Sein Language

Being is said in many ways.

—Aristotle,
Met. 1003ª33

1. To Be

Being is one of the most important philosophical notions, and the behaviour of the verb *to be* has induced philosophical perplexities ever since (at least) Plato's *Sophist*. What follows is a contemporary examination of the matter. Discussions of the notion have always involved a curious blend of logic, linguistics, and metaphysics. My discussion will be no different.

I restrict my linguistic claims to contemporary English. To what extent similar points apply to other languages, I leave to people with better linguistic knowledge to determine. Ironically, though, it is the work of three native German speakers that we will find most useful in the investigations: Frege, Heidegger, and Meinong.

For background to the whole enterprise, let me start with the following distinctions. **Names** are a phrases which may refer to an object—or objects; I will allow for plural reference.[1] These include proper names (*Mary*, *John and Mary*) and definite descriptions (*the highest mountain*, *the highest mountains*). **Predicate complements** are phrases which follow the copula to produce a verb phrase. These include adjectival phrases (*red*), common nouns (*a man*), and participles, present (*running*) and past (*loved*). **Quantifier phrases** are noun-phrases starting with a quantifier (*some person*, *no people*, *all persons*). This trichotomy is essentially, Frege's. In his terms, the three categories are: names, (first-order) concept expressions, and second-order concept expressions.

Against this background we may look at the verb *to be*. In the next two sections of the essay, I will discuss the finite parts of the verb. Following that, we will turn to the nonfinite parts.

2. The Finite Parts of the Verb

The finite present indicative parts of the verb are: *am*/*is*/*are*. The finite past indicative parts are: *was*/*were*. The verb has finite subjunctive parts: *be* (present) and *were* (past). It also has a finite imperative part: *be* (2nd person present only). As far as I can see, the differences of tense and mood, though crucial for many matters, are of little importance for the present discussion. Hence I will restrict what I have to say explicitly to the present indicative parts. Similar comments apply to other tenses and moods.

Following standard logician's practice—and therefore, of course, Frege—we may classify the finite uses of the verb into three kinds that I will call the **predicative**, **equational**, and **existential**.[2] Let us see how these work.

2.1 The predicative use

Let us start with contexts of the form: *name* + *is*/*are* + *X*. If *X* is a predicative complement, the use of *is* is predicative. Paradigms are:

- John is happy.

- The man is running.

- The women are singing.

In predicative contexts, *is*/*are* expresses the relation of instantiation. In Meinongian terms, it expresses the *Sosein* (being so) of an object.[3] We can write this form as: *a* is/are *F* (or in the notation of modern logic, simply *Fa*).[4] The name, *a*, if it refers at all, refers to an object (or objects); the predicate complement refers to a property.[5] And such a sentence is true if the object(s) referred to by *a* instantiate the property referred to by *F*. Thus, in the first example, *John* refers to an object, *happy* refers to a property, and the sentence is true if John instantiates that property.

2.2 The equational use

Still in contexts of the form: *name* + *is*/*are* + *X*; if *X* is a name, then the occurrence of *is* is equational. Paradigms are:

- George Elliot is Mary Ann Evans.

- George is the winner of the race.

- The members of the cabinet are the four oldest people.

In contexts such as this, *is* expresses the relation of identity. In the syntax of modern logic, this form is standardly represented by: *a=b*. And such a sentence is true if the object(s) referred to by *a* are identical with the object(s) referred to by *b*.[6] Thus, in the first example, *Mary Ann Evans* refers to an object, *George Elliot* refers to an object, and *is* indicates that the two object are the same.

Meinong has no special name for this kind of being, so I will coin one: *Identitätsein*. This is a relation that each thing bears to itself, and to only itself. Clearly, it is a particular case of *Sosein*.

