What is the Problem of Non-Existence?

Tim Crane

0. Introduction

The problem of non-existence or 'non-being' is often said to be one of the most ancient and intractable problems of philosophy. But like many such problems – the mind-body problem, the problem of universals, the problem of change – there is often as much unclarity about how to formulate the problem as there is about how to solve it. The aim of this paper is to give a clear formulation of this problem, in the hope of preparing the way to its proper solution.

The present formulation of the problem has a number of distinctive features. First, the solution places no weight on a supposed ontological distinction between being and existence. Such a distinction, in so far as it can be made at all, has no bearing on the problem of non-exsitence. Secondly, it is widely assumed (e.g. by Salmon 1998) that the most difficult aspect of this problem is the problem of accounting for singular negative existential statements. But I will argue that once the overall structure of the problem is recognized, and various plausible assumptions are made, singular negative existentials do not pose an enormous obstacle. The real difficulty is how to account for other, non-existential, truths about the non-existent.

1. Intentionality and aboutness

What is the point of discussing non-existence? My starting point is that the source of our interest in non-existent objects, properties, events (etc.) is the fact that people talk about, or think about, or otherwise *represent* the non-existent. It's not as if the

question of the 'nature' of non-existents would arise separately of any thought or talk about them – indeed, the problem is often stated in the Platonic phrase, 'how can we *think* or *talk* about that which is not?'. Compare existing entities: when the great explorers crossed the oceans to investigate new lands, it was because they thought there was something out there, and they wanted to find out what it really is. It isn't like this with non-existence: it's not as if we think there are all these non-existent things 'out there' and we want to find out what they 'really are'. They *really* are nothing; but people nonetheless think and talk about them. And this is true on a 'Meinongian' as much as on an ontologically orthodox conception of the issue.

I therefore locate the significance of this problem in the study of thought or mental representation. All thought is about something. In other words, whenever someone thinks, they think about something. One of the peculiarities of thought is that some of the things we think about exist, and some of them do not. And what is more, there are truths and falsehoods about the non-existent things we think about.

To my ear, these are fairly obvious truisms. (Not everyone will agree; but in what follows I will say something against those who disagree.) Yet the idea that there are truths about non-existent things seems to be in conflict with another apparently obvious truism: the entire world – the real world, reality, the universe, call it what you like – does not contain more than what exists. The conflict between these two ideas, it seems to me, is the essence of the problem of non-existence.

Some philosophers, however, will deny that what I am calling truisms really are truisms. They may deny, for example, that it is literally true that some of the things we think about exist and some do not. They may even deny that there are any truths about non-existent objects, since there are no such things for there to be any truths about. I think these philosophers are wrong, and here I will explain why.

My own reason for defending these truisms is to defend a certain conception of the mind. I believe that we have no adequate understanding of the mind unless we also have an understanding of the non-existent. My conception of the mind has at its heart the idea of intentionality, what Brentano (1874) called 'the mind's direction on its objects'.[1] Our mental life seems to involve the presence or apparent presence to the mind of things in the world. These things can be mental or material, concrete or abstract, and – so I say – existent and non-existent. I believe that there are general characteristics of intentionality which apply to all, or almost all, intentional states and episodes. One of these is that every intentional state or episode has an object – something it is about or directed on. Another is that every intentional state or episode has a content – the way it represents what it is about or directed on. A third is that every intentional state involves what I call an intentional mode (Crane 2001), what others (e.g. Chalmers 2004) call a 'manner', and what others call an 'attitude'. By this I mean the psychological mode in which the mind is directed upon its object via a content: whether it is through belief, memory, hope, fear etc. All these things I call intentional modes.

The notions of mode and content can be criticized; they form the beginnings of a theory of intentionality and some theorists might want to theorise about intentionality without using these notions. My fundamental starting point, however, is the notion of an intentional *object*, or an *object of thought* (and desire, fear etc. – but for ease of expression, I will not always make this qualification). And I do not see how this notion should be rejected by anyone who takes the phenomenon of intentionality seriously. *Intentional objects* are, by definition, those things in the world which we think about; or those things which we take, or pretend, or otherwise

---

[1] In some earlier work (Crane 1998, 2001, 2003) I argued that intentionality is characteristic of all mental phenomena: that it is the 'mark' of the mental. I still hold this view, but nothing I say in this paper depends on it.

represent to be in the world; or which we merely represent in thought. If there is such a thing as thinking about things in these senses, then there are intentional objects.

Intentional objects are objects of thought. In his posthumously published book *Objects of Thought*, A.N. Prior distinguished between two senses of 'object of thought' (1971). The first is *what we think* – when we think that something is the case. When we believe or judge, what we believe or judge is sometimes called the object of our thought; normally these things are called 'propositions' and states of thinking them are now called propositional 'attitudes' (the term is Russell's: 1921, lecture III). But the second sense is *what we think about*: the objects of thought in what Prior called 'a more natural sense'. Objects of thought in Prior's second sense are intentional objects in my sense. Propositions *can* be intentional objects; but only when we think *about* propositions, not when they are simply what we think.

When someone thinks about some real thing, then that real thing is the intentional object of their thought. When I think about the Lake Balaton, the largest lake in Europe, it is the lake itself, the real lake, that is the object of my thought.

What we think about is not always identical with some real thing. For example, we can think about things in a non-specific way. I can want a glass of Burgundy without wanting some specific glass of Burgundy. In this kind of case, what I want is in a certain way *indeterminate*. But I do not want an indeterminate thing, of course – there are no indeterminate glasses of Burgundy.

Moreover, sometimes we think about things that do not exist; and given how I have just defined 'intentional object', I say that these things too are intentional objects. So some intentional objects are indeterminate, and some do not exist.

