

Moore and Russell on existence as a predicate

by Charles Ripley

MOORE'S PAPER, "IS Existence a predicate?"¹ consists of an introduction and two parts. The first part, much the longer of the two, is well-known and relatively clear. In the second part the argument is sketched briefly rather than being developed with Moore's usual lengthy and exhaustive attention to detail. Consequently this part is rather obscure. But this much is immediately apparent: he is presenting arguments that tell against the thesis that existence cannot be a logical predicate. The first part appears to support this thesis. Since this part is clearer and better known, the opinion is widespread among philosophers that Moore simply denies that existence can be a predicate. For instance Jonathan Barnes writes, "It is plain, I think, that Frege and Moore are wrong in denying sense to sentences of the form, '*a* exists'."² But careful reading of Moore's "Is Existence a Predicate?", especially the second part, shows that this is far from being Moore's position. In this paper I focus chiefly upon the second part, Moore's final word on the subject, in an effort to discover just what is his position. I arrive at the conclusion that he has no consistent position on this issue; for his common-sense intuitions are at odds with certain logical doctrines of Russell, which Moore accepts.

Moore's paper is part of a symposium, following a paper on the same topic by William Kneale. Kneale, in a standard Russellian analysis, argues that existence is not a logical predicate or attribute. Sentences such as "Tame tigers exist" do have a meaningful use; but

¹ G. E. Moore, "Is Existence a Predicate?" *Aristotelian Society, Supp. Vol.*, 15 (1936), 175-88. This is the second and final symposium on the topic: the first paper is by William Kneale, 154-74.

² Jonathan Barnes, *The Ontological Argument* (London: Macmillan, 1972), p. 53.

here “exist”, although grammatically a predicate, is not logically a predicate. On Russell’s theory the sentence is perspicuously expressed as “For some x , x is tame and x is a tiger”. Assertions about existence are to be expressed by means of operators rather than by means of predicate terms. That existence is not a logical predicate is an assumption built into Russell’s system; hence a Russellian treatment of the question, “Is existence a predicate?”, inevitably produces a negative answer. But Moore does not appear to recognize this; for, in considering this question, he accepts and uses Russell’s concept of a propositional function.

At the beginning of his paper Moore professes not to be clear about what is meant by saying that a word or phrase in a particular sentence “stands for a predicate in the logical sense”. But he gathers from Kneale’s examples that in “This is red”, either “red” or “is red” is a logical predicate, and in “Tame tigers growl”, “growl” is such a predicate. Moore suggests that differences between the way these words are used in sentences and the way words such as “exists” are used might help us to discover what is meant by the claim that the latter words do not stand for logical predicates or attributes whereas the former do.

Thus he embarks upon the well-known, much-anthologized comparison of the logical behaviour of “Tame tigers growl” and “Tame tigers exist”. In the first place, “Tame tigers growl” is ambiguous: it can mean either “Some tame tigers growl” or “All tame tigers growl”. “Tame tigers exist”, however, can only mean “Some tame tigers exist”; for “All tame tigers exist” does not appear to have any meaning. This fact, according to Moore, “indicates ... 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 it clear just what the difference is” (p. 178).

Moore sets out to clarify the nature of the difference by comparing “Some tame tigers don’t growl” with “Some tame tigers don’t exist”. The former has a clear meaning, whereas the latter is “another queer and puzzling expression”. He suggests a possible meaning for it—“Some tame tigers are imaginary”. But on this interpretation “Some tame tigers don’t exist” 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”. The difference is that “growl” is used in the same sense in the latter pair, whereas “exist” is not used in the same sense in the former pair. “Some tame tigers don’t exist” is meaningless if “exist” is used in the sense that it has in “Some tame tigers exist”.

Thus, by consideration of traditional categorical propositions, Moore shows us that the use (or, as I prefer to put it, logical behaviour) of words like “exist” and predicates such as “growl” have striking differences. This analysis was prefaced by the question, “What difference between ‘Tame tigers exist’ and ‘Tame tigers growl’ can be the one he [Kneale] has in mind?” (p. 177). There is an implicit suggestion that the differences Moore has uncovered might be the ones Kneale has in mind in denying that existence is a predicate.

