

Tim Crane, Central European University

1. Straw people

Philosophers often defend their views by pointing to the unacceptability of what they take to be the only alternative. So, for example, materialists sometimes defend their view of the mind by contrasting it with the inadequacy of dualist views which treat the mind as an immaterial substance. The idea of immaterial substance is scientifically challenging, obscure, mysterious or even incoherent. This can be part of what moves them to accept a materialist view of the mind.

Another case is the subject of this paper: the problem of non-existence. Many analytic philosophers construct their position in opposition to the view that we should explain thought and talk about the non-existent by appealing to a category of non-existent beings or entities. Here is an example of the kind of view they reject, which they usually attribute to Alexius Meinong (1853-1920): thoughts and sentences about the mythological winged horse Pegasus are explained in terms of reference to the non-existent entity, Pegasus. Pegasus does not exist, to be sure, but it must be an entity of some kind if we are to talk about it. However, the idea that there are entities which do not exist but have some kind of being is deeply peculiar. Don't all these ideas — object, entity, existence, being, reality — come as a package? How can we really pull them apart?

For this reason, it is common to reject the very idea of non-existent objects at the outset, on the way to accepting what seems to be the only alternative: the view, deriving from Quine, that all objects exist, there are no things or objects or entities that do not exist, and that the very idea of a non-existent object is bizarre, wacky or of dubious coherence.

In both these cases, the defence of the orthodox position — materialism, Quineanism — goes via the dismissal of what is perceived as the leading alternative. The adequacy of this approach depends almost entirely on whether the alternative is correctly characterised. That is, it depends on whether the orthodox position is representing a position which it is plausible or intelligible for a serious philosopher to hold. There is little point in arguing against a position which no sensible person would ever hold. We may disagree what counts as a sensible person, of course, but we should at least do our opponents the service of presenting their views in a way that they themselves would recognise.

Yet in both the cases mentioned, this rarely happens. In the case of Cartesian dualism, Descartes's opponents describe his substance dualism as the view that minds are made out of 'mental stuff', just as matter is made out of 'material stuff'. Rather than understanding 'substance' as Descartes himself explicitly defines it — as that which is capable of independent existence (Descartes 1644: Part 1 §51) — his opponents typically understand the word as meaning *stuff*. For

¹ This paper is intended as a tribute to Mark Sainsbury and his work. I owe most of my understanding of the central philosophical issues about reference to Mark, and his tireless and imaginative explanations (in person and in print) of all the complexities in this area. I dedicate this paper to him with gratitude and admiration.

example, Frank Jackson uses word 'ectoplasm' for the 'kind of stuff incompatible with the physicalists' view of what kinds there are—perhaps the stuff out of which thoughts are made according to Descartes' (Jackson 1998:15). This is certainly close to one of the meanings of the word 'substance' in ordinary English ('Marmite is a salty, sticky, edible substance'). And it's easy to see how this mental 'stuff' might seem obscure to genuine science — how does this interact with matter? — deeply unexplanatory — how can this mental stuff think? — even incoherent — what is this stuff anyway?

But it isn't Descartes's actual view. On his actual view, thoughts are not made of anything at all (Robinson 1993: 163). Thought is the essential attribute of mental substances, just as extension is the essential attribute of material substances. Given these starting points, it makes little sense to ask 'how can mental substance think?' any more than it makes sense to ask how a material substance can be extended. Descartes's critics should focus on his view as he actually describes it. I say this not to defend Descartes, but only to introduce how persistent mis-readings of philosophers can distort whole debates, and ignore what is genuinely at issue.

So it is, I will argue, with the problem of non-existence. Philosophers have constructed their defence of Quineanism against an opponent who does not exist. This opponent holds that when we think or talk about something that does not exist, we are related (by thought or reference) to an entity that has some kind of being which differs from existence. The critics of this view are right that it doesn't make much sense. But it is not Meinong's view — I will call the view 'Pseudo-Meinong'. I would like to say that it is not a view that any sensible philosopher has held, but it was actually held by the occasionally sensible Bertrand Russell for a brief period (1903). This is rather ironic given that Russell is often given the credit for liberating us from Meinongian confusion and obscurity — more on this below.

But how did this misrepresentation come about? And what is the genuinely plausible alternative to Quineanism? In this paper I will try and answer these questions, in relation to Mark Sainsbury's work. I do this as a tribute to Mark, partly because he has done more than most contemporary philosophers of language to answer the question of how language can represent the non-existent. More recently he has turned his attention to thought, though he tends to pursue this through the lens of the semantic analysis of attitude attributions, as is common practice. In a paper called 'Intentionality without exotica' (2010), he attempts to explain thought about the non-existent without having to appeal to what he calls 'exotic' objects or entities (that is: entities that are nonexistent, or nonactual, or nonconcrete). He continues this project in his recent book, *Thinking about Things* (2018). But as I explain below, because of his conception of what the 'exotic' must be, he restricts himself in the options available to him.

