

Advanced Reasoning Forum

Proceeding of the
2nd Annual Conference on
Logic and Reasoning

New Europe College
Bucharest, Romania
July 2000

Bulletin of Advanced Reasoning and
Knowledge
Volume 1, 2001
Edited by Richard L. Epstein

New Europe College, Bucharest

Things That Aren't There

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Introduction

Let me begin with a bunch of simple claims, all seemingly true, none very startling in its own right.

- (1) 7 is a prime number.
- (2) Loyalty is a virtue.
- (3) The proposition that snow is white is true.
- (4) The golden mountain is a golden mountain.
- (5) Sherlock Holmes lived on Baker Street.
- (6) Holmes doesn't exist.
- (7) Holmes is a much-admired fictional detective.

To see what the problem is, let the *Naïve View of Predication* be the following claim:

A sentence *a is F* is true to the extent that the object designated by *a* has the property designated by *F*, while *a is not F* is true to the extent that the object designated by *a* does not have the property designated by *F*. Similarly, *a bears [does not bear] R to b* is true to the extent that the objects designated by *a* and *b* stand [do not stand] in the relation designated by *R*; etc.

The Naïve View is a view about how to understand the truth-making underpinnings of predications. It implies (presumably correctly) that a sentence like “Bill Clinton is tall” is true to the extent that a certain individual, Bill Clinton, has the property of being tall. But it also implies, for exactly the same reasons, that “7 is a prime number” is true to the extent that a certain object, the number 7, has the property of being a prime number. Similarly, “Loyalty is a virtue” is true to the extent that a certain attribute, loyalty, has the property of being a virtue, “The proposition that snow is white is true” is true to the extent that a certain object, the proposition *that snow is white*, has the property of being true, “Sherlock Holmes doesn't exist” is true to the extent that a certain object, Sherlock Holmes, fails to have the property of existence, and so on.

But these claims about truth-conditions import reference to entities that have in one way or another often been thought problematic. (1)-(3), for example, import reference to numbers, attributes, and propositions—entities that are abstract rather than concrete, and so are rejected by nominalistically-minded

¹ I am much indebted to participants at the New Europe College conference for their very useful comments. Special thanks, as always, to my fellow ARF members, especially to Mircea and Dick (GA) for making the ARF-in-Romania experience possible.

philosophers. In rejecting such entities, nominalists are then required to do something about the offending predications. Some will be error theorists, banishing the offending terms and predications because they are infected with ontological error. Others will blame the language, seeing here an exception to the Naïve View and offering rephrasing. Some, like W. V. O. Quine, are only partly nominalist, accepting numbers on grounds of their indispensability to science, but rejecting an ontology of attributes in favour of a regimented rephrasing of the common sense language of attributes.

Most of us, however, incline to forms of moderate realism about things not in space and time, rather than Quine's grudging realism. We accept what the Naïve View tells us about ordinary predications concerning physical objects, and also accept what it tells us about number-talk and (here departing from Quine) attribute-talk. We are happy to accept that there are numbers and that their properties make mathematical sentences true or false, and that there are such things as attributes which make claims like (2) true. But even moderate realists tend to balk at some of what the Naïve View implies. As we have seen, that view not only licenses the thought that there are such things as numbers and attributes, but also that there are purely fictional objects like Hamlet and Holmes as well as mythological objects like the golden mountain, which all have properties and stand in relations to other objects—yet don't exist! Moderate realists, who like their realism in moderation, find this hard to swallow. From their point of view the Naïve View implies far too much.

But that leaves moderate realists—most of us—with the problem of how to fix the Naïve View. Should we be error theorists, and recommend that we give up talking the way we do about Holmes and the golden mountain? Or should we say that our apparent ontological commitments are *merely* apparent, that such talk can be given an innocent construal that doesn't commit us to a strange ontology of non-existent objects? Alternatively, should we bite the bullet and accept that even moderate realism hasn't gone far enough? Should we embrace non-existent objects after all, on the grounds that we encounter them in both language and thought, much as the Naïve View suggests?

