Deflationary Existence

Takashi YAGISAWA*

Abstract

I propose and defend a surprisingly simple yet useful analysis of existence, according to which existence is a relation between a thing and a set: a thing \( x \) bears the relation of existence to a set \( S \) if and only if \( x \) is a member of \( S \). This simple set-theoretic analysis of existence demystifies existence and is powerful and flexible enough to serve important theoretical purposes.

Key words: existence, thing, set, relation, context, Quine

0. Introduction

Existence is usually thought to be a deep metaphysical notion, hard to fathom and impossible to define. I disagree. I believe that existence is a shallow notion, metaphysically speaking, easy to understand, and readily definable within a well-established mathematical discipline\(^2\). I propose a relational analysis of existence. It is surprisingly simple yet theoretically powerful. It only requires set theory and contextual shiftiness of the determination of the second relatum.

1. Existence as Membership

The automobile I drive is small, green, old, more than 2,000 pounds in weight, and existent. Of these five characteristics, the last stands out for its peculiar metaphysical nature. Its peculiarity stems from one source, the lack of a contrasting

\* California State University, Northridge

\(^1\) Various versions of this paper were presented at the following places in 2011–2013: University of Rijeka (Croatia), Yonsei University (Seoul), Sapporo International University, Tohoku University, the University of Tokyo, Peking University, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Ryukoku University. I thank the audiences for helpful discussion.

\(^2\) The mathematical discipline does not presuppose any particular analysis of existence. It has certain theoretical presuppositions some of which might even be ontological, but does not presuppose any particular theory of the notion of existence. My proposal is not a proposal in ontology, but one in meta-ontology. Thus there is no threat of vicious circularity.
instance. Some things are large, red, new, or less than 2,000 pounds in weight. But nothing fails to exist. Everything exists, and every existent thing is something. Being a thing and existing go hand in hand. This makes existence hard to fathom, and nonexistence mysterious.

Or so it seems to many philosophers. In opposition to this, however, it is not difficult to point out that we readily make statements like “Pegasus is a thing but it doesn’t exist.” The defender of the claim that everything exists would respond by saying that Pegasus is not really anything at all. After a few exchanges back and forth, the two opposing camps might find themselves locked in a stalemate, with one camp insisting that Pegasus, unicorns, phlogiston, and ether are (nonexistent) things, while the other camp insisting that they are not. What is needed is a fresh start. I am on the side which says that Pegasus, unicorns, phlogiston, and ether are things but do not exist. I maintain that like a particular size, color, age, and weight, existence has contrasting instances; some things genuinely do not exist. I wish to offer what I consider to be the best way for the occupant of this side of the debate to conceptualize existence. Such is my motivation for my proposal.

I propose that existence is not a property of things. It is a relation. A thing exists or does not exist relative to something else.

It is not that I think that every correct characterization of everything has a contrasting instance. My automobile is correctly characterized as a thing, but I do not think that being a thing has a contrasting instance. That is, I do not think that something fails to be a thing. Everything is a thing, even stuff, properties, relations, events, and states of affairs are things in my sense of “thing.” I might as well say “object” instead of “thing” if it were not for those philosophers who insist on restricting the use of the word “object” so that stuff, properties, relations, events, and states of affairs are not objects. I would be happy with the word “entity” in lieu of the word “thing” if it made the discussion go more smoothly. A somewhat archaic-sounding version of “thing” in my sense is “being”; my automobile is a being, or has being, but I do not think that something fails to be a being or lacks being. Thus, I think existence is different from thingness (or entity-ness or object-ness or being-ness). Unlike the latter, existence is not a deep unanalyzable notion of metaphysics. Rather, somewhat like size, color, age, and weight, it is a shallow analyzable relation.

My automobile is small relative to the set of automobiles in the U. S. A., is green relative to normal human vision, is old relative to the set of automobiles in my

---

3 See, for example, Quine 1963: 1.
4 For example, Russell 1905, and Quine 1963.
5 I am using the word “thing” in a rather wide sense so that a thing need not be an individual object. More on this shortly.
6 This is not a categorical claim. There is a sense in which, according to me, these things do exist. This will become clear shortly.
Deflationary Existence  

neighborhood, and weighs more than 2,000 pounds relative to the gravitational field of Earth. Relative to what does my automobile exist? One short answer is: the set of things I possess. Another short answer is: the set of things near the surface of Earth. There are many other short answers. Here is the beginning of a long answer:7

W. V. Quine famously argued that the ontological commitment of a theory is revealed in its quantificational logical regimentation: to exist according to a theory so regimented is to be eligible for being the value of a variable, i.e., to be included in the universe of discourse over which the variables are to range8. The universe of discourse is simply a (nonempty) set of things. So, to exist according to a theory is to be a member of a certain set of things appropriately associated with the theory. I take this Quinean idea and give it a distinctly non-Quinean twist. What I take from the Quinean idea is the set-theoretical relational nature of ontological commitment: for a thing to be ontologically committed to by a theory is for the thing to belong to a certain set of things appropriately associated with the theory. The distinctly non-Quinean twist is to understand existence itself along the same lines. For example, I understand the existence of my automobile in my neighborhood as the obtainment of the membership relation between my automobile and the set of things in the neighborhood9.

