

The Puzzle of Non-Existence

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I

Ontology is the subject within Philosophy, and within Metaphysics, defined as the study of *being*. Those engaged in this study concern themselves with the investigation of the general notion of being and with the question of what forms being can take (of what sorts of things there are). The puzzle of non-existence stretches the limits of our understanding of being. Imagine an ontologist drawing up a list of everything there is; the puzzle is whether this list includes things that don't exist.¹

It's a puzzle because, on the one hand, it is difficult even to make sense of the notion of *non-existent objects*. How could there *be* things that don't *exist*? If something doesn't exist does this not mean that it is nothing: that there is no such thing? So surely there are no things that don't exist. But, on the other hand, there is no shortage of (alleged) examples of non-existent objects, for instance: Santa Claus; Anna Karenina; Zeus and the Fountain of Youth. These objects seem to be available, as it were, to be thought about and talked about. Non-existent objects seem to figure in our plans (when we consider what may come to pass in the future) and our imaginings and our engagement with works of fiction. In describing the world in which we find ourselves, should we not find room for them?

II

The case for a positive answer to this question - for the answer: yes we should find room in our ontology for non-existent objects, can be made a bit more concrete.

Let's look at some thoughts that are apparently about things that don't exist. I can entertain thoughts that it is natural to describe as being 'about Sherlock Holmes', like the thought that Sherlock Holmes is a famous fictional detective. This thought isn't about any real thing² and it's not about nothing. Imagine that I am thinking that Sherlock Holmes is a famous fictional detective and that you have a somewhat similar thought: say you are thinking that Sherlock Holmes inspires many real detectives. What makes our thoughts similar? Both may involve a specific idea or concept, a concept, so to speak, of a fictional detective; but I may have read the Holmes stories inattentively and my Holmes-concept may be very different from yours (it may be more similar to your Poirot-concept than your Holmes-concept). Is not the similarity between our Holmes-concepts, and between our thoughts, best explained by the fact that they are about one and the same thing: Sherlock Holmes?

One can argue in this vein that it is necessary to posit non-existent objects to explain the nature of thought apparently about things that don't exist. It is also necessary to posit non-existent objects, it may also be argued, to explain the truth of certain true sentences. Here are some examples:

- (1) A non-existent candidate received more votes than the Conservative contender (let's imagine this is true)

(2) Ponce de Leon sought the Fountain of Youth

(3) Sherlock Holmes (despite not existing) is more famous than any existing detective.

These sentences all make sense. Furthermore they are true - so the defender of non-existents would say. But that means there are non-existent objects, because these sentences state facts that involve things that don't exist.

III

These are the sort of arguments that are the basis of the case for nonexistent objects. I also want to discuss the case against non-existent objects and I will add to and elaborate the arguments for the rejection of non-existents in tandem with the development of the reasons for their acceptance. To start with there are two pressing objections to non-existent objects. The first objection says that the claim that there are things that don't exist cannot be true because it is a contradiction. Surely, the objection goes, to say that *there is* such and such an object is just to say that such and such an object *exists*. So to say that there is something that doesn't exist is to say that there exists something that doesn't exist.

The advocate of non-existent objects must deny that to say that there is such and such an object is to say that such an object exists. This denial relies on a denial of the plausible thought that 'exists' is to be understood as applying to everything, or at any rate cannot be understood as applying to some things but not to others.³ The advocate of non-existents can point to examples of things that 'exists' doesn't - he will say - apply to. But perhaps the case for non-existent objects requires something more: not a fully developed theory of existence perhaps but at least a plausible suggestion as to what 'so and so exists' means, if not 'there is such a thing as so and so'.

The second objection that I will mention at this point contends that any attempt to say what non-existent objects *are like* is bound to be incoherent. W.V Quine's famous comments in his paper 'On what There Is' to the effect that the alleged class of non-existents is a 'slum' of 'disorderly elements' express this sort of objection. In its most general form the objection alleges that a systematic science cannot contemplate things that don't exist. More specific charges concern the alleged inability of any general account of what non-existent objects are like to give a coherent answer to specific, allegedly legitimate questions (Quine mentions questions about the identity and individuation of non-existents).

I mention this objection at this point to highlight the need, on the part of those who argue that there are things that don't exist, to bolster their case by developing a *theory of non-existent objects* - a theory that tells us something about what these alleged things are like. This is not only needed to address the objection that it is impossible to coherently say anything on this score (the objection that such a theory could not be forthcoming), but it is also needed to bolster the arguments for non-existents mentioned above. These arguments pressed the need to posit non-existent objects in order to explain the nature of certain thoughts and to account for the truths of certain sentences, but the apparent truths that are apparently about things that don't exist would be only partly explained by the fact, were it a fact, that *there are* non-existents;

a full explanation would have to square these truths with the facts *about* non-existents. The case for non-existents needs a general statement of these facts.