What I want to do in this paper is to survey a number of options. My purpose is not to argue that one or another view is clearly right, but to show you that there are interesting and sharply conflicting solutions to the problem, each carrying a cost. There is little consensus about who is right, although my survey will certainly show which side I favour.

Meinong

No doubt (1) to (7), especially (4)-(7) will have put the reader in mind of Meinong.² Rightly so: Meinong is the supreme realist, inclined, as it seems, to let every meaningful term have an object as its denotation. He famously allowed propositions/states of affairs (objectives) into the class of objects, as well as objects like the golden mountain and the fountain of youth. He even allowed impossible objects such as the round square. Some of these objects are

² See, for example, A. Meinong, "The theory of objects".

abstractions, by their very nature not to be found in the real world of space and time, while others are (would-be) spatio-temporal in nature. Propositions, numbers, relationships, and so on, are of the former kind, and these have the potential to have a kind of abstract or ideal existence that Meinong calls subsistence. Objects like Mt. Everest and the golden mountain have the potential to have concrete existence (Meinong simply calls this “existence”). Being either abstract or concrete, objects have the potential either to subsist or to exist. But not all abstract objects subsist; states of affairs that don't obtain (e.g., *Bill Clinton's being a virgin*) do not, nor could impossible mathematical objects like the round square. And not all concrete things exist; the fountain of youth does not, nor does the golden mountain. Meinong famously claimed that such non-subsistent and non-existent objects don't have *any* form of being. That, however, seems merely a semantic choice on Meinong's part, since we can surely choose to define a new weak and general form of being that any object has simply in virtue of being an object (“O has weak being iff O is an object”).

In any case, Meinong's ontology is extreme indeed. He thought that judgments like (1)–(7) show that our thought is sometimes directed at objects like the number 7, the golden mountain, Holmes, and so on, and not just at real spatio-temporal objects like Clinton, Mt. Everest, or my favourite arm-chair. He thought that we should therefore count judgments like (1)–(7) as being true in virtue of objects that in many cases don't have concrete existence or even ideal, abstract existence. He also thought that the properties of non-existing objects can be recovered *a priori* from the way they are characterised. Thus we can tell *a priori* that the golden mountain is golden and the round square is round and square. Generalised, this becomes the claim that the object which is given as being F_1, \dots, F_n *ipso facto* has all of these properties, what Richard Routley calls the *Characterisation Postulate*.³ Meinong also thought that non-existent objects of this kind only have properties that are implied by their characterisation. Thus the golden mountain is neither higher than 10,000 feet nor lower nor the same height—even though, as a mountain, it presumably has some height or other! Oddly, therefore, non-existent objects are typically incomplete with respect to their properties. As for objects like Holmes or Hamlet, it is likely that Meinong thought their characterising properties were the ones given in the texts that produced the names.

... then along came Russell

Bertrand Russell was the main early critic of Meinong's theory, after having flirted with a Meinongian framework in his *The Principles of Mathematics* (1903). By 1904, he had changed his mind, and he launched a seminal attack on Meinong's (and his own earlier) views in his reviews of Meinong's work.⁴ His two most famous arguments against Meinong were as follows: (a) Impossible

³ Routley, *Exploring Meinong's Jungle and Beyond*.

⁴ See Russell's reviews of *Untersuchungen zur Gegenstandstheorie und Psychologie* and *Über die Stellung der Gegenstandstheorie im system der Wissenschaften* in *Mind* 14, 1905, and *Mind* 16, 1907; reprinted in D. Lackey, *Essays in Analysis*.

objects like the round square infringe the law of contradiction, since they both do and do not have some property P. Hence Meinong's theory can't be true.

(b) Meinong's theory licenses clearly unsound ontological arguments. By the Characterisation Postulate, the existent golden mountain is not only golden but also exists, which is absurd.