I propose that existence is membership in a given set10. This is a deflationaly theory of existence. On any particular occasion of existential discourse, if membership in the set $S$ under discussion is to be understood along the lines of “for any $x$, $x$ is a member of $S$ iff $x$ is $F$,” then existence relative to $S$ amounts to being $F$. Existence talk is eliminable this way extensionally case by case. This is the sense in which my proposal is deflationary. In general, any set of any things may serve as the

7 Just the beginning. The long answer cannot be contained in its entirety in this short paper.
8 Quine 1963: 15.
9 Quine’s doctrine of ontological commitment crucially assumes that proper names are eliminable by means of definite descriptions and artificial verbs (e.g., “to pegasusize”). I reject this assumption. My proposal does not presuppose eliminability or dispensability of proper names. The sentence “Pegasus does not exist,” which Quine uses to motivate introduction of his doctrine, is not incoherent on my account. The intelligibility of this sentence, as read de re, does not require that the referent of “Pegasus” exist with respect to any specific set; it only requires that the referent of “Pegasus” exist with respect to some set or other. More on this later.
10 Nathan Salmon mentions the position which takes existence as set membership, characterizing it as Quine-inspired, but sadly dismisses it too quickly: “If Quine’s slogan is understood to mean that for something to exist is for it to be in the range of a function whose domain is a set of objects that might someday serve as variables, one might as well skip the variables and their value-assignments altogether and say that to be is to be an element of a set. But then why not simply say that to be is to be the element of a singleton, or unit set? As explications of existence, these somehow fall flat” (Salmon 1987: 51–2).
second *relatum* of the relation of existence. If a given thing is a member of the set, the existence claim is true, and if not, untrue. The general picture is as simple as that. But in many particular cases of existence claims, we can say much more.

At this point someone might object to my proposal as follows: The sentence “dogs exist” ("there are dogs")\(^{11}\) predicates existence but does not mention any (particular) thing. So it does not predicate existence of any (particular) thing. Therefore, existence cannot be a relation involving a thing.

This objection does not show that existence is not a relation involving a thing. If it did, the following two parallel arguments would show that eating was not a relation involving a thing and that barking was not a property of a thing: (i) The sentence “dogs eat” predicates eating but does not mention any (particular) thing. So it does not predicate eating of any (particular) thing. Therefore, eating cannot be a relation involving a thing. (ii) The sentence “dogs bark” predicates barking but does not mention any (particular) thing. So it does not predicate barking of any (particular) thing. Therefore, barking cannot be a property of a thing.

My proposal that existence is a relation involving a thing does not imply that every true existential sentence mentions a (particular) thing.

Another possible objection is that since ordinary people readily understand statements of existence but do not understand set theory, existence cannot be analyzed in set-theoretical terms. I consider this to be a particular case of a general objection against any conceptual analysis and therefore to be dealt with at the general level as a "problem of analysis." Suffice it to say that ordinary people do seem implicitly to grasp (at least the naïve version of) the notion of a set.

2. **Contextual Determination**

Central to my relational analysis of existence is the importance of a proper specification of the second *relatum*, a set.

The content of an ordinary existential sentence usually needs to be understood on the basis of contextual cues surrounding its utterance\(^{12}\). When we make an existential statement by assertively uttering the sentence “there are dogs,” we ordinarily have in mind a more or less specific set of things, and the correct understanding of

\(^{11}\) I consider “Fs exist” and “there are Fs” as synonymous. Those who disagree are usually called *Meinongians*. If that is what it takes to be a Meinongian, I am not a Meinongian. See Parsons 1980.

\(^{12}\) Davie Lewis puts the core point succinctly: “... part of the ordinary meaning of any idiom of quantification consists of susceptibility to restrictions; and restrictions come and go with the pragmatic wind” (Lewis 1986: 164). It is important to note that Lewis speaks of “the ordinary meaning of any idiom of quantification” rather than the existential quantifier of formal logic. His point concerns predication of existence in ordinary language, and so does mine. See footnote 30 for a related point.
our statement requires relativizing the existence predication to that set. If we make our statement in the middle of a discussion about what animals are exhibited in a given zoo, the right set may well consist of the exhibited animals in the zoo. If we make our statement while trying to ascertain the surviving life forms in a collapsed research lab on Antarctica, the right set is most likely to consist of the research team members and their support animals in the lab. If the contextual cues are so minimal as to give little indication of any specific relatively compact set, then the correct understanding of the content of the statement may require reference to the set of all animals — or even all things — in the vicinity of Earth, or the solar system, or the Milky Way Galaxy, or even the entire known universe\(^\text{13}\).