The reason for distinguishing the equational use of the verb from the predicative use is simple. From *name$_1$ is/are name$_2$*, we can infer *name$_2$ is/are name$_1$*. The relation is symmetric. From *name is/are F* we cannot infer *F is/are name*. Indeed, this is not even grammatical—except as a poetic way of re-expressing the original (*Happy is John*[*]).[7]

2.3 The existential use

Yet still in contexts of the form: *name + is/are + X*: if *X* is empty, we have the existential use of *is/are*. Paradigms of this are:

- Homer is.

- The Hanging Gardens of Babylon are (no longer).

These are perfectly grammatical, but sound rather stretched and precious in English.[8] More colloquial is to use the verb *exist*, thus: *Homer* exists; *the Hanging Gardens of Babylon* exist (*no longer*). The locution with *is* is, in fact, perfectly commonplace in some languages, such as Ancient Greek, which have no separate word for existence.

In Meinong's terms, this is the *is* of *Sein*. (Meinong further divides this into two kinds: existence [*existieren*] and subsistence [*bestehen*]. The first applies to concrete objects; the second applies to abstract ones.) A sentence of the form: *name + is/are* is true iff the object(s) named exist(s).

The existential use of *is* is clearly different from the other two uses, since both of these are grammatical relations, while this is a monadic property. We will write this, henceforth, as *E*.

2.4 Quantifier phrases

Matters are much the same in contexts of the form *quantifier phrase +is/are + X*.[9] If *X* is a predicative complement, the use of *is* is predicative:

- No men are running.

- Every woman is happy.

- Some dogs are allowed in.

The sentence is true iff no/every/some of the objects in question instantiate(s) the property specified by the predicative complement.

If the *X* is a name, the use of *is* is equational:

- No man is Fido (He's a dog).

- Every man (in the room) is John.

- Some man is the winner of the race.

The sentence is true iff no/every/some of the objects in question is/are identical with the object(s) referred to by the name.

If *X* is empty, the use of *is* is existential:

- No unicorn is (or ever was).

- Every one who was there is (no longer).

- Some of those mentioned are (no longer).

The sentence is true iff no/every/some of the objects in question exist.

Let us use S for the particular quantifier (*some*), then *some F is/are G* may be written as $Sx(Fx \wedge Gx)$.[10] The other two quantifiers mentioned may be defined from this in the familiar fashion. Sentences of this form bear further scrutiny. *F* can be the generic *thing/object*, *Ox*: *some thing*

(*something*) *is G*, *some object is G*. Expressions of the form *something is G* are then of the form Sx(O$x \wedge$Gx), or simply SxGx, since to be an object is a property that all things have. In *something is G*, then, the *is* is the *is* of predication.

In Sx(F$x \wedge$Gx), the *F* can also be the existence predicate: Sx(E$x \wedge$Gx). This says that some existent thing is *G*, or simply there exists a *G*. If ∃ is the existential quantifier, we may write this as ∃xGx. This is not equivalent to *some things are G*. Witness: *some things do not exist* (e.g., Father Christmas) versus *there exist things that do not exist*. Obviously, *there exist some Gs* entails *some things are G*, but not vice versa. However, if *G* is the kind of thing that is in space and time, then *some things are G* implies *there exists some Gs*. Thus, *some chairs are in the room* implies *there exist chairs in the room*. This is not because of the force of the *is*, but because of the kind of thing that chairs are: if something is a chair, it exists. More of *there exists* in a moment.

3. There

It is appropriate here to consider the use of *is* in the locution *there is*, as in *there is a church in the town*. It should be noted, first, that this is idiomatic in a certain sense: in other languages, different verbs are used for the sentences with the same meaning. French: *Il y a une église dans la ville* (*avoir*, to have); German: *Es gibt eine Kirche in der Stadt* (*geben*, to give).

Next, though linguists disagree over the parsing of such sentences,[11] one thing about which there is no disagreement is that *there is* **is not a quantifier**. What to make of such locutions?

3.1 There is, *I*

Let us start with locutions of the form *there is + X*, where *X* is a simple quantifier phrase, as in:

- There are no dinosaurs.

- There are some beautiful works of art.

- There is a man on the bus.