Although these objections have often struck analytic philosophers as devastating, Meinong himself remained largely unperturbed. He argued against (a) that the law of contradiction only holds of the actual and the possible. And he argued against (b) that the existent round square is indeed existent, but that nothing untoward follows unless we are also forced to admit—which we are not—that it actually exists. Russell himself confessed that he could not see a difference between “exists” and “is existent,” but Meinong was really buying into a larger package here, one suggested by his student Ernst Mally. According to this way out, there are both nuclear and extranuclear properties. The usual properties we use to characterise things are nuclear (red, round, being a mountain, being a detective, living on Baker St., and so on), while the properties that things have by virtue of their actual impact on the real world are extranuclear: possibility, impossibility, existence, relationships to actual things such as *being admired by Meinong*, and so on. Meinong is suggesting that the Characterisation Postulate only works in terms of nuclear predicates, and that there is a way of construing “existent,” but not “exists,” as a nuclear predicate. So Meinong thought that he could reformulate his theory to avoid the sorts of difficulties Russell talks about.⁵

The real question, of course, is whether this way of saving the theory is worth the costs: both the ideological cost—the strangeness of the nuclear/extranuclear distinction—and the ontological cost. And that rather depends on whether there is any other, better, way of accounting for our apparent ability to talk and think and make true judgments about what does not exist. To this question Russell had his own answer, given in terms of his enormously influential theory of definite descriptions.⁶

Russell's answer took a very simple form. Definite descriptions—expressions of the form “the F”—were not genuine referring terms purporting to stand for things in the world. A definite description like “the golden mountain” or “the man who won the US Presidential election in 2000” is at bottom a quantificational expression whose meaning can only be given by showing what it contributes to the meaning of an entire sentence. In particular, Russell held that “the F is G” is to be analysed as the conjunction of:

- (i) There is at least one thing which is F,
- (ii) there is at most one thing which is F,
- (iii) this thing is G.

⁵ See T. Parsons *Nonexistent Objects* for a history of the nuclear/extranuclear distinction.

⁶ Russell, “On denoting”. G. Ostertag's *Definite Descriptions: a reader* is a very good recent anthology on the theory of descriptions.

Existence statements were simpler. “The F exists” was to be analysed as the conjunction of (i) and (ii) (that is, “There is exactly one thing which is F”), so that any statement of the form “the F is G” entailed the corresponding existential statement “the F exists.”

The upshot was that Russell had a way of analysing statements like “The golden mountain is a golden mountain” or “The golden mountain does not exist” without these analyses carrying any commitment to objects. On the proposed analysis, the former simply says, falsely, that somewhere in the world there is a unique golden mountain and it is golden and a mountain, while the latter says, truly, that it is not the case that there is a unique golden mountain. The expression “the golden mountain” is no longer seen as the logical subject of these sentences, contrary to the Naïve View which sees surface grammar as a reliable guide to logical grammar and truth-conditions.

On the surface, this doesn't answer Meinong, since Meinong thought it obvious that both sentences were true. But Russell can simply respond that Meinong's intuitions, like many intuitions in philosophy, should not be taken at face value in cases where speakers may find it hard to discern fine distinctions. When Meinong claims that it is *a priori* that “The golden mountain is golden,” Russell will claim that a priority really attaches to the sentence “If it exists, the golden mountain is golden,” a close neighbour of the former. On this score, there is no reason to prefer Meinong's account to Russell's.

