

# V. Being



## 1. The Four Meanings of “is”

Having characterised truth as the correspondence of knowledge and reality, it is time to ask: What is real? One answer would be: everything that is. But what does “is” mean? Just as it was impossible to provide an explicit definition of the concept of truth, it is equally impossible to grasp the meaning of the term “is” by means of an explicit definition. In any definition like “the meaning of ‘is’ is such and such”, we would be using the meaning of the term “is”, which is precisely what we are trying to define.

The verbal noun that goes with “is” is “being”. Either way, we are no more able to define explicitly the meaning of the verbal noun “being” than we are able to define the meaning of the finite verb “is”. If we say “Being *is* such and such”, we are again using the term that is to be defined as part of the definition. Through the meaning of “is”, we imply that we understand “being”, which is in fact what we are trying to understand. Faced with any explicit definition of being – for example, “Being is reality” – we could ask: Is reality per se the same as being? We would have to answer this question in the negative, since whatever is not real but only imagined also *is*. Like the concept of truth, being is another key concept of philosophy that cannot be explicitly defined. Therefore, we are only able to define the concept of being implicitly but not explicitly. Like the concept of truth, the concept of being can only be elucidated. In elucidating the concept of being, we can raise to consciousness what we already know about it in an undeveloped form.

Like the concept of truth, the concept of being is also *ambiguous*. When we say “Socrates is”, the term “is” does not

mean the same as when we say “Socrates is a human being.” In the first instance, “is” in the sentence about Socrates means that “Socrates exists”; in the second instance, it connects “Socrates” and “human being”. In the first instance, the meaning of “is” is existential; in the second instance, it is copulative. The copulative meaning can be broken down further into three different meanings.

If we say “Socrates is a human being”, we mean that Socrates is a member of a class, namely, the class of human beings. Instead of a “member”, we may also talk about an “element”. The term “class” in this context does not mean a specific social stratum, but a totality or a set. A class in this sense is the totality of the objects or creatures that share a common property. The class of human beings, for example, is the totality of those creatures who share the property of being human. We can refer to such a class either in the plural or in the singular. We can say, “Human beings are creatures” or “The human being is a creature.” An individual human being – say, Socrates – is something concrete and visible. The class of human beings, in contrast, is something abstract, that is, something that has been “drawn out” from the individual and concrete human beings and is no longer visible. Thus, we have never seen that abstract property which is common to all human beings – the property of being human. What we have seen is only individual human beings.

If Socrates is a human being, he is an element in the class of human beings. If, further, a human being is a creature, the class of human beings is also included in the class of creatures. In the first instance, the term “is” indicates (a) an element relation; in the second instance, (b) a class relation. The difference is that in a class relation, the characteristics of the larger class are also those of the smaller. Just as, for example, the class of creatures is invisible, so is that of human beings. However, where an

element belongs to a class, the properties of the class are not necessarily also properties of the element. For example, while the class of human beings has no head, Socrates indeed had a head. We can further say that Socrates is Socrates. Then the copulative “is” means as much as (c) “is identical with”.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the word “is” has one existential meaning and at least three copulative meanings; that is, it has at least four different meanings.

However, if “is” has four different meanings, that is not to say that it simply means a number of different things, that is, that it is homonymous. A homonym is a word that conveys a diversity of meanings, while its sounds and spelling remain the same. Thus, a “lock” can be a device for securing doors or a strand of hair, to give just one example. But “is” does not simply mean a number of different things. Rather, it has a main meaning to which the various other meanings are subordinated.

But what is the main meaning of “is”? Is it the existential meaning or one of the three copulative meanings? It seems to us that it is the existential meaning. To make a proposition such as “Socrates is a human being” true, we must assume that Socrates exists. If Socrates did not exist, the proposition would not be true. Therefore, a true proposition must have a referent in reality, even if the existence of this referent is only hypothetical. So we may ask: “Did Socrates exist?” Likewise, the truth of a proposition such as “The human being is a creature” presupposes the existence of a class, and the truth of “Socrates is Socrates” the existence of Socrates. That is a law of logic, which can be phrased as follows: If a proposition is true, it presup-

---

<sup>1</sup> These three distinctions, as well as that between property and attribute, were worked out by Frege, cf. *Concept and Object*, 167-178. Transl. Geach and Black.

poses the existence of something about which it tells a truth. This is also called the law of existential generalisation. The truth of the proposition leads to the general conclusion that there is something to which the conclusion applies.

The copulative meaning of “is”, then, in this logical sense, presupposes the existential meaning. Therefore, we may assume that of the four meanings of “is”, the existential one is logically fundamental. Although the four meanings of “is” vary, “is” does not simply mean different things. Rather, the various copulative meanings of “is” are oriented towards *one* basic meaning, so to speak, as their focus. The term “is” has *one* focal meaning, the meaning of existence. This was first realised by Aristotle, even though he does not yet distinguish between the different meanings of “is” mentioned above and he calls the focus of the different meanings of “is” not existence, but substance.<sup>2</sup> The term “substance”, as he uses it, can also be translated as essence.

The theory of what is is also called the theory of being or ontology. The Greek participle “*on*” means “what is” and the Greek noun “*logos*” also means “theory” or “study”. The subject matter of ontology was first described by Aristotle in the following programmatic terms:

There is a science which investigates being as being and the attributes which belong to this in virtue of its own nature. Now this is not the same as any of the so-called special sciences; for none of these others treats universally of being as being. They cut off a part of being and investigate the attribute of this part; this is what the mathematical sciences for instance do.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Aristotle, *Metaph.*, Book 4, Chapter 2, 1003a33-b10, Book 7, Chapter 1, 1028a13-30. Transl. Ross.

<sup>3</sup> *Metaph.*, Book 1, Chapter 1, 1003a21-26. Transl. Ross.

Thus, the other sciences – mathematics, physics or biology – are partial sciences. They “cut off” a part from the whole and they explore what is only in so far as it is countable, mobile or alive. In contrast, ontology does not “cut off” anything from the whole and explores what is as it is. Therefore, it is not a partial or special science, but the science of what is common to all that is. All that is is. Therefore, being is common to all that is. Consequently, ontology, as the theory of what is as what is, is not a special discipline, but a universal one. It is the theory of all that is, in so far as it is. But since the existential meaning of “is” is primary, the fundamental question of ontology is: “What exists?”

## 2. Real Existence and Real Facts

The most obvious answer is probably: everything that can be experienced through the senses. Stones, plants, animals and human beings can be experienced through our senses. Therefore, we attribute real existence to them. We learnt in the last chapter that real existence, too, is only hypothetical. Nevertheless, subject to this qualification, we can attribute reality to everything that we experience through our senses. With this in mind, for the sake of simplicity, we can describe hypothetically real existence as real existence.

In agreement with everyday understanding, we define real existence as an existence that can be verified by sensory experience. We all have seen stones, plants, animals and human beings. That is why we say that stones, plants, animals and human beings exist. If we were asked whether stones, plants, animals and human beings really exist, we would answer: “Of course they do.” For what could be more real than something we can see and touch? We all have carried stones, mowed lawns,

stroked cats and embraced human beings. The criterion of real existence is our ability to experience things through our senses.

But this criterion does not mean that only what we actually experience through our senses really exists. At the bottom of the sea, there may be many treasures that nobody has seen. Nevertheless, they really exist, because they may one day be seen and raised by a diver. Experience through the senses as the criterion of existence means that only what we can experience through our senses really exists. Conversely, what we cannot experience through the senses has no real existence. We have never seen a horse with wings, except in paintings. But a painted horse is not a real horse. A painted horse has no real existence, except perhaps in a fresco. Therefore, the criterion of what really exists is also the criterion of what does not really exist.