In what follows, I first outline Sainsbury's views on non-existence, then I will explain Pseudo-Meinong and how it differs from Meinong. Meinong's actual view is not absurd, though I find it unacceptable. My aim, however, is not to defend Meinong, but to give a clear description of his view. I will then argue that there is a modification of Meinong's actual view which is plausible. I

conclude Sainsbury's views could be clarified and simplified by appeal to such a view, once *exotica* are out of the picture.

2. Sainsbury on non-existence

Sainsbury has written illuminatingly about both linguistic reference and mental intentionality. In both cases, he puts at the centre the need to explain talk, and thought, about things that do not exist. In *Reference without Referents* (2005), he presented a theory of linguistic reference for all noun phrases — for singular, plural, quantified noun phrases; for names, descriptions and demonstratives — which builds the possibility of reference failure into the basic structure of the account. Rather than a referring term being associated by a semantic theory with its referent, it is associated with a reference condition — the condition that the world has to meet in order for it to have a referent. Sainsbury presented a genuine alternative to the usual back-and-forth between description theories of singular reference and direct reference theories, setting this alternative within a general and comprehensive theory of reference for all noun phrases.

Thinking about Things (2018) shares some of the commitments of the earlier book. Sainsbury proceeds, as is standard in the tradition, by investigating the phenomenon of intentionality by means of an investigation into attitude ascriptions. Accordingly, Sainsbury proposes a new theory of attitude attributions, which he calls 'display theory', and he argues for the non-relationality of thinking in general, or intentionality.

Sainsbury's display theory is that when we attribute a psychological attitude to a subject we put the concepts involved in the attribution on 'display', and 'the attribution is correct if the concepts displayed match those in the mind of the subject' (2018: 1). Displaying a concept is not the same as quoting a word, since one can quote without understanding the words quoted, yet displaying concepts in an attitude attribution requires that we understand them. But nor is it using the concepts in the way we would outside of attitude attributions. If I say that my pet unicorn is coming to dinner, I am using the concept in the normal way, entailing (for example) that I have a pet unicorn. But if I say that Arabella hopes that her pet unicorn is coming to dinner, that carries no such entailment. In attributing this hope to Arabella, I display the concept unicorn, and in doing so I attempt to characterise how things are in her mind.

Sainsbury's theory is distinctive among theories of attitude attributions in at least two ways. First, it does not just deal with propositional attitude attributions, but also those attitudes attributed by psychological intensional transitive verbs ('imagines', 'fears' etc.: see Forbes 2006, Grzankowski and Montague 2018). And second, it gives a unified account of attributions in what is variously called the 'transparent', '*de re*', 'exported' (etc.) style, as well as in the usual intensional style. None of these labels is exactly accurate, and there is no one syntactic pattern for them, but the phenomenon is familiar: sometimes we describe people's attitudes using concepts that they themselves would not use, in order to draw attention to distinctive aspects of their situation.

So while a standard intensional attribution might attribute truly to Oedipus the belief that Jocasta is not his mother, and the desire to marry Jocasta, we can also say truly that Oedipus

wanted to marry his mother. As Sainsbury nicely puts it, attitude attributions are ‘at the vortex of potentially conflicting demands’: at the centre there is ‘the demand for fidelity to the subject’s state’ but there is also the need (e.g.) to describe the attitude in terms of ways the subject is actually related to the world, whether they are aware of these relations or not (2018: 73-4). How does Sainsbury’s theory resolve this tension?

The central idea is that the concepts displayed in an attribution of an attitude must be appropriately related to those in the mind of the subject if the attitude is to be true. At its simplest, there will be an identity between these concepts; but the ‘*de re*’ (etc.) cases require a more complex account:

Exact match between displayed conceptual structure and a structure exercised by the subject is required, except when the attributor’s concepts are used *de re*, in which case the requirement is sameness of reference. (2018: 74).

My attribution to Oedipus of the belief that Jocasta is not his mother is correct, because these concepts are the concepts that he himself exercises and he does not take them to be co-referential; but my *de re* attribution of the desire to marry his mother is also correct (partly) because the conceptual structure ‘his mother’ is co-referential with the concept ‘Jocasta’. The two conceptual structures (in the display and in the subject’s own mind) must also be isomorphic, of the same conceptual type, and the subject must be related to the concept by an appropriate psychological relation reported in the display.