What about a claim like (6), that Holmes doesn't exist? I said earlier that Meinong would probably have thought Holmes was describable in terms of the descriptions given in the stories. Russell is more explicit. Any name, unless it is one that attaches directly to sense-impressions or universals, is a description. That means that “Holmes doesn't exist” is logically equivalent to a sentence like “The man called ‘Holmes’ who lived at 221B Baker St, solved such-and-such crimes, had a friend called ‘Watson’, etc., doesn't exist”, and that sentence obviously succumbs to the machinery of Russell's theory. Thus, (6) is true since there is no (unique) person in the world who meets these conditions.⁷

Sentence (5) is more difficult, since the non-existence of Holmes means that it comes out as false, contrary to our tendency to discern a sense in which it is true. But even here there is much to be said for Russell's theory. Russell might take the view that ordinary intuition again requires slight correction, that the real truth requiring analysis is “It is true in the Holmes stories that Holmes is a detective,” where “It is true in X that . . .” is a wide-scope operator (like “N believes that . . .”). This would leave us with a Russellian translation like “It is true in the Holmes stories that there is a unique man called ‘Holmes’ who . . . , and he is a detective,” which is clearly true.

Sentence (7) is far more difficult. Russell can perhaps make sense of the claim “Holmes is a fictional detective”—try “It is true in some fictional stories

⁷ Couldn't someone accidentally fit some story without the story being about him? To deal with this, Russell may need to allow an additional predicate like “is a person with whom the author of this text is acquainted” into any description abbreviating a fictional proper name.

that Holmes is a detective”—but not “Holmes is a much-admired fictional detective.” The latter resists any kind of “in the fiction” operator. It is true not because there is some kind of story in which it is true, but because real people find Holmes appealing and admirable⁸—even though Holmes is a merely fictional detective and as such doesn’t exist! And as if that is not enough, consider quantified talk about fictional and mythological objects. Just as we can quantify over the objects referred to in (1)–(3) (“There are many qualities that are considered virtues,” for example), so we can quantify over fictional characters. Consider, for example, “There are fictional characters in Charles Dickens’ novels whose dullness and ineffectualness makes them seem both pathetic and intensely likeable.”

Meinongian realism: another try

Russell’s theory of descriptions therefore faces serious difficulties when it comes to talk about the non-existent.⁹ And that might suggest a return to forms of Meinongian realism. The most fully worked out version of Meinong’s own approach is found in the neo-Meinongian theories of Richard Routley and Terence Parsons, which accepts the distinction between nuclear and extranuclear properties.¹⁰ That approach earlier struck us as quite counterintuitive. Now we are saying the costs are perhaps worth incurring, given the difficulties facing Russell’s way out.

But there is also an alternative approach, most fully defended by Ed Zalta.¹¹ Zalta denies the intelligibility of the nuclear / extranuclear distinction and suggests instead that there are two different ways in which something might be said to have a property.¹² Something S might *exemplify* a property P, or it might *encode* it. The golden mountain encodes being golden and being a mountain (it is an abstract object somehow built up out of those properties), and to that extent we can truthfully say that the golden mountain is golden and a mountain. But it does not literally *exemplify* these properties; it only exemplifies

⁸ The claim is true even if the Holmes stories themselves claim that Holmes was cranky and universally disliked; that is, it may be true that Holmes is widely admired, even if in the fiction Holmes is universally disliked.

⁹ The theory also faces other, quite different difficulties. No matter how well it deals with definite descriptions, there are important reasons to think that it doesn’t cope at all well with proper names. See especially Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity*. Although Kripke doesn’t explicitly talk about empty, e.g., fictional, names, his arguments apply to those names as well.

¹⁰ Routley, “Rehabilitating Meinong’s theory of objects” and “*Exploring Meinong’s Jungle and Beyond*,” and T. Parsons, “Nuclear and extranuclear properties, Meinong, and Leibniz”. The approaches of these two philosophers differ markedly. Routley’s later work favors a radical paraconsistent logic and accepted the idea of true contradictions, while Parsons’ logic is far more conservative.

¹¹ Zalta, *Abstract Objects and Intensional Logic and the Metaphysics of Intentionality*. See also P. van Inwagen, “Creatures of fiction” for an earlier, less developed, defence of the idea that fictional objects are abstract objects.