What really exists exists in connection with other things. This connection can come about in various ways. But the way it can come about is restricted by *categories*. Category (from *katēgoría*) literally means accusation, and also statement. We can state about Socrates that he is so and so tall, for example, 170 centimetres. His height falls into the category of quantity. We can state that he has a certain shape, for example, that he is stout. Girth falls into the category of quality. We can also state that at a certain time, he is in a certain place, say, at seven o'clock in the morning in the marketplace in Athens. Place and time fall into the categories of space and time. We can further state that he is doing something, for example, walking about, or that he is suffering from something, for example, freezing because he is wearing nothing but a sheepskin. Walking about and freezing fall into the category of acting and suffering. We can state that he has certain relationships with other people, for example, that he is married to Xanthippe and has three sons. Being married and having children fall into the category of rela-

tionships. Finally, we can state that he is a human being. That is the category of essence, inasmuch as it says what he is.

“Essence” is an ambiguous term. It has both a concrete and an abstract meaning. The concrete essence is the concrete Socrates, the Socrates of flesh and blood. The abstract essence, on the other hand, is what is left of Socrates once all flesh and blood has been “abstracted”, that is, removed from the concrete Socrates. What is then left behind is what he has in common with all other human beings. Ultimately, that is the bare fact of his humanity. The term “substance” is as ambiguous as the term “essence”. Like essence, substance can be either concrete or abstract. Concrete substance is the result of the coalescence of matter and form. Abstract substance is what is left, once matter has been eliminated. The division into categories also goes back to Aristotle.<sup>4</sup>

The number of categories identified by Aristotle is controversial. But the decisive thing is his realisation that things that exist occur in combination with other things that exist. The way in which things that exist can occur in combination with other things is predetermined by these categories. Categories, on the one hand, are the most universal concepts under which the predicates of a simple proposition fall. A simple proposition is one that consists of a subject, a predicate and perhaps an object. A simple proposition is not composed of several clauses, but it can become part of a composite statement. But categories are not only the most universal concepts under which the predicates of a simple proposition fall. They are also the most universal genres under which things identified by linguistic predicates can be

---

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Aristotle, *Cat.*, On the category of substance, Chapter 5, 2b11-4b19.

classified.<sup>5</sup> They are the largest “drawers” in which we can “store” almost everything that is.

The combinations of the things that exist within categories are also called facts today. For example, it is a fact that Mr or Mrs Smith is so and so tall and has such and such a shape, happens to be in a specific place at a specific time, does or suffers something, or is a father or mother. When we talk about a fact, we do not say that it is, but that it is the case. As the world consists not only of individual beings but of combinations of beings, it is a sign of progress in thinking that Wittgenstein introduces his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921) with these words: “The world is all that is the case. The world is the totality of facts, not of things.”<sup>6</sup>

A thing is, or exists, while a fact is the case. A thing is something that is; a fact is a combination of things that are. The combinations of things that are occur within the framework of certain possibilities. The possible combinations of what is with what is are limited by categories. We cannot connect willy-nilly anything with anything else. For example, we cannot say that Socrates is a prime number. That would be a category mistake, since the essence of Socrates does not fall into the category of either quantity or number. Likewise, we cannot say that Mr Smith or Mrs Jones is a square root, because the essence of neither Mr Smith nor Mrs Jones falls into the category of square roots, except perhaps in a figurative sense. Thus, the world is the totality of facts in so far as the world is everything that is organised in categories. Now we can formulate the question “What exists?” more accurately as: “What facts are the case?”

---

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Aristotle, e.g. *Metaph.*, Book 5, Chapter 6, 1016b32, Book 10, Chapter 13, 1054b35.

<sup>6</sup> TIP, § 1 and § 1.1. Transl. Ogden.

### 3. Physical Facts and Psychic Facts

The first facts that come to mind here are probably those that we can verify by the evidence of our external senses, for example, the fact that snow is white. That is a physical fact. It is true that we do not see the fact that snow is white with our eyes. But we do see the white colour of the snow, albeit, to put it more accurately, only the white colour of, say, a concrete snowball. The sense of sight, which provides evidence for this contention, is directed towards the outside. It is an external sense, like the other four. We will call facts that we can verify by the evidence of our external senses *physical facts*. We have learnt that physical facts – for example, that snow is white – are also hypothetical. However, subject to this qualification, we can simplify matters by calling physical facts real, even if they are real only in a hypothetical sense.

But we cannot supply evidence for all facts through our external senses. For example, I can see the white colour of the snow, but I cannot see the process of seeing as such. Nevertheless, it is a real fact that I can see a white snowball, hear the whistle of a marmot, smell the odour of a cigar, taste the juice of a lemon and feel for the key to my front door. It is a further real fact that I feel pain, say, if I am stung by a wasp. I can just about see the sting of the wasp, but the pain itself I can neither see nor perceive with any of my other external senses. However, as I still feel the pain, the evidence for the facts in question is supplied, not by my external perception, but by my internal or inner perception. Like external perception, inner perception requires the stimulation of my nerve ends. To use the somewhat dramatic image of one of my students: “The breakers of the world crash against the cliffs of my body.”

Facts for which we can supply evidence solely by our internal perception we will call *psychic facts*. We can also call them

facts of consciousness. Consciousness is another concept that cannot be explicitly defined, but only elucidated. The concept of consciousness comprises everything that can occur in consciousness. In everyday life, we use the term in a narrower sense. Consciousness contains a diversity of things. Accordingly, philosophers have divided consciousness in diverse ways. In everyday life, we still speak about feeling, willing and thinking.

As it is not clear how the different faculties of the soul relate to each other, the pattern we may find most convincing is that introduced by Descartes, the founder of the modern philosophy of consciousness, in his *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641) and adopted by Franz Brentano (1838-1917) in his *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* (1874). Descartes distinguishes (a) ideas, (b) judgments and (c) acts of will,<sup>7</sup> and Brentano follows him by distinguishing (a) representations, (b) judgments and (c) acts of will, which he also calls motions of the soul, interests, or acts of love and hate.<sup>8</sup>

The term “idea” (a) here means the same as representation. But the term “representation” is ambiguous. We can take it to mean either the act of representation or what is being represented, that is, the content of the representation. When we say that representations are a part of consciousness, we mean acts of representation. This concept of re-presentation, again, cannot be explicitly defined: An act of representation is anything I represent. Therefore, an act of representation – we may elucidate – is anything that can occur in our consciousness. A judgment (b) consists in our recognition of a proposition as true or false. Here

---

<sup>7</sup> Descartes, *Meditations*, Meditation 3, Section 5, 36-37. Transl. Cottingham.

<sup>8</sup> Brentano, *Psychology II*, Chapter 6, § 3, 33-36. Transl. Rancurello et al.

we must distinguish between judgment and proposition. A judgment is something psychic and, like a representation, may vary from one person to another. In contrast, a proposition, that is, the content of a sentence (see p. 98), is nothing psychic, but we assume that it remains identical despite the differences between the psychic processes of different people. Thus, we may or may not recognise the theorem of Pythagoras as true, but the sense of the sentence “ $a^2+b^2 = c^2$ ”, that is, the proposition  $a^2+b^2 = c^2$ , is true regardless. An act of will (c) consists in our desiring something as good or avoiding it as bad.

