Andrea Bottani / Richard Davies (Eds.)
Modes of Existence

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Modes of Existence

Papers in Ontology
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Contents

Introduction

Richard Davies and Andrea Bottani

The aim of this introduction is to comment briefly on the background to the three primary topics touched on from various directions by the contributors to this collection. The background is the very general field of what is meant by the verb 'to exist' and, hence, of what we have called in our title 'modes of existence'. At the risk of some artificiality, the subdivisions of this field considered by our authors might be summarised as: first, the general principles of how ontological primitives are to be established; second, the question of the status of negative existentials; and, third, the treatment of fictional discourse.

These questions are closely interrelated in ways that might be made to emerge by recasting them, at an equal risk of facetiousness, as the 'is' question; the 'is not' question; and the 'as if' question. Put that way, shorn of abstract terminology, it should be plain why most of the essays here presented touch on more than one of the primary topics. Any answer to the 'is' question will have consequences for the 'is not' question. Indeed, one of the most influential texts on these issues, Quine's 'On What There Is', announces on its very first page 'the ontological problem', which is understood as the 'riddle of nonbeing' (Quine 1948). Likewise, any answer to the 'is not' question will have consequences for the 'as if' question. Again, a – or we might say, advisedly, 'the' – classic in the field, Russell's groundbreaking article, 'On Denoting' (Russell 1905), witnesses a very direct relation between a characteristic handling of sentences whose grammatical subject has no referent and the view that myth-making, story-telling and the like do not produce truths, at least not in the way that, say, zoology produces truths.

Let us proceed to consider what is at stake in our three questions, considered separately and jointly.

I.   'Is'
The approaches adopted by all the authors here represented to the 'is' question fall within the taxonomy presented in the useful overview

offered by Peter van Inwagen in introducing his discussion of Colin
McGinn's recent book *Logical Properties*. Although van Inwagen indi-
viduates a total of six distinguishable positions, we may say that they
fall into two principal classes.

On the one hand, there are theories that regard being and
existence as identical; for instance, Kant, Frege and Russell
regard assertions of being/existence as ascriptions of a relation-
al property to an abstract object, such as a property, a concept or
a propositional function. Thus, Kant famously observes that,
'"Being" is obviously not a real predicate; that is, it is not a con-
cept of something which could be added to the concept of a
thing'[1], by which he seems to have meant that the satisfaction of
the concept is quite a different matter from its definition.
Likewise, for Frege, existence cannot but be a predicate of pred-
icates[2]; and what Russell calls the 'feeling for reality' should
ensure that logic contemplates 'only one world, the "real"
world'[3]. Also among those whom van Inwagen classifies as not
seeing any call to make any distinction between 'there is' and
'there exists' is Quine, for whom the existential quantifier (plus
identity) expresses both indifferently. As we shall see in consid-
ering the 'is not' question, van Inwagen places himself squarely
in the Quinean tradition of those who say that 'there is an *x*' or
'there exists an *x*' both mean exactly that, for some *x* and for
some *y*, *x* is identical to *y*.

On the other hand, van Inwagen sets out four theories that make
some distinction between being and existence. The theories that distin-
guish between being and existence clearly do not rely, as the Quineans
do, on the alleged basicness of unrestricted quantification, but range
instead over a variety of domains of quantification that are not co-ter-
minous with concrete actuality. In Meinong's view, for instance, we
ought to distinguish between existence and subsistence; in addition to
the things that have existence (concrete, real objects) or subsistence

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[1] Kant 1781, p. 504 (A598, B626), emphasis original.

[2] Frege 1884, §53.

[3] Russell 1919, p. 169.

(abstract, ideal objects)[4], Meinong's characteristic claim is that some things have nonbeing or are outside being (*Aussersein*)[5]. More recent champions of the Meinongian tendency have inclined, rather, to distinguish the concepts of being and existence, and to attribute the former to everything whatever, while allowing that there are things that do not exist. It may be that the verbal distinction here does not amount to a real philosophical novelty but rather a terminological preference for using 'exists' in place of 'exists or subsists' and 'has being' for 'there is'. Nevertheless, the thesis that there are things that do not exist is one that the neo-Meinongians share not only with those who envisage an ontology of *possibilia*, which are things that possibly exist, but do not actually do so; but also with McGinn, whose theory of existence is set out in some detail and is subjected to close criticism regarding its consequences for what we are calling the 'is not' question.