The relations talked of here are the relations between conceptual structures, and between the subject and the concept. Although intentionality involves these relations, it does not involve relations to the objects of thought, to things thought about. This is what is meant in this context by the non-relational character of intentionality: the things we think about need not exist, and therefore we are not related to them. Sainsbury’s display theory makes it clear how you can attribute an attitude without committing yourself to the existence or the being of the things you are talking about. He quite rightly maintains, as he did in *Reference without Referents*, that there are no conceptual difficulties with the idea of a concept for something which does not exist — indeed it ought to be a presupposition of any theory of concepts that this possibility can arise.

Sainsbury believes that in order to have a theory which explains how this can arise, we should avoid talking about intentional objects: ‘we don’t have to believe in a metaphysical category of “intentional objects”, some of which are non-existent’ (2018: 61). Indeed, he presents the idea of a non-existent object as one of the obstacles which any theory of reference or intentionality must avoid. In his paper ‘Intentionality without Exotica’ (2010) he says his aim is to explain the singularity of thought without ‘positing exotic objects to be the relata of such states, and the referents of such expressions or concepts, where by an exotic object I mean one that is either nonexistent, nonactual, or nonconcrete’ (2010: 302).

Of these three kinds of exotic object, it is clearly the nonexistent which are supposed to be the most controversial. Nonconcrete (i.e. abstract) objects are widely accepted these days, even

in orthodox philosophies like materialism; and even nonactual objects are taken more seriously than nonexistent ones. The reasons here are complex, but surely one of them is that those who believe in nonconcrete and nonactual objects take them to exist in the very same sense that ordinary, non-exotic spatiotemporal objects exist. On a still popular conception of existence, accepting the existence of something is quantifying over it using the machinery of ‘existential’ quantification and bound variables. Thus David Lewis (1986) quantifies over non-actual objects in his metaphysical system, while Peter van Inwagen (1977) quantifies over abstract objects in his explanation of fiction. Both Lewis and van Inwagen have orthodox ontologies (materialist and realist) and orthodox metaontologies (quantificational conceptions of existence).

It’s also worth noting that attempts have been made to explain intentionality, and in particular, thought about the non-existent by appealing to non-actual entities (e.g. possible worlds and their inhabitants), or to abstract entities (e.g. uninstantiated properties). And yet this is not the main focus of the discussion of the problem of non-existence by Sainsbury and others. The non-actual and the non-concrete are relatively exotic, to be sure — but it’s fair to say that they are regarded as not as problematic as the non-existent.

Theories of non-existent objects are typically supposed to postulate an *ontological* category of non-existent entities as the referents of our words, and as the objects of our thoughts, in cases of fiction, myth or error. As noted above, Sainsbury, like many philosophers, attributes this view to Franz Brentano’s student Meinong. He refers to Meinong’s ‘opinion that there is a genuine ontological category of intentional objects’ (2018: 30), and he claims that ‘the vast edifice of “object theory” (*Gegenstandstheorie*) is based on a mistake’ (2018: 19). *Gegenstandstheorie* is Meinong’s name for his theory of objects (*Gegenstanden*).

Sainsbury here assumes that Meinong takes all intentional objects to be entities of some kind — and an entity is something with being. So even those intentional objects which do not exist must have *some* kind of being, even if not full-fledged existence. Maybe it is a ‘lower-class ontological status, a sort of being shy of existence’ — in Nathan Salmon’s words (Salmon1998: 288). It is because Meinong is credited with introducing non-existent objects which are still entities of *some* kind that Gilbert Ryle famously called him ‘the supreme entity multiplier in the history of philosophy’ (Ryle1933).

The obscurity of the idea of objects having a ‘sort of being shy of existence’ is one reason why Sainsbury wants to avoid talk of non-existent objects or intentional objects. However, as I will now explain, this attitude embodies a misunderstanding. Clearing up this misunderstanding will show how there are more options in thinking about the non-existent than many are willing to consider, and that someone with Sainsbury’s other commitments can profit by taking them seriously.

3. Meinong and Pseudo-Meinong

Sainsbury is not alone, of course. It has been common for 20th and 21st century philosophers who talk about non-existence to dismiss the very idea of non-existent objects. The puzzle that such objects is supposed to raise is how we should explain the non-verbal distinction between

being and existence. If we say there are non-existent objects, then we must be attributing them some being (we have used the plural form of the English verb *to be*, after all). But isn't the very idea of an object with being tied up with the idea of existence? What can it be to be an object, if not an existing thing, or an existing entity? Objects, entities, things, beings — aren't these just different words for the same, basically unanalysable idea? So what is the non-verbal distinction between being and existence?