A correct understanding of intentionality must employ the idea of an intentional object. So given that some intentional objects do not exist – or, in other

words, we can think about things that do not exist – then there can be no adequate

general understanding of intentionality without an account of thought about the non-

existent. This is why the question of non-existence is significant.

2 Relational conceptions of intentionality

Some will protest that we cannot really think *about* things that do not exist, any more

than we can really *talk* about things that do not exist. C.D. Broad took this view,

comparing the sentence 'cats do not bark' with 'dragons do not exist':

> it is obvious that the first is about cats. But, if the second be true, it is certain
> that it cannot be about dragons for there will be no such things as dragons for it
> to be about (Broad 1939: 182)

The idea that we cannot 'really' think about or talk about the non-existent amounts to

the conviction that real or genuine 'aboutness' must involve a relation to the real thing

thought about. This conviction can be hard to shift. But in my opinion it is deeply

mistaken. The correct approach is nicely summarized by Richard Cartwright:

> it is at least disturbing to be told that, when we finally tell our children that
> Santa Claus does not exist, we say nothing about Santa Claus. Presumably they
> expect to hear something about him – the truth about him, one way or the other;
> and it is scarcely believable that the hard facts of semantics force us to
> disappoint them. Nor is it much consolation (to us or to them) to be told that we
> say nothing about him in the same sense as that in which we say something
> about Caesar when we say he crossed the Rubicon; for it is not clear that
> "about" has an appropriately different sense. (Cartwright 1960: 633)[2]

Cartwright is surely right about the ordinary use of the word 'about'. There is nothing

in the ordinary meaning or use of this word that stops us from saying that we can talk

or think about things like Santa Claus, that do not exist. This does not stop

---

[2] Cartwright alludes here to the view that 'about' is ambiguous, a view held by Searle (1983) among others.

philosophers from introducing a technical, strictly relational, sense of 'about'; but this technical sense cannot be derived in any simple way from ordinary usage.[3]

Since reference is a relation, I distinguish, then, between aboutness and reference. A thought can be *about* something non-existent, but such a thought *fails to refer*. 'Reference' in this sense is a technical term for the relation between a word or thought and an existing thing. 'Aboutness' is the mere representation of some thing in words or thought, whether or not it exists. So although my word 'Pegasus' does not *refer* to the mythological winged horse Pegasus – 'Pegasus' is, after all, commonly called a 'non-referring term' – I can talk or think *about* Pegasus.

I therefore distinguish between the adicity of a predication, and whether that predication expresses a relation. Intentionality or aboutness is ascribed in terms of a two (or more) place predication; but I want to distinguish this idea from the idea of a relation. Not all facts expressed by polyadic predications express relations, just as not all monadic predications express intrinsic (non-relational) properties. My claim here is that intentionality is not a relation, although reference is.

By 'reference' here I mean the relation which semantic theorists (following Frege) treat as holding between a word, or collection of words, and something in the world. I do not mean the act a speaker performs when they refer to something (so-called 'speaker's reference'). 'Referring' in the sense of what a speaker does, is part of the commonsense psychological or semantic vocabulary, whereas 'reference', the term for the semantic relation, is not. When someone refers to something in a speech act, it is the same thing as talking about it. So just as one can talk about things that do not exist, so one can refer (in the sense of 'speaker's reference') to such things: 'To what are you referring?' 'Pegasus of course!'.

---

[3] An example of a technical use of 'about' would be the kind of definition introduced by Smiley 1960.

If someone still wants to insist that it is not possible for a thought-episode to be genuinely *about* something non-existent, with the consequence that aboutness must go hand-in-hand with the real relation of semantic reference, they should take my distinction between aboutness and reference as a stipulation. After all, if someone takes this view of 'about' they will still need some *other* way of describing thoughts about Pegasus. You might say, for example, that these thoughts *represent* Pegasus, although they are not *about* it. I find it more natural to say my words and thoughts are about Pegasus, but they do not refer to Pegasus.

Some will not be satisfied, and will insist that properly understood, intentionality must be a real relation to its objects. So they will deny even that a thinker can represent Pegasus, strictly speaking. I don't think that this is an uncontroversial consequence of the ordinary meaning of the word 'about', so it must be part of a theory of intentionality. What might such a theory be?

According to the *purely relational conception of intentionality*, intentionality is always a relation to some existing object of thought. There are various ways of developing this idea. For example, one might think that although it might seem that we think about particular objects, in fact most of our thoughts are really about the *properties* of those objects. When we think about Pegasus, the winged horse of Greek mythology which was born from the blood of Medusa the gorgon, we are not really thinking about *a winged horse*, since no such thing exists. Rather, we are thinking about the properties of *being a horse*, *having wings* etc. – and these properties exist. Presumably we 'unify' these properties in our thought in some way, to create a thought that we roughly call a thought 'about Pegasus'. For example, we might construe the thought as quantificational in form: *something is a horse with wings*

which was born from the blood of something which has snakes instead of hair. (Or some claim along these lines; the details don't matter too much here.)

But what about when the particular objects we think about *do* exist? For example, what about when we think about a real existing horse, such as the Darley Arabian, one of the ancestors of all thoroughbred racehorses? The purely relational view could give two answers. The first answer says that we do succeed in thinking about a particular horse – so that thought about existing things is very different from thought about non-existing 'things' (this is what I call the *moderate answer*).

The second answer is to say that in the case of real things too, we are 'really' thinking about properties: the characteristic properties of the Darley Arabian. In this case, thought about an existing thing is the same kind of thought as thought about a non-existing 'thing' (this is what I call the *extreme answer*).