The dichotomy that van Inwagen helpfully proposes as basic to posing and resolving the 'is' question clearly excludes, as van Inwagen candidly acknowledges, a great many of the ways that that question has been approached in the tradition. While it may well be that philosophers of the sort that van Inwagen calls 'our sort' are right to think that clarification of how to pose and resolve the 'is' question is a primary philosophical objective, a doubt might be raised about just how to identify 'our sort' of philosopher.

While, again, van Inwagen is surely right to say that the ontological musings of, for example, Heidegger and Sartre are not to be taken to be clarifications – even in intention – of the 'is' question, he also names and sets aside Aristotle and Ryle as not 'of our sort'. In so doing, he makes it clear that, for philosophers of 'our sort', the debate about the 'is' question and its cognates is not a question of 'analytic' against 'Continental'. For, though only local legend might have it that Aristotle was an early Student of Christ Church, Oxford, there is no doubt that

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[4] For this account of Meinong's considered position, see Grossmann 2005. In some moments, it seems that being is the genus of which existence and subsistence are mutually exclusive species; in others, that subsistence is possessed also by the things that exist and is the timeless aspect of their being. We are grateful to Venanzio Raspa for exegetic clarification on a point about which, as Lambert observes, Meinong expresses himself 'confusingly' (Lambert 1983, p.4).

[5] Cf. Meinong 1904, p. 82.

Gilbert Ryle counts as an 'analytic'. Rather, 'our sort' embraces all those who recognise that a crucial stand must be taken over how quantification is to be construed, and thus it cannot but include Frege, Russell and Quine. On the other hand, though Meinong, the neo-Meinongians, the possibilists and McGinn do not form a homogeneous team, they do count as of van Inwagen's 'sort' because their claims can be translated without obvious residue into the canonical notation of first-order predicate logic with identity. And, once translated, those claims can be tested for their consequences. While Heidegger would not have admitted the tellingness of the test (cf. Carnap 1932), most modern Meinongians see that the machinery of quantification theory permits their characteristic claims about the 'is' question to be expressed perspicuously.

What, then, of Aristotle and Ryle? Relative to the 'is' question, what sets them, and with them many others, apart from van Inwagen's sort is, as he notes, that, in their different ways, they deny the univocity of being. They deny, that is, that the 'is' question with regard to the category of the subjects of predication (substances) exhausts what there is to be said about being[6]. If they were right about this, it would pretty clearly imply the inapplicability of first-order predicate logic with identity to large tracts of the 'is' question. For that canonical notation presupposes that the only candidates for being are substitution-instances of the variables envisaged by the notation. The substitution-instances of the variables of first-order logic are individuals; and the category-theoretic approaches of Aristotle, Ryle and many others will allow not merely that being is said in many ways[7], but that it is said of instances of categories other than that of individual substance.

Of course, many philosophers have been persuaded that instances of other categories can be treated as if they were substitution-instances of the variables of first-order predicate logic, and have quantified gaily over events, times, places and whatnot (though rarely, for example, over postures[8]) as if they were individuals in just the way that substances are individuals. That is, because these other kinds of particulars

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[6] See, e.g., Aristotle, *Categories*, v.

[7] See, e.g. Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, Γ, ii, 1003a33.

[8] Cf. Aristotle, *Categories*, v, 1b27.

can be subjects of predication, the canonical notation treats them on a par with what the category-theorists will think of as the focal bearer of 'is'. About this, it is not our present intention to judge or even to opine, beyond the observation that there may be more to the 'is' question than can be captured by translation into the canonical notation of the Quineans. Nevertheless, even those who doubt or deny the univocity of being may learn a great deal about the 'is' question by attending to translatability into first-order predicate logic with identity; but they may continue to doubt or deny that such translatability fixes a limit to what is to be done in ontology.

Relative to the dichotomy we have borrowed from van Inwagen, the first two contributions to this volume stand in fairly stark opposition. The distinction between theories that do not and theories that do distinguish between being and existence may be applied to the two thinkers who stand more or less openly behind Kevin Mulligan and Venanzio Raspa: respectively, the early Wittgenstein and Alexius Meinong.

In Quine's image, the ontology of the *Tractatus* is undoubtedly a 'desert landscape'[9], insofar as Wittgenstein announces that 'the world is the totality of facts'[10]; being a fact is thus the only way for something to be part of the world or to exist. The question, then, that Mulligan raises formulates our 'is' question as the question, 'what is a fact?'