Of course, those views which make explicit connections between particular quantification ('some' and its formal representation) and existence will rule out non-existent objects at the outset. On these views, 'some things do not exist' expresses a contradiction. But even if you are neutral on these theories of quantification, the challenge remains to distinguish in a non-stipulative, non-purely verbal way between these different ideas of an object, thing, existing entity, or being. And this is hard to do without either stipulating or just identifying some other properties (e.g. spatiotemporality) as the properties of existing things, as contrasted with things that have being. (However, see Yourgrau 2021 for an interesting alternative: things in the past, for example dead people, have being, since the past is real; but they no longer exist.)

This said, I think it is uncontroversial that the orthodox line is that there is no non-verbal distinction between *being*, *existence*, *reality* and *what there is*. All these terms connote the same basic idea. For this reason, many think that it is just obvious that 'there is...' and 'there are...' always express a belief in existence. Jason Stanley, for example, writes: 'There are no nonexistent objects; surely that is a truism if anything is' (Stanley 2001: 39).

If this is really a truism, then the idea of non-existent objects is a nonstarter. So what could Meinong have had in mind when he said that there are such things? This requires us to outline the basic elements of Meinong's *Gegenstandstheorie*.

Meinong followed Brentano his teacher in holding that in (almost) all consciousness, something is 'given' to the mind, and he called what is given an object (*Gegenstand*). The central point of Meinong's theory is that we could study objects 'as such', and predicate things of them, independently of whether they have being. This is his famous principle of the independence of *Sein* (being) from *Sosein* (being-so: i.e. having properties). The theory makes various fundamental distinctions between all the things that are 'given to us' in thought — that is, all the things we can think about or mentally represent — as part of his aim to classify the various objects of thought or knowledge, as such.

We can distinguish among all these objects between those objects which have being and those which have no being. Beings fall into two kinds: those which have spatiotemporal being (existence), and those which have non-spatiotemporal being (mere subsistence). Meinong therefore draws the line between being and existence as that between the spatiotemporal and the non-spatiotemporal. Material objects like people, rocks and furniture exist, whereas so-called 'ideal' objects like propositions ('objectives') and numbers only subsist.

It is worth pointing out here that this distinction between existing beings and subsisting beings should not be obscure for a contemporary analytic philosopher. It would be accepted in different terminology by any philosopher today who accepts that there are concrete as well as

abstract objects, in the usual understanding of those terms. Concrete objects essentially have spatiotemporal location, abstract objects do not. In Meinong's terminology, concrete objects exist, and abstract ('ideal') objects subsist.

But in addition to existent and subsistent objects, there are also objects with no being whatsoever. These objects, like the round square and the golden mountain, are what we might call 'mere' objects of thought, or mere intentional objects. But, despite what Sainsbury and others say, this is not a metaphysical category. Meinong distinguishes quite clearly between *Gegenstandstheorie* and metaphysics. At the very beginning of 'The Theory of Objects', he writes that 'metaphysics has to do with everything that exists. However, the totality of what exists, including what has existed and will exist, is infinitely small in comparison with the totality of the Objects of knowledge' (Meinong 1981: 79). He restricts metaphysics to the study of the existent, but the study of being has a wider scope, since it includes the subsistent. This restriction is perhaps a merely verbal one, since there is nothing obviously wrong with calling metaphysics the study of being, but the distinction between being and existence, for Meinong, is not verbal.

However, it is crucial to emphasise that those objects which are the common focus of today's debates about non-existence — the round square, the golden mountain, Pegasus, Vulcan the planet etc. — have *no being at all*, on Meinong's view. What we call today non-existent objects, Meinong would have called objects which are outside being (*Außersein*). But they are still objects. The Theory of Objects studies all objects — with or without being — and that is why the theory of objects is not ontology. And this is why the general category of an intentional object — an object of thought — is not an ontological or a metaphysical category. (See Crane 2013, chapter 1, for more details; and for an excellent recent discussion, to which I am very sympathetic, see Adams 2022, chapter 3)

I hope it is clear even from this brief discussion that Meinong's actual views are very different from Pseudo-Meinong's. And yet, as we have seen, so many philosophers happily describe Meinong in Pseudo-Meinongian terms. The pressing question then, is: why did philosophers misrepresent Meinong's view so blatantly?

4. Russell and Meinong

Part of the reason must be that they derived their picture of Meinong, directly or indirectly, from Bertrand Russell. There is a certain irony in the fact that the only significant 20th century philosopher who defended the view that all objects of thought have 'being of some kind or another' was Bertrand Russell, who is also promoted as the philosopher who liberated us from Meinongian obscurities. The truth is that much of the confusion over Meinong derives from Russell himself.

