

“REALLY EXISTS” — INDEFINABLE ?

Donald Hudson in his *Ludwig Wittgenstein* says :

“‘Really exists’ seems to be indefinable in somewhat the way that G. E. Moore said ‘good’ was. Take *any* proposed definition of ‘really exists’, e.g. ‘being part of the physical world’. If this definition is correct i.e. if in normal use this is what ‘really exists’ means — notice what follows. The statement, ‘what is part of the physical world really exists’ must then appear to most people to be an insignificant tautology, equivalent to ‘What is part of the physical world’. And the question ‘Does what is part of the physical world really exist’ must appear self-answering, equivalent to ‘Is what is part of the physical world part of the physical world?’ However, is this how the statement and the question do appear? Would the reader say that ‘What is part of the physical world really exists’ seems to him a mere tautology, similar to ‘Apples are apples’? Or would he say that the question, ‘Does the physical world really exist?’ can be answered simply by consulting an accurate dictionary as the question, ‘Is a bachelor an unmarried male?’ can? I think not”.¹

In this paper I shall not be concerned with the use he makes of this argument, but with the argument itself — i. e., the argument that ‘really exists’ is indefinable.

I would like to say in the very beginning that “‘What is part of the physical world really exists” does not seem to be a mere tautology, similar to ‘Apples are apples’. And I would agree with him that the question, ‘Does the physical world really exist?’ cannot be answered simply by consulting an accurate dictionary, as the question, ‘Is a bachelor an unmarried male?’

He says that ‘really exists’ is indefinable because if we try to define it, we get something which is an insignificant tautology. I think there is no justification for such a conclusion and he is mistaken so far as the indefinability of ‘really exists’ is concerned. For I contend that it can be significantly defined.

According to him, *any* definition of ‘really exists’ can be taken up, but for the purpose of discussion he takes up the materialistic

definition of 'really exists' — 'being part of the physical world'. And then he says that this leads to an insignificant tautology. For 'What is part of the physical world really exists' becomes 'What is part of the physical world is part of the physical world, when the expression 'really exists' is replaced with its defined equivalent 'being part of the physical world.'

Now, the expression 'really exists' is defined with the help of the expression 'being part of the physical world.' This definition functions as a kind of a rule which says something like as follows :

Wherever the expression, 'really exists' occurs, it can be meaningfully replaced with its defined equivalent 'being part of the physical world' Thus, e. g.,

Do tables really exist ?

= Are tables part of the physical world ?

Do unicorns really exist ?

= Are unicorns part of the physical world ?

Do values really exist ?

= Are values part of the physical world ?

Does God really exist ?

= Is God part of the physical world ?

Now, the question is : Can a rule be applied to itself? — Does the grammar of a rule include the applicability of the rule to itself? I don't think so. A rule says something like a king who says:

'All my subjects must obey this law'

and by saying so he keeps himself outside the boundaries within the law is applicable. Thus, when we go, I think, against the grammar of a rule and apply it to itself we get such propositions that Hudson calls 'insignificant tautologies'.

Whenever we use language, we use it to talk about the world, to talk about the reality — in whatever sense we understand the words 'world' and 'reality'.—And when we talk about the language itself the context makes, or should make, it clear that we are doing so. This should be so even if language is used for any other purpose. Granted these exceptions, whenever we talk we talk about the world, about the reality and all our talk is ontologically significant and informative. In this connection Hudson, while discussing the example he has taken up, says : "Materialists

undoubtedly want the statement of their belief to be understood as ontologically significant and informative. But if 'really exists' meant 'being part of the physical world', the statement, 'If anything really exists, then it is part of the physical world' would be neither significant nor informative ontologically. All it would amount to is : if anything is part of the physical world, then it is part of the physical world. Materialists are misguided if they try to make their beliefs true by definition. Statements which are true by definition have to do only with the meanings of words. But materialists, as such, do not hold beliefs about the meanings of words, but about the nature of reality."²