One of the most prominent theories of what it is to be a fact, elaborated under the pretty direct influence of the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus*, is that associated with F.P. Ramsey, according to which a fact is a true proposition (Ramsey 1920). If this is so, then, the world is the totality of true propositions. Against a suggestion of this sort many objections might be raised, among which we may mention two, which appear separately damaging and jointly fatal to it. A first objection is that, if the world is made of true propositions, then it becomes entirely mysterious what it is in virtue of which they are true. If, that is, 'what is the case' is itself propositional, the distinction between truth and falsehood seems either to be downplayed or to run counter to the intuitive thought that truth is a product of or supervenes upon reality.

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[9] Quine 1948, p. 4.

[10] Wittgenstein 1921, 1.1

Furthermore, truth is treated as identical with being, and what vanishes is the idea that truth and falsity are linguistic notions. A second objection is that, while there is nothing particularly mysterious about a proposition's being false of something else (of the that-which-it-is-about), the notion of a fact's being 'negative' puts the cart before the horse, because it seeks to build the notion of truth, rather than that of, say, existence, into the basic ontological notions without explaining what is true of what. If a (positive) fact is a true proposition, then a negative fact would have to be a true proposition that is false, which certainly looks incoherent. Hence, it is very implausible to propose a theory of facts on which they are both true propositions and ontologically fundamental.

An alternative approach has been to say that a fact should be construed as a *sui generis* entity that has some internal structure, but that is nevertheless primitive. For instance, one might say that a fact is a combination of *n* particulars or properties with an *n*-placed predicate. The notion of combination here is to be taken as in some way predicative or exemplificative: the particulars exemplify the predicate. Were the question answered of how this combination is supposed to be wrought, Mulligan proposes that, even on this conception of what facts are, they are not ontologically fundamental because exemplification is not the most basic sort of ontological tie. It is not the most basic because it can itself be construed as a case of the more general notion of 'obtaining' or 'being thus-and-so'. In this respect, if there are facts, then they are to be understood as obtaining states of affairs rather than as any sort of entity that has a predicative structure.

More positively, Mulligan argues that things (substances), states, processes, perhaps space-time and, for the non-nominalist, kinds of things, kinds of states and kinds of processes, should be counted as fundamental for the very simple reason that it is *because* of these that any facts that one might wish to cite are true. The fundamentalness of things (etc.) is an ontological fundamentalness relative to facts, properties and relations in two leading respects. One is that none of the former is identical with any of the latter. For instance, a person endures in time and has boundaries in space whereas a fact about, a property of, or a relation to a person has neither of these features and, hence, cannot be identical with the person. The other is that things (etc.) cannot

be constructed out of facts (etc.). What this means is that, while there might be something that makes a certain person sad, and that person's being sad makes true the fact that the person is sad, that fact is not among the things that makes the person sad. Rather, the converse holds: the sad person is the truth-maker of the derivative fact.

While there may remain some uncertainty about how to understand what it is for a fact to be made true by a sad person, it is pretty certain that it will have to call on the notion of an object. As already indicated, this notion is itself by no means neutral in those theories that propose some distinction between a wide sense of 'being' and narrower senses of 'existence' and 'subsistence'. While the initial moral drawn from Russell's theory of descriptions was that the beings over which 'object' should range are restricted to those recognised in the "real" world, anti-Russellians of various stripes have continued to subdivide objects according to the species of being that they instantiate.

In discussing Meinong's account of the status of fictional and æsthetic objects, Venanzio Raspa assumes the fundamental theses of his theory of objects. It is worth noting that the theory is in large measure motivated by Meinong's desire to make sense of Brentano's claim that every mental state must have an object as a component. Thus, when one thinks about, imagines, or deplores something, there has to be a something about which one is thinking, that one is imagining or deploring; this something is the 'intentional object' of the state in question. Consider, then, the apparently inconsistent triad: (i) all intentional states are relations to their objects; (ii) an n-placed relation requires that n relata exist; and (iii) some intentional states have as their objects things that do not exist[11]. Where Husserl moved in the direction of denying (i) by saying that intentional states are other than 'quasi-relations' and Russell would have refused (ii) in the case of non-referring or 'merely intentional' states, Meinong takes (iii) head on.