The purely relational view of intentionality is rarely stated in such explicit forms. But even in its less explicit forms, it has some popularity, a popularity that might be associated with its similarity to Bertrand Russell's famous (1918) distinction between knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description. Someone influenced by Russell might say that just as Russell distinguished between *knowledge* by acquaintance and *knowledge* by description, so we can distinguish between *thinking* about an object 'by acquaintance' and *thinking* about an object 'by description' (i.e. by thinking about its properties). Then they can give the moderate answer that we can only think 'by acquaintance' about objects that exist, but we can think 'by description' by thinking about the properties of things.[4] Or they can say that we can only really think about the properties of things, whether or not there are any

---

[4] I am indebted here to discussions with Bill Brewer.

objects which have these properties. This extreme view holds that all of our thought about the world is, in a certain sense, 'by description' (Bach 1982).

If either version of the purely relational view is right, then one of the assumptions of this paper – that it is straightforwardly and simply true that we can think about non-existent objects – is incorrect. But the purely relational view is hopeless, and can only be defended *either* by imposing a reading onto the ordinary phrase 'thinking about' which is phenomenologically incredible, *or* by assuming an implausible 'descriptivist' conception of thought.

My view is that *thinking about something* is not a technical notion in philosophy, but (like the notion of *talking about something*) it is a central piece of our commonsense psychological vocabulary. The things we think about – what I am calling the objects of our thoughts – can also be the things we want, the things we love, the things we hope for, the things we fear. The extreme version of the purely relational view gives a picture of the objects of these attitudes which is, phenomenologically speaking, quite unrealistic. If I fear death by drowning, the extreme view says that what I fear are certain properties. This is quite wrong: what I fear is an event of a certain kind. Yet events are particulars; and there may be, in reality, no event of this kind. If I want some inexpensive burgundy, I do not want properties; I want a *thing* of a certain *kind*, which *has* certain properties. And such a kind of thing need not exist. If I hope for heaven hereafter, I do not hope for properties, I hope for my experience to continue after my death in a certain kind of place or state. But there is no such kind of place or state. It is easy to find many more examples where it is plainly implausible to consider the objects of attitudes to be properties.

The extreme view is sometimes defended by adopting an analysis or reduction of these attitudes to attitudes whose contents are propositional in nature. This is the view I call *propositionalism*, which I have rejected elsewhere (Crane 2001). Another possible reductive approach is to think of our apparently singular ideas of the objects of thought, fear, hope, desire and so on, as being analysed into general ideas, i.e. ideas of properties. This would be like a version of the famous descriptive theory of names, transferred to ideas. What an idea of Pegasus, or of the Darley Arabian, 'really' is, is an idea of the form *the F which is G, H* (etc.), where *F, G, H* (etc.) are general ideas, ideas of properties. Yet this descriptive view of ideas is no more plausible than the famous descriptive view of names, and like many authors I will rely on the standard Kripkean refutation of this view.

It is true that our ideas are complex, and can be thought of as having a certain structure. Ideas of individual things will often involve conceptions of properties that the thinker takes to be distinctive of those things. But this does not mean that these ideas are really ideas of *properties*. My idea of the Darley Arabian is an idea of a particular horse, which really existed, and I do think of this horse as one of the ancestors of all modern racehorses. This does not prevent it from being an idea of the Darley Arabian, and nor does it prevent it from being literally true that I think about the Darley Arabian.

So if I am right that the notion of *something thought about* is a notion of the same kind as *something wanted, feared, hoped for* (etc.), then it is phenomenologically quite implausible to say that the only things we think about are properties. We think about objects, events, kinds, states, facts… all of these can be *objects of thought* in the sense I am talking about here. An object of thought is just

something thought about. Since we can think about things that do not exist, then some objects of thought do not exist. But what does this really mean?

3 Non-existent objects

On October 17 2006, *USA Today* published a list of the 101 most influential people who never lived.[5] At the top of the list are the Marlboro Man, Big Brother, King Arthur, Santa Claus, Hamlet, Dr. Frankenstein's Monster, Siegfried, Sherlock Holmes, Romeo and Juliet (that's two actually), Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (that's only one) and Uncle Tom. There is a certain amount of confusion in the list, in the mix-up of fiction and myth, and of characters/roles and actors. Otherwise, many of the philosopher's favourite non-existent things are there – with the exception of Pegasus, who seems to have had little influence outside philosophy and Greek mythology.

Apart from the appealing silliness of this report, one thing stands out: how pervasive and ubiquitous our talk of the non-existent is. Not only do we indicate the influence and fame of these people (Sherlock Holmes is more famous than any living detective, as Terence Parsons (1980) has pointed out) but hours are spent wondering about their non-existent emotions (Siegfried fell in love with his aunt, you know), their non-existent families (how many children did Lady Macbeth have?) and societies are formed to bring together those interested in these non-entities. Claims are even made about them in learned science journals. In 1981 *Nature* reported that 'an eminent scientist, Dr Isidore Nabi, was blessed with a biography in *American Men and Women of Science* by a group of scientists … Apparently Nabi's three creators

---

[5] http://www.usatoday.com/life/people/2006-10-16-influential-people-list_x.htm

have been in the habit of using his fake existence as a means of concealing their own identity'.[6]

Using names for non-existent people and things is rooted in our talk and thought about the world. This is partly because of our interest in fictions – stories which are often precisely about things that do not exist.[7] But it is partly because of the fragility of our epistemic endeavours. We create theories about the world and hypothesise that there are all sorts of things. Sometimes we are right, sometimes we are wrong. But when we are wrong, our words work in the same way, they have the same roles in our languages, and we still are able to talk about these things.