Moore’s result in this first section is not necessarily fatal to the view that existence can be an attribute or logical predicate. It could be argued that there is a difference between the copulative use of the verb “to be” (as in “Some tigers are tame”) and its absolute use (as in “Tame tigers are” or “Tame tigers exist”). Of course Russellian logic renders both, indifferently, as “ $(\exists x)(x \text{ is a tiger} \cdot x \text{ is tame})$ ”; but, as we shall see, Russell’s theory may have some limitations in this regard.

In the second section of the first part of the paper, Moore professes to bring out “another important difference between this use of ‘exist’ and the use of ‘growl’” (p. 182) by means of Russell’s doctrine of propositional functions. Moore accepts this doctrine with one qualification. For him, “Some men are Greeks” means not, as Russell has it, that “ x is a man and a Greek” is true in at least one instance, but that it is true in at least *two* instances. So much is implied by the use of the plural. Given this amendment, Moore thinks that Russell’s doctrine is true.

The difference between “growl” in “Some tame tigers growl” and “exist” in “Some tame tigers exist” that this doctrine brings to light is that, as Moore puts it, “... while the first asserts that more than one value of ‘ x is a tame tiger and *grows*’ 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” (p. 184). We must note that this is so because Russell’s procedure of giving logical reconstructions of sentences deals with assertions of existence by means of operators (quantifiers and the “E!” symbol which is defined in terms of quantifiers), not by means of predicate symbols. But Moore, as I have noted earlier, gives no sign of recognizing that the outcome is thus prejudged. He goes on to draw as his conclusion, “another thing which Mr. Russell himself holds”, 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” (p. 185). It is the meaninglessness of “This exists”, according to Moore, that explains the fact that “Some tame tigers exist” asserts only that some values of “ x is a tame tiger” are true, not that some values of “ x is a tame tiger *and exists*” are true. Thus Moore is convinced, through his qualified acceptance of Russell’s theory, that “This exists” is meaningless when “exist” is used in the sense that it bears in sentences such as “Some tame tigers exist”.

Since the point of the present paper turns upon the status of “This exists”, I shall pause to clarify Russell’s view. He distinguishes between two kinds of logical terms, which he calls “things” and “concepts”. “The former”, he tells us, “are the terms indicated by proper names, the latter those indicated by all other words.”³ Existence and its cognates are not terms. In *9 of *Principia Mathematica*,⁴ the universal and existential quantifiers are defined in terms of the “values” of propositional functions. “ $(x)(\phi x)$ ” is introduced as meaning “ ϕx is always true”, and “ $(\exists x)(\phi x)$ ” as “ ϕx is sometimes true” or “there exists an x such that ϕx ”. In *14, concerned with descriptions, Russell introduces the expression “ $(\iota x)(\phi x)$ ” for “the term x which satisfies ϕx ”. “The x satisfying ϕx exists” is symbolized as “ $E!(\iota x)(\phi x)$ ” and defined as “ $(\exists b)(x)[\phi x \equiv (x=b)]$ ”. He makes the following comment with regard to existence:

It would seem that the word “existence” cannot be significantly applied to objects immediately given; i.e. not only does our definition give no meaning to “ $E!x$ ”, but there is no reason, in philosophy, to suppose that a meaning of existence could be found which would be applicable to immediately given subjects.⁵

In response to a suggestion by Chisholm that in later years, notably in the *Inquiry*, “Russell now appears to be content that he has found such a meaning [of existence] ...”,⁶ Russell replies, “The suggestion

that I have found a meaning of ‘existence’ other than that given in *Principia Mathematica* *14 has no foundation.”⁷ All of this bears out Moore’s interpretation of the status of “This exists” in Russell’s thought.

Before leaving this topic, let us focus for a moment on the word “this”; thus far we have been concerned only with “exists”. As we have seen above, things are indicated by proper names, which Russell also calls, simply, “names”. A name is “a simple symbol, directly designating an individual which is its meaning, and having this meaning in its own right, independently of the meanings of all other words.”⁸ Apart from this designative function, a name has no meaning. If “ a ” is a name, the words, “ a exists” are meaningless.⁹ It is terms such as “ a ”, with the sole function of designating, that Kneale calls “logically proper names”. Now according to Russell, the proper names that are actually used in ordinary language are not logically proper names but disguised descriptions.