Consider the sentence “there is a horse with wings.” The concept *horse with wings* is associated with a certain set, namely, the set of horses with wings. A necessary condition for the truth of the sentence is that a thing be a member of this set. And indeed a thing is a member of this set, for Pegasus is. Remember that according to the position I favor, Pegasus is a thing. Its non-actuality does not stand in the way of its thingness. (Do not conflate existence with actuality. The importance of this warning will become clearer shortly.) But the sentence in question is not yet to be judged true at this point, for it is still to be determined whether a sufficient condition for its truth is satisfied. And for that, we need to know the universe of discourse that is presupposed for the purpose of the statement; only then can we determine the second *relatum* of the existence relation asserted. Suppose that it is the set of all actual animals. Then the second *relatum* is the intersection of that set and the set of horses with wings. Pegasus is not a member of this intersection; neither is any other thing. Thus, the statement is false. Suppose, on the other hand, that it is the set of all animals in the Greek mythology. Then the second *relatum* is the set just of Pegasus. Pegasus is a member of this set, so the statement is true.

Here is a simpler case. Suppose that the uttered sentence is “Pegasus exists.” If the universe of discourse is the set of actual animals, then the statement is false. If it is the set of animals in the Greek mythology, then the statement is true. Either way, in this case there is no need to consider the intersection with any other set\(^\text{14}\).

The word “something” does not mean “some existing thing.” It means “some thing,” i.e., simply “a thing.” So, by saying that something is thus-and-so, we are merely saying that a thing is thus-and-so, without any existential implication.

But both in ordinary discourse and in philosophical discourse, we sometimes say “something” and mean “some existing thing.” When we do so, we are not using

\(^{13}\) It should go without saying that the “universe” and the “universe of discourse” should be kept strictly separate. This unfortunate terminological coincidence should not confuse us.

\(^{14}\) The Fregean would disagree, for she would insist that we should consider some set associated with the name “Pegasus” via its sense (*Sinn*). Thus I am not a Fregean.

— 5 —
"something" as equivalent to "a thing," but as equivalent to "a thing that exists." Suppose that we so use the word "something" as we say the following: the sentence "there is a winged horse" with the set $S_1$ understood as the universe of discourse, is true if and only if something is a member of the intersection of $S_1$ and the set of winged horses. The question, on this supposition, is whether our metalinguistic biconditional at issue, interpreted in accordance with the speaker's meaning, is any more informative than the following metalinguistic biconditional: "snow is white" is true if and only if snow is white. Someone might say that even though this kind of biconditional may serve useful theoretical purposes in the right hand in the right context of theoretical discourse\textsuperscript{15}, in the present supposed context it is merely uninformative, for it amounts to saying little more than that "there is a winged horse in $S_1$" is true if and only if there is a thing that is a winged horse in $S_1$. But if someone says this, she is mistaken.

Like "exists" and "there is," the word "something," when used to mean "some existing thing," is sensitive to the contextual determination of the relevant second relatum of the existence relation associated with the "existing"-part (the middle part) of "some existing thing." Call that second relatum $S_2$ in the above case of our utterance of the biconditional. $S_2$ is another universe of discourse in addition to $S_1$, namely the one in accordance with the supposed speaker's meaning of "something." Then what we mean to say by our biconditional is in effect that "there is a winged horse in $S_1$" is true if and only if the intersection of $S_1$, $S_2$, and the set of winged horses is nonempty. This is certainly more informative than saying that "there is a winged horse in $S_1$" is true if and only if there is a thing that is a winged horse in $S_1$.

At the same time, this introduces a third set, $S_2$, into the picture, complicating the specification of the truth conditions needlessly. The lesson which I think we should all learn from this little reflection is that we should not use the word "something" to mean "some existing thing" but stick to its proper meaning, "some thing," i.e., "a thing." We can always say "some existing thing" explicitly if that is what we wish to mean, just as easily as we can say "an existing thing."

In a standard context in which the sentence "Pegasus does not exist" is uttered, the universe of discourse is likely to be a set of only actual things, including actual animals. When uttered in such a context, the sentence is true if Pegasus is not a member of that set, i.e., if Pegasus is not an actual thing. This is what I had in mind when I said at the beginning of Section 1 that Pegasus is a thing but does not exist. Likewise with my statement that unicorns, phlogiston, and ether are things but do not exist. On the other hand, in a non-standard context, like one in which philosophy is discussed, someone may speak of Pegasus with ontological seriousness. When uttered in such a context, "Pegasus exists" may well come out true, for the relevant

\textsuperscript{15} See Tarski 1983: 155. Clearly, truth is not among the topics we are focusing on.
Deflationary Existence

set may well include Pegasus, and perhaps other non-actual things (from the Greek mythology, say). As for unicorns, phlogiston, and ether, think of those contexts in which, respectively, the European folkloric fauna, Joseph Priestley’s chemistry, and the universe according to ether theory are taken seriously ontologically.