I will illustrate this very simple idea with a classic example. The term 'Vulcan' was introduced in 1859 by the French astronomer Urbain Le Verrier as a name for a planet orbiting between Mercury and the Sun. Le Verrier had previously discovered the planet Neptune, using much the same methods as he went on to use when hypothesizing Vulcan. Once the name 'Vulcan' was introduced, those who used it were, on the face of it, aiming to refer to just one object. In many ways their speech acts are similar to those about other, existing planets – 'Vulcan might appear tonight' seems to express a similar thought to 'Neptune might appear tonight' etc. Those who use the singular term 'Vulcan' to talk about Vulcan seem to be talking about a particular object, just as those who use the singular term 'Neptune' to talk about Neptune.[8]

But the representation of the non-existent does not arise only when we have *names* for people, places and other particular objects that do not exist. We can also

---

[6] *Nature* 293, 2 (1981). Thanks to Andrew Pomiankowski for bringing this to my attention.
[7] For the purposes of this paper, I am assuming that fictional characters don't exist. Some philosophers (e.g. van Inwagen 1977, Thomasson 2003) disagree. But even if they are right about fiction, they still need to explain non-fictional non-existence.
[8] See Crane 2011a for a defence of the claim that we can think in a genuinely 'singular' way about non-existent objects.

represent *properties* that do not exist, *events* that never occur, *facts* or *states of affairs* that never obtain, and we can represent them in all sorts of ways. In language, we can do this by using names, descriptions, demonstrative pronouns and quantifier phrases. In thought, we can represent things that do not exist in some comparable ways. There are many distinctions we can make in the ways we think about objects and properties.

Following Keith Donnellan (1974: 5) we can make a general distinction between two ways we think about what does not exist. These two ways I call *error* and *fiction*:

(i)   *Error*: this is when we think about things which are genuinely supposed to exist but do not. Le Verrier's supposed planet Vulcan, phlogiston, the fountain of youth and similar things are in this category, as are the objects mistakenly thought to exist by those who are hallucinating, for whatever reasons.

(ii)   *Fiction*: this is when we think about things which we know do not exist. Many characters and places in novels, plays and movies do not exist; many objects of fantasy and imagination, and so on, likewise – they all belong here.

There are other categories which cannot be precisely identified with these two. Things in the category of *myth*, for example, might have once been in the category of Error (the ancient Greeks' thoughts about Zeus) but later fell into the category of Fiction (when we tell children about the Greek myths).[9] This illustrates that things may belong to both categories across time. Nonethless, there are also some clear differences between the two categories. In most cases of thinking about fictional entities, we are perfectly well aware that (many of) the things we are thinking about do not exist. Negative existentials – when we sincerely deny that some object exists – are a similar case. Gareth Evans (1982) called both of these uses 'conniving uses' of

---

[9] I therefore use the word 'myth' in a way which is different from Salmon's (1998), but I believe closer to its ordinary meaning.

empty singular terms, and aimed to give an account of them in terms of Kendall Walton's notion of a game of make-believe (see Walton 1990).

Sometimes objects of hallucination are taken as examples of non-existent objects (see Smith 2002, Azzouni 2010). The philosophy of perception contains many discussions of objects of hallucinatory experience, and a lot of the issues relating to non-existence in general will apply to them. I believe that the idea of a non-existent object of a hallucination is perfectly coherent, and a full account of non-existence should deal with these cases along with the others. Sometimes they will be objects of error, and sometimes akin to fictional objects, depending on whether the subject is aware that they are non-existent. However, since the status of hallucination is controversial, it is preferable not to base a purely general account of non-existence upon this kind of case.

There are other kinds of case, which for one reason or another will not figure prominently in the rest of my discussion here. There is the case of thinking about things that once existed, but do so no longer: people who have died, cities that have been destroyed, volcanoes that have exploded, destroying all around them. It is the most normal thing in the world, in our ordinary discourse, to talk of these things as no longer existing. But metaphysically things are more complicated. For on some views of time, existence is not limited to the present; so existence in the past is not a form of non-existence (see e.g. Smart 1989). So it is not an uncontroversial example of something that does not exist. I don't want to take a stand on these views of time, and more importantly, I don't think that the problem of thought about the non-existence should depend on the truth or falsehood of these views. So I will ignore non-existence in the past here, since we have in (i) and (ii) many relatively uncontroversial examples of things that do not exist.

Another example often discussed is the case of numbers and other mathematical objects. Some will say that numbers do not exist, because they are not in space and time. Others will say that existence is not limited to existence in space and time. This latter view is the orthodox view these days, and it is my attitude too. But since the ontological status of numbers is a complex issue which is largely independent of what I am saying here, the and because I have nothing new to say on the topic, I will put this issue to one side too.

In saying that some objects of thought – some intentional objects – do not exist, I am using a quantifier ('some') to talk about non-existent things. This will ring alarm bells in some quarters, since there is an influential (perhaps even orthodox) tradition that relates natural language quantification or its formal regimentation with 'ontological commitment'. If this view is right, and if we can quantify over non-existent objects of thought, then we must be 'committed' to them in some sense. But what can this mean? Does this mean that non-existent objects are part of our ontology, and that we must distinguish ontologically between what exists and what has some other kind of ontological status, what Nathan Salmon once called a 'lower-class ontological status, a sort of being shy of existence' (Salmon 1998: 288)? The difficulty is that it is hard to know what such a distinction really amounts to. What does it really mean to say that entities can have different kinds of ontological status? Surely things either are part of reality, or they are nothing at all.

My own view is that natural language quantification is not ontologically committing: contrary to received opinion, it is not difficult to understand natural language quantification in a non-committal way (see Crane 2011b). But saying this does not help us avoid the problem about non-existents. For this problem does not arise simply because we can *quantify* over non-existent objects, since there are other,

non-quantificational truths about these objects. That this is so is shown by the simple fact that a quantification 'some A is B' can only be true if it is true of some object *x* that it is B. Quantification, then, is not the issue.