We may inquire significantly whether Homer existed, which we could not do if “Homer” were a name. when we ask whether Homer existed, we are using the word “Homer” as an abbreviated description; we may replace it by (say) “the author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.” The same considerations apply to almost all uses of what look like proper names.¹⁰

Exceptions to this principle are “‘this’ and ‘that’ and a few other words of which the meaning varies on different occasions.”¹¹ Because of this variation they cannot be descriptions. Then are they names? In “The Philosophy of Logical Atomism” (1918) Russell asserts that they are: “The only words one does use as names in the logical sense are words like ‘this’ or ‘that.’”¹² Hence “this exists”, like “ a exists”, will be meaningless. But in the *Inquiry* (1940) Russell’s view has changed. Here he gives us a protracted discussion of the use of “this” in the conviction that all “egocentric particulars”, words “the denotation of which is relative to the speaker”,¹³ can be defined in terms of “this”. He asks whether “this” is “a name, a description

⁷ B. Russell, “Reply to Criticisms”, *ibid.*, pp. 714–15.

⁸ B. Russell, *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1919), p. 178.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 178–9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

¹² *The Monist*, 28 (1918), 524.

¹³ B. Russell, *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1940), p. 108.

³ B. Russell, *The Principles of Mathematics*, 2nd ed. (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1937), p. 44.

⁴ Cf. A. N. Whitehead and B. Russell, *Principia Mathematica*, paperback ed. to *56 (Cambridge: University Press, 1962), p. 127.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

⁶ R. M. Chisholm, “The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge”, in *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*, ed. P. A. Schilpp (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University, 1944), p. 437.

or a general concept”¹⁴ and finds that the fact that “the designation of ‘this’ is continually changing”¹⁵ prevents its inclusion in any of these three classes. Russell concludes that he has explained the use of “this” by “depriving the word of all significance in isolation.”¹⁶

Now if “this” is not a name, it cannot be a logically proper name; hence the meaninglessness of “*a* exists” is irrelevant to the question of the status of “This exists”. And although “this” has no significance in isolation, it is not isolated on normal occasions of utterance of “This exists”. On such occasions it always has a designation. Consistent with this line of thought is Kneale’s discussion of “This exists”. Kneale observes that “we are able to indicate to each other the particulars to which we refer” (p. 165); he holds that this ability is “due to the peculiarity of our habitual rules for the use of certain words such as ‘this’, ‘here’, ‘now’ and ‘I.’” Kneale concludes that the meaningfulness of “This exists” is consistent with Russell’s theory.

From these considerations it follows that even according to Mr. Russell’s account of existential propositions the sentence “this exists” may have a perfectly good meaning, namely, “there is something to which my token ‘this’ has the deictic relation.” (Pp. 165–6)

This appears to be the only sense in which Russell’s theory permits “This exists” to have significance. On this interpretation existence is not a predicate: the demonstrative is analyzed as a statement of a dyadic, epistemic relation, existentially quantified. I am surprised that Moore does not comment upon this part of Kneale’s paper: I would expect him to object that “This exists” says something about the item referred to, not merely (as Kneale’s analysis has it), that something is being referred to. A more contemporary wording of the same point is that in “This exists” the demonstrative “this” is *used*, whereas in Kneale’s formulation it is *mentioned*. Hence the two propositions cannot have the same meaning. The difference is clear when one thinks of a context which “This exists” would actually be uttered. My grandfather told a story of an Irishman who went to the zoo. Confronted with a giraffe he was thunderstruck and exclaimed, “There ain’t no such animal!” Now let us suppose that this man was less negatively minded. He might well have exclaimed in amazement, “This exists!” In doing so he would express surprise; but the

cognitive meaning of his statement is simply that what is before him does exist. He is not saying anything about his token, “this”, as Kneale would have him do; he is simply using it.