The Meinongian answer to the 'is' question is thus formulated in terms of a taxonomy of the ways that various categories of objects are related or not related to being. The distinction between existent and non-existent objects is coordinated in the first instance with that between real (concrete) and ideal (abstract) objects, and motivated by

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[11] This formulation is owing to Tim Crane in an unpublished paper on intentionality in Husserl.

what Meinong calls 'the principle of the indifference of the pure object to being'[12]. As several commentators have pointed out, this principle is closely related to the Kantian argument, alluded to above, that the being of an object is 'alien or extrinsic' to what it is for an object to be the object it is[13]. This, in turn, derives from the notion that an object's being what it is is determined by the properties attributable to it: being determined or being thus-and-so (*Sosein*) is therefore independent of and prior to being (*Sein*).

There appears, however, to be an asymmetry in the treatments of this 'indifference'. On the one hand, Kant's objection to what he dubbed the Ontological Argument for the existence of a God is that the concept of a God cannot include, as one of its 'real' properties, the property of existence; on the other, Meinong allows that there are objects, such as the round square, the list of whose properties, which makes up its being thus-and-so, includes an absurdity, so as to 'carry in itself the guarantee of its own non-being in every sense'[14]. Why, one might wonder, should not a certain listing be such that it does carry in itself the guarantee of its own being in some sense or other? If, that is, 'indifference' is a relation between being thus-and-so and existence, then the non-existence of the round square should have a parallel in the existence of something-or-other in virtue of the properties (other than existence) that constitute its being thus-and-so. If the something-or-other in question is not God, then perhaps we might think of the empty set or whatever else makes for the necessary truths of arithmetic. This is not to suggest that properties, such as self-identity, which are necessary for something to exist, are also sufficient; but rather, it is a hanging query about whether or not some being thus-and-so is such as to guarantee – to provide sufficient conditions – that something should instantiate it.

Nevertheless, Meinong does envisage an 'infinite totality of objects which are outside being'[15], from among which we *select* when talking about fictions (a point to which we shall return in considering the 'as if' question). What makes the totality a totality is that it contains

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[12] Meinong 1904 p. 86.

[13] Cf. Findlay 1933 p. 49; Lambert 1983, p. 20.

[14] Meinong 1904, p. 86.

[15] Meinong 1910, p. 197.

all the listings of properties that are attributable to objects, including absurd ones. Given that the listing of the properties is identical with what it is to be a determinate object (its being thus-and-so), it becomes a merely verbal matter whether we say it is the listing, such as one including both 'round' and 'square', or the object itself, such as a round square, that is absurd.

Just as one might easily think that Ramsey, with his facts, was insufficiently alert to the merely possible, one might also worry that Meinong's objects are overly hospitable to the impossible. The point can be made by reference to a recurring fiction whose incoherence has perhaps become a commonplace among philosophers without thereby affecting Hollywood box-office. Consider the many stories of backwards time-travel, in which the superposition of what actually happened and what is successively made to have happened is so successfully brushed over as not to impede the unfolding of the plot: the Terminator both was and was not in the police station at a time t. Of course, the story might be told without apparent absurdity, but it is not a matter of indifference that there is an absurdity lurking. For this reason, it might be well to say that no action taken by the Terminator after t can be such as to bring it about that he wasn't if he was or that he was if he wasn't, just as no town is such that every man in it is shaved either by himself or by the barber (but not both). The fact that such absurdities may be more or less covert or may take time and reflection to be unveiled does not make them any the less absurdities: whether they carry in themselves a guarantee of their own non-being implicitly or explicitly, the guarantee is in force.

It might be noted that, these sorts of logical or conceptual absurdity are just one species of how the non-existence of something fitting a certain description might be guaranteed. There may be physical reasons for rejecting the existence of certain categories of things. For instance, we might wonder whether, conjointly, equine physiology (especially regarding muscle efficiency and the structure and tensile strength of the rib cage) along with the principles of aerodynamics are sufficient to carry a guarantee of the non-being of flying horses, such as Pegasus.

In short, the 'is' question as it is faced in this volume is a question primarily about the nature of the objects of which it can be said that they are. Whereas Mulligan proposes that the concrete particular is

prior and offers a fiercely parsimonious account of the ontological fundamentals, Raspa's Meinong begins with listings of properties and thus enlarges the class of objects that are independent of what exists or even subsists.