- There is everything described.

Perhaps the most natural understanding of the *there* in this context is as a dummy subject, standing in for the quantifier phrase. This makes our examples equivalent to:

- No dinosaurs are.

- Some beautiful works of art are.

- A man on the bus is.

- Everything described is.

(In the same way, *it* can be a dummy subject standing in for a noun phrase. *It is too difficult for me to get there* means: *for me to get there is too difficult*.)

The *is*, in this case, is clearly the *is* of existence (since it is not complemented), and can be replaced by the verb *exists*:

- There exist no dinosaurs [No dinosaurs exist].

- There exist some beautiful works of art [Some beautiful works of art exist].

- There exists a man on the bus [A man on the bus exists].

- There exists everything described [Everything described exists].

So, in contexts such as these, the *is* is the is of existence.

I note that indefinite descriptions like *a man on the bus* can be (at least) two different things. They can be common nouns, *John is a man on the bus*; they can also be quantifier phrases, *a man on the bus spoke to me* (i.e., *some man on the bus spoke to me*). On the current understanding, in *there is a man on the bus*, the phrase is a quantifier phrase (the singular form of *there are some men on the bus*). Given this, the inference: *a is an F, so there is* (*exists*) *an F* is invalid (*a* might not exist); but the inference *a is an F*, so *something is an F* is valid.

3.2 There is, *II*

Matters are somewhat different if the X in *there is* + X is a quantifier phrase plus a predicative complement, as in:

- There are no women on the committee.

- There are some children running.

- There is a man in the church.

- There is every person one could wish for here.

Again, the most natural understanding of such a sentence has the *there* standing in as a dummy subject of the quantifier phrase, giving:

- No women are on the committee.

- Some children are running.

- A man is in the church.

- Every person one could wish for is here.

So, e.g., *there is a man in the church* means $Sx(Mx \wedge Cx)$. The sentence is true if something satisfies $Mx \wedge Cx$, and the *is* here is the *is* of predication, as I have already observed. Similarly, *there is some thing* (*something*) *C* means *some thing is C*: $Sx(Ox \wedge Cx)$—or just $SxCx$: something satisfies *C*. The something here, note, does not have to be an existent thing. Witness: *There are three non-existent objects mentioned on the page, as well as one existent object* (Anna Karenina, Sherlock Holmes, Zeus; Winston Churchill).

I note, however, that sentences of this form can sustain a reading where the *there* stands for everything that follows the *is*. Thus, our four examples could mean:

- No women on the committee are [exist].

- Some children running are [exist].

- A man in the church is [exists].

- Every person one could wish for here [exists].

This reading is much less natural in most contexts. However, strictly speaking, sentences where what follows the *is* is a quantifier phrase plus a predicate complement are ambiguous.

3.3 An idiom

There is one complicating factor to note. In some idiolects *there exists* can be used just to mean *some*. Thus, in mathematical texts, in particular, one frequently finds locutions of the form *there exists a prime number greater than 10* (or *prime numbers greater than 100 exist*). However, these mean neither more nor less than that something has a certain property, such as *prime number greater than 100*. That the use of the word *exists* in this context is an idiom is shown by the fact that there are clearly contexts which resist this locution. Thus, again, *some things do not exist*—e.g., Father Christmas—makes perfectly good sense; *there exist things which do not exist* does not.

The idiomatic use of *exists* in mathematics is mirrored by an equally idiomatic use of modal vocabulary. For example, mathematicians frequently say that one mathematical structure *can* be embedded in another; or that, given a certain lemma, one *may* prove such and such a theorem. These locutions have nothing to do with possibility and necessity (much less permission and obligation). They are simply ways of expressing the fact that something satisfies a certain condition—a function (in the case of the embedding) or a deduction (in the case of the proof). So it is with talk of existence here.

