

# The Philosophy Café

## Being and Not Being: What is Real?

**Sunday 13 June 2021**

Ontology is the branch of philosophy that studies concepts such as existence, being, becoming, and reality. Let us start with the last and work our way backwards.

### What is Reality?

There are three main ways to answer the question, 'what is real and what is not real?', but there are other ways. The study of categories or highest kinds they are is what we really talking about, and how they form a system of categories that provides an encompassing classification of all entities. That is the philosophical work, and it seeks to comprehend the whole. In this way we cannot say, with the clarity of reason, "x is real, and I have no interest in y which is not real." All real things are connected, and, in reason, must have connection to the unreal. Everything fits even as we can accept conflict and paradox.

So, saying what is real and not real comes to these three main ways of description, and from description the attempt – successful or not – to explanation:

### Particulars and universals

Here we are only talking about parts and the whole or common.

Universals concern features that can be exemplified by various and different particulars. For example, a tomato and a strawberry are two particulars that exemplify the universal redness. Universals can be present at various distinct locations in space at the same time while particulars are restricted to one location at a time. Furthermore, universals can be fully present at different times, which is why they are sometimes referred to as repeatables in contrast to non-repeatable particulars.

Now, the conventional mis-headed idea is that particulars, material objects, are what is real, and universals are only 'unreal' descriptors of those realities. This thinking is, philosophically, confused. Realists about universals believe that there are universals. Modern science would not be possible if it were not so.

Realists are divided among themselves as to whether universals can exist independently of being exemplified by something ("*ante res*") or not ("*in rebus*"). Nominalists, on the other hand, deny that there are universals. They have to resort to other notions to explain how a feature can be common to several entities, for example, by positing either fundamental resemblance-relations between the entities (resemblance nominalism) or a shared membership to a common natural class (class nominalism).

Such nominalism might be difficult to understand in 'common sense' modernity. However, it is a possibly correct thesis that language creates an illusion that there is a tangible reality. Whether this is correct, or not, is impossible to prove scientifically or logically. Indeed, a number of brilliant mathematicians and scientists are nominalist.

#### Abstract and concrete

The most general division of there 'being', existence, is concrete objects and abstract objects. The difference is not easily to say as the characteristic marks of concreteness and abstractness has no consensus. Indeed, philosophers are suspect about the talk of characteristics – what "really" is character? So, instead, it is better to talk of usage – how we use concrete objects and abstract objects differently. Examples of concrete objects include plants, human beings and planets. Examples of abstract objects are numbers, sets and propositions, and might also include images, and the meta-concepts of thought. You can see the usage here is different in the cognition or form of reasoning which is used in the reference to the objects or signs (Semiotics). One form of reasoning becomes very particular. The other, abstraction, relates universals, and perhaps abstraction can be explained as the process from the particular to the universal.

#### Ontological dependence and other terms

Categorisation is the first step, and the nominalist may wish to go no further. For the realist there are a series of terms which need to be employed in answering the question of what is real, or not? Ontological dependence refers to the fact (if and when) an entity "ontologically depends" on another entity if the first entity cannot exist without the second entity. Ontologically independent entities, on the other hand, can exist all by themselves. As can be

seen in that awkward explanation, which is the standard, these 'realist' ideas are very contentious.

Other terms have better hope for the question.

**Identity** is a basic ontological concept that is often expressed by the word "same". However, sameness is not always sameness and there different theories and sub-terms to explain identity.

**Modality** relates the concepts of possibility, actuality and necessity. These concepts are often defined in terms of 'possible worlds'. A possible world is a complete way how things could have been.

**Substances** is a category which has played a central role in many ontological theories throughout the history of philosophy. A substance is not necessarily material, and may possibly not be material. Substances are *particulars* that are *ontologically independent*: they are able to exist all by themselves.

**Properties and relations** are the explanations philosophers use, both in the case of concrete objects and abstract objects. The language is obviously metaphorical and are not the actualities when talk of ownership of 'things' as properties – land, jewellery, houses, etc., -- and when discussing the physicality of human relations.

**States of affairs and events** are the situation described or explained as what philosophers refer to as propositions. It is taking the talk of properties and relations to a higher level, to a summative conclusion.