IV

A discussion of theories of nonexistent objects should start with the most famous and influential theory: Alexius Meinong's notorious Theory of Objects. The Theory of Objects can be understood to a first approximation as holding that for every collection of qualities there is exactly one object that has just those qualities. The theory posits, for example, an object that has just the qualities: *is golden* and *is a mountain* – that is, it posits a golden mountain. It also posits an object with the qualities: *is a fountain, confers eternal youth on those who drink from it* (a candidate for the referent of 'the Fountain of Youth') and an object with the qualities: *is a detective, is tall, plays the violin...* (a candidate for the referent of 'Sherlock Holmes'). A central principle of the theory is the so-called Principle of the Independence of Being (*sein*) and So-Being (*sosein*), which says roughly that the failure to exist doesn't prevent an object from having qualities. One doesn't have to exist to be a mountain; the golden mountain is no less an example of a mountain than existing mountains like Everest and K2, or so Meinong would have it.

The Theory of Objects is notorious as the target of a number of apparently devastating objections made by Bertrand Russell. Russell took the theory to entail that for every description there is an object that that description is true of; so for example on this interpretation of the Theory of Objects the descriptions: 'the golden mountain', and 'the headless horseman' succeed in specifying objects; but so, as Russell pointed out, does the description: 'the existent golden mountain', and we might add, 'the non-square square'⁴. Whatever about non-existent golden mountains, there is surely no *existing* golden mountain, and nothing at all could both be square and also non-square; so this is a problem for the Theory of Objects, at least if Russell's interpretation of the theory is correct.

Russell's interpretation is not correct, it would appear, or at any rate, even if it is, the theory can be modified. The charge that Russell's interpretation is not correct is based on his neglect of a distinction that Meinong seems to have made between predicates that stand for real or 'nuclear' (*konstitutorisch*) qualities, and predicates that don't. Nuclear qualities may be understood⁵ as the qualities a thing has that together constitute the intrinsic nature of the thing – the way the thing is, in and of itself. To give examples, the predicates 'is square' and 'is a mountain' stand for nuclear qualities; for a thing to be a mountain is for it to be a certain way; two mountains, in both being mountains, have a (nuclear) quality in common. Consider 'is non-square' though. When we apply 'is non-square' to an object we are denying that it is a certain way (i.e. square) rather than positively affirming anything about its nature. One would be reluctant to speak of a triangle and a circle as being the same way (having a quality in common), in both being non-square. 'Is non-square' does not stand for a nuclear quality then. The followers of Meinong who have drawn attention to the distinction between predicates that stand for nuclear qualities and those that don't (Terence Parsons, Dale Jacquette) would also argue that 'existent' doesn't stand for a quality (we apply 'existent' to a thing not to mark any aspect of its nature but to mark its *status*, they would say). If 'is non-square' and 'existent' don't stand for real qualities then the Theory of Objects can say that for every set of qualities (meaning 'nuclear'

qualities) there is an object that has just those qualities, without saying that there is an existent golden mountain or a non-square square.

This is how some followers of Meinong reply to Russell's criticisms. Others (Edward Zalta, for example), choose a different path. They propose a modification of the Theory of Objects that makes use of a distinction originally made by Meinong's student and collaborator Ernst Mally. While Mount Everest has the quality of *being a mountain*, that is it *instantiates* this quality, the Golden Mountain 'has' this quality in a different way, these philosophers say: it 'encodes' the quality of being a mountain. While having (instantiating) non-squareness involves a failure to be square (to instantiate squareness), having non-squareness in this different way (encoding non-squareness) needn't involve a failure to be square (to encode squareness); and so there is no contradiction in saying that the non-square square is square and is non-square, if this means encodes being square and encodes being non-square. Encoding existence does not involve instantiating existence, and so while the existent golden mountain, in a manner of speaking, exists, in another manner of speaking it doesn't. (As these are different manners of speaking there is no contradiction) The modified Theory of Objects says that for every set of qualities there is a Meinongian object that *encodes* just those qualities.