It might be objected that in the Irishman’s “This exists!” “this” is a covert description, as Russell claims “Homer” to be in the question, “Did Homer exist?” On this interpretation the Irishman’s exclamation really amounts to, “The animal with a very long neck surmounted by a small head, etc., exists.” This sentence can be dealt with by existential quantification; any temptation to regard existence as a predicate, in this example, is thus removed. Now I doubt the plausibility of this line of argument; for it confers upon this unlettered Irishman analytical powers such as he need not possess. Moreover Russell himself provides the material for an effective rebuttal. In his analysis of the proposition, “This is hot”, he raises the question of the referent of “this”. This word, he tells us, “may be replaced by something that is strictly a name, say ‘W’, denoting that whole complex of qualities which constitutes all that I am now experiencing.”¹⁷ The “impersonal truth” expressed by “This is hot” can now be expressed as “hotness is part of W”. Unfortunately, however, this move has “the apparent consequence that all judgments of perception are analytic”. If “W” names a bundle of qualities that includes hotness, then, as Russell puts it, “as soon as ‘W’ is defined, the proposition ‘this is hot’ becomes analogous to such propositions as ‘rational animals are animals.’” The only way out of this difficulty, according to Russell, “is to say that, although ‘W’ is, in fact, the name of a bundle of qualities, we do not know, when we give the name, *what* qualities constitute W. That is to say, we must suppose that we can perceive, name and recognize a whole without knowing what are its constituents.” On this view, which appears to be based on sound psychological principles, the Irishman could perceive the giraffe and be surprised at its existence without, at that moment, being able to describe it. Hence the “this” of his “This exists!” need not be interpreted as a covert description.

Some time ago we left G. E. Moore, near the end of the first section of his paper, stating his conviction that when “exist” is used in the sense that it bears in sentences such as “Some tame tigers exist”, to point and say “This exists”, is to express “*no proposition at all*”. We have seen that he reaches this conclusion by accepting and making use of Russell’s concept of a propositional function. This argument of Moore’s, and the earlier one that shows the difference in logical

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 109.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 113.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 128.

behaviour between “grows” and “exists” when used as grammatical predicates of categorical propositions, are widely interpreted as arguments through which Moore shows, to his satisfaction, that existence is not an attribute. Yet the sentence with which Moore concludes his first section is far from saying this. It is limited, tentative and qualified. On the meaninglessness of “This exists” he says:

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.” (P. 185)

This is far from being a ringing declaration that existence is not a predicate!

In the largely ignored Part II, Moore argues that there are senses of “exist” in which existence is a logical predicate or attribute. Such, at least, is my interpretation of what he must be about, given that he is evidently not satisfied with the negative evidence of Part I. But Moore is tantalizingly tentative and non-committal. He begins with a one-sentence account of what he has done in Part I.

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. (P. 186)

The qualifying phrase, “in this usage”, deserves to be noted. Moore’s expressed view is that “some tame tigers exist” represents a specific “use” or “usage” of “exist”. In this usage, “This exists” is meaningless, and hence there is reason to say that existence is not a predicate. But, he goes on to suggest, there are other uses of “exist”:

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”. (P. 186)

The two preliminary sentences of Part II have now been quoted. The remainder of Part II is divided into two sections numbered (1) and (2), in each of which a different alternative “significant use” is suggested. The first sentences of section (1), however, present a

general argument for the significance of “This exists”. Moore begins by considering “the case of anything to point at which and say ‘This is a tame tiger’ is significant.” Of any such object, he continues, “... you can clearly say *with truth* ... ‘This *might* not have existed’, ‘It is *logically possible* that this should not have existed’.” He goes on to argue that if “This might not have existed” is true, “This does in fact exist is also true”; hence “This exists” is significant. Moore follows this argument with a second one leading to the same conclusion:

If the sentence (a) “It is logically possible that this should not have existed” expressed a true proposition, it seems to follow that the sentence (b) “This does not exist”, where “this” refers to the same object to which it refers in (a), must express a proposition, though a false one; and, if so, the sentence “This exists”, which expresses its contradictory, must also be significant, and the proposition it expresses true. (P. 186)

Moore now proceeds to suggest the first of the alternative senses of “exist” in which “This exists” is significant. Before considering it, however, let us pause to ask how plausible is the claim that the verb “to exist” is used in two different senses in

(1) Some tame tigers exist,

and in

(2) This might not have existed,

where “this” refers to a tame tiger at which one is pointing. For such is Moore’s claim. In Part I he concludes that “This exists” is meaningless when “exists” is used in the sense of (1). In Part II, in the argument I have just summarized, he deduces the significance of “This exists” from the truth (hence significance) of (2). But it is hard to see how there could be a difference in sense between (1) and (2). Imagine the sentence

(1a) This tame tiger exists,

said as the speaker points at a certain tiger. The sense of “exist” in (1a) is surely the same as in (1). One can now proceed to point again, at the same object and say,

(1b) This tame tiger might not have existed.