When I put forth in this paper a statement of existence or nonexistence without any explicit specification of the intended set relative to which it should be understood, I have in mind a fairly obvious set containing just actual things. Any bare existence talk, i.e., talk of existence or nonexistence without explicit mention of the second relatum of the existence relation, should be understood accordingly. Whenever I intend as the second relatum some set containing some non-actual things, I shall make it clear explicitly.

Do not object by saying, “But you can’t speak of winged horses in any way, for there aren’t any.” Two things are wrong with saying this. First, we can truthfully assert that there are winged horses, provided that we do so with an ample enough set at work to include a sufficient variety of non-actual animals. Second, nonexistence of $x$ does not preclude our ability to speak of $x$; Pegasus does not exist but we can speak of Pegasus. So even with respect to a slim set which includes at most actual physical things, we can still speak of a winged horse and assert truths about it, e.g., that it is a winged horse and that it does not exist. Once we realize that the objector must be assuming an implicit reference to actuality when she says, “…, for there aren’t any,” the objection loses its force.

When I maintain in general terms that existence is a relation between a thing and a set of things, the notion of a thing, invoked twice, is free of any existential implication, hence there is no provision for any particular set to be involved, even implicitly, with respect to which the locution “a thing” should be understood. Otherwise, it would be circular to say, as I wish to in defining existence, that for any thing $x$, the statement that $x$ exists, understood relative to a context of utterance $C$, is true if and only if $x$ is a member of the set appropriately determined by $C$. Also, since I say that a set has things as its members and wish this to be an informative characterization of a set for my purposes, I need the notion of a thing not to be dependent on the notion of a set. Thus, a satisfactory general formulation of my proposal requires an independent notion of a thing. I take the notion of a thing to be primitive.

3. Existence, Occupation, and Containment

Many things are in my neighborhood, and my automobile is one of them. So, my automobile is a member of the set of those things which are in the neighborhood.

---

16 This is the cash value of footnote 6.
When understood as a statement of the existence of my automobile, this would be circular and utterly trivial if "are in the neighborhood" meant "exist in the neighborhood." We need an alternative understanding of "are in the neighborhood." This problem is entirely general. When I made a brief proposal in Yagisawa 2010 that existence should be considered as a relation to a collection, I mainly had in mind existence at a possible world. To exist at a possible world \( w \) is to be a member of the set of things appropriately associated with \( w \). What is the appropriate association? Existence should not figure in the characterization of the appropriate association, on pain of vicious circularity. The problem is to fill the lacuna in the following definition of existence at a world: a thing \( x \) exists at a possible world \( w \) if and only if \( x \) is a member of the set of all and only those things which are \( \ldots w \ldots \). The problem concerning the existence of my automobile in the neighborhood is a problem confined to a single world, namely the actual world, but it is essentially the same problem.

I think that the solution to this general problem will suggest itself if we first consider different natures of things. Some concrete things such as automobiles are by nature spatiotemporal. Cartesian egos are by nature temporal but not spatial. Certain abstract (non-concrete) things, like Platonic Forms, are by nature neither spatial nor temporal. Other abstract things might be non-spatial but temporal.

For the sake of our discussion, let us take just two contrasting examples: a particular automobile and the Platonic Form of automobile. The former is spatiotemporal, and the latter is not.