According to this model, consciousness has different levels. The lowest level is that of (a) representations; the second that of (b) judgments; and the third that of (c) acts of will. Judgments require representations; acts of will require both judgments and representations. Without representations, I cannot regard anything as either true or false or desire anything as good or bad. Likewise, without judgment, that is, without evaluating something as good or bad, I cannot desire it as good or reject it as bad. If I desire an apple, I do so because I have explicitly or tacitly passed the judgment that it is good. If I avoid milk that has gone off, I do so because I have explicitly or tacitly passed the judgment that it is bad. As a rule, we do not desire or avoid “blindly” but “seeing”, because our response is based on judgment. But this judgment need not always be explicit or pronounced. We sometimes find certain people appealing or unappealing, pleasant or unpleasant, “at first sight”. As Shakespeare put it: “Who ever lov’d, that lov’d not at first sight?”<sup>9</sup>

What is the case in our consciousness is a fact of consciousness in the wider sense. A judgment pronounced, on the other hand, is a fact of consciousness in the narrower sense. Natu-

---

<sup>9</sup> As You Like It, Act III, Scene 5, Phoebe.

rally, we are not conscious in the narrower sense of all facts of consciousness in the wider sense. I may see a face in a crowd without consciously taking it in. I may only become conscious of having seen that face before when I see it again later. It is an astonishing property of human beings – acquired in the course of evolution – to be able to remember faces, as opposed to masks or names. Similarly, I may feel a pain without becoming conscious of it, because it has not reached the intensity that would draw my attention to it. Only a stronger pain is a fact of consciousness in the narrower sense. Nietzsche quotes: “One burns something in so that it remains in the memory. Only something which never ceases to *cause pain* stays in the memory.”<sup>10</sup>

I can affirm a proposition even without knowing about it explicitly. Any child who accuses his mother of contradicting herself tacitly affirms the axiom of non-contradiction. St Augustine (354-430) reports in his *Confessions* (c. 400): “I have personally watched and studied a jealous baby. It could not yet speak and, pale with jealousy and bitterness, glared at its brother sharing its mother’s milk.”<sup>11</sup> Although the infant has no word and probably no concept of jealousy, it seems to harbour jealous feelings of which it is not aware. The boy mentioned by Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) also seems to be unconsciously jealous: “So far the child has been the only one; now he is informed that the stork has brought a new baby. The child inspects the new arrival, and ex-

---

<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, Treatise 2, § 3, 311. Transl. Kaufman and Hollingdale with small alteration by Ferber.

<sup>11</sup> St Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 1, Section 7, 11. Transl. Chadwick.

presses his opinion with decision: ‘The stork had better take it back again!’”<sup>12</sup>

We adults can also be swayed by motives of which we are not conscious. We may think that we are trying to help, but all we want is to steal the limelight. Conversely, we may think that we are acting out of a desire for recognition, but we are obeying purer motives than we ourselves believe. An act of will, that is, an act of consciousness in the wider sense, can be carried out without being accompanied by an act of consciousness in the narrower sense. On the map of our soul – as Kant put it in his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798) – only a few places are illuminated: “Thus, the field of *obscure* representations is the largest in the human being.”<sup>13</sup>

A representation is obscure when it is not articulated in language. If on the map of our soul there are only a few illuminated places, it does not follow that there are no more places that could be illuminated. Nor does it follow that, if we were not conscious of a conscious act, we would be unable to articulate it. Just as there are things that I cannot perceive with my external senses, so there are acts of consciousness of which I am not conscious. At first sight, this seems to be a contradiction.

The contradiction is resolved if we say that a fact of consciousness in the wider sense need not be conscious to us in the narrower sense. But it must have the potential to become conscious. It will become conscious if we articulate it in language. But just as there are more physical facts than we articulate, there are also more psychic ones.

---

<sup>12</sup> Freud, *Interpretation of Dreams*, Chapter 5, Section 4, (D), b, 213. Transl. Brill. Quotation without reference.

<sup>13</sup> *Anthropology*, AA, Vol. 7, § 5, 136. Transl. Loudon.

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) goes so far as to say: “But a soul can read in itself only what is distinctly represented there; it cannot unfold all its folds at once, because they go to infinity.”<sup>14</sup> But, in order to show that the unopened folds of the soul “go to infinity”, we would have to articulate them in such a way that the articulation could continue indefinitely. How could we account for something that we are unable to articulate? In principle, having learnt language, we should be able to express whatever we may imagine; otherwise, we would not be able to imagine it.

This is also called the principle of expressibility.<sup>15</sup> Alternatively, we can call it the principle of articulability. It should be possible to articulate unconscious “knowledge”. But articulating what I unconsciously “know” is not as easy as opening a closed hand. Every teacher has experienced how difficult it is, not only for children, but also for adults, to express what they already “know” at an unconscious level. Every child “knows” what milk tastes like. But can the child say what it tastes like? We all “know” what a piano sounds like. But can we say what it sounds like? Likewise, we all “know” unconsciously what the word “is” means. But to put that unconscious knowledge into language is very difficult.

For physical facts, we can supply evidence from our external perception; for psychic facts, from our internal perception. We can call both kinds of fact real, because we are able to provide evidence for both from our perception. This world view, which recognises two kinds of fact – physical and psychic – is often called dualistic. It goes back to Descartes, according to whose *Meditations on the First Philosophy*, human beings con-

---

<sup>14</sup> Leibniz, *Monadology*, § 61. Transl. Arlew and Garber.

<sup>15</sup> Searle, *Speech Acts*, § 1.5.

sist of two things, extension and thought.<sup>16</sup> The extended thing is the body; the thinking thing is consciousness. I can experience my body through the intermediary of my external perception and my consciousness directly through my internal perception. But first I am directed outward. It is only when I turn back to myself that I experience my internal being.

It would seem that physical facts are more real than psychic ones. It would seem to be more real that snow is white than that I see the white colour of snow. It would seem to be more real that there is an external world than an internal world. But Descartes shows us that it is not so. It is actually easier for me to doubt all external perception than it is for me to doubt my internal perception. It is easier for me to doubt that snow is white than that I see the white colour of the snow. As we have seen, sensory evidence offers only a *prima facie* criterion of truth. If, according to Descartes, “it is prudent never to trust wholly those who have deceived us even once”,<sup>17</sup> we can infer from a single case of deception by our senses that they could deceive us again.

Internal perception, then, seems less deceptive than external. In Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Polonius reads out a letter from Hamlet to Ophelia: “Doubt that stars are fire,/ Doubt that the sun doth move,/ Doubt truth to be a liar. / But never doubt I love.”<sup>18</sup> Hamlet is more certain of his love than of the sun and stars. He could say, with Prince Klemens von Metternich (1773-1859): “Of all realities the strongest for me is love.” That the sun moves and the stars are fire could be merely a dream – as

---

<sup>16</sup> Descartes, *Meditations*, 2nd Meditation, cf. esp. Sections 5, 8, 19-20, 23. Transl. Cottingham.

<sup>17</sup> Descartes, *Meditations*, 1st Meditation, Section 3, 9. Transl. Cottingham.

<sup>18</sup> Act II, Scene 2.

could be the white colour of the snow. But even then, we would be performing acts of consciousness, precisely in the form of dreaming. Psychic facts seem more real than physical ones, since we can doubt the existence of the latter more readily than the existence of the former. The existence of physical facts, therefore, is more hypothetical than that of psychic ones.

Following Descartes, Brentano writes: “However, besides the fact that it has a special object, inner perception possesses another distinguishing characteristic: its immediate, infallible self-evidence. Of all the types of knowledge of the objects of experience, inner perception alone possesses this characteristic.”<sup>19</sup> This is true, if only in the sense that the evidence of inner perception is less deceptive than the evidence of external evidence. Nevertheless, the “immediate, infallible” evidence of internal perception is also merely *prima facie* evidence. We can not only be mistaken about our own feelings for other people – for example, love – but we can also doubt a sensation – for example, the sensation of pain, because we are capable of imagining pain.

But now a further objection arises: Could we not reduce the psychic facts to physical ones, so that we would be left with only *one* kind of fact, the physical? We would then no longer be dealing with a dualistic world picture, but with a monistic, physicalist one. Is it not the case that the psychic facts, as it were, are only garments of the physical? After all, every representation, every judgment, every act of the will is nothing but a cerebral process. This assumption marks the beginning of the great modern programme of research into the naturalisation of consciousness.