Or else (still pointing),

(2) This might not have existed.

Thus we have progressed from (1) to (2) through two intermediate steps. All four of these sentences appear to be significant, and there appears to be no ground for saying that the sense of “exist” is not the same in all of them. Then why, one may well ask, does Moore think otherwise? The answer is that given his conclusion in Part I and his evident conviction that “This exists” can be said significantly, he has two alternatives, either to disavow his argument in Part I or to say that “This exists” is significant in a different sense of “exist”. He opts for the latter alternative.

In both of Moore’s alternative senses of existence, the referent of the demonstrative “this” is a sense-datum. In the first sense, which I shall call “sense (1)”, to say “This exists” is to say, of a sense-datum or set of sense-data, “This sense-datum is of a physical object”. An after-image, Moore observes, is not “of” a physical object; hence in this sense of “exist” a person having an after-image could appropriately say to himself “This [image] does not exist”. Moore makes no suggestions as to the possible role of sense (1) in intersubjective discourse; but it would seem to have a place. A desert traveller might point and say to his companion, “An oasis!” The latter, familiar with the countryside, might reply “A mirage”. “What you think you see over there does not exist”, he might explain; “your sense-data are not ‘of’ any physical object”. Both travellers are having visual experiences that seem to be caused by an oasis in a certain place nearby. But what they seem to perceive does not exist; their sense-data are “of” no physical object. Subjective hallucinations also provide opportunities for sense (1). A student of mine, a nurse, once told me of a patient in *delerium tremens* who told her that the floor was swarming with mice. He was busily engaged in scooping them up by the handfuls and dumping them into a pillowcase. He was grateful when the nurse helped him in his task, picking up handfuls of the (to her) imaginary mice and dropping them into the pillowcase. But instead of doing this she might well have said, “Those do not exist”. She might have gone on to explain that she was using “exist” in Moore’s sense (1)—that the patient was having sense-data that are not “of” any physical object.

The nurse might also have granted that the mice did exist in Moore’s sense (2). Sense (2) has to do with the existence of the sense-datum itself; according to Moore it is significant to say of a

sense-datum as such, “This might not have existed”. If so, by the argument we have seen above, “This exists” is also significant. In support of his claim he uses the example of an after-image:

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. (P. 188)

On the sense-datum theory, in any case of perception I am directly aware of sense-data and only indirectly aware of physical objects. Hence in having a visual experience I am having certain sense-data. So presumably it would be true at any time to say of my sense-data, in Moore’s sense (2), “These might not have existed”; for I might have had my eyes closed at that moment.

I shall not discuss Moore’s comments upon the logical behaviour of these two special senses of “exist”; to do so would be beside the point. I shall argue that neither of these two, whatever their merits or their logical behaviour, can be the sense of “exist” Moore is using when he argues, early in Part II, that “This exists” is significant. His argument, let us recall, focuses upon the case of “anything to point at which and say ‘This is a tame tiger’ is significant” (p. 186). In such a case he thinks it also to be significant to point at the thing and say “This exists”, “*in some sense or other*” (p. 186). He states his reason for thinking so as follows:

... it seems to me that you can clearly say *with truth* of such an 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 also true, and therefore the words “This exists” significant. (Pp. 186-7)

Thus the significance of “This exists” depends upon the possibility of saying, with truth, of the object at which you point, “This might not have existed”. Now let us suppose that “exist” is being used in sense (2). Given the concept of sense-data, Moore’s claim that one can truly say of a sense-datum that it might not have existed—that I might not have had the sense experience in question—is plausible. But one surely cannot point at a sense-datum and say, “This is a tame tiger”. Since sense-data are private objects, to think

of pointing at them is to confuse categories. In my examples of possible everyday use of sense (1) I allowed for pointing, not at sense-data, but at the apparent spatial location of the experienced objects. The *delerium tremens* patient might have pointed towards the floor, directing the attention of the nurse to the place where he “saw” the mice. Had she convinced him of their non-existence, he could have pointed in the same direction and said, “Those do not exist”. By this he would mean, “What I seem to see in that location does not exist” or, as Moore would put it, “My sense-data are not ‘of’ physical objects”. In this way we can make fair sense of Moore’s reference to pointing in relation to sense (1); but no such line of interpretation is available in relation to sense (2). This sense of “exist” has to do with the sense-datum as such. Since it makes no sense to speak of pointing at a sense-datum, Moore cannot be using “exist” in sense (2) when he points at something and says “This is a tame tiger” or “This might not have existed”. The demonstrative must pick out something at which one can point.

