

SUBSISTENCE DEMYSTIFIED?¹
A Note on Cusmariu's "Subsistence Demystified"

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"Subsistence Demystified"¹ promises to clear up our conceptual difficulties on an age-old philosophical problem which has tried the philosophical abilities of thinkers from Plato to Russell. Even if the title proves a little pretentious, we can perhaps overlook it if we are told something new and interesting about subsistence. And we are. Unfortunately, what is new is not interesting and what is interesting is not new.

The author states the problem succinctly enough. If there are abstract objects, do they enjoy a special mode of being different from the mode of being of temporal objects? Universals are intimated as being candidates for this former type of entity. The author eschews the alleged Platonic thesis about degrees of reality and Russell's distinction between existence and subsistence. Existence like (numerical) evenness does not admit of degrees; things do not more or less exist any more than numbers are more or less even. "The distinction between existence and subsistence is not any clearer than talk about degrees of reality" (p. 25). There is something in this. One does not solve a philosophical problem about the ontological status of a class of entities (or possible entities) merely by coining a term to apply to the mode of existence of that class. But a careful reading of the article shows that Cusmariu seems to commit the same sin. Consider his three definitions. The first, " a exists =Df $(\exists y)(y=a)$ " which is to say that a exists if it is identical with something which exists. The circularity aside (using the existential quantifier to define existence) the so-called definition is not very enlightening. If the author meant that as a formalization of "to be is to be the value of a bound variable" a footnote to Quine would have been in order. His second definition, " a subsists =Df $(\exists y)(y=a \ \& \ (z)(Tz \rightarrow z \neq y))$ " (where T is the predicate 'is a temporal object'), tells us that something subsists if it is identical with a non-temporal object. His third definition is, something 'textists' if it is identical with a temporal object, " a textists =Df $(\exists y)(Ty \ \& \ y=a)$." To my knowledge, no philosopher ever thought that any abstract objects like universals, numbers, sets, propositions, etc. were temporal. But the problem of subsistence is precisely the

problem of the ontological status of such entities. Nothing is gained by telling us that they are non-temporal. We have always known what they were not. What we want to know is what they are, if anything. The title of the article promises to tell us something about subsistence. Instead, it tells us that subsistence is non-temporal existence. Is this not cotton candy when the menu promised steak? What has the author said about subsistence? He tells us that it entails existence, but of existence he says that it might be said that existence is a pure and simple property. If it is simple it is not analyzable. Thus he cannot, nor does he try to say anything about existence. And he tells us nothing about non-temporality. So his "demystification of subsistence" consists in his giving it two characteristics neither one of which he says anything about. He then goes on to say that now "we can understand the Platonic intuition (what I would call Plato's deduction) that universals and individuals have different modes of being without implying that there is more than one fundamental concept of existence" (p. 27). But the problem of subsistence is precisely the problem of the mode of being of things like universals. What we want to know are the differentia between the two modes of being and what are the similarities. Cusmariu tells us that the differentia is non-temporality, which we knew over two thousand years ago, and that the similarity is that they share a common simple "property," existence (which being simple has no sense only a reference), about which he can say nothing.

If we adopt Cusmariu's "philosophical method" there is no end to the philosophical problems we can dissolve. We can solve the mind-body problem by simply saying that mental entities and physical entities both have some simple unanalyzable property. It is just that they enjoy different modes of being. When asked about this unanalyzable property we simply say that something has it if it is identical with something which has it and that it does not admit of degrees. But the mind-body problem is precisely, "What are the differentia between mental entities and physical entities?". Cusmariu criticizes Russell for inventing a term to "solve" a philosophical problem. Russell had a pretty good idea of what it meant to say that a temporal object existed and there seemed to be no way to avoid the conclusion that the universal "similarity" in some sense exists. So as not to confuse the issue Russell did not want to use the same term, "existence," to apply to such a radically different kind of entity. So in the cause of clarity he adopts the use of the term "subsistence." Cusmariu takes the old term, "existence," and applies it equivocally to both kinds of entities, without telling us what it is both entities are said to have in common (because it is an unanalyzable simple). He then invents a new word, "texists," to take

the place of the old one, "exists." And that is simply the old philosophical shell game.

It might be thought that the value of the paper could be saved with a change in title. If no new or interesting differentia between abstract objects and temporal objects are offered in virtue of which we can understand "subsistence," perhaps the value of the paper lies in providing us with a simple notion of existence. But it does not do that either. The analysis of existence does not allow us to distinguish fictional objects, which I assume do not exist, from non-fictional ones. The paper does not offer us any differentia between existence and non-existence. Suppose someone says that the planet Krypton exists. We say, "but where?" He says, "it is a non-temporal object, a special kind of planet." We say, "In virtue of what does it exist?" He says, "In virtue of this simple, pure property existence. I admit it doesn't exist, but lots of things don't exist, but do exist." To which we say, "But how do we decide whether something exists or even if it is meaningful to say it exists?" To which he says "That's a different problem."

NOTES

¹Arnold Cusmariu, "Subsistence Demystified," Auslegung, VI, No. 1, (1978), pp. 24-27.