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In an Honors section of Introduction to Philosophy (Phil 11001), taught by Dr. Thomas Norton-Smith, Kristine Morgan was asked to provide a metaphysical explanation for the number three. This particular assignment has the purpose of reflecting the branch of philosophy called "metaphysics," which examines and describes something in its essence and existence as one of the important "Ways of Knowing."

What is the Number Three?

When examining what sort of existence the number three has, it is important first to understand exactly how it exists relevantly in the physical world. First of all, the primary existence of number three is not a tangible existence; one cannot walk through the forest and find threes growing wild with beautiful, silky, burnt orange and maroon spotted petals and green leaves. Second of all, the number three cannot do anything by itself to declare its own existence in the physical. Unlike air, gravity, or time, which are also intangible but still capable of certain physical actions such as wind, combustion (air), gravitational pull (gravity), or orbits (time), the number three does not have the physical properties necessary to be detected by the senses of any terrestrial being by itself.

So, exactly how does the number three exist? Well, it has a co-dependent existence; in order for three to exist, it requires something called "units." Three exists as an application of units, and units can be any existing thing with physical properties. The units are what determine the type of existence three has. If the unit is another application such as five, six, or seven, or a variable (a variable occurs when the units' arrangement or amount varies) such as X or Y, then the existence is not yet detectable; this only creates another type of application or formula that requires units with physical proprieties to be "plugged into it" in order to be detected through the senses in the real world. There are two ways that three can be used as an application to units; it can be used in terms of quantitative measurement or it can be used in terms of sequences.
Earlier I mentioned that you cannot walk through the forest and find threes growing wild. However, you can find three tiger lilies growing wild. The tiger lilies are the units and three is the application. This is an example of three applied as a quantitative measurement. In other words, three is the amount of tiger lilies growing. You can tell there are three tiger lilies if you count the first seen as one, the second as two, and then the third as three, and you see no other tiger lilies besides the ones counted. If all these conditions are satisfied, then you have a three of tiger lilies. Remember that units can be any existing thing and not exclusively tiger lilies.

Now, suppose we are standing in line at Ticketmaster. The first person in line is number one, the second person in line is number two, and the third person in line is number three. What makes this application significant is that the units are in a certain order with respect to three. This is a sequential arrangement using the number three. Number one will be the first person to buy concert tickets, number two will be the second, and number three will be the third. Also, it is important to know that any unit(s) that may be doing any action may be used in a sequence of three, just as long as the units do the actions in sequence with respect to three.

This leaves one more question: can three exist without being invented or perceived by man? Well, actually, there is not a definite “yes” or “no” answer to this question; the idea that three’s existence is relevant without a human perception of it can be debated. For example, a dog is not aware of the label “three,” but imagine a mother dog that has three puppies. Some may argue that she will be able to recognize the physical properties of each puppy and that she will examine each puppy in sequence in order to know if all three puppies are there. Therefore, three has relevantly existed without a human’s perception of it. However, another person may argue that when dog breeders sell a puppy from a litter of three, there is no significant change in the mother dog’s behavior after the puppy is gone; so, the mother dog fails to perceive any relevant existence of the number three. Both arguments are reasonable and opposing; this is why it is unknown whether or not three can exist as an application of units without our perception of it.

In conclusion, the number three definitely has a relevant existence to human beings in the real world if three is used as an application that takes form as either a sequential arrangement or quantitative measurement of independently existing units. If all of these conditions are satisfied, then three can be perceived by man through the senses, whether or not three can be perceived by any non-human beings.