2.   *'Is not'*

Proceeding, then, from the 'is' question to the 'is not' question, it is helpful to bear in mind the distinction that Frederick Kroon draws between the Russellian 'feeling for reality' that allows us to use terms like 'pseudo-object' for the likes of round squares and, perhaps, flying horses, and the question of the correct logical analysis of propositions that are at least apparently about them. In particular, we need to be attentive to the question of how propositions denying that such things exist can be true.

On a simplified version of Russell's theory of descriptions, 'the present King of France is bald', is false because it is equivalent to the conjunction, 'there is at least and at most one present King of France, and he is bald', whose first conjunct ('there is at least one present King of France') is false. By analogy, then, we would expect to have to say that, 'the present King of France does not exist', is false because it is equivalent to the conjunction 'there is at least and at most one present King of France, and he does not exist', whose first conjunct ('there is at least one present King of France') is false. Yet, it is apparent that 'the present King of France does not exist' is true.

The trouble here presumably arises from the way that 'the present King of France does not exist' appears to say of the present King of France that *he* does not exist; that is, for some x, x is a present King of France and x does not exist. What we have already heard Quine calling the 'riddle of nonbeing' is just that, if a sentence beginning with the quantifier, 'for some x', is to be true, there has to be an x that satisfies the predicates attributed to it; as Kroon notes, this line of thought risks landing Russell and others with the thesis that 'the present King of France does not exist' must be treated not merely as false, but as a contradiction because it appears both to assert and to deny of something that *it* is a present King of France. But there is no contradiction here; so something has gone wrong.

On the Quinean reading advanced by van Inwagen, the nonbeing predicate denies of everything that it is a present King of France: for all *x*, *x* is not a present King of France. So it may be worth pausing for a moment on the issue of how the quantifiers of the canonical notation of first-order predicate logic are to be read. For the purposes of criticising all those ('of our sort') who distinguish between being and existence, Van Inwagen himself makes do with the symbol for universal quantification, '∀', read as 'for all', and merely alludes to another, which he describes as beginning with 'e' and rhyming with 'residential'.

One motivation for this austerity might be expressed by considering one way that introduction of the rhyming quantifier can give rise to puzzles. Consider what Whitehead and Russell say when introducing '∃'; they say, 'it stands for "there exists"'[16]. So far forth, the symbols adopted by logicians are not responsible to anything but the other things that logicians use them for or say about them. In this respect, a reading of a bit of symbolism differs from the reading one might give of a word in a foreign language; for instance, a direction, of the sort that Giuseppe Spolaore cites, to read the French word '*canard*' to stand for the same as the English word 'water' would pretty quickly lead to downright error because the French word is no longer up for stipulation of the sort that logicians are free to give to their symbols when they introduce them. Here, as Humpty Dumpty might say, the logician is master[17].

It is instructive to note how it is hard to find an English (or French or Humpty-Dumptian) formula that stands to '∀' as 'there is' and 'there exists' do to '∃'. Of course, the formula '∀*x* F*x*' *could* be read 'there is not (or does not exist) an *x* such that not-F*x*'. That would do the trick. But it has not caught on and few would feel at home with it as a reading of the universal quantifier. Rather, van Inwagen's 'for all'

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[16] Whitehead-Russell 1910, 'Summary of *9', p. 127.

[17] Wittgenstein affirms that 'in logic a new device should not be introduced in brackets or in a footnote', and then complains (in brackets) that, in the *Principia*, 'there occur definitions and primitive propositions expressed in words. Why this sudden appearance of words? It would require justification, but none is given, since the procedure is in fact illicit'; Wittgenstein 1921, 5.452. What is alleged to be illicit is that words should be master in such a context.

sounds just right. That is, the direction in which readings of the quantifiers should be made uniform is by taking the reading of '∀' as the paradigm: it might just be advisable to allow the symbolism to be master for a moment, and to read '∃x' as 'for at least one x'. The instruction to be had here is to the effect that we can use the notion of quantification without introducing distracting talk of being or existence; and the advantage of doing so is that we can postpone the philosophical questions until after we have got the logical means for expressing them perspicuously.

Quite apart from the reasons that have motivated substitutional readings of the quantifiers[18], we may recall a particularly intriguing moment in the *Principia* at which Whitehead and Russell feel the need to introduce some extra symbolism, in addition to the quantifiers, for saying that something exists. This moment occurs in the introduction of the symbol '(ιx)', which the authors say is to be read 'the term x which satisfies'. The manoeuvre they then perform appears to constitute a denial that the use of this symbol involves any ontological commitment. For, Whitehead and Russell proceed to introduce the formula 'E! (ιx) (Fx)', which they read as 'the x satisfying Fx exists'[19]. What makes this moment intriguing is that it appears to pose a choice.