---

<sup>19</sup> Brentano, *Psychology I*, Book 2, § 6, 128. Transl. Rancurello.

There are similar developments in modern science, where, for example, the phlogiston theory of combustion has been replaced with the oxidation theory. According to the former theory, combustible bodies contain a certain substance, phlogiston, that escapes in the process of combustion. According to the latter theory, the air itself contains a combustible part, called “flammable air”, in fact, oxygen. Thus, it seems possible to replace the pre-scientific “phlogiston” of psychic fact with a certain kind of physical fact. Just as some phenomena perceived through our external senses appear to us different from their physical nature – after all, we do not perceive colours and sounds as light waves and sound waves – so certain cerebral processes appear to us only as psychic facts. Psychic facts, then, only seem to have a psychic existence. In reality, they are nothing but physical facts.

However, it cannot be said that this programme of naturalising consciousness has been a success. The reason is not that the science of the human brain is insufficiently advanced, but something more fundamental, that is, conceptual. Leibniz voiced the following objection:

Moreover, it must be confessed that perception and that which depends upon it are inexplicable on mechanical grounds, that is to say, by means of figures and motions. And supposing there were a machine, so constructed as to think, feel, and have perception, it might be conceived as increased in size, while keeping the same proportions, so that one might go into it as into a mill. That being so, we should, on examining its interior, find only parts which work one upon another, and never anything by which to explain a perception.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Leibniz, *Monadology*, § 17. Transl. Arlew and Garber.

This objection is circular, because it presupposes what it tries to prove. Nevertheless, it illustrates something peculiar to representations. A representation, that is, something psychic, cannot be explained by something physical, because the psychic is conceptually different from the physical. Facts are facts. But the evidence for physical facts is in the public domain, while the evidence for psychic facts is accessible only to me. The evidence for physical facts is given to me through the mediation of the external senses, the evidence for psychic facts directly through internal perception. Having an internal perception means possessing an internal perspective.<sup>21</sup> In contrast, we perceive physical facts only from outside. Therefore, if we could reduce psychic facts to physical ones, we would lose some of the conceptual content that we associate with psychic facts, that is, the internal perspective. Any reductionist explanation – for example, “Acts of representation are nothing but cerebral processes” – could be countered by asking: An act of representation may be nothing but a corresponding cerebral process, but is the corresponding cerebral process an act of representation?

I would answer this question in the negative, because we cannot exhaust the concept of the psychic by physical criteria. Perhaps we can localise a cerebral process if, say, we feel pain. But the pain itself is not a localisable part of the cerebral cortex. Also, the pain is accessible only to me. Only my behaviour in pain, like the relevant part of the cerebral cortex, is accessible to everybody. But my strained facial expression, like a part of my cerebral cortex, has no internal perspective. It is perceived from outside.

We can localise a cerebral process and even measure eye movements when we dream. But nobody else can perceive my

---

<sup>21</sup> This has been made clear once more by Nagel, 1974, 435-450.

dreams as I do. Others can only perceive an account of my dreams. However, in that case, they do not perceive my dreams from inside, but from outside, because what they hear are the words I use to tell my dreams. Thus, Wittgenstein's remark, "An 'inner process' stands in need of outward criteria",<sup>22</sup> is correct. But no external criterion can exhaust the meaning we associate with the concept of an "internal process". Because of this conceptual irreducibility of the psychic to the physical, we cannot entirely dismiss this dualistic world picture.

#### 4. Semantic Existence and Semantic Facts

There is a further kind of existence, which we cannot describe as real, because we cannot provide any evidence for it either through our external or through our internal perceptions. For example, we all assume that there are such things as numbers and combinations of numbers. Thus, we all believe that there is the number 1 and the combination  $1+1=2$ . What we can experience through our senses are only materialised numerals, for example, the numerals on the face of our wristwatch. But if we say  $1+1=2$ , we do not mean that the numeral 1 on our wristwatch, joined to the numeral 1, results in the numeral 2. The numeral 1, joined to the numeral 1, would only result in the numeral 11. Rather, we mean that the meaning of the numeral 1, added to the meaning of the numeral 1, results in the meaning of the numeral 2. We obviously assume that the numerals 1 and 2 have a meaning. It is only to the meaning that we ascribe an existence when we say that there is a numeral 1 or that  $1+1=2$  is valid. We further ascribe existence to classes, for example, the class of human beings, which I mentioned before. Classes can

---

<sup>22</sup> Wittgenstein, PI, § 580. Transl. Anscombe et al.

also be combined. If, for example, we say “The human being is a creature”, the class of human beings is included in the class of creatures.

According to a hypothesis championed by Whitehead and Russell in *Principia Mathematica*, numbers are classes of classes.<sup>23</sup> 1 would be the class of all unit classes, 2 the class of all two-membered classes, 3 the class of all three-membered classes, etc. A unit class  $[x]$  is the class that contains  $x$  as the sole element. It must be distinguished from that element  $x$ , because it has at least one property that the element does not have – it contains an element. The class of all unit classes is the class of all classes that contain  $x$  as the only element. The class of all two-membered classes is the class of all classes that contain  $x$  and  $y$  as the only elements, where  $x \neq y$ . The class of all three-membered classes is the class of all classes that contain  $x$ ,  $y$  and  $z$  as the only elements, where  $x \neq y \neq z$ , and so on.

What kind of existence do classes and classes of classes have? Obviously, nobody has ever seen, heard, tasted, felt or smelled a class or a class of classes. Classes cannot be experienced though our external perception. But can they perhaps be experienced through internal perception? A possible answer, attributed to Plato, is that we grasp invisible things, such as classes, not with our bodily eyes, but with our “mind’s eye”. This “eye of the soul” is an intellect that does not infer but that, like our bodily eye, is supposed to have the ability to see things directly. However, what it sees is not the visible but the invisible. The paradox of how we can “see” the invisible seems to be resolved as follows: We see the invisible not with our bodily eye, but with our mind’s eye.

---

<sup>23</sup> Cf. PM, Part II, Section A, § 52.

Now the hypothesis of a mind's eye is a wonderful image of how we perceive things for the existence of which we cannot produce any sensory evidence through external experience. But granting any reality to the image would impose a burden of proof on us that we would hardly be able to supply. Even our bodily eye does not perceive things directly, but sees something as something (cf. p. 57). Why should what is true of the bodily eye not also be true of the mind's eye?

Further, to repeat Wittgenstein, an "internal process", such as an intellectual vision or intuition, needs external criteria. But what external criterion could there be for an "intellectual intuition" of my own? If I have such an experience, I cannot show its existence to others, who do not have it and who do not believe in it, by means of an external criterion. If others have it, and I do not, they cannot show it to me either by means of an external criterion. The hypothesis of an intellectual intuition can be neither verified nor falsified intersubjectively. It is accessible to introspection only and is thus of a private nature. This leaves the subjective will of the observer with substantial room for manoeuvre. The wings of intellectual vision may raise us above reality and above our fellow humans. But do they not also resemble the wings with which angels cover their eyes?<sup>24</sup>

If I claimed to have a special vision that others do not have, I would hardly be able to convince those who do not have it. If anything could convince them, it would be their belief in an authority. An intellectual vision is a metaphorical auxiliary construction to explain the paradox that we can "see" things that we cannot see. However, to infer from the metaphor of an intellectual vision the reality of that vision would be a mistake. Thus,

---

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Isaiah, VI, 2, King James Bible: "Above it stood the seraphim each one had six wings; with twain he covered his face."

both intellectual and sensory vision must be ruled out as means of registering invisible classes. How, then, do we register the invisible?

