Problems of existence

According to a standard theory of existence – let us call it (Q) – existence is a second-level property, i.e. a property of properties (Frege1974, Russel 1905, Quine 1963, Miller 2002). More precisely, (Q) defines existence as follows:
(Q) *x* exists =*df* the property of "being *x*" is exemplified, where "being *x*" is a second-level property.
For example, the meaning of "Socrates exists" would be "the property "being Socrates" is exemplified" and the meaning of "dinosaurs exist" would be "the property of "being a dinosaur" is exemplified".

In this contribution, I shall argue that if (Q) is endorsed, then every theory admitting the existence of anything at all must be committed to the existence of properties of arbitrary levels. As a consequence, it is no longer possible to characterize e.g. a theory of properties that admits the existence of first-level properties but not of second-level ones. In particular, (i) I shall argue that from (Q) and the existence of a first-level property, it will follow the existence of a second-level property as well. Moreover, I shall discuss possible generalizations of this argument (ii) to properties of higher level and (iii) to versions of (Q) framed in terms of other entities, e.g. classes.

(i) The argument goes as follows:

(1) F is a first-level property	H1
(2) F exists	H2
(3) *x* exists =*df* the property "being *x*" is exemplified	(Q)
(4) the property of "being F" is exemplified	(2) and (3)
(5) if F is exemplified, then F exists	H3
(6) "being F" exists	(4) and (5)

What this argument tells us is that if we endorse (Q) we are no longer able to distinguish a theory of properties that admits the existence of first-level properties only from a theory that admits the existence of higher-level properties as well. As a consequence, if theories that admit the existence of just first-level properties make sense, (Q) does not capture the meaning of existence. In other words:

(1) a theory that admits the existence of just first-level properties does make sense;
(2) given (Q), we cannot characterize such a theory;
(3) therefore, (Q) does not capture the meaning of existence.

(ii) Since we can apply again (Q) to (6) and to its derivates, every theory admitting the existence of first-level properties is also committed to the existence of properties of arbitrary levels.

(iii) (Q) could be framed in less ontologically demanding entities, like classes. The argument is generalizable to such other versions as well. If, for example, we want to frame (Q) in terms of classes, (Q) will force us to admit classes of arbitrary level.
In these cases, depending on our theory of classes, the ontological bill could be cheaper. As a consequence, it could be less interesting – from a metaphysical point of view – to distinguish a theory that admits only first-level entities. Nevertheless, this is not the point of the argument. Insofar as we make sense of theories admitting only first-level entities, (Q) does not capture the meaning of existence that we are employing.

References

Frege G. (1974), *The Foundations of Arithmetic*, trans. J. L. Austin (Oxford: Blackwell).
Miller B. "Existence", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2002 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/existence/>.
Quine W.V.O. (1963), *On What There Is*, in *From a Logical Point of View* (New York: Harper and Row), 1-19.
Russell B. (1905), *On Denoting*, reprinted in R.C. Marsh (1968, ed.), *Logic and Knowledge* (London: Allen and Unwin).