On the hand, the symbol '(ιx)' might be read, as has occasionally been heard, as a 'function' (when it is called 'the iota-function') or as a 'prefix'[20], that is, as a symbol for a mapping from some domain onto some range, in which case, we might understand why it needs to be prefaced with 'E!', so as to ensure in some way that the two ends of the mapping are not, so to speak, vacant. But this is a curious doctrine on at least two counts. First, given that the only variable in play is '*x*', it is not clear that we have a function in any of the standard senses: how

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[18] Such as that, if '∃' is read as 'there is a' (or 'there exists a'), then the logical truth '(∀x) (Fx v ¬Fx)', insofar as it implies '(∃x) (Fx v ¬Fx)' and implication is transitive, will imply that there is or there exists at least one thing. But the existence of even one thing is not obviously implied by any logical truth, because logical truths imply only logical truths and it at least appears a contingent matter that anything exists.

[19] Whitehead-Russell 1910, *14.02, p. 174.

[20] W.v.O. Quine 1952, pp. 230-4.

is 'the' a mapping? And, second, it is hard to see what difference there is between 'the x satisfying Fx exists' and 'the x satisfies Fx'.

Though what is not clear or hard to see in these cases might be made clear or easy to see, the other salient option, which is the line that Russell unequivocally takes in the *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*[21], is to read '(ιx)' as a quantifier, meaning something like 'for at least and at most one x'. In that case, the 'E!' is redundant. If it were not redundant, then it could be placed in front of any other quantified expression; thus a stretch of symbols like, 'E! ($\exists x$) (Fx)' might encourage us to read 'for at least one x that exists, Fx'. Since there is a glaring redundancy in such a case, we may infer that, if '(ιx)' is a quantifier, '(ιx) (Fx)' does not stand in need of 'E!' to say that the x satisfies Fx.

Although Kroon and van Inwagen have different dialectical and expository purposes, they converge interestingly on one important point about the 'is not' question, namely that it is unwarranted to expect there to be a single logical form or semantical profile displayed by all negative existentials.

Reconstructing the passage in Meinong's thought as between the first (1902) and the second (1910) editions of *On Assumptions*, in which 'The Theory of Objects' (1904) is a crucial moment, Kroon suggests that Russell's first proposal of the theory of descriptions (in 1905) is vitiated as a criticism of Meinong by his having as a target a composite (and incomprehensible) position that Meinong never occupied all at once. Specifically, on the later view, Meinong is free to explain away negative existentials such as 'the golden mountain does not exist' by allowing that the object 'the golden mountain' is assumed *as a pretence*, and its non-existence is asserted from *outside* the pretence.

A solution of this sort seems also adapted to dealing with denials of the existence of objects that are picked out only by means of a description that is then said to be wrong. In the case of the assertion, sometimes attributed to Hobbes[22], that the Holy Roman Empire is not holy, not Roman and not an empire, we might say that the first occurrences

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[21] Russell 1919, p. 177.

[22] The assertion does not appear in *Leviathan*, IV, 47, where one might expect it.

of 'Holy', 'Roman' and 'Empire' figure as it were in scare-quotes: they are used to evoke an entity that does not answer to the description[23]. In such cases, we have a phenomenon related to what Donnellan (1966) called the 'referential' use of descriptions, in which a description may be false of the object to which it is applied but may nevertheless succeed in picking out the object referred to in virtue of the beliefs or readinesses to collude in the pretence of those to whom the description is proffered. Where Donnellan began to probe, it has become apparent that the complexities of linguistic uses in this area cannot all be caught with a simple dichotomic distinction. As van Inwagen illustrates in his conclusion, we can count at least three different ways in which 'doesn't exist' can operate, according to the kind of context in which it is deployed.

Even if, then, the 'is not' question calls for attention to precisely what is being said in the issuing of a negative existential, there remains a question about what we are to say in general about the metaphysical status of non-existent objects. If we are to say that there are objects that are not identical to anything, this might be formalised as '$(\exists x) \neg (\exists y) (y = x)$'. If the quantifiers are read as unrestrictedly objectual, that is, as ranging over objects as the values of the variables within a domain identified as 'the universe'[24], then it would appear that the formalisation expresses a contradiction, if for no other reason than that it says that, for at least one x, x is not even self-identical.

