we were using "growls" merely as the singular of "growl" with the meaning it has in "Some tame tigers growl." "This is a tame tiger, *and exists*" would be not tautologous, but meaningless.

This, I think, gives us a second true thing, which may perhaps be sometimes part of what is meant by saying that "exist," in this usage, "does not stand for an attribute."

II.—So far I have been solely concerned with the use of “exist” in such sentences as “Some tame tigers exist,” and have tried to point out two differences between its use here and the use of “growl” in “Some tame tigers growl,” which may perhaps be part of what is meant by saying that “exist,” in this usage, does not “stand for an attribute,” whereas “growl” does. But I cannot help thinking that there are other significant uses of “exists”; and I want, in particular, to try to point out two such, and to consider what, if anything, true can be meant by saying that in these usages also “exists” does not “stand for an attribute.”

(1) I have just said that to point at a thing which you see and say “This exists” seems to me to be meaningless, if “exists” is the singular of “exist” in the sense in which it is used in “Tame tigers exist”; but I cannot help thinking that in the case of anything to point at which and say “This is a tame tiger” is significant, it is also significant to point at it and say “This exists,” *in some sense or other*. My reason for thinking this is that it seems to me that you can clearly say *with truth* of any such object “This *might* not have existed,” “It is *logically possible* that this should not have existed”; and I do not see how it is possible that “This might not have existed” should be true, unless “This does in fact exist” is true, and therefore also significant. The statement “It is logically possible that this should not have existed” seems to *mean* “The sentence ‘This does not exist’ is significant”; and if “This does not exist” is significant, “This does exist” must be significant too. Now I cannot help thinking that in every case in which I point at an object which I am perceiving and say significantly “This is a tame tiger,” “This is a book,” my proposition is in fact a proposition about some sense-datum, or some set of sense-data, which I am perceiving; and that part of what I am saying is that this sense-datum (or these sense-data) is “of” a physical object. That is to say, I am saying of some sense-datum that it is “of” a physical object in the sense in which it is true to say of an after-image which I see with my eyes shut that

it is *not* "of" a physical object. And I think that part, at least, of what we mean by "This exists," where we are using "this" in the same way as when we point and say "This is a book," is "This sense-datum is *of* a physical object," which seems to me to be certainly significant. If "of" here stood for a relation, we might say that "This is a book" was short for "The thing which this sense-datum is 'of' is a book," and therefore "This exists" short for "The thing which this sense-datum is 'of' exists"; in which case the use of "exists" in question would be that which in *Principia Mathematica* is symbolized by  $E!$ , and there would be the same sort of reason for saying that it does not "stand for an attribute" as in the case of the "exist" which occurs in "Some tame tigers exist." I do not believe, however, that "of" here does stand for a relation, nor therefore that "This" in "This is a book" can be said to be short for the sort of phrase which Russell has called "a definite description"; and, this being so, I am not at all clear as to what that is true could be meant by saying that "exists," in this usage, "does not stand for an attribute." The only suggestion I can make is this. It seems to me that "This exists" (in this usage) always forms part of what is asserted by "This is a book," "This is red," etc., etc., where "this" is used in the manner with which we are now concerned; and possibly part of what is meant by saying that "is a book," "is red," etc., "stand for attributes," is that *part but not the whole* of what is asserted by any "value" of " $x$  is a book," " $x$  is red," etc., is "This exists." In that case "exists" in "This exists" would not "stand for an attribute," solely because the whole of what it asserts, and not merely a part, is "This exists."

(2) Another reason why "This exists," where "this" is used as it is in "This is a book" seems to me to be significant, is because it seems to me not only significant to say of a given sense-datum "This *is* of a physical object" or "This is *not* of a physical object," but also to say of the sense-datum itself "This exists." If this is so, we have to do with a new sense of "exists," since certainly no part of

the meaning of such an assertion with regard to a sense-datum is that it, or any other sense-datum, is "of" a physical object. But my reason for holding that it is significant for me to say, for instance, of an after-image which I am seeing with my eyes shut, "This exists," is similar to that which I gave in the last case : namely that it seems to me that in the case of every sense-datum which any one ever perceives, the person in question could always say with truth of the sense-datum in question "This might not have existed" ; and I cannot see how this could be true, unless "This does in fact exist" is also true, and therefore significant. That "this exists" has any meaning in such cases, where, as Mr. Russell would say, we are using "this" as a "proper name" for something with which we are "acquainted," is, I know, disputed ; my view that it has, involves, I am bound to admit, the curious consequence that "this exists," when used in this way, is always true, and "this does not exist" always false ; and I have little to say in its favour except that it seems to me so plainly true that, in the case of every sense-datum I have, it is logically possible that the sense-datum in question should not have existed—that there should simply have been no such thing. If, for instance, I am seeing a bright after-image with my eyes shut, it seems to me quite plainly conceivable that I should have had instead, at that moment, a uniform black field, such as I often have with my eyes shut ; and, if I had had such a field, then that particular bright after-image simply would not have existed.

But, supposing "This exists," in this usage, has a meaning, why should we not say that "exists" here "stands for an attribute" ? I can suggest no reason why we should not, except the same which I suggested in the last case.