Now let us turn to the possibility that when one points at something and says, “This might not have existed”, one is using “exist” in sense (1). By this one would mean, “This sense-datum might not have been ‘of’ a physical object” or, in other words, “This sense experience I am now having might have been a dream or an hallucination”. In relation to sense (1) we must distinguish carefully between “This might not exist” and “This might not have existed”. The former expresses a doubt about the veridicality of one’s present perception: it means, “This present sense experience of mine might be hallucinatory”. The latter is a counterfactual assertion. Now the problem arises that to make a true counterfactual statement, one must be assured of the fact to which the statement is contrary. We have seen that Moore himself says, “... I do not see how it is possible that ‘This might not have existed’ should be true, unless ‘This does in fact exist’ is also true ...” (pp. 186–7). When “exist” is used in sense (1), this amounts to the claim that “This sense-datum might not have been ‘of’ a physical object” cannot be true unless “This sense-datum is in fact ‘of’ a physical object” is also true. But how could one know this latter proposition to be true, given that to accept and use sense (1) of “exist” is to entertain the possibility of a sense-datum *not* being “of” a physical object? Once this possibility is entertained, there is usually no basis for an immediate decision. In most cases there is no intrinsic characteristic of illusions, hallucinations and dreams that marks them as non-veridical experiences. A vivid dream, for instance, usually is known to be a dream only after the dreamer wakes

up. Now we have seen that Moore makes the universal claim that in the case of “anything to point at which and say ‘this is a tame tiger’ is significant ... you can clearly say *with truth* of any such object, ‘This might not have existed’” (p. 186). But this is not so when “exist” is used in sense (1). Were the desert traveller to point and say “This is an oasis”, his statement would be significant, although false. But according to Moore’s own account of such matters, the traveller could not say with truth, “This might not have existed” (that is, “This sense-datum might not have been ‘of’ a physical object”), since there is no ground for asserting “This does in fact exist” (that is, “This sense-datum is in fact ‘of’ a physical object”). It follows that the sense of “exist” in which one who has pointed and said “This is an X” can always truly say “This might not have existed” cannot be sense (1).

Earlier we found no reason to suppose that the verb “to exist” is used in different senses in “Some tame tigers exist” and “This might not have existed”, the latter being said of an object at which one points. But we explored Moore’s hypothesis that there is a difference, examining the two alternative senses of “to exist” in which he claims “This exists” to be significant. Since he derives the significance of this statement from the truth of “This might not have existed”, he is committed to holding that “to exist” must have the same sense in both these propositions. We have now established that when the verb “to exist” is taken in either of Moore’s two alternative senses, the proposition, “This might not have existed”, is not always clearly true, as Moore declares it to be. Hence, it cannot be in either of these senses that “This exists” is meaningful. Consequently the sense in which Moore argues that this proposition is meaningful must surely be the same sense of “to exist” as is used in “Some tame tigers exist”. Thus the argument with which section (1) of Part II begins is in conflict with Moore’s conclusion in Part I that “This exists”, in this sense, is meaningless.

Moore went wrong in his relatively uncritical acceptance of Russell’s theory, using it as a framework within which to examine the meaning of the claim that existence is not a predicate, without recognizing the inevitability of the answer. Moore is uneasy with his conclusion that “This exists” is meaningless; for as a common-sense philosopher he thinks there are contexts in which it can be meaningful. He seeks to have the best of both worlds by conjecturing that when “This exists” is meaningful, a different sense of existence is involved. We have seen that he did not succeed in substantiating this claim. It is clear, in retrospect, that Moore should have discarded

30 Russell, nos. 37-40 (1980)

Russell's theory. A procrustean logician is an unsuitable bedfellow
for a common-sense philosopher.

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