Here, a question arises : Are the materialists really misguided ? Do they try to make their beliefs true by definition ? When they try to define the expression, as suggested by Hudson 'with the help of the expression 'being part of the physical world' do they mean to say that " 'Really exists' means 'being part of the physical world'" is true by definition ? Or do they mean to say that if anything really exists that must be a part of the physical world ? Or to put in other words, 'X really exists' is ontologically meaningful, significant and informative, if and only if X is a part of the physical world ? By saying that 'really exists' is definitionally equivalent to 'being part of the physical world' they seem to mean that this is how the expression 'really exists' can be meaningfully used in a talk which is supposed to be ontologically significant and informative. So I would like to say that the materialists are not misguided, but Hudson commits the blunder of applying a rule to itself and complains that the materialists are misguided. And with Hudson's line of approach any other definition will meet the same fate and the people, i. e., theologians, Platonists, etc., who offer such definitions will have to be called as misguided, as Hudson calls the materialists to be. (Of course, ' definitionally equivalent ' and ' true by definition ' are two different terms and the latter should be confined to the fields of logic and mathematics.)

So I would like to say that the expression ' really exists ' can be significantly and informatively defined with the help of the basic attitude that we have towards the world—the basic attitude in and through which we determine the existence or non-existence of other things in the world.

I said when we define 'really exists' as 'being part of the physical world' it has the force of a rule which says :

Wherever the expression 'really exists' occurs, it can be meaningfully replaced with its defined equivalent 'being part of the physical world' and also said that it is not applicable to itself. But now I would like to say that there is another field in which this rule is not applicable. This is the field of the basic attitude towards the world, what R. M. Hare calls a *blik*. He says, '...our whole commerce with the world depends upon our *blik* about the world....'³ and "...without a *blik* there can be no explanation; for it is by our *blik* that we decide what is and what is not an explanation."⁴ In Hudson's words "...any man's *blik*, 'picture' or way of looking at the world, determines what, for him, does and what does not, constitute an explanation."⁵ This *blik* or basic attitude is something in and through which the existence or non-existence of others is conceived. The physical world is some thing which matters for a materialist and his basic attitude, *blik*, is grounded in it and, for him, the existence of any thing is determined if it is a part of the physical world. For another man it might be the religious world and for a third the Platonic world and so on.

So 'really exists' may mean for different persons as follows :

'Really exists' means 'being part of the physical world.'

'Really exists' means 'being part of the religious world.'

'Really exists' means 'being part of the Platonic world' And so on.

What I am trying to say is that the rule is not applicable to such basic attitudes or *bliks*. For, if we do so notice what follows :

'Does the physical world really exist?'

— 'Is the physical world part of the physical world?'

'Does the religious world really exist?'

— 'Is the religious world part of the religious world?'

'Does the Platonic world really exist?'

— 'Is the Platonic world part of the Platonic world?' And so on.

These look like absurdities as : 'Is the whole part of the whole?'
Is the *x* part of the *x*?

So I would like to conclude that the expression 'really exists' can be significantly and informatively defined with the help of the

basic attitude that we have towards the word—the basic attitude in and through which we determine the existence or non-existence of other things; but the definition functions as a rule; and as such it prohibits the application to itself and to the basic attitude, *blik*, with the help of which it is defined. My objective in this paper was to do this much only. — To say where we go to against the grammar of a definition. There are other problems which I have not touched upon. For instance, why and how the materialists or for that matter, the theologians and others, say what they say? And whose view is the correct view to be accepted? But I would like just to say here that in Indian philosophy knowledge is classified as true knowledge and false knowledge, whereas in Western philosophy knowledge is said to be true by definition. So truth is the constitutive essential and inherent part of knowledge. Further if knowledge is understood to be a power in the hands of man—a power to bring about changes in this world and if knowledge is thought to be public so that anybody interested in knowledge can own it and use it as a power to bring about changes in his surrounding, then the materialists seem to have an edge over others. There is no appeal to faith in the materialists' conception of knowledge.

(Parenthetically I would like to say that 'Do unicorns really exist?')

Is a significant and informative question in any framework, but 'Do these horses really exist?'
is a non-sensical question in any framework.)

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NOTES

1. Hudson, Donald, *Ludwig Wittgenstein*. Richmond, Virginia : John Knox Press, 1968. pp. 63-64.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
3. Hare, R. M. in A. Flew and A. MacIntyre (eds.), *New Essays in Philosophical Theology*. New York : The Mac Milan Company. 1966 p. 101.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Hudson, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

