A PRIORI EXISTENCE

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Summary

This paper deals with the question whether existence claims may be supported in an a priori manner. I examine a particular case in point, namely the argument for the existence of so-called logical atoms to be found in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*. Although I find it wanting, I argue that more general reflections on the notion of existence allow us to straightforwardly answer our initial question in the affirmative.

1. Introduction

Are there things whose existence can be justified a priori? As always in philosophy, it depends on whom you ask. Think, for example, about the argument for the existence of a substantial ego—whether this presumed substance should really be regarded as immaterial is a separate issue—that Descartes put forward in the second Meditation and, especially, in the first chapter of his *Principia Philosophiae*.\(^1\) This argument can be considered a priori because it does not rely on any particular experience or any specific experiential content. The mere fact that we do have experiences, of whatever content, suffices for it to go through. However, the very same kind of entity Descartes took to be indubitable has been rejected by Hume and Wittgenstein for the reason that we are unable to encounter substantial egos in experience.\(^2,3\) Here, as elsewhere, one philosopher’s modus ponens

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1. In contrast to the Meditations, the *Principia Philosophiae* contain an explanation of why the ego is a substance as opposed to, say, a mere bundle or sequence of thoughts. See Descartes 1644: 8.

2. “For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception” (Hume 1739: 252; his emphases).

3. “There is no such thing as the subject that thinks or entertains ideas. / If I wrote a book
is another philosopher’s *modus tollens*.

In this paper I shall examine another potential candidate, namely Wittgenstein’s aprioristic argument to the effect that logical atoms must exist. I hope that doing so will help us to acquire a better understanding of the notion of existence and its kin.

2. Varieties of existence

Existence comes in a *de re* and a *de dicto* mode. If we use notation based on the lambda-calculus, taking the singular term “\(\lambda x.Fx\)” to denote the property of \(F\)-ness, we can render the *de re* interpretation of “existence” as

\[ \lambda x.\exists y(y = x). \]

According to this reading, existence turns out to be a philosophically unexciting property since the question “What is there?” […] can be answered […] in a word—‘Everything’—and everyone will accept this answer as true” (Quine 1948: 1). Indeed, the claim “Everything exists” is true *a priori* since “\(\forall x\exists y(y = x)\)” is a theorem of first-order predicate logic with identity.

If existence is to be of any concern, we have to switch from ontology in the narrow sense to what Quine calls ideology, especially to the question what *kinds* of things there are.

This leads us to the *de dicto*—or *de conceptu*, to be more precise—reading which goes back to Frege’s contention that existence, like number, is a second-order property of concepts—namely the property of being instantiated. It cannot straightforwardly be expressed in the familiar idiom; the closest first-order representation we can get is

\[ \lambda x.\exists y(y \in x), \]

which stands for the set-theoretic property of being non-empty. Existence so understood does cut philosophical ice since there are not only entities (concepts or first-order properties) that have it but also entities that lack it.

called *The World as I found it*, I should have to include a report on my body, and should have to say which parts were subordinate to my will, and which were not, etc., this being a method of isolating the subject, or rather of showing that in an important sense there is no subject; for it alone could *not* be mentioned in that book” (Wittgenstein 1922: § 5.631; his emphasis).