A closely related objection to the view that there are non-existent objects – which is often not properly distinguished from the point about quantification – is that those who say that there are non-existent objects are committed to a distinction between being and existence. The reason is that 'there are things that do not exist' distinguishes between *what there is* and *what exists*. And since the phrase 'what there is' employs the third-person present tense form of the verb *to be*, it is said this is a way of talking about *being*. So saying this is distinguishing between *being* and *existence*. But (the objection runs) the distinction between being and existence is merely verbal. So 'there are things which do not exist' is contradictory – meaning either 'there are things which there are not' or 'there exist things which do not exist'.

This line of thought derives of course from Quine (1948), and the idea that there is no non-verbal difference between being and existence is described by Peter van Inwagen as 'the essence of Quine's philosophy of being and existence' (2008: 37). But it seems to me that the question of a distinction between being and existence is largely irrelevant to the truth of the claim that there are things that do not exist. An indication that this is not the real issue is shown by the fact that even Richard Routley, one of the most vociferous anti-Quineans, agrees with Quine here: 'there is only one way of being, namely existence' (Routley 1980: 42). Routley and other 'noneists' tend to reject even Meinong's (1904) innocuous distinction between between being and existence – that is, they do not say that some beings subsist and some exist. Rather, they see 'there are' as expressing non-committing quantification. And this is not to say that these quantifiers express being rather than existence.

What, then, should we make of the familiar charge that the noneist is committed to a 'jungle' of unwholesome, ill-behaved pseudo-entities? If 'committed' means *ontologically committed* then the charge is baseless, for the reasons we have just seen. And no-one should be committed to pseudo-entities, whatever their ontological views. The noneist *talks about* non-existents, and calls them 'objects' and 'objects of thought' (Priest 2005) or 'items' (Routley 1980). But this is one of the uncontroversial parts of their view: that we can talk about things that don't exist in the same way we can talk about things that exist.

The controversial part of the noneist view is neither the distinction between being and existence, nor its claim that there are things that do not exist. The controversial part is the claim that they share with Meinong: that non-existent objects have all the properties they are characterized as having. This claim is what Routley calls the 'characterization postulate'. This postulate is, I believe, false. But the postulate does not follow from the claim that there are things that do not exist. You can accept the latter without accepting the former: you can accept that there was something postulated by Le Verrier without accepting that it is a planet. Non-existent objects do not have all the properties they are represented as having.

Nonetheless, this does not mean that non-existent objects have *none* of the properties they are represented as having. If we understand something's having a property simply in terms of something being true of it, then it seems that there are many cases of non-existent objects having properties. This is because there are many truths about non-existent objects, as I shall now explain.

4 Truths about the non-existent

What do I mean when I say there are truths about non-existent objects? Here are some

familiar examples:

(1) Vulcan was a planet postulated by Le Verrier to explain the pertubations in the orbit of Mercury. Vulcan was introduced by using much the same methods as Le Verrier used to introduce Neptune in 1846.

(2) Sherlock Holmes is more famous than any living detective; for example, Sherlock Holmes is more famous than Sir Ian Blair.[10]

(3) Pegasus is a mythological winged horse; according to the myth, Pegasus sprung into being from the blood of Medusa, the gorgon killed by Perseus.

(4) Siegfried is one of the most unappealing heroes in all dramatic works.

I think that all these claims are true. They all seem to involve predicating something – being postulated to explain something, being famous, being a mythological winged horse, being unappealing – of things that have never existed, and do not and never will exist: Vulcan, Sherlock Holmes, Pegasus, Siegfried.

Some would go further. Some would say that it is straightforwardly true that non-existent objects can have trivial 'logical' properties: Siegfried is self-identical, he is either *F* or *not-F* for any property *F*, and so on. Or they might go even further and say that Siegfried is a man, Sherlock Holmes is a detective, Pegasus is a horse and Vulcan is a planet. A *non-existent* man, detective, horse and planet, to be sure – but haven't we just said that there are non-existent objects? So if there are non-existent objects, what's wrong with saying that there are non-existent horses, planets and so on?

What we need is an account of the principles which determine whether such predications are true. Some familiar principles only bring the problem into relief and make it more vivid. Consider what I shall call the *simple view of truth and*

---

[10] Sir Ian Blair was the head of London's Metropolitan Police Force from 2005-8.

predication: predication involves combining terms for objects with terms for properties and relations, and the predication is true just in case the objects have the properties or stand in those relations. As Quine puts it:

> Predication joins a general term and a singular term to form a sentence that is true accordingly as the general term is true of the object to which the singular terms refer. (Quine 1960: 96)[11]

The simple view is very appealing. Our singular terms pick out objects, our general terms pick out properties or relations, and when we combine them what we say is true when the objects have the properties or stand in those relations. This way of thinking lies at the heart of elementary predicate logic, and it is the standard starting point for classical semantics of natural language.

But what if the singular terms do not refer? What should we say then? Standard logic textbooks are not much help here. Neil Tennant's *Natural Logic* is typical:

> Our language allows the formation of terms such as 'the square root of Jupiter' or 'the empty set's wife'. Are we to regard these as denoting any objects? Our present answer is simple and evasive. We design our language so that this problem never arises. We secure every name a denotation, and we assume that every function is 'everywhere defined'. (Tennant 1990: 22)

This might be a perfectly reasonable procedure for dealing with the languages of elementary logic. But our language does contain terms which do not refer (i.e. which have no denotation) so it is no help to us.