In the early years of the twentieth century Russell had made a study of Meinong, and had published some articles on Meinong in *Mind*. In *The Principles of Mathematics* (1903), however, he took things in a non-Meinongian direction, when he wrote that 'being is that which belongs to every conceivable term, to every possible object of thought' (Russell 1903: 427). His argument for this is that if 'numbers, the Homeric gods, relations, chimeras and four-dimensional spaces ...

were not entities of a kind, we could make no proposition about them' (Russell 1903: 449). And yet we clearly can make propositions — that is, say and think things — about them, so they must be entities or beings.

This is not Meinong's view, because it attributes being to every possible object of thought, something that Meinong explicitly denies. Rather, the view is Pseudo-Meinong's: it distinguishes being from existence, it says little about what being is, but holds that the non-existent round square has some kind of being. Of course, as we saw, Meinong did think that abstract (ideal) entities have a different kind of being from spatiotemporal entities; but the round square has no being at all. So Russell is not defending Meinong's view here, but a distinct one.

In any case, Russell quickly dropped this view, and by the time he wrote *An Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy* (1919) he was fully opposed to the idea of non-existent objects having any kind of being:

The sense of reality is vital in logic, and whoever juggles with it by pretending that Hamlet has another kind of reality is doing a disservice to thought. A robust sense of reality is very necessary in framing a correct analysis of propositions about unicorns, golden mountains, round squares, and other such pseudo-objects. (1919:70)

Moreover, he does not acknowledge that the 'another kind of reality' view was once his own, but rather attributes it to Meinong:

It is argued, e.g. by Meinong, that we can speak about 'the golden mountain', 'the round square' and so on; we can make true propositions of which these are the subjects; hence they must have some kind of logical being, since otherwise the propositions in which they occur would be meaningless. (1919: 169)

And in *My Philosophical Development* (1959), he credits both his 1903 view and his own argument for it to Meinong, and says that the theory of descriptions helped him escape this view:

Meinong, for whose work I had had a great respect ... pointed out that one can make statements in which the logical subject is 'the golden mountain' although no golden mountain exists. He argued, if you say that the golden mountain does not exist, it is obvious that there is something that you are saying does not exist - namely, the golden mountain; therefore the golden mountain must subsist in some shadowy Platonic world of being, for otherwise your statement that the golden mountain does not exist would have no meaning. I confess that, until I hit upon the theory of descriptions, this argument seemed to me convincing. (1959: 64)

These well-known texts are part of a familiar story about the problem of non-existence. The picture they suggest is this: Russell faced a problem when trying to explain judgement and

thought about the non-existent. Originally he toyed with Meinong's view (in 1903), but when he discovered the theory of descriptions (1905), he solved the problem — or at least most of it. By 1919, he was fully freed from the allure of Meinongianism. Assisted by the later dismissals of Ryle, Quine and others, Meinong's views became a paradigm example of the kind of confusion you fall into if you lack a training in logic, the theory of descriptions and a robust sense of reality. (Whether this is a correct account of the development of Russell's thought is not something I will discuss here: see the fascinating alternative account in Hylton 1993.)

But the familiar story is historically incorrect, and philosophically misleading. It is incorrect because the view that non-existents must have 'some shadowy kind of being' is Russell's, not Meinong's. And it is misleading because in presenting the problem of non-existents as largely solved by the theory of descriptions, it suggests that the remaining problem is only to do with singular reference, where that is understood as unsusceptible to analysis by the theory of descriptions.

Those who think that names are devices of direct reference, for example, will not think the whole problem is solved by the appeal to the theory of descriptions, since names function very differently to descriptions. But this has led some to think that it is only really non-referring proper names that give rise to a problem of non-existence. Thus Nathan Salmon writes that 'among the most perennial of philosophical problems are those arising from sentences involving non-referring names. Chief among these problems is that of true singular negative existentials' (Salmon 1998: 277).

It's true that if you accept the theory of descriptions and the direct reference theory of names, then you may see the only remaining problem with non-existence as those involving names. But the general problem of non-existence, as I have argued elsewhere, is not a problem about names, it is first and foremost a problem about truth (Crane 2013). There are many truths about non-existent objects. But what explains their truth? If we accept the truisms that (i) truths are generally explained by how things are in reality, and (ii) non-existent objects are no part of reality, then we have a problem. To formulate this problem you need to assume neither the theory of descriptions nor the direct reference theory of names.