The statement that there is an automobile in a given garage is true if and only

---

17 Or impossible. But impossible worlds would be a distraction here.
18 David Lewis explicitly posits existence as a relation between a thing and a world in his analysis of Anselm's ontological argument in Lewis 1970: 177. I, with Lewis, think that fruitful philosophical analyses often require us to construe existence as a relation between a thing and a world. My aim in this section is to show that my proposed relational analysis of existence not only does not conflict with such a construal but also subsumes it as a special case of a more general theory of existence.
19 Nathan Salmon tries to point out a difficulty with a temporally and worldly relativized version of Quine's thesis of ontological commitment: "The notion of a function being an assignment of values to variables with respect to a time \( t \) and a possible world \( w \) is defined in terms of the notion of existence: an assignment of values to variables is an assignment with respect to \( t \) and \( w \) if and only if everything it assigns exists at \( t \) in \( w \)" (Salmon 1987: 52). The solution I propose in this section will work equally well as a response to Salmon.
20 Some might say that God is a concrete thing similar to a Cartesian ego (for God is a person and an agent) but that God is not only non-spatial but also non-temporal (for God created not only space but also time).
21 Alie Thomasson in Thomasson 1999 advocates the view that fictional entities are such abstract objects. Jeffrey Goodman makes the even more radical claim in Goodman 2003 that fictional entities are not only temporal but also spatial (spatially located).
if an automobile is a member of a certain appropriate set associated with the garage in question\textsuperscript{22}. What the set is depends partly on what kind of thing an automobile is. As we have noted, an automobile is a concrete, spatiotemporal thing by nature. We can use this fact to specify the set in a non-circular way. Intuitively, for a particular automobile to exist in a given garage is for the automobile to be somewhere in the garage, that is, for the automobile to have a spatiotemporal location within the garage. Thus we arrive at a satisfactory specification of the set, as follows: the set of things which occupy a spatiotemporal region\textsuperscript{23} contained in the garage. The specification is in terms of occupation and containment, neither of which presupposes existence. Occupation is a relation between a concrete thing and a spatiotemporal region, and containment is a relation between a physical thing with spatial capacity—like a garage—and a spatiotemporal region. Neither relation presupposes the existence of either relatum. Pegasus, a nonexistent divine creature, occupies a nonexistent spatiotemporal region contained in the nonexistent land of the Greek mythology. A nonexistent automobile might well occupy a nonexistent spatiotemporal region contained in an equally nonexistent garage, just as my existent automobile occupies an existent spatiotemporal region contained in my existent garage.

Someone might complain that a nonexistent automobile cannot occupy an existent spatiotemporal region, and that an existent automobile cannot occupy a nonexistent spatiotemporal region. Also, a nonexistent spatiotemporal region cannot be contained in an existent garage, and an existent spatiotemporal region cannot be contained in a nonexistent garage. This means, the complainer might continue, that occupation and containment require that either both relata exist or both relata not exist. This requirement is a conceptual requirement and therefore, the complainer might conclude, the concepts of occupation and containment presuppose the concept of existence, so it is circular to define existence in terms of occupation and containment.

This complaint might sound compelling at first; how could an automobile possibly occupy a spatiotemporal region, or a spatiotemporal region be contained in a garage, if one of the relata exists but the other does not? Upon closer inspection, however, the complaint is found to be without foundation. The plausibility of our intuitive judgment that an automobile could not occupy a spatiotemporal region if one of them (the automobile or the spatiotemporal region) exists and the other does not is explicable without building existence into the definition of occupation. When

\textsuperscript{22} That is, if and only if the intersection of the set of automobiles and a certain appropriate set associated with the garage in question is nonempty.

\textsuperscript{23} Or a spatiotemporal point. This disjunct is necessary for a more general characterization to avoid excluding things which only occupy a point location instantaneously. This complication will be ignored in the remainder of the paper. (Alternatively, we may simply regard a point as a special, limit case of a region.)
we think of a given spatiotemporal region as unfit for occupation by a given automobile, we are thinking of the automobile being cut off from the spacetime of which the region is a part. The "cut off" relation here is simply lack of spatiotemporal overlap. The automobile is a spatiotemporal thing, and the spatiotemporal region is obviously spatiotemporal. So, for the former to occupy the latter, the former’s spatiotemporal extent and the latter’s spatiotemporal extent must overlap. This has little to do with existence of either. Similarly with containment.

This consideration exposes the core defect in the complaint. It is a mistake to think that it is a conceptual requirement that in order for occupation or containment to hold between two things, either both things should be existent or both things should be nonexistent. It is true that occupation and containment do not hold between two things if either exists without the other; and this is necessarily so, but not conceptually so. The concept of occupation or the concept of containment does not require anything or things to exist or not exist in any combination.

It is important to be clear about conceptual distinctness and priority. An automobile may occupy a spatiotemporal region contained in a given garage, but this does not entail that either the automobile or the garage exists. Existence is a relation between a thing and a set of things. For each claim of existence, the second relatum, the set, needs to be explicitly specified or implicitly understood. Occupation and containment may figure in such a specification or understanding. But one could grasp the concept of existence without grasping the concept of occupation or the concept of containment. In this sense, neither occupation nor containment is conceptually prior to existence. (Neither is existence prior to occupation or containment.) However, one could not understand fully a particular statement of existence without understanding what the relevant set is, and the relevant set may be given only in terms of occupation and containment. In this sense, both occupation and containment may be indispensable for a full understanding of a particular statement of existence.