The point that the use of the word *exists* in a mathematical context is just an idiomatic way of saying that a concept is instantiated was made by no less a person than Frege himself. Thus we have:[12]

> I have called existence a property of a concept. How I mean this to be taken is best made clear by an example. In the sentence 'there is at least one square root of 4,' we have an assertion not about (say) the definite number 2, nor about -2, but about a concept *square root of* 4; viz. that it is not empty.

But also:[13]

> Existential sentences, beginning 'there is' ('*es gibt*'), are closely related to particular ones: compare the sentence 'there are numbers which are prime' with 'some numbers are prime'. This existence is still too often confused with reality and objectivity.

It might be suggested that by 'reality' here, Frege means physical reality, rather than some platonic reality. However, this thought does not survive long. The platonic reality of abstract objects—if Frege really does sub-

scribe to this—is objective if anything is. So this cannot be the contrast he is drawing.

4. Nonfinite Parts of the Verb

Let us now turn to the nonfinite parts of the verb *to be*. These are principally the infinitive and the participles.

4.1 Verb complements

Let us start with the infinitive: (*to*) *be*. The most common occurrence of an infinitive in English is as a complement to a finite verb, especially an auxiliary verb, e.g., *will be*, *ought* (*to*) *be*, *may be*. In each of these cases, *be* can be used in the predicative, equational, and existential senses. For example, we have, respectively:

- John will *be happy*.

- John will *be the first person to pass the post*.

- After I die, I will not *be* (any longer).

Similarly for the other verbs which the infinitive can complement. The participles, *being* and *been* can also be used as verb complements. The first of these complements *be*, used in its predicative sense; the second complements *have*. Thus we have:

- Mary is being (has been) difficult.

- Mary is being (has been) the most difficult person.

- If I am thinking (have thought) then I am being (have been).

which display our three uses of the verb.

4.2 As a noun phrase

Perhaps the philosophically most significant use of the infinitive—with or without an added complement—is as a noun phrase. Thus in:

- *To be kind* is a noble aim.

- *To be the first man across the line* is his aim.

- *To be* is to do.

The three infinitive clauses illustrate the predicative, equational, and existential uses of the infinitive verb.

Again, the infinitive can usually be replaced by a present participle, used in a nominative sense—a gerund. Thus, we have equivalently:

- *Being kind* is a noble aim.

- *Being the first man across the line* is his aim.

- *Being* is doing.

In uses such as this, the infinitive or participle refers to a property—or, possibly, a state of affairs or an event involving that property.

4.3 The ambiguity of being

But what property? *To be* is, as we have seen, ambiguous. It can mean the property of existence, *Sein*. But it can also mean *Sosein* and *Identitätsein*. There is another kind of "*sein*" to note here. Not every sentence of the form *name is/exists* is true. *The tallest mountain exists* is true; *Father Christmas exists* is not. In Meinongian terms, the tallest mountain has *Sein*; Father Christmas has *Nichtsein*. An object, as such, may therefore have either *Sein* or *Nichtsein*. It itself is "beyond" the pair of predicates. Again, in Meinongian terms, any object has *Außersein*. That is, it is simply an object.

Now, *Außersein*, *Sosein*, and *Identitätsein* are equivalent. If something has *Außersein* (is an object), it has properties (*Sosein*)—if only the property of being an object; and if it has properties, it is obviously an object. Similarly, if something is an object (*Außersein*) it is self-identical (*Identitätsein*) and vice versa. We may therefore take these three to be essentially one notion, distinct from *Sein*.

To be or *being*, then, is ambiguous. It may mean either *Außersein* or *Sein*. The first corresponds to the grammatically transitive use of *is*; the second to the intransitive. I will refer to the first of these (*Außersein*) as $being_H$, and the second (*Sein*) as $being_M$. Clearly, anything with $being_M$ has $being_H$, but not vice versa.