The other misrepresentation involved in the Russellian story — more relevant to the present paper — is the suggestion that those who reject the theory of descriptions are committed to Pseudo-Meinongian exotica. I say 'suggestion' because it does not actually follow from Russell's story. Rather, Russell presents a challenge to those who would reject the theory of descriptions. His argument is that if a non-referring term like 'the round square' really is the logical subject of a proposition, then if we are to assert anything ('make a proposition') about it, it must have some kind of being. Russell's conclusion, famously, is to deny that 'the round square' is the logical subject of propositions expressed using those words.

But what is rarely questioned is the idea that the logical subject of a proposition must have being if we are going to assert anything about it. And yet this is the key assumption behind Russell's arguments, and the arguments of those that followed him. G.E. Moore for example writes that the things we talk about 'must still have some kind of being . . . simply because we can think and talk about them' (Moore 1953: 289). I will call this the Russell-Moore Assumption. It

is this assumption that is driving the traditional conception of the problem of non-existence and the associated concept of exotic non-existents.

I believe that if we want to understand non-existence, then we must give up the Russell-Moore Assumption; and to this extent Meinong is right. This is not because there is nothing at all to be said for the assumption — after all, it is very close to the starting point of classical theories of reference, deriving from Frege. So it is not some kind of obvious error. The point is rather that we should not treat it as an intuitive starting point, or an unquestioned assumption; it is part of a theory. As such, it has to be weighed against the apparently manifest fact that we often think and talk about things that don't exist. Given this, the Russell-Moore assumption either requires us to treat names as descriptions and descriptions as quantifiers (with all the familiar semantic contortions that this involves), or to accept exotica which have being but no existence (Russell's 1903 view), or (perhaps worst of all) to deny that we can really talk and think about non-existents at all.

It is the unacceptability of these three options which should lead us to question the Russell-Moore assumption. But once we reject this assumption, then we can say (with a straight face, as it were) that there are non-existent objects, and things can be truly predicated of them. So for example we might say that Vulcan was a planet postulated by the French astronomer Urbain Le Verrier in 1859. Vulcan doesn't exist, but this sentence is still true, and in a perfectly natural sense, 'Vulcan' is its subject.

Sainsbury himself implicitly rejects the Russell-Moore assumption. This is crucial to his project in *Reference without Referents* (2005), as its title implies. He would also reject the three options mentioned. So I propose to him that he should consider accepting non-existent objects. But what does it mean to accept them? Not to accept their existence, of course, since that would be contradictory; and not to accept their being, since (pace Russell 1903) Vulcan, Pegasus *et al* have no being. Rather it is just to accept talk of non-existent objects at face value, to talk about them, predicate true things of them, and to generalise by quantifying over them. The idea of quantifying over non-existents will raise the alarm in some areas, so I need to say a little about what I mean by this.

5. Quantification and non-existent objects

Natural language quantifiers answer 'how many?' questions. How many pigs are in the garden? There might be *some* pigs, or *none*, or *a few* or *exactly two* (etc). Quantifier words (belonging syntactically to the category of determiners) join with nouns to create quantified noun phrases. Quantifying over non-existent objects is, therefore, a matter of making claims about non-existent objects using quantified noun phrases: for example, I believe that of all the characters talked about in the Bible, some existed and some did not. So: *some characters in the Bible did not exist* — here I quantify over non-existent objects. This is, on the face of it, intelligible; indeed, I would argue that it is also plainly true (for more details see Crane 2013, chapter 2).

There is, of course, a still widespread view that the English quantifier 'some', should be represented in logical languages by the Russellian symbol '∃' and that ontological commitments

should be expressed explicitly by using this symbol, the variables it binds, and other non-logical concepts. Sainsbury (2018) rejects this view, and I do too (Crane 2013). In its place, Sainsbury gives a substitutional interpretation of ‘something’, from which it follows that its logical role cannot be to express ontological commitment. He argues that no more ontological commitment is expressed by quantification than is present in what he calls the ‘vindicating instances’ of the quantified sentence. However, his claims are limited: he does not claim that substitutional quantification is fundamental, or that all natural language quantification should be given a substitutional interpretation. But his view of quantification is a clear example of how one can quantify over non-existent objects by using words like ‘some’ and ‘something’.

My focus here, though, is not on his interpretation of ‘something’, but on what he says about non-existent things and objects. In the course of defending his account of ‘something’, Sainsbury makes a distinction between ‘there are things that don’t exist’ and ‘there are objects that are non-existent’ (2018: 19, 61). The first he thinks is true, the second false. In his earlier book on fictionalism (2009), he makes the same distinction between things that don’t exist and non-existent objects. So it is reasonable to assume that it is a fairly persistent aspect of his view. His concern with the phrase ‘objects that are non-existent’, then, is that it predicates the property of being nonexistent of an object. But how can this predication make sense if the object is, in reality, nothing?