A similar line of consideration gives us a satisfactory specification of the set to which the existence of the Platonic Form of automobile is to be relativized. Intuitively, since Platonic Forms are abstract and non-spatiotemporal, they are not the kind of things that exist in a garage as opposed to outside the garage, or in one spatiotemporal area of the universe as opposed to another. Rather, they are the kind of things that exist in a non-spatiotemporal realm of the universe. Let us call that realm Abstract Realm. Intuitively, then, for the Platonic Form of automobile to exist in the universe at large is for it to occupy a portion contained in the universe’s Abstract Realm. The occupation relation here is not a relation between a thing and a spatiotemporal region. Neither is the containment relation a relation between a

24 That is, it is so with metaphysical necessity but not with conceptual necessity.
25 The set need not be so given. It may be given without mentioning occupation or containment at all: e.g., as the set of Jane’s favorite things.
thing with spatiotemporal capacity and a spatiotemporal region. Let us mark the
difference by means of different subscripts: my automobile occupies\(_c\), a spatiotemporal
region contained\(_c\) in the garage, whereas the Platonic Form of automobile occupies\(_a\), a
portion contained\(_a\) in the Abstract Realm. By implementing this differentiation by
means of subscripts, I do not intend to suggest that there is a single overarching non-
disjunctive relation of which occupation\(_c\) and occupation\(_a\) are particular instances,
or that there is a single overarching non-disjunctive relation of which containment\(_c\)
and containment\(_a\) are particular instances. Nor do I intend to suggest that there is
not. I simply leave these questions open.

Existence at a possible world is simply existence relative to an appropriate set
of things occupying a relevant part of the universe as it is at that world\(^{26}\). So, for
an automobile \(x\) to exist at a possible world \(w\) is for \(x\) to be a member of the set of
things which occupy\(_c\) a spatiotemporal region contained\(_c\) in the universe as it is at \(w\),
and for a Platonic Form \(x\) to exist at \(w\) is for \(x\) to be a member of the set of things
which occupy\(_a\) a portion contained\(_a\) in the Abstract Realm of the universe as it is at
\(w\). Existence at a world is thus derivative of existence relative to a set and is by no
means a competitor to it.

But what good is existence if it is only existence relative to a set which itself
may or may not exist? Pegasus exists relative to the set of creatures from the Greek
mythology, but the set does not exist, and existence relative to a nonexistent set is no
genuine existence at all, it might be complained. A number of unwarranted assumptions
underlie such a complaint, as we might notice easily by now. One assumption is
that the set of creatures from the Greek mythology does not exist. Since my theory is
that existence is a relation to a set, this assumption needs to be understood relative
to an implicitly understood set, if the complaint is not to beg the question. Relative
to the set of sets of things in your kitchen, say, the set of creatures from the Greek
mythology does not exist, but relative to the set of sets of mythological creatures, it
does. It is not at all intuitively objectionable to maintain that Pegasus is not among
the things in your kitchen but that it is among the mythological creatures.

It might be responded that if the set, \(S\), of creatures from the Greek mythology
does exist in some sense, \(S\) will be the empty set, so Pegasus is not a member of \(S\),
hence Pegasus does not exist relative to \(S\); nothing does. Here I would counter that
such a response conflates \(S\) with the intersection of \(S\) and the set of actual creatures.
The intersection is empty, but \(S\) is not\(^{27}\).

If the set relative to which a given existence claim should be understood is
absolutely unrestricted, i.e., if its membership condition is without any restriction

\(^{26}\) The notion of a possible world is a technical notion of modal metaphysics, not to be
confused with the intuitive notion of the universe.

\(^{27}\) \(S\) contains not only Pegasus but also Phoenix, Karkinos (a giant crab), and a host of
other creatures.
whatever, then my proposal might appear to be in jeopardy, for it might appear that
in such a case no set needs to be specified even implicitly as the relativizing factor of
the existence claim, hence existence need not in general be considered to be a relation
between a thing and a set. I do not believe that this line of thought is damaging to
my proposal, for two reasons. First, I do not believe that the idea of an absolutely
unrestricted set is coherent. Such a set would include a proper class as a member,
which is impossible\(^\text{28}\). Second, even if a given existence claim is to be understood in
terms of an absolutely unrestricted set, it is still an existence claim with a relativizing
set; it is just that the relativizing set has a highly unusual membership condition\(^\text{29}\).

4. Some Theoretical Benefits

My proposal yields a number of specific theoretical benefits. I sketch five of them
briefly in this section.

1. Domain relativity: The famous Quinean answer “everything” to the question
“what exists?” has to be right. At the same time, it is too easy. An adequate
analysis of existence should offer a smooth account of this peculiar situation and de-
mystify it. Quine himself attempts to remove the mystery partly by means of domain
relativity\(^\text{30}\).