So can the simple view be modified to apply to claims about non-existent objects? Or if not, what principle should we appeal to in order to establish whether and when such claims are true? At the very least, our logic should be a 'free' logic,

---

[11] Quine's remark would have to be modified to make room for plural terms and relational predications, but this does not affect the central point.

which allows singular terms to lack a reference.[12] If there is to be such a thing as a logic of our language, then it had better be a logic that does not assign a referent to every singular term, since our language has singular terms without referents. But saying this much does not, *by itself,* tell us when sentences containing such terms are true, and when they are false.

One extreme view says that we should modify the simple view of truth and predication, by specifying that if the terms do not refer, the predication is false. This view has recently been defended by Mark Sainsbury (2005). Sainsbury follows Burge (1974) and others in endorsing a *negative* free logic, which holds that all 'simple' sentences containing empty names are false. A simple sentence Sainsbury defines as 'one constructed by inserting *n* referring expressions into an *n*-place predicate' (2005: 66). Simple sentences are distinguished from those which contain truth-functional and non-truth-functional or intensional operators (e.g. propositional attitude verbs like 'believes that') in which the normal logical functioning of terms breaks down. Putting these complex sentences to one side, then, this view holds that all the simple claims we make about non-existent objects are false. Not only is Siegfried not a man, and Vulcan not a planet, but Vulcan is not self-identical and Pegasus is not *F* or *not-F*, for any *F*.

At the other extreme, there is Alexius Meinong's (1904) view that non-existent objects have all the properties they are represented or characterized as having: the 'Characterization Postulate' discussed at the end of the previous section. On Meinong's view, it is literally true that Sherlock Holmes is a detective, Pegasus is a horse, Siegfried is a man, and so on. (Of course, Holmes is a non-existent detective, Pegasus a non-existent horse, and Siegfried a non-existent man.) The way these

---

[12] The literature on free logic is now vast. See Lambert 2003 for a useful collection of writings on the subject, and a clear introduction to the philosophical issues.

objects are, the properties they have, their ways of being, what Meinong called their '*Sosein*' – this is independent of whether or not they actually *have* being. This is Meinong's famous principle of the independence of being (*Sein*) from being-so (*Sosein*):

> the *Sosein* of an object is not affected by its *Nichtsein*. The fact is sufficiently important to be explicitly formulated as the principle of the independence of *Sosein* from *Sein*. … the principle applies, not only to Objects which do not exist in fact, but also to Objects which could not exist because they are impossible. Not only is the much heralded gold mountain made of gold, but the round square is as surely round as it is square. (Meinong 1904: 20)

On Meinong's view, non-existent objects have all the properties they are characterized as having. If we can talk or think about the round square, we can talk or think about something that is round. It is true that the round square is round *precisely because* we have predicated roundness of it.

Here, then, are two extreme views about when predications of things of non-existent objects are true and false. Sainsbury's view is that no simple predication is true; Meinong's view is that such predications are true when they follow from a characterization of a non-existent object.

I reject both views, for the simple reason that there are some 'simple' predications of non-existent objects which are true, and some simple predications are false. The kinds of true simple predications I have in mind are versions of those mentioned above:

Le Verrier is thinking about Vulcan

Holmes is more famous than Sir Ian Blair

Pegasus is a mythical winged horse

Sigfried is an unappealing hero.

All these claims, it seems to me, are true. Yet they are all, on the face of it, simple

predications (i.e. they do not obviously include truth-functional operators,

propositional attitude verbs or other intensional operators). So Sainsbury's approach

cannot be correct as it stands. But this does not mean that Meinong is right and the

round square is round, and so on. The round square is no more round than Pegasus is

a horse. The correct position is that some simple claims about non-existents are true

and some are false, just as some simple claims about existents are true and some are

false. A solution to the problem of non-existence must state general reasons which

will enable us to say when a predication of something of a non-existent is true, and

when it is false.

This is a problem because of quite general considerations about the fundamental

connection between truth and reality, and the idea of something being true of

something. For anything – a claim, an assertion, a sentence, a proposition, a thought –

to be true is for it to say, in some way or another, how things really are. This idea is

embodied in one of the earliest 'definitions' of truth in our tradition, Aristotle's:

> To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of
> what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true. (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*
> 1011b25)

Philosophers have understood Aristotle's remark in a number of ways. Some see it to

be an early statement of what is right about the correspondence account of truth.

Others have taken it to be the basis of a theory of 'truth-making'. Still others have

taken it to be the original form of 'minimalism' about truth. My theme here is

intentionality, not truth, but Aristotle's remark gives us an insight into our problem.

Since Vulcan does not exist, Vulcan 'is not'. So to say of Vulcan that it is, is

plainly false. Likewise, since Vulcan is not, then to say of Vulcan that it is not, is

plainly true. Or to put it in a more contemporary idiom: the negative existential claim 'Vulcan does not exist' is true.

These claims conform to Aristotle's description of truth, read most literally. But of course, not all true or false claims say of something that it *is* or that it *is not* in this precise sense – that is, where 'is' and 'is not' mean *exists* and *does not exist*. Not all true or false claims are existential claims. If Aristotle's platitude is to apply to all truths, we should understand it not just talking about something's *being*, but also about something's being a *certain way*. When we say that something is a certain way, and it is – or when say that something is not a certain way, and it is not – then what we have said is true. And conversely with falsehood.

Now the problem is that the claims about the non-existent are not simply (true) negative existentials, or (false) existential claims. Saying something truly about the non-existent is not always a case of saying 'of what exists not that it does not exist'. As we saw above, it can also be a case of saying of something that is not that it *is a certain way*. And it seems that such talk can be true. The question is, if such claims can be true, then *why* are they true?