We might envisage two ways to defend, or at least explicate, the thesis common to Meinong, the neo-Meinongians, the possibilists and McGinn[25]. The first may be called 'primitive existence', which is a refusal of the equivalence between 'there are non-existent objects' and 'there are objects not identical to anything'. The primitive existence approach appears to be an obstinate reiteration of the thesis to be defended rather than a contribution to understanding of what is meant by distinguishing between being and existence. The other line is what we may call 'quantifier weakening' where we might distinguish two

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[23] The case is not unique, of course. If we apply the same treatment to 'Lord Privy Seal', we find that nouns and adjectives get up and walk about.

[24] Cf. Haack 1978, p. 42.

[25] These options are canvassed in an unpublished paper by Philip Percival on the metaphysical status of non-existent objects.

sub-versions of the weakening involved. On the one hand, there is the option of saying that the 'there are' in 'there are objects not identical to anything' should not be read objectually but substitutionally, as ranging over terms; on the other, someone might say that the 'anything' should not be read as unrestricted but as limited to some sub-domain of objects (such as those in time and space). But, not only do these responses seem *ad hoc*, they also seem to miss the point. Rather, a solution of the problem might lie in finding some reading of the apparently contradictory formalisation '$(\exists x) \neg(\exists y) (y = x)$' that is both clear and consistent. One approach might be to say that the key is not so much a matter of the construal of the quantifiers, as one of how to interpret the notion of identity. What is called for is clarification of the modalised notion that is in play when we speak of what might have been had a certain entity – one that does exist – not existed, and more in particular, what might have been true of that very entity itself in the case of its non-existence.

In a certain sense, this approach to the 'is not' question is the converse of the issues raised by the 'as if' question: rather than consider what makes it true to say of a certain fictional character, say, Sherlock Holmes, that, had he existed, he would have lived in Baker Street, we take a certain actually existing person, say, Tony Blair, and examine what could have been said of *him* had he not existed.

We shall return in a moment to some of the proposed ways of construing the fictional and mythological names that allow us to speak truly of things that do not exist as actual, concrete or real objects. But, first, we may consider the status that it is very tempting to attribute to a wide range of what Achille Varzi calls 'negative events', such as failures to happen, omissions or non-occurrences. As with 'negative facts', where we have a true proposition that is not true, here we seem to be up against a happening that doesn't happen. Nevertheless, as Varzi notes, what does not happen seems to play a role in our thinking about explanations, giving rise to a tendency to think of negative events as implicated in causation and, hence, as forming part of the history of the world. For instance, it sounds perfectly natural to say that John's failure to water the flowers was responsible for their withering.

In general, there are fair grounds for resisting the idea that talk of events, whether positive or negative, can carry us to the deepest or most general level of ontological commitment. For one thing, the very

phrase 'ontology of events' has an air of oxymoron about it: an event is what happens, rather than what is. For another, an event always presupposes some objects to which it happens: we can have things to which nothing happens, but we cannot have happenings that do not happen to something. Even if there are some turns of speech, such as 'it is raining', that ostensibly refer to events without an obvious substance to which they happen (it is not the sky, the cloud, the weather or even the rain that is doing the raining), it remains the case that you cannot have rain without water, but you can have water without rain. It will not quite do to say, as Donald Davidson says[26], that there is a 'symmetry' between 'substances and their changes'; for, if there really were symmetry, then one would be equally ready to assert that there is symmetry between changes and their substances. And this symmetry does not sound as symmetrical as the one that Davidson asserts.

What stimulates Varzi's enquiry is the widely-held view, promoted by Davidson and his acolytes, that causation is a relation among events. On that view, therefore, our referring to and quantifying over events, including negative ones, such as John's failure to water the flowers, is a commitment made in order to report causal relations. In order to restrict the range of the events that are to be admitted as legitimate terms of causation, Varzi's own 'feeling for reality' induces him to separate two elements that might mislead us into the admission of negative events.

The first concerns the ways that descriptions of causal factors can be cast as either positive or negative. Thus, if John stays where he is, that event could also be described as a non-leaving. Of course, Mary's impatience may be due to John's not leaving, because his leaving was what she expected of him; but his non-leaving just *is* the ordinary (positive) event of his staying. The mere appearance of a negation-sign in the linguistic expression does not make what happens negative.