There are thus two versions of the Theory of Objects (as interpreted by Parsons and Jacqueline, and as modified by Zalta) that are immune to Russell's criticisms; but it may be asked, at what price? An apparent attraction of the Theory of Objects is that it posits all the right objects for explaining the apparent truths about fiction and imagination. It posits an object that has exactly the qualities that Conan Doyle attributed to Sherlock Holmes: this very object, one can say, is Holmes. But now imagine a work of fiction that features a non-square square (an episode of Star Trek Deep Space Nine, say). The theory as interpreted by Parsons and Jacqueline that says that for every set of nuclear qualities there is an object that has just those qualities doesn't furnish an appropriate fictional object, as non-squareness is not a nuclear quality.⁶

Consider also the modified Theory of Objects that says that for every set of qualities there is a non-existent object that *encodes* just those qualities. It is not unfair to ask what exactly it is to encode a quality and whether there is any good reason to make the distinction between exemplifying and encoding apart from the wish to avoid Russell's criticisms. If not the theory is worryingly ad hoc. The motivation that the distinction's authors seem to have in mind is something like this. 'Sherlock Holmes is a detective' is something we would want to endorse. We wouldn't want people to go around with the mistaken impression that Holmes is a criminal. But Sherlock Holmes is not really a detective at all. One wouldn't call on Holmes to solve a real crime, even if one were alive in 1890; Holmes has a poor track record when it comes to apprehending real Victorian era criminals like Jack the Ripper and Dr Crippen. The acceptability of the claim that Holmes is a detective and also its unacceptability point to an ambiguity: two different senses to the words. That's the thought.

But that is perhaps sloppy thinking. It is easy to explain why it is *acceptable* to say 'Holmes is a detective' without positing a sense of the words according to which this sentence is *true*. This is an acceptable thing to say, because in saying it, even if strictly speaking it's false, we get across what we wanted to say – that Holmes is a

fictional detective. – that is that Holmes is a detective according to the fiction. So there isn't really any good reason for thinking 'is a detective' could mean either of two things. There is also no satisfactory explanation on offer, of what it is to encode a property. To encode a property is not merely to be imagined to have the property, as this is not a way of having a property. In the absence of a proper explanation of the notion of encoding and any independent motivation for the introduction of this notion, it is wise to regard the modified Theory of Objects with suspicion. Does that mean there is no vaguely plausible theory of Non-existent objects, or is there room for another theory? I suggest there is room for a theory that denies that there *is any sense* in which Holmes is (really) a detective, and Meinong's Golden mountain really a mountain, despite not existing.

V

We are inclined to agree with the claims that Holmes is a detective and the Fountain of Youth is a fountain. These claims are informative as to the content of the stories or legends that feature Holmes and the Fountain of Youth. But there is also an inclination against regarding these claims as literal truths. One might feel that Meinong goes wrong in holding the Golden Mountain to be no less valid an example of a mountain than Everest, and the Fountain of Youth to be no less an example of a fountain than the ones in Trafalgar Square. I suggest that Meinong's position only gains plausibility if qualities like *is a mountain*, *is a detective* and *is square* are thought of, phenomenally, as aspects of our apprehension of objects, rather than as real objective features of the objects themselves. If we think that being a mountain is something real and objective then we have problems with Meinong's Principle of Independence.

Remember Meinong's notion of nuclear qualities. 'Is a detective', 'is a mountain' and 'is a fountain' stand for nuclear qualities but 'is a fictional detective' doesn't seem to stand for any aspect of a thing's intrinsic nature. Being a fictional detective seems to be a matter of (1) not being real and (2) being imagined as a detective by the author or readers of a story. 'Is a fictional detective' is not applied to an object to mark any of its nuclear qualities. Neither for instance is, 'is famous' or 'is thought about by the readers of Conan-Doyle's stories' applied to an object to mark a way that that object is, in and of itself. But while intuitively there is something not completely kosher about the claim that Holmes is (really) a detective or the claim that the Golden Mountain is (really) a mountain, the claim that Holmes is a fictional detective and the claim that Holmes is famous and the claim that Holmes is thought about by readers of detective fiction seem entirely safe and unobjectionable. This is as things should be, because while we can think about them and project qualities onto them, non-existents, I would suggest, lack nuclear qualities.

Non-existent objects like Holmes have no real, nuclear qualities, but are the empty vessels onto which we project the qualities we imagine them as having. This sort of view paints nonexistent objects as something like 'bare particulars'. The notion of a bare particular is an old and at one time reputable notion that has since fallen into disrepute. The idea was that ordinary objects, rather than being merely made up of their qualities, are essentially quality-less (they don't essentially have any quality or qualities) particulars, or *substrata*, supporting whatever qualities they happen to have at the time. Ordinary (existing) particulars according to the bare particular theory are

potentially bare. The view being recommended is that non-existents are particulars that really are bare. As such they are almost, but not quite, nothing. As such, also, their non-existence may be explained as their bareness, their failure to have any qualities. To exist, it may be held, is just to instantiate some (nuclear) quality or qualities. To exist is to be some way, rather than just to be. This is an explanation of what it is to exist (remember the objection that the notion of *nonexistent object* is a contradiction forces the provision of such an explanation) that is compatible with the thought that there are things that don't exist.