¹² Like the nuclear / extranuclear distinction, this distinction between ways of possessing a property is also due to Meinong’s student, Ernst Mally.

properties like being abstract (and therefore *non-golden*), being thought about by Meinong, and so on. Indeed, to the extent that it is an abstract object it does not exist. (For Zalta, as for Routley and Parsons, non-existence is a genuine property.) Similarly, Holmes is an abstract object that encodes properties such as being a detective without exemplifying them. What is true according to the Conan Doyle stories, on the other hand, is that this object Holmes *exemplifies* being a detective.

Zalta's theory has a great many theoretical advantages over its neo-Meinongian rivals. It captures our intuitive data well, and, importantly, allows us to continue using something like classical logic. The round square is round as well as non-round, not because the world contains impossibilities but because an object might encode both being round and being non-round. But nothing could ever *exemplify* both these properties, so the consistency of the natural world is not threatened. Zalta's theory also allows us to avoid some of the extremely odd features of concrete Meinongian objects of the type favoured by Routley and Parsons. In particular, Zalta's abstract objects are not incomplete. So long as it is meaningful to predicate F-ness of an abstract object X, we can truthfully say that X *exemplifies* either F-ness or its complement. What is not true is that such an object *encodes* either F-ness or its complement.

But Zalta's theory also comes at a cost. We must not forget its ontological commitments. It accepts a whole new range of objects, the objects that encode properties. Of course these are abstract, not concrete, objects, and so they might strike moderate realists as sufficiently akin to other objects they accept (propositions and properties, say) not to be threatening. But that, I think, would be a mistake. Consider Holmes again. Holmes is admired by a great many of us because of his astuteness, his strength of will, and other admirable qualities. We don't seem to be admiring an abstract encoding object, whatever that is. Our admiring seems just like the admiring we do in the case of ordinary people, except that the person in this case is fictional! That is a fundamental datum that Russell failed to capture, and that Zalta captures very poorly, despite the added luxury of a more elaborate ontology.

Meinong's appeal to assumptions

We have seen that the Meinongian program, no matter how pursued, comes at a considerable cost. We have also seen that the contrasting view of Russell has some glaring deficiencies. What is not generally appreciated is that Meinong himself was aware of a radical alternative, one he pursued for a while until he decided it was too radical to do the job by itself.¹³ The story Meinong tells is found in his important but neglected work *On Assumptions*.¹⁴

Suppose, Meinong asks, that we want to know what some object O is like. To discover O's properties it is not enough that I have a representation of O, perhaps a mental image. I must in addition apprehend or intend the object, where

¹³ See my "Was Meinong only pretending?"

¹⁴ Page references are to the English translation.

intending an object is an active mental act which makes knowledge of an object's properties possible. The account of intending Meinong provides comes in two parts. If I believe that object O has some form of being (existence or subsistence), then my intending O is the mental act of judging that O has that form of being. By thus intending O I am then able to address the question of O's properties, perhaps by a further exploitation of the perceptual representation that provided the evidence for the existential judgment, or, if O is a mathematical object, by following proofs whose validity partially rests on my recognition of O's subsistence.¹⁵ Now consider objects that we cannot intend in the way described because we do not think of them as either categorically existent or subsistent. Our lack of commitment may be due to either agnosticism on our part or otherwise positive disbelief. Thus I may say (evinced the first attitude): "The golden mountain may or may not exist," while another, a disbeliever, may say: "The golden mountain does not exist." Neither of us intends the golden mountain in the same way as someone who has a perceptual representation "as of a golden mountain" and who apprehends this object by (wrongly) making the appropriate existential judgment.