The subscript 'M' here stands for Meinong, since this is how he uses the word, as I have noted. When Meinong speaks about being (*Sein*), he means something (*existieren*/*bestehen*) which an object may have or lack. The 'H' stands for Heidegger. For when Heidegger speaks of *being* he speaks of what all objects have, whether or not they exist. Thus he says:[14]

> Everything we talk about, mean, and are related to is in being in one way or another. What and how we ourselves are is also a being. Being is found in thatness and whatness, reality, the objective presence of things [*Vorhandenheit*], subsistence, validity, existence [*Da-sein*], and in the "there is" [*es gibt*].

And to make it clear that this is *Sosein*, that is, *Außersein*:[15]

> Being is used in all knowledge and all predicating, in every relation to beings and in every relation to oneself, and the expression is understandable without "further ado." Everyone understands "The sky is blue," "I am happy," and similar statements.

4.4 Being and beings

The gerund *being* can function not only as a (proper) noun, but also as a common noun. So one has: *this is a being*, *these are beings*. Beings are the things that have the property of *being* (whichever of the two meanings is at issue). As Heidegger is wont to say, everything has being (*Sein*), and so is a being (*Seiend*). This use, note, is not normally available with other gerunds. Thus, it makes no sense to say, e.g.: *this is a running** One has to say: *this is a running thing*. By contrast, *this is a being thing** makes no sense at all.

Finally, there is a bit of philosophical jargon concerning *being* worth noting. As well as the property *being*, some writers, arguably following Aristotle, have taken there to be property instances, tropes. Thus, for the universal *humanity*, we have: *the humanity of Socrates*, *the humanity of Xantippe*, etc. In logicians' terms, *humanity of*, is a function symbol (cf., *father of*), rather than a predicate. Applying this to the universal *being*, we then have: *the being of Socrates*, *the being of Xantippe*, etc.—and more generally, *the being of beings*. Or as Heidegger puts it: *das Sein des Seinden*.

5. This Be the End

This completes our overview of the behaviour of this most philosophically important and troubling of verbs. Said Quine: to be is to be the

value of a bound variable.[16] Things are slightly more complicated than that.[17]

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NOTES

1. In nearly all cases, reference is context dependent; but this will play no role in what follows.

2. See Priest (2008, xxi). Linguists themselves disagree about exactly how many distinct uses of the first two kinds there are (somewhere between one and four). See Mikkelson (2011).

3. For Meinongian terminology, see Marek (2008).

4. If the terms are plural, it would be more normal to write this as *Faa* (see Linnebo 2008), but I simplify here and in what follows.

5. At least, an abundant one; there is no heavy-duty metaphysics going on yet. (For the distinction between sparse and abundant properties, see Swoyer and Orilia [2011].)

6. In the plural case, each of the *a*s is a *b*, and vice versa.

7. Actually, one may reduce the *is* of identity to the *is* of predication by supposing that when it is used in this sense, it is actually elliptical for *is identical to*. So *George Elliot is Mary Anne Evans* means *George Eliot is identical to Mary Anne Evans*. The symmetry of the relation is then a fact about this particular predicate: cf., *Mary is the same height as George*.

8. When my first child was born, I recall sending my parents a telegram saying "Marcus Timon Priest is."

9. It makes no sense for the left flank of the *is* to be a predicative phrase, for reasons we have just noted. The only other permutations that make sense are: *quantifier phrase + is/are + name* (*every man is John*); *quantifier phrase + is/are + quantifier phrase* (*every member is some man*); *quantifier phrase + is* (uncomplemented) (*every man in the room is*). In the first two cases the *is* must be the equational *is*. (For all men, x, x = John; for every member, x, some man, y, is such that $x=y$.) In the third, it is obviously existential.

10. See Priest (2005).

11. See McNally (2013).

12. Geach and Black (1970, 48–9).

13. McGuiness (1984, 239).

14. Stambaugh (1996, 5).

15. Stambaugh (1996, 53).

16. Quine (1948).

17. Drafts of this paper were given in 2013 at the University of Göttingen, and at the workshop *Fiction/alism*, at the University of Hamburg. Thanks go to the participants in the ensuing discussions. Thanks, too, go to Friederike Moultmann for helpful discussions on these matters.

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