Given its Quine-inspired origin, my proposal has an obvious and immediate ad-

28 A proper class is just like a set except that it is not a member of anything.

29 What is the relation between an existence claim with an absolutely unrestricted set
and absolutely unrestricted existential quantification? It is not as simple as one might
suspect. Existence is a relation between a thing and a set of things, while existen-
tial quantification is an operation on properties and relations (or concepts in Frege’s
sense). In order to become clear about the relation between the two, we need an
account of how my proposal on existence is related to the standard Fregean rendition
of an existence statement as a higher-order predication.

30 And partly by means of changing the subject from existence to ontological commit-
ment. I do not emulate Quine in this second respect, as noted earlier. Some might
think that emulating Quine in this respect would help me avoid the potentially infinite
recess of existential questions and answers: “Does x exist?” — “x exists relative to
S\(_1\)” — “Does S\(_1\) exist?” — “S\(_1\) exists relative to S\(_2\)” — “Does S\(_2\) exist?” — “S\(_2\) exists
relative to S\(_3\)” — “Does S\(_3\) exist?” — and so on. But I am not certain how changing
the subject from existence to ontological commitment would stop the recess. I also
do not think that this potentially infinite regress is vicious. It is a mistake to think
that any question of existence has an absolute answer. It is a mistake to think that we
may speak of absolute or ultimate existence. To take my proposal seriously is to take
existence seriously as a relation, which is to cease to think of existential questions as
absolutely or ultimately answerable. (I thank an anonymous referee for a comment
that prompted most of this note.)

— 12 —
true relative to the set of things in the neighborhood supermarket but false relative to the set of things in your kitchen. The statement "everything exists" is obviously true when the relevant set is understood to contain those things which are termed "everything" in the statement. At the same time, it is too easy to understand the statement that way, because the set is subject to contextual determination, which can shift much too easily "with the pragmatic wind." It is just too easy to mean by one's utterance of "everything" only those things which are in the set.

2. *Conceived existence*: Conceive a tree. Conceive it to be a pine tree. Conceive it to be standing in the middle of a meadow. Conceive it to be 15 feet tall. Now conceive it to be existing. Each time we add a characterization of the conceived tree, the content of the conception becomes more definite than before, except in the last step. Adding existence to the conceived tree does not add any further characteristic to the already conceived content.

My proposal explains why this is so. At the start, we are invited to conceive an arbitrary member of the set of trees. We are then invited to conceive an arbitrary member of a smaller set, that of pine trees. Then a still smaller set is given, followed by an even smaller set. But when we are invited next to conceive the tree to be existing, we are not given a further set, smaller or larger than before. Instead, since existence is a relation to an appropriate set and in this case an obviously salient set is the set of 15-foot pine trees standing in the middle of meadows, we naturally take it to be the appropriate set, in the absence of a contrary instruction. But the conceived tree already is a member of that set; that is how we conceived the tree just prior to the last step. Thus, we feel at a loss as to what further to do; we feel that we have already done all there is to do to comply with the invitation, namely conceiving a member of the set of 15-foot pine trees in the middle of meadows. This is an obvious consequence of my proposal.

---

31 See footnote 12.
32 The basic point is made by Immanuel Kant against the property theory of existence in Kant 1781, Chapter III, Section 4.
33 This Kant-inspired consideration does not refute the property theory of existence, for existence might be a property the possession of which would not make any difference to the content of conception when a thing is conceived to come to exist. (This is not a criticism of Kant.) Still, the consideration does place non-negligible pressure on the property theory, making existence according to it seem mysterious, thereby casting serious doubt upon its intelligibility.

According to Kant, to say of a particular subject that it exists is to "posit the subject in itself with all its predicates, and indeed posit as being an object that stands in relation to my concept" (Kant 1781, A599, B627; emphasis his). This might almost sound like my proposal. To say of x that it exists is, according to Kant, to posit x as an object in relation to a given concept, whereas I say that it is to put x as a member of a given set. There is an obvious formal parallel between "posit/object/concept" and "put/member/set." My proposal might be considered Kantian in this, perhaps...
3. *Intentional relations:* My proposal has a distinct advantage over the property theory of existence (apart from the advantage noted above and in footnote 33) without being Fregean. I have distinguished thingness and existence. The distinction is compatible with the property theory. The property theorist could coherently say that Agatha Christie is a thing and has the property of existence, while Miss Marple is a thing but does not have the property of existence, and that Urbain Jean Joseph Le Verrier is a thing and has the property of existence, while Vulcan is a thing but does not have the property of existence. Given this, an objection might be mounted against the property theory, as follows:

You admire Miss Marple and marvel at Vulcan, but how can this be if Miss Marple and Vulcan flatly lack the property of existence? If there exists no such thing as Miss Marple or Vulcan, how can you stand in a genuine relation to either of them? Being a thing alone does not help. Existence in some sense must underwrite the availability for standing in genuine relations with things like you and me. Miss Marple does exist according to Christie’s novels, and Vulcan according to Le Verrier’s theory. But since you do not exist according to either, we cannot say that you admire Miss Marple according to the novels or that you marvel at Vulcan according to Le Verrier’s theory.