So how do we intend the difficult cases: the golden mountain, the *perpetuum mobile*, phlogiston, Hamlet? Meinong's answer, which he himself calls the *Assumption View*, is exciting and, I think, close to the truth once we reject the realist commitment to objects in terms of which the question is phrased. Under conditions of agnosticism or disbelief (so runs the answer) we intend objects, and thereby gain a degree of cognitive access to them, by fairly explicitly *assuming* that they have being. In Meinong's own crisp summing-up:

In order to give a thing some thought, a person "places himself in the situation in which there is such a thing."¹⁶

Note that someone's assuming such an existential proposition carries no implications about belief, provisional or otherwise. Indeed, Meinong thinks that assuming is a *sui generis* intellectual attitude towards objectives, different in kind from judging in large part because of such an absence of commitment. The example that perhaps most graphically bears this out is the case of assumption in the case of play-acting, drama and fiction:

The intellectual attitude of the child at play is less than judgment, but it is more than representation; which it is to say, it is an attitude of assuming.¹⁷

Similarly "fiction is just assumption."¹⁸ What Meinong means is that in play-acting, drama and fiction a certain kind of pretense takes place. Thus

The child at play "feigns" properties, situations, and so forth with regard to himself and others,¹⁹

¹⁵ Meinong, *On Assumptions*, p. 174.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

while

the dramatist will inevitably be confronted with the task of “placing” himself in not just one but, by turns, almost all the roles of the drama.²⁰

Assumption, then, is frequently pretense. We often pretend that things are thus-and-so without ever believing, even provisionally, that things are really this way. While such pretense can in a sense be entirely serious (at one point Meinong mentions war-games), in no sense are participants serious in believing the assertions that occur during the pretense—unless, of course, they forget the point of the activity. There is no delusion here, no matter how provisional,²¹ only a different kind of attitude towards assertions: a pretend attitude in which we place ourselves “in the situation in which there is such a thing.”²² Only in this way can one go beyond mere representation to a cognitive grasp of the object. That is how we get to see that the golden mountain is indeed a golden mountain, or that Holmes lived on Baker Street.

6. Pretense

Throughout his discussion, Meinong preserves talk of objects. The assuming or pretending he talks about is part of a quasi-psychological story about how we find out about certain kinds of objects. But there is an analogue of Meinong’s story that does without special objects altogether, and in my view represents one of the most exciting new ways of dealing with the problem of our talk of apparently non-existing things. The 1970s saw the (re-)emergence of the idea of pretense or make-believe, where it was put to work dealing with some difficult problems in aesthetics. One such problem was how to make sense of people’s reactions to the events depicted in movies and books: the way we recoil and scream as the Green Slime approaches Charlie in some B-grade horror-movie, for example, while knowing full well that no one can be in any danger since the Green Slime doesn’t exist.²³

In Kendall Walton’s influential development of the idea of make-believe, children as well as adults play games of make-believe on the basis of props that mandate that they imagine certain things.²⁴ Thus, a children’s game may require its participants to imagine that a certain oddly shaped stump is a bear, that actions done to the stump are acts against the bear, and so on. Another sort of game, indulged in by children as well as adults, involves reading/listening to a story or watching a movie, a game that requires its participants to imagine that certain events really happened (that there really was a famous detective called “Holmes”

²⁰ Ibid., p. 86.

²¹ Ibid., p. 83.

²² Ibid., p. 175.

²³ See K. Walton, “Fearing fictions”.

²⁴ See Walton, *Mimesis as Make-Believe* and G. Evans, *The Varieties of Reference*. For an application of the pretense view to various issues in philosophical logic, see M. Crimmins, “Hesperus and Phosphorus: sense, pretense, and reference”.

who lived on Baker Street, for example, or that there really is a green, slimy creature approaching Charlie). In Walton's terminology, something is true in a game of make-believe when it is thus mandated to be imagined. Some such claims are truths internal to the story ("Holmes knew Watson" and the like) while others involve the game-players themselves. In children's games, of course, there is often no real distinction. Truths are largely created by what the participants do.