Actually, Plato himself probably knew that this intellectual vision was a metaphor when he said that only the best soul “which following God becomes likest to him”<sup>25</sup> can see the invisible in a “place beyond heaven”,<sup>26</sup> but even that soul sees it “with difficulty”.<sup>27</sup> He also said: “Immaterial things which are the noblest and greatest, are shown only clearly through *logos*, and in no other way.”<sup>28</sup> The word “*logos*” literally means “speech”, but in Plato it can also mean “explanation”, “definition” or “argument”. If the only way to show “the noblest and greatest” things clearly is through *logos*, this can only happen through speech, explanation, definition or argument and not through either sensory or intellectual vision.

But here I will take the literal meaning of “*logos*” as my starting point. The human being (as a class) or numbers are abstract concepts. By means of language, we are able to create any number of abstract concepts, for example, by converting adjectives into nouns. For example, we can take the adjective “red” and make up the abstract noun “redness”. Likewise, we can turn the adjective “white” into the noun “whiteness”. Then, instead of saying “Snow is white”, we could say “Snow contains whiteness.” If we then formulate true propositions about such abstract concepts – for example, “Whiteness is a colour”, “The human being is a creature” or “ $1+1=2$ ” – we follow the law of existen-

---

<sup>25</sup> Phdr. 248a. Transl. Ferber.

<sup>26</sup> Phdr. 248a. Transl. Ferber.

<sup>27</sup> Phdr. 247c. Transl. Ferber.

<sup>28</sup> Plt. 286a. Transl. Jowett altered by Ferber. For this passage, as well as a critical interpretation of intellectual vision and the “light in the soul”, in Plato, cf. Ferber, 2007, 47-51, 106-120.

tial generalisation by assuming that there are classes such as the class of whiteness, the class of human beings and the class of all unit classes or all two-membered classes.

However, these abstract concepts do not exist in the real world, but in our way of representing the real world in abstractions, in language. Abstract concepts are not linguistic phenomena in the same way as words are if we regard them as mere sounds or letters. But they are linguistic phenomena in the same way as the meanings of words. What, then, is left if abstract concepts have no real existence? Obviously, the meanings of abstract words.

Even a sceptic who believes that abstract words have no meaning would assume meanings of these words. To be able to say, for example, that the abstract term “human being” has no meaning, he would still have to assume an interpersonal meaning for that term. The meaning of words is the subject matter of semantics. Therefore, abstract concepts have no real, but a semantic, existence.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> The term “semantic existence“ is introduced in Ferber, *Normatives ‘ist’, Sein Gottes und Leibniz-Schellingsche Frage*, 390-391. The distinction I make there between real and semantic existence roughly corresponds to that between “existing” (*hypárchein*) and “subsisting” (*hyphístasthai*), represented by the Stoics (cf. SVF IIi, 322, 488, 541) and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century still by Russell (cf. *Problems*, Chapter 9), but I try to define the concept of subsistence more precisely by means of Frege’s theory of the sense becoming the referent. Quine objects to the distinction between two meanings of “there is”, stating that “the distinction between one meaning of ‘there is’ for concrete objects and another for abstract ones – given only one sense of ‘there is’ for both – makes no sense”, *Word and Object*, § 49, 242. Quine seems to assume that the concept of being can explicitly be defined by “only one sense of ‘there is’” and that it is the genus of which the being of concrete things and the being of abstract things are species. However, I am not saying that the concept of being can be explicitly defined (cf. p. 129), but only that our everyday understanding of being can be implicitly elucidated by the distinction between real and

Real existence is an existence that can be verified by the evidence of external or internal sense perception. Semantic existence, as I define it, is the existence attributed to the meaning of an expression – the meaning of “human beings” in “The human being is a creature” or the meaning of the numeral “1” in “ $1+1=2$ ” – which, in the absence of a referent that can be experienced in reality, itself becomes the referent. By this definition, I am extending Frege’s apt remark “The indirect reference of a word is accordingly its customary sense”<sup>30</sup> to abstract concepts. The “indirect reference of a word”, in Frege’s terminology, means the referent of a word in indirect speech. In indirect speech, I speak about the speech of another. If, for example, I say “John told me that he was at home”, my indirect reference is to the fact that John is at home. My direct reference, on the other hand, is to John’s telling me that he is at home.

The same applies to abstract objects, where the object is not an object of the external world but the meaning of the expression in question. For example, if we say “The human being is a creature”, the term “human being” does not refer to a specific individual in the external world, say, to Jack, but rather to the meaning of “human being” in “The human being is a creature.” Similarly, by saying “The class of human beings is included in that of creatures”, we do not refer to a specific fact in the external world, but rather to the content of that sentence. The content of a sentence is also called a proposition. By such a sentence, therefore, we refer to a proposition.

But if we say “ $1+1=2$ ”, the term “1” no longer refers to a specific thing – say, a stone – in the external world, but to the

---

semantic existence. But in an implicit definition or elucidation, the definiendum may recur in the definiens.

<sup>30</sup> Frege, *Sinn and Bedeutung*, 145. Transl. Geach and Black.

meaning of the term “1”. Likewise, by “ $1+1=2$ ”, we no longer refer to two specific things in the external world. Rather, we refer to the proposition “ $1+1=2$ ”.

Thus, in such sentences about abstract concepts, the referent is no longer a thing in the real world, but the content of the sentence, that is, the proposition itself. We can call this the reification of propositions, which turns them into facts. Naturally, we cannot see this referent, or this combination of referents, either with a bodily or with a mind’s eye. If, regardless of this, we say that these referents exist, we are asserting that the meanings of the corresponding expressions, or the contents of the corresponding sentences, exist. Propositions such as “The class of human beings is included in that of creatures”, or “ $1+1=2$ ”, are not real facts. However, as it is nevertheless the case that the class of human beings is included in the class of creatures, and that  $1+1$  equals 2, we can still talk about facts. But they are *semantic facts*. By the act of linguistic reference to such facts, the meanings of the expressions themselves are *made* into facts.

Thus, semantic existence, unlike real existence, is an artificial one, created by human beings. Semantic facts are manufactured facts. They are the reified rules for the use of abstract expressions. Once we have turned them into facts, these meanings, or combinations of meanings, gain a status that is analogous to that of natural facts – but only an analogous status, for these semantic facts have no real existence. Nevertheless, once we have turned them into facts, they exist *as if* they were to be found in nature. They exist *as if* they were independent of the circumstance that they came into being only thanks to the human ability to create the relevant abstract terms.

Once they have gained this seemingly independent status, it is possible to forget their human origin and to believe that they are really independent. Then it might be asked where they exist and how they can be perceived. Since these meanings, or com-

binations of meanings, cannot be found in the empirical world or perceived through our external senses, some philosophers – called Platonists – hit upon the idea that their “home” was in an invisible world that we could only see with a mind’s eye. Plato himself, however, seems to have known that such ethereal things can clearly be shown only by speech, explanation or definition “and in no other way” and that the mind’s vision of these ethereal beings is attached to speech or occurs “always with true logos”.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, in addition to real facts – whether physical or psychic – we have to reckon with semantic facts. There can be as many of them as there are reifiable meanings. As these meanings are not verifiable by internal or external experience, they can be multiplied indefinitely. The realm of semantic facts is limited only by the rule that they must not logically contradict themselves. We may not only assume that there is the class of all unit classes, two-membered classes and three-membered classes, but we may also assume that there is the class of all four- or five-membered classes, etc., all the way to the class of that class which contains an infinity of elements. With Cantor, we may even assume an infinity of classes of classes that again contain an infinity of elements. But no intellectual intuition is able to visualise an infinity of classes with an infinity of elements. Classes and hierarchies of classes have a semantic existence only because we can meaningfully talk about them. A round square, on the other hand, has not even a semantic existence, because a round square is not something that we can meaningfully talk about. A round square is not a square. The corresponding expression “round square” has therefore no possible reference except in a rhetorical sense when we say that we have

---

<sup>31</sup> Ti.51e

to round a square or to square a circle. Then we mean that we have to face not an impossible but a very difficult task. For semantic existence, Hilbert's criterion of existence (cf. p.86) is a necessary and sufficient criterion, whereas for real existence, it is only a necessary criterion but not a sufficient one. Since semantic objects can, in principle, be multiplied at will, some philosophers conceived the idea that they should not be allowed to proliferate. William of Ockham (1290-c. -1349) coined the phrase: "Entities should not be multiplied unnecessarily."

