

Do things exist?

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Existence, as almost anything else, is not an entirely unambiguous concept. This article is an attempt to explore this question. Before the titular question is answered, it might be instructive to look at, perhaps, a simpler question. Does money exist?

“Of course”, you might say, “What a ridiculous question? Here is a 100 rupee note. Go ponder whether this exists.” But is that really what money is? The 100 rupee note, or perhaps a 1 dollar bill, or maybe the electronic signals in the stock market that tells you something abstruse. As most people might testify, they are all of them money, and hence none of them money. Money isn’t the physical entities you exchange at your store to get something in return. But rather that very idea that you could exchange a standard unit of something quite arbitrary for something of utilitarian value. And so, it is not “money” that exists, but rather this “idea of money” that does. It leads to the exchange of coins and such, which do physically exist.

But is it really so?

I would argue against it. I believe that money does exist. Not the physical tangible coins, but the idea of money. Look at it this way, money can affect the environment physically. If not anything else, take the example of a bank. It is literally a piece of infrastructure that money created to handle money. And if anything is able to physically influence the environment, it must physically exist. A more practically oriented person might argue that this is utter bovine excrement. “Of course the bank exists because it is tangible, of course coins exist because they are tangible, of course an idea does *not* physically exist because it is not tangible.” They might agree that ideas exist on some other realm but not in the physical one.

Again, a stronger point could be made. It might be quite impossible to convince somebody that an idea physically exists but it might be easier to convince them that even tangible things may not exist. Take for example, yourself. You are (most likely) a collection of cells interacting in a highly coordinated fashion to read this very sentence. So the existence of a person cannot be attributed to any specific set of cells of the person. Many cells in your body do get replaced every decade or so[1][2]. And even regions of your hippocampus do keep

regenerating[3]¹. This argument should convince you that the physical tangible parts² of you are not what make you, you. It is rather the entire interconnection of cells in your body that do that task. You are like a city, with a menagerie of complex, complicated systems that are working in unison to accumulate your experience and behaviour over time. Just as the coins help facilitate the working of the idea of money, the cells in your body help facilitate the working of you. And your existence is no more or no less than the existence of the idea of money. And so it is my contention that both, you and money, exist solely because both can influence the environment physically. It might be that there is some entropy that exists for the individual that make up the system and some entropy for the system itself but this is an issue that is not within the scope of the article.

An even more convinced physicalist might argue against even this. They might say that you and money might exist but not in the same way that a coin exists. Does the coin, then, really exist? If one zooms down on the coin one would find that there is around 10^{15} times more empty space than “real” matter and most of it is force fields and things that do not merit the same sort of existence as is generally accepted. Even looking at the “real” matter of nuclei and electrons one is not completely convinced they exist, because they are after all wavefunctions that are distributed across space and time and even these most “real” matter cannot really be said to exist in any sense other than that they influence their environments physically.

I am convinced that existence is a semi-clear label that is effective in some situations and not in others and that it is at least *reasonable* to argue that things do not exist in the conventional sense of the word. Readers not convinced by this argument are beyond my scope of convincing and I shall try no more. As for me, I advocate the point of view of militant agnosticism³.

References

- [1] Gerardo Sison: Does Your Body Really Replace Itself Every 7 Years?,
www.discovery.com/science/Body-Really-Replace-Itself-Every-7-Years
- [2] Alex Kasprak: Does The Human Body Replace Itself Every Seven Years?,
www.snopes.com/fact-check/does-body-replace-itself-seven-years/

¹While there are parts of you, and indeed your brain, that remain constant throughout your life, it is should still be quite clear that replacing a cell in your body would not change you. This is a hotly debated topic in philosophy and medicine and there is no consensus but I assume that most people would agree that, maybe sometime in the future, it would be possible to replace every cell in your body with a functional replica and things would still work.

²In fact even the cells in the said cells replace themselves. It is definitely the case that neurons, being living cells, constantly get nutrients from outside the cell and eject its parts out. But certain atoms are “fixed” so to speak, like tooth enamel. Again, there is no consensus.

³Agnosticism of the existence of things to be clear.

- [3] Kendra Cherry (Medically reviewed by Shaheen Lakhan): How New Brain Cells Regenerate,
www.verywellmind.com/adult-neurogenesis-can-we-grow-new-brain-cells-2794885