The case of novel-reading or movie-watching is especially interesting from this point of view. Walton holds that participants create truths to the extent that they are readers or watchers. "I am reading about Holmes" is such a truth; "We are all sad about what happened to Anna Karenina" is another. Truths like the latter are created by our reactions to the events described in the novel or depicted on the screen. This provides an answer to the problem of our reaction to Charlie's plight as the Green Slime approaches. No doubt our screams and the palpitations of our hearts are real enough, but what we experience is not genuine fear for Charlie. It is only make-believe that we fear for Charlie as the Green Slime approaches. While there is a sense in which we are genuinely scared, what shows that we are not in the grip of genuine fear for Charlie is that we don't act appropriately—we don't rush towards the screen, for example, or call in the army (unless, of course, we forget that we are watching a movie).

What is important from the point of view of the larger ontological questions at issue is the anti-realism of this theory. When speakers talk about "The Green Slime," they do so from the perspective of a game of make-believe in which their use of the term "the Green Slime" refers to some creature depicted on the screen they are watching; in reality, of course, there is nothing for it to refer to. Similarly, when I remark that "Holmes is much-admired," I am speaking from the perspective of a game of make-believe in which other people are also participants, acquainted with records about a man called "Holmes" whose character and deeds occasion admiration in much the same way as we might admire historical persons for the deeds attributed to them in historical records. What I say is true from the perspective of this game.

But surely I don't simply utter a *pretend*-truth? Isn't there a sense in which what I say is in fact genuinely true? This is something that Meinongians, of course, would insist on. And this is one place where pretense theorists may well seem to be in trouble. Many of them, Walton included, are inclined to accept a direct-reference view of names, a view on which the semantic role of a name is simply to stand for its referent.²⁵ But then no sentence containing the name "Holmes" expresses a genuine proposition, since the name "Holmes" has no referent. It is only make-believe that the name has a referent, and that the sentence expresses a proposition. Walton's way out is to invoke a distinction between what is semantically expressed by a sentence and what a speaker asserts or conveys through its use. When you speak "about Holmes" from the perspective of the game of make-believe, you also implicitly assert that you have

²⁵ See Recanati, *Direct Reference: From Language to Thought* for a detailed account of the direct reference view of names and demonstratives.

said something that is true from the point of view of the game; you assert that the sentence's fictional truth-condition holds. And this reflective claim may well be genuinely true. It is in this sense genuinely true to say that "Holmes is a much admired detective."

But what about the claim that Holmes doesn't exist, for example, or that he is a fictional detective? Surely these are literal truths, truths that have nothing to do with make-believe or pretense? Pretense theorists like Walton disagree. To see what a pretense theorist might say about such a case, it is worth mentioning some little-known comments by Meinong on negative existential claims like "Phlogiston does not exist." When articulating his Assumption View, Meinong asks this:

What if someone intended something like "phlogiston", in order to make this judgment about it: that there isn't anything of that sort?²⁶

He continues that only the assumption or pretense that there is such a thing can allow us to think about it and hence make this judgment about it. He seems to think, therefore, that an utterance of the negative existential "Phlogiston does not [really] exist" must involve speakers in a shift from pretense to reality, with the sentence being true just when a certain bit of pretense indulged in by the speaker fails to match reality. The latter is presumably the case when the real world, unlike the world of the speaker's pretense, fails to contain anything deserving the name "phlogiston."

Modern pretense theorists believe something rather similar. According to Walton, for example, when we say that some objects exist (e.g., London, Denmark) and others not (e.g., Holmes and Hamlet), we are playing a new kind of game of make-believe. It is a game that contains elements not authorised by the works of fiction in question. In particular, it contains special fictional predicates such as "exists," whose rules of application—that is, the rules that tell us when it is fictionally true in the game to say something of the form "X [doesn't] exist"—are governed by facts about the real world. Simply put, "X exists" is true in this kind of unofficial game just when *genuine* or *non-pretended* attempts to refer with the term "X" (and any other terms that co-refer in the scope of the work) succeed in securing reference to something in the real world. Now consider a specific negative existential like claim (6) above ("Holmes doesn't exist"). Given what was said earlier, when a speaker utters (6), he or she implicitly asserts that the fictional truth-condition of this sentence is satisfied. To that extent, he or she implicitly asserts that genuine attempts to refer with the name "Holmes" and kindred terms *fail* to secure reference to anyone in the real world.²⁷ This latter

²⁶ Meinong, *On Assumptions*, p. 175.