Another way to put the point is in terms of John Bigelow's well-known slogan that 'truth is supervenient on being'. This means that no possible situation can differ in respect of what is true of it unless it also differs in its being: that is, in the objects, properties, relations and other entities it contains. Thinking picturesquely, no two possible worlds could differ in what was true of them unless they also differed in being. (Maybe there could be no two worlds which are identical in their being; but this does not matter for the point at hand.) But if truth is supervenient on being, then how can one truly say *of something that is not* – something that does not exist – that it *is* a certain way?

My conclusion is that the general problem of non-existence derives from the fact that there are truths about non-existent things, but that truth is dependent on being, on reality, on how things really are, or on what exists. This assumes no controversial conception of truth-making, or of being, or of existence. All it assumes is that we can talk and think about non-existent things (objects of thought) and that there can be some truths about them. But if they are true, why are they true?

This is the general problem of non-existence. It is not the specific problem of how singular negative existential statements, or propositions, or claims, can be true. For even if one solves that specific problem of the negative existentials, the general problem remains. The final section of this paper attempts to show this.

5 Negative existentials

It is widely held that negative existential claims, or statements, or propositions, are among the most difficult problems facing an account of existence and non-existence. Salmon, for example, 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). In the final section of this paper, I shall argue that Salmon and others are wrong about the significance of negative existentials. There is a puzzle about negative existentials, but its solution is simpler than the puzzles raised by other truths about the non-existent.

G.E. Moore gives a textbook 20th century account of the problem of negative existentials:

> In saying that there is no such thing as a round square, I seem to imply that there is such a thing. It seems as if there must be such a thing, merely in order that it may have the property of not-being. It seems, therefore, that to say of anything whatever that we can mention that it absolutely is not, were to contradict

ourselves: as if everything we can mention must be, must have some kind of
being. (Moore 1953: 289)

Moore's argument recalls Russell's *Principles of Mathematics* view that non-existent
objects 'all have being, for if they were not entities of a kind, we could make no
propositions about them' (1903: §427). Moore sees this as producing a contradiction,
since he (rightly) does not distinguish between denying existence of the round square
and denying its being. Russell made this distinction in 1903, but by 'On Denoting'
(1905) he also thought the problem was that 'it must always be self-contradictory to
deny the being of anything'.

Russell and Moore state the assumption which generates the problem: that
things we talk about 'must still have some kind of being … simply because we can
think and talk about them' (1953: 289). In order to talk about X, in order to make
some proposition about X, then X must have being of some kind. Let's call this 'the
Moore/Russell assumption'. Of course, the whole point of Russell's (1905) theory of
descriptions was to show how this assumption can be rejected for most expressions
(though not for 'logically proper names' of course). Russell's inventions occurred at
the beginning of the golden age of the philosophy of language, so perhaps we can
understand why the Moore/Russell assumptions seemed so compelling at that time.

But there is no reason why anyone *now* should think that this assumption has
anything to be said for it. The general problem of non-existence, as I stated it above,
does not assume that all the things we talk about have some kind of being. Indeed, it
rejects this assumption: indeed, the general problem of non-existence arises because
of this rejection.

To reject the Moore/Russell assumption we only need to described how a non-
referring term, like 'the round square' can be intelligible, and thus how we can 'make

propositions' about it. But intelligibility of this particular phrase is easily

demonstrated, since it derives from the intelligibility of the adjective 'round' and the

noun 'square', the determiner 'the' and the syntactic principles which allow the

construction of the whole noun phrase. We understand all these words and we

understand the phrase they make when put together. Of course, nothing could actually

be a round square, but this is intelligible too. 'The round square' is intelligible

independently of the existence or being of the round square.

Granted that nothing prevents us from constructing a proposition about the

round square, we need now to ask what prevents from constructing the proposition

that *the round square has no being* or *that the round square does not exist*. Since we

have rejected the significance of the distinction between being and existence (§3

above), we can treat these sentences as expressing the same proposition. The

proposition expressed by the sentence 'the round square does not exist' is a complex

one, since it involves negation. But on the face of it, 'the round square does not exist'

is the negation of 'the round square exists' and is equivalent to 'it is not the case that

the round square exists'. The otherwise important distinction between internal and

external negation (between '*a* is not *F*' and 'it is not the case that *a* is *F*') does not

apply to subject-predicate existential propositions. Now 'the round square exists'

expresses a falsehood, simply because the round square does not exist. Assuming that

the negation of a falsehood is a truth, it follows that 'the round square does not exist'

is true.

This approach does not require any particular view of the semantics of definite

descriptions, or of whether 'exists' is a first-level predicate. If we assume that definite

descriptions function as singular terms and that 'exists' is a first-level predicate, then

the negative existential proposition in question has the simple form '¬E[*a*]', the

negation of 'E[*a*]', where 'E' is the first-level existence predicate. But suppose we follow Russell and reject both these assumptions. The proposition would then have the form '¬(∃*x*)(∀*y*)(R*x* & S*x* ≡ *x*=*y*)', the wide-scope negation of '(∃*x*)(∀*y*)(R*x* & S*x* ≡ *x*=*y*)' where 'R*x*' and 'S*x*' abbreviate '*x* is round' and '*x* is square' respectively. This proposition is true just in case there is no object such that it and only it has the properties of being round and square. Finally, one could take the combination of views found in Evans (1982), for example: descriptions are treated in Russell's way, but 'exists' is a first-level predicate. Thus, using familiar abbreviations, '¬E(ι*x*R*x* & S*x*)' would be the negation of 'E(ι*x*R*x* & S*x*)'. Evans does not in fact take this approach to negative existentials; but it is one which someone who holds this combination of his views could hold.