VI

Perhaps a plausible theory of existence can be developed along these lines but there is an immediate obstacle that must be overcome. Remember the second objection mentioned in section III. One of the forms this general objection takes is the charge that there are questions that can be asked about the alleged members of any alleged category of things that demand an answer and a good one; but in the case of non-existent objects there is no answer. One of these questions, according to W.V Quine, (an implacable opponent of non-existence) is: what are the (non-question begging) 'identity conditions' for these things? Quine suggests that for every category of things it should be possible to *explain* what it is for things of that sort to be one and the same thing. Sets are objects for which informative identity criteria can be given. For a set *x* to be one and the same set as a set *y* is for them to have the same members. According to Meinong's Theory of Objects, for every collection of qualities there is a single object that has just those qualities. So Meinong can furnish identity criteria for non-existent objects: for object *x* to be one and the same thing as object *y* is for *x* to have just those properties that *y* has. It should be possible to see the difficulty one would have in trying to explain what it would be for given non-existents to be one and the same if non-existents are bare particulars. I can say that an object *x* is the same object as Sherlock Holmes if and only if *x* is the object written about by Conan Doyle that I and many others imagine as a tall pipe-smoking detective; but this doesn't really *explain* what it is to be one and the same object as Holmes. It assumes that the object Conan Doyle wrote about and that I'm imagining is Holmes and so says little more than *x* is Holmes just if *x* is Holmes.

Rather than trying to meet Quine's challenge I suggest that one might do better to question the assumption that identity conditions can be furnished for every legitimate category of objects. We perhaps shouldn't let examples like sets, which are rather peculiar 'objects' overly influence us; what are the identity conditions for persons? Even if Quine's objections can be set aside though there is a related worry for the sort of theory of non-existents that has been mooted. An advocate of non-existent objects would want to say that it is possible to think about and talk about these things – in fact the possibility of thought and communication about non-existents has been cited as part of the case for the acceptance that there are such things. But how could our thoughts latch onto the right object, as it were, if non-existents are bare particulars with no individuating features that allow them to be picked out?

VII

Let us finish with a final objection to non-existent objects, one that might just as well have been mentioned at the beginning. Again it is due to Russell. Even in the most

general and abstract enquiry, Russell said, we must be guided by a 'robust sense of reality'. The objection is that in contemplating non-existent objects at all we fail to heed anything like a robust sense of reality. This is an objection which strikes many with great force; but Meinong would have regarded Russell's comment merely as the expression of a prejudice, what he called the 'prejudice in favour of the actual'.

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¹ It could also be asked whether there are *properties* that don't exist but this paper will not embrace this question.

² The thought is not about an *idea*. If I'm thinking that Tony Blair is a famous politician my thought is very different from any thought I might have about an idea (for instance the thought that my idea of Blair is influenced by my political leanings). There seems to be no less of a distinction between thoughts like the thought that Sherlock Holmes is a famous fictional detective and thoughts about ideas.

³ Some philosophers believe that 'exists' doesn't apply to objects but to properties (Bertrand Russell and Gottlob Frege believed something along these lines). To say that tigers exist for instance is not really to say something about the tigers, on this view, but to say something about the property of being a tiger – that it has instances.

⁴ Russell makes this and similar criticisms in several places, including in 'On Denoting' a paper in which he proposes his own solution to some of the problems that non-existent objects have been posited to solve. Russell mentions 'the round square' as an example of a contradictory description of an object. Parsons (Parsons 1980 pp38-39) argues that 'the non-square square' is a better example.

⁵ They may be understood otherwise, perhaps, but this seems to me to be the only understanding that (1) validates the notion (2) is close to Meinong's intention and (3) serves to allow the use of the notion of nuclear qualities in the defence of the Theory of Objects.

⁶ This is not quite true. Parsons in fact claims that 'is non-square' and 'existent' both fail to stand for nuclear qualities and also (they are ambiguous) stand for special nuclear qualities: what he calls 'watered-down extra-nuclear qualities'. But this seems a retrograde step as it seems not to be in keeping with the kind of understanding of the notion of nuclear qualities that validates this notion and the distinction between predicates like 'is a mountain' and those like 'is non-square'.