## 5. The Being of Universals, the Being of Fictitious Things and the Being of Nothingness

### a) *The Being of Universals*

The concept of semantic existence allows us to express a view on the so-called problem of universals. Aristotle defines the universal as "that which is by its nature predicated of a number of things".<sup>32</sup> Therefore, the meanings of universal names are also universal, since they refer to several particular things. For example, the meaning of the universal name of "human being" applies to several individuals, if we say that Socrates is a human being, that Plato is a human being, that Aristotle is a human being, etc. Universal names are not only nouns, such as human being, house, etc., but also adjectives, which may denote either properties or relationships. We can say, for example, that Socrates is so and so tall and older than Plato, that Plato is so and so tall and older than Aristotle, that Aristotle is so and so tall and older than his pupil Theophrastus, etc. The words "tall" and "older" are used for several men. In

---

<sup>32</sup> De int., Chapter 7, 17a38. Transl. Ackrill.

fact, most of the words in our sentences are universals. The problem of universals is the way in which this common element exists. Porphyry (232-305), in his *Introduction* (after 268) to Aristotle's theory of categories, formulated the decisive options as follows:

I shall not say anything about whether genera and species exist as substances, or are confined to mere conceptions; and if they are substances, whether they are material or immaterial; and whether they exist separately from sensible objects, or in them immanently. This sort of problem is very deep, and requires a more extensive investigation.<sup>33</sup>

Nevertheless, let us venture to say a word about this problem in a smaller treatise, even though we are unable to plumb its entire depth at this point. Genera and species are classes. Genera constitute the class, species the subclass. In the statement "The human being is a creature", the universal name "human being" denotes the species or the subclass, and the universal name "creature" denotes the genus or the class.

Regarding the universals' mode of existence, Porphyry distinguishes two possibilities. One (a) is called universal realism. It was advocated especially by Plato and Aristotle. According to this position, genera and species really exist, although they obviously have no bodies. The other (b) is called universal conceptualism. In modern times, it was championed by, among others, John Locke (1632-1704). According to this position, genera and species exist only in our minds, as thoughts or concepts.

There is a third position, not mentioned by Porphyry, namely, (c) universal nominalism. Like conceptualism, nominalism holds that in reality there are only particular things. But

---

<sup>33</sup> Introduction, 1a8-12. Transl. Edghill.

in contrast to conceptualism, it regards genera and species as existing in name only. If names are regarded as nothing but sounds or letters, universals exist only as a *flatus vocis*, that is, a “breath of the voice”. But this position is so extreme that – as with the negation of the propositions of identity and non-contradiction – I doubt that anybody has seriously advocated it. According to the nominalist, the universal name “nominalist” itself would only be a “breath of the voice”. And the nominalist’s voice would only be able to “breathe” the name of nominalism without making it intelligible either to others or to himself.

In fact, some of the philosophers remembered under the heading of nominalism, for example, Ockham (cf. p. 154), incline towards conceptualism. In contrast, Quine, who is regarded as a nominalist, even assumes the existence of abstract objects, at least as a useful myth, for “science would be hopelessly crippled without abstract objects.”<sup>34</sup> Classes, too, are abstract objects.

Under the first item of the above taxonomy, (a) realism, Porphyry again distinguishes two possibilities: Either (a’) the genera and species are separate from the bodies or (a’’) they exist in, and are dependent on, the bodies. The first (a’) of these possibilities is Platonic universal realism; the second (a’’) is Aristotelian universal realism. Thus, we can distinguish between (a) universal realism, (b) universal conceptualism and (c) universal nominalism, with (a) realism breaking down into the (a’) Platonic and the (a’’) Aristotelian variant.

According to the Platonic (a’) variant, “we usually assume one distinct form for each group of many things to which we

---

<sup>34</sup> Quine, *From Stimulus to Science*, Chapter 3, 40.

apply the same name.”<sup>35</sup> “Eidos”, or “idea”, rendered here as “form”, is Plato’s word for what we call universals or classes today. The Platonic ideas exist as independent essences or substances, of which the following predicates are true: “Uncreated and indestructible”, “admitting no modification”, “imperceptible to sight or the other senses”, they are “the object of thought.”<sup>36</sup>

The Platonic ideas, then, are not ideas in today’s sense of subjective representations. Rather, they are something objective. Thus, even if there were no individual human beings, the universal concept of “human being” would exist as an “uncreated and indestructible” substance which cannot be perceived either by our bodily eyes or in any other way, but which is destined to be seen by thought. Conversely, the visible Socrates is not an independent and unmodifiable substance but only a created and destructible phenomenon that we can perceive with our eyes or in other ways.

According to the Aristotelian variant (a’), Plato is right in so far as he assumes the existence of one universal concept for the many things to which we apply the same name. It is also Aristotle who explicitly introduces the distinction between genus and species.

For Aristotle, essence or substance is what underlies any given genus and is “neither said of a subject nor in a subject, e.g. the individual man or the individual horse”.<sup>37</sup> Thus, the concrete human beings of flesh and blood underlie the genus of human beings, and we do not say “The human being is Socrates or Socrates is in the human being”, but vice versa, “Socrates is a

---

<sup>35</sup> R.596a. Transl. Ferber.

<sup>36</sup> Ti. 51a. Transl. Ferber.

<sup>37</sup> Cat., Chapter 5, 2a12-14. Transl. Ackrill.

human being and being human is in Socrates.” On the other hand, the genera and species, for Aristotle, are substances only in a secondary or abstract sense.

Unlike Plato, Aristotle does not regard the substances as independent entities, but only as dependent predicates: “For it seems impossible that any universal term should be the name of a substance.”<sup>38</sup> The first, or concrete, substance is something particular, and only the so-called second, or abstract, substance is something universal. The universal which is said of the particular has no independent existence, but is only a quality of that particular. If, for example, we say “Socrates is a human being”, we refer to a quality of a particular individual, namely, the quality of being human or the fact of being a member of the species. But being human, or a member of the species, does not mean a particular individual, say, the visible flesh-and-blood Socrates. Rather, it is a quality which distinguishes the human species from others. It is the “occurrence of an essence” in a particular individual.<sup>39</sup> We can mentally perceive this universal quality in Aristotle in the same way as we do the ideas in Plato. Thus, by a kind of induction, we see in Socrates something universal, namely, a human being: “Thus it is clear that it is necessary for us to become familiar with the primitives by induction; for perception too instils the universal in this way.”<sup>40</sup>

This brings Aristotle close to conceptualism. However, for this position, contrary to the views of Plato or Aristotle, the universals are not real, but exist only in thoughts or representa-

---

<sup>38</sup> *Metaph.*, Book 7, Chapter 13, 1038b8-9. Transl. Ross.

<sup>39</sup> Expression from Donald Cary Williams (1899-1983), cf. Ferber, *Metaphysische Perle*.