The point is that in order to understand negative existentials does not require adopting either the controversial Russell-Frege view that 'exists' does not function logically as a first-level predicate, or Russell's theory of descriptions. The very simple proposal defended here is that the negative existential proposition is the negation of the existential proposition, and the former is true when the latter is false. This proposal is available to those who take Russell's views, or to those who reject them.

The proposal is not without its own assumptions. The assumption that the negation of a falsehood is a truth, and the assumption that there is no distinction between internal and external negation for existential propositions, are both assumptions which could be rejected. But they are plainly more reasonable than the Moore/Russell assumption that in order to talk about X, X must have some kind of being.

I have followed Moore in discussing the example of the round square. Perhaps it is harder to see the value of the present approach to negative existentials in the case

of proper names. Assuming a first-level existence predicate, 'Vulcan does not exist' has the form '¬E[*a*]', the negation of 'E[*a*]'. Some views of names might make this difficult to understand. On a Millian view, the semantic role of a name – its contribution to the proposition expressed by sentences in which it occurs – consists simply in the fact that it stands for an object. So, no object, no semantic role – and no proposition expressed by a sentence like 'Vulcan does not exist'.

The Millian view of names has a difficult time accommodating non-referring names, and therefore an equally difficult time making sense of singular negative existentials (but see Salmon 1998 for a Millian response). The problem it has derives from the fact that it associates the significance of a name with its having a reference. If the problem of negative existentials derived solely from this Millian view – and not from the more general Russell-Moore assumption – and if the main problem of non-existence is the problem of singular negative existentials, then we would expect this problem to disappear if Millianism were rejected. After all, there are other views of names which are not Millian, which treat names as making a semantic contribution to the sentences in which they occur even if they do not refer to anything (see Sainsbury 2005 for discussion).

But if I am right about the structure of the problem of non-existence, then it will not be true that the problem disappears if Millianism is rejected. For the general problem derived not from anything like the Russell-Moore assumption, or from any specific theory of names. It derives from the simple conflict between the idea that there are truths about non-existent objects, and the idea that truth is dependent on reality. This problem would remain even if Millianism were false. Insofar then as the

problem of singular negative existentials is specifically a problem for Millianism, it is not central to the general problem of non-existence.[13]

<div align="right">

Faculty of Philosophy

University of Cambridge

Cambridge CB3 9DA

</div>

References

Azzouni, Jody (2010) *Talking About Nothing* (New York: Oxford University Press)

Brentano, Franz (1874) *Psychology from an Empirical Standpoint* Originally published in 1874; English edition edited by L. McAlister, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul 1973; reprinted with an introduction by Peter Simons, London: Routledge 1995.

Cartwright, Richard (1960) 'Negative Existentials' *Journal of Philosophy* 57 (1960): 629-639

Chalmers, David J. (2004) 'The Representational Character of Experience' in Brian Leiter (ed.) *The Future for Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) 153–181

Crane, Tim (1998) 'Intentionality as the Mark of the Mental', in A. O'Hear (ed.) *Contemporary Issues in the Philosophy of Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 229–251

Crane, Tim (2001), *Elements of Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

---

[13] Thanks to the audience at my Carnap Lectures in Bochum in March 2011 for helpful discussion, and to an anonymous referee for *Philosophia* for excellent critical comments.

Crane, Tim (2003) The intentional structure of consciousness' in A. Jokic and Q. Smith, (eds.) *Consciousness: New Philosophical Perspectives*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 33-56Crane 2011

Crane, Tim (2011a) 'The Singularity of Singular Thought' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 2011

Crane, Tim (2011b) 'Existence and Quantification Reconsidered' in Tuomas Tahko (ed.) *Aristotelian Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)

Keith S. Donnellan (1974) 'Speaking of Nothing' *Philosophical Review* 83:3-31.

Evans, Gareth (1982), *The Varieties of Reference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

Meinong, Alexius (1904) '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

Prior, A.N. (1971) *Objects of Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press)

Russell, Bertrand (1921) *The Analysis of Mind* (London: George Allen and Unwin)

Broad, C.D. (1939) *Religion, Philosophy and Psychical Research* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul)

Quine, W.v.O. (1948) 'On What There Is' *Review of Metaphysics* 2: 21-38

Salmon, Nathan (1987) 'Existence' *Philosophical Perspectives* 1:49-108.

Searle, John (1983) *Intentionality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)

Smart, J.J.C. (1989) *Our Place in the Universe* (Oxford: Blackwell)

Smiley Timothy (1960) 'Sense Without Denotation' *Analysis* 20:125 - 135.

Smith, A. D. (2002), *The Problem of Perception* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press).

Van Inwagen, Peter (2008) 'McGinn on Existence' *Philosophical Quarterly* 58: 36–58

Quine, W.v.O. (1960) *Word and Object*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press

Routley, Richard (1980) *Exploring Meinong's Jungle and Beyond* (Canberra: Research School of the Social Sciences)

Priest, Graham (2005) *Towards Non-Being* Oxford: Oxford University Press

Tennant, Neil (1990) *Natural Logic* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press)

Lambert, Karel (2003) *Free Logic: Selected Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)

Sainsbury, R.M. (2005) *Reference without Referents* Oxford: Oxford University Press

Burge, Tyler (1974) 'Truth and Singular Terms' *Noûs* 8: 309-325

Russell, Bertrand (1918) 'Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 11 (1910-1911), pp.108-128

Russell, Bertrand (1903) *The Principles of Mathematics* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Moore, G.E. (1953) *Some Main Problems of Philosophy* (London: Allen and Unwin)

Bach, Kent (1982) '*De Re* Belief and Methodological Solipsism' in A. Woodfield (ed.) *Thought and Object* (Oxford: Oxford University Press)

Parsons, Terence (1980) *Nonexistent Objects* (New Haven: Yale University Press)