The second point that Varzi makes involves a distinction between reporting a causal relation and offering an explanation, where the former would, at least in the long run, call on a causal law and the latter demands no more than some merely psychological satisfaction with a reference to a factor that helps us understand what was untoward in the case in hand. More specifically, whereas the context '... because ——'

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[26] Davidson 1969, p. 175.

of causal explanation is referentially opaque, oblique or intensional, and hence dependent on the particular descriptions that flank it, the Davidsonian thesis is that the context '—— caused ...' is referentially transparent, direct and extensional, and hence satisfied by any terms co-referential with the actual cause and effect. Employing a distinction of this sort, we might concede that John's failure to water the flowers explains the death of the flowers, inasmuch as Mary had given him a task that, if he had carried it out, would have helped the flowers to survive, but we might still think that no real cause of their death has been cited.

Mobilising these two devices, Varzi is satisfied that the temptation to allow negative events can be kept at bay, in much the way that the invocation of fictional contexts can be used to avoid serious ontological commitment to there having been someone who was Sherlock Holmes, when we say, truly, that Sherlock Holmes lived in Baker Street.

3.   'As if'
While it is true to say of Sherlock Holmes that he lived in Baker Street, it is not true to say of Baker Street that Sherlock Holmes lived in it. This asymmetry is due to the fact that Conan Doyle is in some way authoritative as to some of the things that it is true to say with respect to the non-referring term 'Sherlock Holmes' while, even within the fiction of Conan Doyle, the reference of 'Baker Street' is Baker Street. The papers by Maria Reicher, Carola Barbero, Francesco Orilia and Giuseppe Spolaore address, from slightly different angles, features of how fictional discourse can generate true predications and identity statements without thereby committing us to an ontology on which fictional objects such as Sherlock Holmes increase the population of the world we live in. This is the 'as if' question.

The most widespread strategy for dealing with fictional discourse is to say that sentences that ostensibly refer to characters such as Sherlock Holmes are to be understood within the context of some story-telling, of a pretence or of a game of make-believe.

Maria Reicher investigates the scope that should be ascribed to such a context of story-telling by considering the logical behaviour of the 'story operator'. The story operator is a device for making sentences

like 'Sherlock Holmes lived in Baker Street' true by the addition of the rider 'according to a story'. As it is mostly generally expounded, the story operator is read as a sentence-forming operator on sentences, which therefore embraces the whole of the initial sentence within its scope. Thus, 'Sherlock Holmes lived in Baker Street', becomes, 'according to a story (Conan Doyle's), Sherlock Holmes lived in Baker Street', and so comes out true because, from *A Study in Scarlet* onwards, there are repeated indications in Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories that our hero's address was as reported. On this understanding of the story operator, its logical form could be rendered as, 'Story (F*a*)'.

The reading of the story operator as a sentence-forming operator on sentences is offered as having the beneficial effect of ensuring that everything that falls within its scope is taken to be fictional and, hence, of not landing us with ontological commitment to the entities, such as a man by the name of Sherlock Holmes with whom we could have shaken hands and to whom ostensible reference is made.

Reicher raises two objections to the standard reading of the story operator. The first is that, appearances to the contrary, there are sentences to which it cannot be applied as a way of avoiding commitment to fictional entities. For, it is pretty clear that 'Sherlock Holmes is a detective invented by Conan Doyle' is true, while 'according to a story (Conan Doyle's), Sherlock Holmes is a detective invented by Conan Doyle' is false, because, whatever other slips there might be in the Sherlock Holmes stories, Conan Doyle never mentions himself as an inventor of anything in the stories he wrote. Hence, we would do well to admit 'Sherlock Holmes' as a possible grammatical subject of true sentences that do not carry the story-operator rider.

The other objection to the standard reading is that, rather than treat the story operator as a sentence-forming operator, we would do well to regard it as a predicate modifier. That is to say, in place of saying, 'according to a story (Conan Doyle's), Sherlock Holmes lived in Baker Street', we say, 'Sherlock Holmes, according to a story (Conan Doyle's), lived in Baker Street'. This has the logical structure of a simple predication of the form, '(F*a*)'. The advantage here is that it permits us to build a more consistent and plausible theory of fictional entities. Consider, for instance, the claim that Sherlock Holmes was swifter but less subtle than Hercule Poirot. On the sentence-forming reading of the story operator, there would have to be a story such that