To my ear, though, it is hard to hear the difference between the two phrases — *things that don’t exist* and *objects that are non-existent* — unless you have already assigned more specific theoretical meanings to the words ‘thing’ and ‘object’ than their ordinary use compels. Sainsbury himself stipulates that the word ‘object’ will be used in a metaphysical way (2018: 48-9), and this is no doubt part of what explains his opposition to talk of non-existent objects and intentional objects. Although this is a theoretical or technical use of ‘object’, I believe that it has its source in the idea that the central or focal meaning of ‘object’ is ontological.

The final question I would like to address here, then, is what the point is of talking about intentional *objects* at all. If we can have non-referring terms as subjects of propositions and we can quantify over non-existents without committing to their having any kind of being — in other words, we reject Pseudo-Meinong — then why do we need to go further and talk about non-existent intentional *objects*?

6. Why objects?

One reason is because we might be convinced of the need for something like Meinong’s Theory of Objects. As we saw above, the aim of the Theory of Objects is to give an account of objects in the most general sense — any kind of object of thought, whether existing, subsisting or entirely lacking in being. The controversial part of this theory is not the distinction between being and existence, nor even the claim that there are non-existent objects. It is rather what Richard Routley (later Sylvan) called the Characterisation Postulate (CP): the claim that non-existent objects have all the properties they are characterised as having.

This is really the essence of Meinong's view. It goes further than the claim that there are non-existent objects, and it goes further than Meinong's Principle of the independence of *Sein* and *Sosein* (since that does not entail that non-existent objects have every property that they attributed). And it is this principle which, as Russell saw, leads to contradiction: if we can think of an existent round square, then from the additional assumption that no round square can exist, we can conclude that such an object must be existent and non-existent.

But even if this contradiction can be avoided (in the style of Terence Parsons 1980) by employing a technical distinction between kinds of properties or predicates, Meinong's view is quite incredible. In fact, it is often not recognised — even among anti-Meinongians — how demanding the CP really is, independently of Russell's objection. I have often found anti-Meinongians turn up their noses at the idea that there are non-existent objects, but at the same time willingly accept that Vulcan is a planet or that the round square is round.

My attitude is the reverse of this: there are non-existent objects, but they have few of the properties that they are represented as having. So it is worth spelling out what one is forced to say if one accepts the CP. One consequence, for example, is that Pegasus has the property of being a horse. But if anything that has the property of being a horse is a horse, then it follows that of all the horses that there are, some of them are non-existent. In other words, not all horses exist. And it follows from this, on uncontroversial assumptions, that there are horses that occupy no location in space and time — since it is undeniable that location in space and time implies existence (whether or not the converse is true). Also, it follows that there are horses that are invisible, intangible and undetectable by any sense organ or machinery; there are horses that you and I cannot ride, horses which were not born of any other horses, or indeed were not born at all. And so on.

It is crucial to emphasise that the CP does not follow from the mere idea that there are non-existent objects of thought. The fact that some characters in the Bible did not exist does not imply that they have all the properties represented them as having. This allows us to distinguish the fully Meinongian position (which accepts the CP) and the moderate position, which merely accepts that there are non-existent objects.

But which properties do these objects have? This presupposes the answer to a prior question: what does it mean for these objects to have properties at all? The answer is a long story (my version is in Crane 2013, chapter 3). But for the purposes of this paper, all I need to say here is that an object has a property when something can be truly predicated of it. So for example, I can truly predicate of Sherlock Holmes that he is famous; indeed, as Parsons (1980) says, he is more famous than any living detective. So Holmes has the property of being famous.

So much for properties, but is there a general principle about which properties non-existent objects can have? In *The Objects of Thought* (2013: §3.4), I defended the thesis that non-existent objects can only have 'representation-dependent' properties: properties whose instantiation depends on their being represented in some way (see McGinn 2002). Fame is such a property: you can only be famous if you are represented in some way in thought, language or otherwise. Being fictional, or mythological, or postulated are also representation-dependent. But

being a detective, being a horse, or being a planet are not. So Holmes can be a fictional detective, Pegasus a mythological horse and Vulcan a postulated planet. But Holmes is not a detective, Pegasus is not a horse and Vulcan is not a planet.

I mention this view here to point out that there is another way of conceiving non-existent intentional objects which is neither Meinong's view, nor Pseudo-Meinong's. It is not the case that these are the only two ways to understand the idea of non-existent intentional objects. Meinong is committed to the CP, whereas Pseudo-Meinong is of dubious coherence. Neither is acceptable to Sainsbury. But the view just described should be acceptable to him, and is consistent with the main lines of the conception of intentionality he develops in *Thinking about Things*.