<sup>40</sup> *Analytica posteriora*, Chapter 19, 100b4-5. Transl. Barnes.

tions. Locke writes in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690):

To conclude: this whole *mystery* of *genera* and *species*, which make such a noise in the schools, and are with justice so little regarded out of them, is nothing else but abstract *ideas*, more or less comprehensive, with names annexed to them. In all which, this is constant and unvariable: that every more general term stands for such an idea, and is but a part of any of those contained under it.<sup>41</sup>

To give an example: The name “human being” stands for the idea of a human being and contains only part of what we mean by that concept. But while for Plato the term “*eidos*”, or “*idea*”, means something objective that exists independently of human beings, for Locke it means something subjective that is created by human beings. In contrast to Aristotle’s view, however, for him the universals do not exist as real in the particular.

We can sum up the comparison by means of a medieval characterisation: For Platonic realism, the universals exist “before the things”; for Aristotelian realism, they exist “in the things”; and for conceptualism, they exist only “after the things”.

According to the above assumption, classes have no real, but only semantic, existence (cf. p. 151). Genera and species, being classes, likewise have no real, but only semantic, existence. We obviously do not see the meaning of words with our bodily eyes. Thus, nobody has ever seen the meaning of the universal terms “human being” or “creature” with a bodily eye, either as something separate from, or as something real within, the world of the senses.

The existence of an intellectual intuition is too uncertain to provide a starting point (cf. p. 149). Only a soul that is not in-

---

<sup>41</sup> Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book 3, Chapter 3.

carnate could perhaps be assumed to be capable of seeing not only particular things, but also something universal without a universal name, that is, without a linguistic symbol. But the existence of a soul without a body is even less certain than that of an intellectual intuition. And even if there is such a thing as an intellectual intuition, and if universals exist as independent entities, there still remains the open question: How are we to imagine the relationship between these universals and the sensory phenomena?

Plato uses a diversity of images, such as the participation of sensory phenomena in the ideas, or the reproduction of ideas in the sensory phenomena. The metaphor of participation suggests that the ideas exist beyond and apart from the sensory phenomena, while the metaphor of reproduction suggests that they are contained within them. But if the transcendent ideas are within the sensory phenomena, then the *one* idea is either “dispersed and multiplied in the infinity of the world of generation” or “as still entire and yet divided from itself, which latter would seem to be the greatest impossibility of all, for how can one and the same thing be at the same time in one and in many things?”<sup>42</sup> Thus, the relationship between ideas and sensory phenomena leads us into a contradiction. Plato’s possibly last word on the matter in *Timaeus* is that sensory phenomena are “the imitations of real existences [that is, ideas] modelled after their pattern in a wonderful way which is hard to explain and which we will hereafter investigate”.<sup>43</sup> Unfortunately, he does not seem to have investigated this question as precisely as one could have wished.

---

<sup>42</sup> Phlb.15b. Transl. Ferber.

<sup>43</sup> Ti. 50c. Transl. Ferber. Cf. Ferber, Theory of Ideas in *Timaeus*.

In contrast, Aristotle's position is closer to our own understanding of reality in that it recognises that universals have no separate existence, but depend on the particular. The "inexplicable" relationship between sensory phenomena and ideas now turns into the everyday predication of a universal based on a particular. This enables Aristotle to avoid Plato's separation between universals and particulars, for the universals exist in the particulars from which they are predicated. However, Aristotle, too, assumes an intellectual intuition as the precondition for perceiving the universal. Aristotle's position, then, also leads to a contradiction.

It is in fact the mirror image of Plato's. If the universal exists in the particulars, it is either individualised or a particular, and can no longer be grasped by a universal name. The quality of being human appears in Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, etc. in their individual form. But this raises the question of how an individualised universal can still be universal, that is, common to different individuals such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, etc., and occur in different places and times. Aristotle seems to solve the problem by arguing that universals are universal only potentially owing to our capacity for intellectual abstraction. But in so doing, he falls victim to a crucial problem of conceptualism.

According to conceptualism, genera and species exist only as thoughts or concepts in the human mind. This would make them ideas or representations. However, ideas or representations are parts of a particular soul and therefore no longer universal, but individual and subjective (cf. p. 47). And if universals are subjective, they are no longer the "shared property of many", to quote Frege.<sup>44</sup> Further, according to the law of existential generalisation, we assume that classes exist if we regard

---

<sup>44</sup> Frege, *Sinn and Bedeutung*, 145. Transl. Geach and Black.

the proposition “The human being is a creature” as true (cf. p. 131). This implies that not only our representation of class, but the class of human beings itself, exists. Therefore, we refer by our true propositions to something outside our mind.

By saying “The human being is a creature”, we mean even less that only the name “human being”, as a structure of sounds or “breath”, exists. As we put forward such true propositions, we think not only of something that lies outside our mind, but also of something that exists outside our linguistic utterances, that is, the class of human beings. By the proposition “The human being is a creature”, we do not mean that it is the name of the class of human beings that exists, but that the class of human beings itself does. But then the universal name “human being” for the many human individuals cannot be only a “breath of our voice”, as nominalism claims in an extreme statement.

Thus, neither realism, nor conceptualism, nor extreme nominalism can satisfactorily answer Porphyry’s question of how genera and species exist. Realism claims too much; conceptualism and, above all, extreme nominalism claim too little.

If genera and species have only semantic existence, then universals exist neither as realities, nor as thoughts, nor as names, but only as the meanings of names. In contrast to *real* Platonism, I will call this position *semantic* Platonism. According to this position, universals exist, as in real Platonism: Being “invisible and imperceptible by any sense”,<sup>45</sup> they are experienced objectively and differently from the sensory phenomena. However, in contrast to real Platonism, they are not “uncreated and permanent”,<sup>46</sup> but are created by human beings. Only hu-

---

<sup>45</sup> Ti. 52a. Transl. Ferber.

<sup>46</sup> Ti. 52a. Transl. Ferber.

man beings can give the universal names a meaning, which they then turn into the referent of their speech.

By saying this, I am applying Frege's remark "The indirect reference of a word is accordingly its customary sense" not only to propositions (cf. p. 152), but also to universals. We could call this the reification of the meaning of universal names. If semantic objects of this kind exist, universals, unlike sensory phenomena, have no existence that can be experienced through the senses, but only a semantic existence. Nor do they exist objectively in the strong sense of being independent from human beings, but only in the weak sense that we take their intersubjective identity for granted.

In common with Aristotle, semantic Platonism assumes that we often obtain the same intersubjective meaning by abstracting the similarities between individuals. This is most noticeable in the case of the natural species, which to some extent include human beings. Thus, we obtain the universal name "human being" by abstraction from the perceptible properties shared by the many different human individuals.

In common with conceptualism, semantic Platonism assumes that universals are made by human beings. Thus, it is a labour of intellectual abstraction that creates the shared meaning of the name "human being", which we then make the object of our speech.

In common with nominalism, semantic Platonism assumes that in reality only the particular exists, while the universal resides in the universal names. But, counter to extreme nominalism, I must stress once more that here the universal does not exist in the universal names as constructs of sounds or letters, which vary from one human being to another, but in the meanings of these names.

Semantic Platonism, then, tries to integrate elements of Platonism, Aristotelianism, conceptualism and nominalism, with-

out postulating the reality of universals or denying their inter-subjective sameness. If the meanings of universal names are made the referents, it may appear as if they are perceived directly or “seen”. However, what we see, for example, in the proposition “Human beings are creatures” is not a physical human being, but only the likeness of a human being or a quasi-human. Therefore, semantic Platonism, too, is only a “quasi-Platonism” and the vision of the universals only the likeness of a vision or a “quasi-vision”.