### What is Becoming?

Becoming is the possibility of change in a thing that has being, that exists. The concept of becoming originated in ancient Greece with the philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus, who in the sixth century BC, said that nothing in this world is constant except change and becoming (i.e., everything is impermanent).

Following the history of this study, "becoming" concerns a specific ontological concept studied by modern process philosophy as a whole or with the related study of process theology.

The question is whether there is anything stable as not to be in a state of change or process. Heraclitus, in the "Περὶ φύσεως" ("Perì phýseōs" or "On Nature") provided the in the famous aphorism πάντα ῥεῖ (panta rhei), translated literally as "the whole flows [as a river]," or figuratively as "everything flows, nothing stands still." The concept of "becoming" in philosophy is connected with two other terms: movement and evolution, as becoming assumes a "changing to" and a "moving toward." Becoming is the process or state of change and coming about in time and space.

### What is Being?

Being is the material or immaterial existence of a thing. Anything that exists is being. Several great philosophers have had a go at explaining 'Being'. the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) (who himself drew on ancient Greek sources) adopted German terms like Dasein to articulate the topic. It is a favourite topic of existentialists and phenomenologists.

The subject **had** been the great divide between the Continental and Analytic philosophy. Ayer was a strong critic of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. As a logical positivist Ayer conflicted with Heidegger's proposed vast, overarching theories regarding existence. These he felt were completely unverifiable through empirical demonstration and logical analysis, and this sort of philosophy an unfortunate strain in modern thought. He considered Heidegger to be the worst example of such philosophy, which Ayer believed to be entirely useless. In *Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (1982) Ayer accuses Heidegger of "surprising ignorance" or "unscrupulous distortion" and "what can fairly be described as charlatanism." Today, there is less concern from Anglo-American philosophers on the problem of existence, either way.

### Illustration: Image Types of Existence

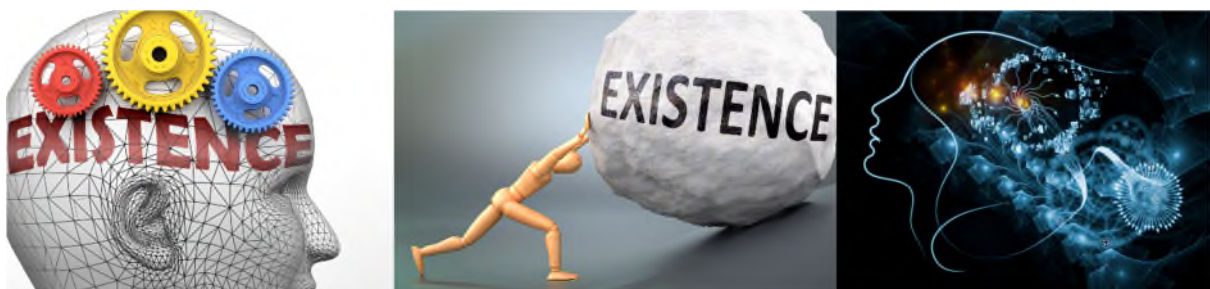


Illustration 172336751 / Human Existence © Mike Suszycki | Dreamstime.com

Illustration 217878463 / Human Existence © Mike Suszycki | Dreamstime.com

Illustration 63646139 / Human Existence © Agsandrew | Dreamstime.com

## What is Existence?

And the last question is to be, or not to be, as human experience, and here we can only go to William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, (Hamlet, act 3 scene 1):

---

*“To be, or not to be: that is the question:  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep;  
No more; and by a sleep to say we end  
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks  
That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation  
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;  
To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;  
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come  
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,  
Must give us pause: there's the respect  
That makes calamity of so long life;  
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,  
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,  
The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,  
The insolence of office and the spurns*

*That patient merit of the unworthy takes,  
When he himself might his quietus make  
With a bare bodkin? who would fardels bear,  
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,  
But that the dread of something after death,  
The undiscover'd country from whose bourn  
No traveller returns, puzzles the will  
And makes us rather bear those ills we have  
Than fly to others that we know not of?  
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;  
And thus the native hue of resolution  
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,  
And enterprises of great pith and moment  
With this regard their currents turn awry,  
And lose the name of action.--Soft you now!  
The fair Ophelia! Nymph, in thy orisons  
Be all my sins remember'd!"*

---

Human existence is best described as literature. Existence is a philosophical question, and it is not a scientific answer.

\*\*\*\*\*