It still might be pressed, though, that given what 'object' means in other contexts, isn't it also misleading to talk about *non-existent intentional objects*? Doesn't this talk of objects inevitably lead to the kinds of misunderstandings I have been warning against in this paper? So wouldn't it be better to avoid talk of objects altogether?

Some may prefer this approach and prohibit all talk of non-existent intentional objects (see Searle 1983, chapter 1). But if they do, they will not be able to describe the phenomenon of intentionality in the various simple, straightforward ways that have come naturally to the tradition: every thought has an object, every thought is about something, there is something that every thought is about, some of the things we think about exist and some do not — and so on. There are of course various strategies to deal with this problem — for example, to reject as fallacious the inference from 'every thought is about something' to 'there is something every thought is about'. But those who adopting these strategies deprive themselves of these simple ways of describing intentionality, and in my view leave themselves with little or no explanation of the semantics (or the philosophy of mind) of non-existence.

In any case, even if these philosophers still refuse to talk about non-existent intentional objects, they should not respond to those who do — like Robert Adams, Graham Priest, Richard Routley and others, including me — by saying that 'non-existent intentional object' *must* name some peculiar quasi-ontological or metaphysical category, and then scratch their heads wondering what this might be. This would be analogous to insisting that Cartesian dualists must hold that minds are made of some ghostly ectoplasm, and then wondering what such a thing might even be.

7. Conclusion

My conclusion is that it is a mistake begin our discussion of the problem of non-existence with the assumption that the only options are Quine's and Pseudo-Meinong's. And yet many discussions do implicitly begin in this way. This has the effect of forcing the Pseudo-Meinong position, as a default, upon anyone who wants to talk about non-existent intentional objects. And this in turn has made it difficult for philosophers to be properly understood when they talk in this way, since their critics inevitably hear these words as expressing the view that there are objects which do not exist and yet have some kind of 'being shy of existence'. I hope I have shown here

why this is a misunderstanding, why it matters, and why it would aid Mark Sainsbury's project to accept non-existent intentional objects.

REFERENCES

- Adams, Robert Merrihew (2022) *What Is, and What Is In Itself* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
- Crane, Tim (2013) *The Objects of Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
- Descartes, René (1644) *Principles of Philosophy*. In *Descartes: Philosophical Writings*, translated by John Cottingham, University of Reading, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1985).
- Forbes, Graeme (2006) *Attitude Problems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
- Grzankowski Alex and Michelle Montague (2018) *Non-Propositional Intentionality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
- Hylton, Peter (1993) *Russell, Idealism and the Emergence of Analytic Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
- Jackson, Frank (1998) *From Metaphysics to Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
- Lewis, David (1986) *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford: Blackwell)
- McGinn, Colin (2002) *Logical Properties* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
- Meinong, Alexius (1981) 'On the Theory of Objects' translated by Isaac Levi, D. B. Terrell, and Roderick Chisholm, in Roderick Chisholm (ed.) *Realism and the Background of Phenomenology* (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview, 1981)
- Moore, G.E. (1953). *Some Main Problems of Philosophy* (London: Allen and Unwin). Originally presented as lectures in 1910–11.
- Parsons, Terence (1980) *Non-existent Objects* (New Haven: Yale University Press)
- Robinson, Howard (1993) 'The Anti-Materialist Strategy and the "Knowledge Argument"' in Howard Robinson (ed.) *Arguments Against Materialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
- Russell, Bertrand (1903) *Principles of Mathematics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)
- Russell, Bertrand (1919) *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy* (London: George Allen and Unwin)
- Russell, Bertrand (1959) *My Philosophical Development* (London: George Allen and Unwin 1959)
- Ryle, Gilbert (1933) Review of J. N. Findlay, *Meinong's Theory of Objects*, *Oxford Magazine*, *Oxford Magazine*, 52: 933-34
- Sainsbury, Mark (2005) *Reference without Referents* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
- Sainsbury, Mark (2009) *Fiction and Fictionalism* (London: Routledge)
- Sainsbury, Mark (2010) 'Intentionality without exotica' in Robin Jeshion (ed.) *New Essays on Singular Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
- Sainsbury, Mark (2018) *Thinking about Things* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)
- Salmon, Nathan (1998) 'Nonexistence' *Noûs* 32: 277–319
- Searle, John R (1983) *Intentionality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)

Stanley, Jason (2001) 'Hermeneutic Fictionalism' *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 25: 36–71
Van Inwagen, Peter (1977) 'Creatures of Fiction' *American Philosophical Quarterly*
14: 299-308
Yourgrau, Palle (2019) *Death and Non-existence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)