Admittedly, semantic Platonism is “difficult to accept”, but also difficult “not to accept”<sup>47</sup>, as Glaucon, Plato’s brother, says about real Platonism. It is “difficult to accept”, because we have no clear-cut criterion of the identity of such airy constructs as semantic objects. This was stressed particularly by Quine.<sup>48</sup> We can see, for example, that an individual is the same today as yesterday and, if necessary, we are able to verify that individual’s identity by comparing fingerprints. But how can we tell that the invisible meaning of the universal name “human being” that we used yesterday is not something different today? We must probably be contented, in the spirit of Wittgenstein, with the fact of a successful communication over time *within* a language community, if we say, for example, “The human being is a creature.”

On the other hand, semantic Platonism is “difficult not to accept”, because we rely on universal semantic objects and their identity not only in the sciences, but also in our everyday communication. Aristotle aptly formulated this idea as follows: “Not to have one definite meaning is to have no meaning, and if

---

<sup>47</sup> R 532d. Transl. Ferber.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. e.g. Word and Object, § 43.

words have no meaning our talking with one another, and indeed with ourselves, has been annihilated.”<sup>49</sup>

*b) The Being of Fictitious Things and the Being of Nothingness*

The concept of semantic existence allows me to address a further problem, namely, the problem of fictitious things – golden mountains, horses with wings, centaurs, etc. – and the problem of nothingness. Fictitious things are things that, unlike a real horse, a real mountain or a real human being, have no real existence. But fictitious things, unlike logically impossible things – for example, a round square – are logically possible. Therefore, facts that include fictitious things do not necessarily contravene the law of non-contradiction. It is no logical contradiction to say that a horse can have wings or that a cow can speak, even though in reality there are no horses with wings or talking cows. However, a square cannot be round for logical reasons. For a round square is not a square.

What, then, is the ontological status of things that are not? Fictitious things and nothingness do not exist. If we say (a) “There is no golden mountain” or (b) “There is no nothingness”, we are putting forward a true proposition. But the prerequisite of a true proposition is that there should be something about which it says something true. Therefore, the corollary of the true proposition (a) is the true proposition (a’): “There is an x, which means that this x is a golden mountain.” Likewise, the corollary of the true proposition (b) is the true proposition (b’): “There is an x, which means that this x is nothingness.” The corollary of the negation of the existence of fictitious things and of nothingness is the affirmation of existence. This is a contra-

---

<sup>49</sup> *Metaph.*, Book 4, Chapter 4, 1006b7-11. Transl. Ross with slight modification by Ferber. Cf. Prm. 135b-c.

diction. Thus, the ontological status of things that are not appears contradictory: They do not exist and they exist all the same.

The contradiction disappears if we make a distinction between real and semantic existence. The corollaries of propositions (a) and (b) are propositions (a') and (b'). But in (a) and (b), it is not stated whether a golden mountain and nothingness have a real or a semantic existence. Nobody has ever seen a mountain in nature that consisted entirely of gold. Likewise, nobody has ever literally seen nothingness (even though many have faced nothingness in the figurative sense). Therefore, golden mountains and nothingness do not exist really, but only semantically, in so far as we can talk about golden mountains and nothingness meaningfully, that is, without a logical contradiction. Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) thought that he could make meaningful statements even about nothingness, for example: "The nothing itself nihilates."<sup>50</sup>

The propositions (a) and (b), then, have to be rephrased as (α) "There is no real golden mountain" and (β) "There is no real nothingness", and (a') and (b') as (α') "There is a semantic x, which means that this x is a golden mountain" and (β') "There is a semantic x, which means that this x is nothingness." The two propositions, (α) "There is no real golden mountain" and (α') "There is a semantic golden mountain" contradict each other as little as do (β) "There is no real nothingness" and (β') "There is a semantic nothingness."

Thus, negative existential propositions deny only the existence of a real referent in expressions such as "a golden mountain" and "nothingness", but not the meaning or the semantic referent. Rather, the meaning of the expression itself becomes

---

<sup>50</sup> Metaphysics, Section 3, 31. Transl. Krell.

the referent. Therefore, I can again apply Frege's remark "The indirect reference of a word is accordingly its customary sense"<sup>51</sup> to fictitious objects where the referent is not an object in the external world, but the meaning of an expression, as in the case of the golden mountains. Since representations are private, but by a golden mountain, we mean something shared, the meaning of "golden mountain" cannot be located in our world of representation. Moreover, when we speak of a golden mountain, we do not mean our representation of a golden mountain, but a golden mountain as such. However, if the meaning of the expression becomes the referent, the meaning itself has an existence, albeit only a semantic one. We may call this process the reification of the meaning of names for fictitious things.

That is why the law of existential generalisation (cf. p. 132) does not always apply to negative existential propositions. It is necessary to indicate the context in which it does apply, whether in the real or in the semantic world. Where negative existential propositions about fictitious objects are concerned, we must modify the law of existential generalisation to ensure that the existential propositions concerned deny only real, but not semantic, existence. Thus, the proposition "There is no golden mountain" denies only the real existence of a golden mountain, but not its semantic existence. Indeed, in order to be true, it tacitly assumes the semantic existence. Since negative existential propositions about fictitious objects do not deny, but tacitly assume, their semantic existence, what follows from a negative existential proposition about fictitious objects is not their real, but their semantic, existence. That is how the distinction between real and semantic existence can solve the problem of how we are able to talk meaningfully about things that do not exist.

---

<sup>51</sup> Frege, *Sinn and Bedeutung*, 145. Transl. Geach and Black.

Fictitious things, like abstract things, have no real, but only a semantic existence. Logically impossible things like round squares do not even have semantic existence since the expression “round square” does not say anything definite (cf. p. 165).

This does not mean that I need not recognise a difference between abstract and fictitious objects. While the former seem indispensable to the sciences, for example, mathematics, physics and biology, the latter – say, the gods of Homer – are creations that are accepted only within the framework of ancient mythology. Golden mountains may exist only in the fairy tale world of the Grimm brothers, or Polonius and Ophelia only in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. In contrast to what really exists, what exists semantically is made by human beings. In addition, it is context-dependent, since it only makes sense within a framework of existential settings, be it Cantor’s set theory, modern physics and biology, Greek mythology, Grimm’s fairy tales or Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. The essential difference between abstract objects and fictitious ones is that the contexts in which they exist are different. But, however disparate numbers, ideal mass points, natural species, Homer’s gods, golden mountains, Polonius and Ophelia may be as far as function and content are concerned – they all have only a semantic existence.

There is a sense in which real existence is also context-dependent. It depends on the context of the specific experience of human beings. But it does not depend on any one of the contexts I have mentioned within that experience. Once we have made this distinction between the context of the experience of the human species and the specific context within that experience, we can simplify matters by saying that real existence is context-independent, while semantic existence is context-dependent. Thus, our explanation of the concept of “being” answers the question “What exists, or what facts are the case?” as follows: Real and semantic facts are the case. Since real facts

can be either physical or psychic in nature, we can also say: Physical, psychic and semantic facts are the case. Such a distinction between three kinds of fact can be called – to use Popper’s phrase – an ontology of three worlds.<sup>52</sup> The physical world is the totality of the physical facts, the psychic world is the totality of the psychic facts and the semantic world is the totality of the semantic facts.

However, a more fundamental distinction is that between two worlds, the real and the semantic. It goes without saying that the concept of being, which we assumed to be a precondition of this explanatory distinction, does not belong to the real world. For the concept of being, there is no experience, either internal or external. As Kant says, “Being is obviously not a real predicate.”<sup>53</sup> But neither is nothingness a real predicate. The concept of nothingness, in so far as we can talk meaningfully about it, like that of being, belongs in the semantic world.

---

<sup>52</sup> Popper, *Objective Knowledge*, Chapter 4, 158-197, esp. Section 4, 164-167.

<sup>53</sup> Kant, CPR, A 599/B 624. Transl. Guyer and Wood.