RESCHER ON 'E!'

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In [4] N. Rescher rejected the definition of 'E!' given by H. S. Leonard in [3]. Leonard's definition was essentially

(L) $\qquad E!x$ iff $(\exists\phi)(\phi x \ . \ \Diamond \sim \phi x)$

In other words, a thing, x, exists if and only if x has some contingent property. Rescher's definition was essentially

(R1) $\qquad E!x$ iff $(\exists\phi)(\phi x \ . \ \Diamond (\exists y) \sim \phi y)$

In other words, x exists if and only if it has some nontrivial property. Later, in [5], Rescher provided a new definition

(R2) $\qquad E!x$ iff $(\exists P)(Px \ . \ (\exists y) \sim Py)$

In other words, x exists if and only if it has some nonuniversal property. In (R2) 'P' must range over only "qualitative properties". Such a property is one "denoted by a predicate which either (1) is a primative predicate of the language, or (2) is definable in terms of primative predicates by means of alternation and conjunction (only), in terms of these alone, and thus without negation and without any reference to particular individuals."

In this note I will first briefly show that Rescher's reason for rejecting (L) is unsatisfactory. Then I will show that (R2) must be rejected. Finally, I will make some remarks about the general attempt to formalize a definition of existence.

Rescher's rejection of (L) is based on the argument that such a definition denies existence to abstract mathematical objects, such as numbers, sets, etc., since "such objects necessarily have each of those properties which they do have." Thus, for abstract object X,

(R3) $\qquad (\forall\phi)(\phi X \supset \Box \phi X)$

Of course, given (R3), (L) must be rejected. But should we accept (R3)? It seems to me that there are clearly properties of numbers, etc. which are merely contingent. The number of coins in my pocket is two. It need not be. It is simply a matter of accident that two has the property of being

the number of coins in my pocket. That same number is denoted by the numeral '2'. It need not be. Perhaps being the number of coins in my pocket and being denoted by '2' are not properties at all of the number two, and thus are not contingent properties. But if they are not properties, what are they? Indeed, if they are not considered properties, what is?

Rescher would like to say that all properties of abstract objects are necessary, and that such objects exist. Do such objects, then, necessarily exist? One of Rescher's motivations has been to deal with the logic of 'exists' independently of the theology of 'exists' exhibited in the debate over the Ontological Argument. Now he in turn finds himself face to face with those theologians who argue that only God necessarily exists.

Rescher replaces his (R1) with (R2) because he wants a definition which, unlike (R1), will not entail '$(\forall x)\text{E}!x$' ('everything exists'). Now given (R2), to say that something does not exist is to say

(R4) $(\exists x)(\forall P)(Px \supset (\forall y)Py)$

Since this only makes sense when 'P' ranges over "qualitative properties", one line of attack would be to challenge Rescher's notion of such properties. (Is it more than just an *ad hoc* device? What is a "primative predicate"? etc.) But a surer path is to show that there are clear counter-examples to (R2). Given this definition of 'exists' and assuming that 'male' is a primitive predicate, we can say that since Hamlet has the property of being male, and since being male is not universal, Hamlet exists. Rescher probably would not want to admit existence for Hamlet, but if he did we might simply introduce Hamlet's brother. (Rescher may want a special *fictitious existence*, but he gives no evidence of such an inclination: 'E!' just means 'exists' *simpliciter*.) Still other kinds of counter-examples are possible when, for example, 'fictitious' is allowed as a value for 'P'.

Much of what Rescher has said in [5] seems unobjectionable. It surely is not the case that everything exists. Some things, e.g., Hamlet (and undoubtedly his brother) do not exist. The logic of 'exists' should be independent of, at least logically prior to, the theology of 'exists'. The question of whether 'exists' is a predicate is, indeed, unanswered by definitions of 'exists'. What seems wrong is just the general attempt to formalize a definition of 'exists'. No such definition given thus far seems immune from flaw. Those which do not entail '$(\forall x)\text{E}!x$' tend to allow, like (R2), easy counter-examples. Others are merely circular (*cf.* [1], p. 110). My hunch is that 'exists' cannot be defined formally in terms of other properties—nontrivial, nonnecessary, nonuniversal, or otherwise. If this is so, it should, however, serve as no comfort to those who claim that 'exists' is not a predicate. It simply means that if 'exists' can be defined, such a definition must be in less formal terms than those thus far offered (perhaps in terms of our ordinary linguistic conventions).

Final note: In [1] I was at some pains to show that while we can say what does not exist (viz. impossible things, where various kinds of impossibility are distinguished), we have great difficulty saying what *does* exist. The

line between what exists and what is possible in every sense yet fails to exist is virtually impossible to draw. My suggestion there is that as philosophers we have been for too long worried about where to draw this line while ignoring a more fundamental, and perhaps easier task: the distinction between (i) what can sensibly be said to exist or fail to exist ('/exists/', 'the category *exists*, in F. Sommers' terminology, see [6]), e.g., Nixon, Hamlet, faster than light dogsleds, round squares, etc., i.e., things to which the ascription of 'exists' or 'fails to exist' would be at least category correct, and (ii) things which cannot sensibly be said either to exist or fail to exist, e.g., red numbers, valid philosophers, and sad squares, i.e., things to which the ascription of 'exists' or 'fails to exist' would be category mistaken. What I suggest, in effect, is a "descent" from the class *exists* to the category *exists*; from 'exists' to '/exists/'.

REFERENCES

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