My relational analysis is free from such an objection. Miss Marple and you do exist relative to an appropriately chosen set (e.g., one including both the characters in Christie’s novels and her readers), and Vulcan and you do exist according to an appropriately chosen set (e.g., one including both the heavenly bodies postulated by Le Verrier and astronomy enthusiasts). Not only is thingness kept separate from existence, but also there is a sense in which anything exists: for any $x$, $x$ exists according to an appropriately chosen set. Thus, my proposal allows us to have the cake and eat it too. The property theory does not\textsuperscript{34}.

4. *“Where?” questions:* Assertions of existence naturally invite the response, “where?” Black swans exist. Where? Unopened bottles of wine exist. Where? Holes, boundaries, and shadows exist. Where? Transfinite numbers exist. Where? The questions, “where do black swans exist?” and “where do unopened bottles of wine exist?” are perfectly intelligible and easily answerable. The question, “where are holes, boundaries, and shadows?” may be a little more difficult to answer satisfactorily, and the question, “where do transfinite numbers exist?” may be very difficult to answer at all. But the questions of the whereabouts of holes, boundaries, and shadows are nonetheless perfectly intelligible. As for the question of the whereabouts of transfinite numbers, if one thinks to some extent that it is not a legitimate question

\textsuperscript{34} Notice an obvious connection to the first benefit discussed in this section, *domain relativity*. Notice also that unlike the Fregean account, my account avoids the assumption that the so-called empty names have descriptive contents as their semantic values.
that can be properly answered, then to that same extent one should perhaps think
that existence assertions about transfinite numbers are not quite intelligible. Or so it
might seem intuitively. Based on this intuitive judgment, one might well think that
such assertions about transfinite numbers should be replaced with proof-theoretic
assertions, or assertions of some other more tractable kind. (See the benefit 5 below
for more on this.)

My proposal readily explains this apparently tight yet somewhat inchoate rela-
tion between existence and whereabouts. Any existence assertion of the form “Fs
exist” ("there are Fs") is in effect an assertion of a certain relation between the set
of Fs and a set of things. To say that black swans exist is to say in effect that
the set of black swans and a certain set of things understood from the context intersect
non-vacuously; and that is the case if and only if a thing that is a black swan is a
member of the second set. When the set is left implicit, the addressee may under-
standably request its explicit specification. Asking a “where?” question is a natural
way to issue such a request. For example, the correct answer “in Australia” to the
question “where do black swans exist?” informs us that the set is the set of things in
Australia and that black swans exist relative to the set of things in Australia. Thus,
my proposal offers a ready explanation of the naturalness of “where?” questions in
response to existence assertions.

5. Motivation for nominalism: Closely related to the last two benefits is the
benefit of being able to offer a natural explanation why nominalism is attractive.
Nominalism denies the actual existence of non-spatiotemporal things. In the ter-
minology of my proposal, nominalism denies that a thing is a member of the set
of things that occupy a portion contained in the Abstract Realm of the universe
as it is actually. Unlike occupation and containment, which are straightforward
spatiotemporal relations, occupation and containment seem mysterious.

Our natural impulse to ask “where?” when presented with the assertion “Pla-
tonic Forms exist” may be seen to underlie our postulation of the Abstract Realm,
but to say that Platonic Forms are located in the Abstract Realm may just be a more
dignified way of saying that they are located we know not where. If so, perhaps we
would be better off not claiming their existence at all.

5. Conclusion

Existence is unmysterious and metaphysically shallow. It is simply the member-
ship relation. Forgetting all about the second relatum of this relation, a set, is at the
root of the usual misguided take on existence, enshrining it as metaphysically special

35 I make the customary simplification of ignoring the difference between a plural noun
(“swans”) and its singular form (“a swan”).
and deep. It is high time that we brought existence down to earth. In this paper I have made a modest attempt in that direction, but much remains to be done. Here is a list of some further topics to be explored:

(1) Frege’s view that existence is a property of concepts;
(2) the view that existence as a property of objects can be defined as $\lambda x \exists y (y = x)$;
(3) statements of existence de re;
(4) ontological pluralism;
(5) modal realism;
(6) the possibilism/actualism debate;
(7) the view that everything exists necessarily;
(8) the relation between existence and reality$^{36}$.

References

Parsons, Terence, 1980, Noneexistent Objects (Yale University Press).
———, (manuscript), “Existence De Re.”

(Received 2013.8.2; Revised 2013.11.30; Accepted 2013.12.6)

$^{36}$ Some results of explorations of most of these topics are reported in Yagisawa (manuscript).