²⁷ This is not the only way pretense theorists have tackled negative existentials. My preferred account holds that 'exists' is a universal predicate which literally holds of everything, and that negative existentials exploit this logic of 'exists' to convey the claim that underlying determinants of reference fail to secure reference to anything in the world. (See my "Disavowal through commitment" theories of negative existentials"; Walton, "Existence as metaphor" contains a reply to an earlier version of this idea.)

claim is indeed true, and it is this salient truth we focus on when we decide that the claim “Holmes doesn’t exist” is true. Walton tells a similar story about sentences involving the predicate “is a fictional X” (e.g., “Holmes is a fictional detective,” “There are fictional characters in Charles Dickens’ novels whose drollness and ineffectualness makes them seem both pathetic and intensely likeable,” etc.).

Where to go from here?

Earlier I said that Meinong had a kind of pretense theory—his Assumption View. But unlike the modern form of pretense theory developed by Walton and his school, Meinong’s view was combined with an unyielding commitment to an extreme form of realism. Given that Meinong came so close to a “no objects” form of pretense theory, why did Meinong not finally adopt such a theory? The reasons are instructive. In fact, the first edition of *On Assumptions* saw Meinong contemplating this move. There he had proposed that what is involved in the objectivity of representations is the fact that we merely assume or pretend to ourselves that there exists a represented object. This is what Meinong now has to say in the second edition of *On Assumptions*:

If objectivity consists in the “having” of an object, and the “had” object must be one that has being, then a representation simply does not have an object in any of the instances of fiction, and at this point one really cannot see why objectivity is still ascribed to the representation, despite its dependency on a fiction. . . . [T]hose proceeded in a more consistent fashion who flatly termed a representation like that of the golden mountain . . . objectless.

Yet even now this attitude strikes me as being completely in conflict with the facts. Just as clearly now as before, the facts tell me instead that when I think of unclouded human happiness or of the perpetual motion machine, my thoughts are directed to “something”, i.e., to an object, just as surely as if it were a matter of the most everyday piece of actuality.²⁸

Meinong here lays down the limits of the use of assumption or pretense. Contrary to a “no objects” view, Meinong now claims that pretense by itself cannot complete the goal of accounting for the full range of phenomena that seemingly involve non-existent objects.

Modern pretense theorists like Walton deny that there is such a limit. They agree with Meinong, contra Russell, that the logical form of sentences like (4)-(7) is indeed that of genuine subject-predicate sentences whose semantics fully accords with the Naïve View. What they deny is that more than a pretend-commitment to objects is needed to capture the truth of such sentences, or that more than a pretend-commitment to objects is needed to account for the feeling that our thoughts about Holmes, the perpetual motion machine or phlogiston are directed at actual objects. Like most of us, pretense theorists have little trouble with the commitments apparently required by (1)-(3) (they are mostly moderate realist about things like numbers, properties and propositions), but they think that

²⁸ p. 170.

talk of the golden mountain, phlogiston, Holmes, and so on, is of a different order altogether and is not to be understood in realist terms.

Who is right? Here I must express my allegiance to the pretense theory, while agreeing that the jury is still out. Deciding if pretense is enough will require much more research into the nature of pretense and make-believe, and will need to look at a great many different but interconnected kinds of contexts involving our thought and talk about the apparently non-existent. Perhaps in the end only a mixed theory will do, with some, but not all, such contexts succumbing to a pretense analysis. (Kripke holds a view of this kind.)²⁹ But if the pretense theory is ultimately successful, it will have achieved something rather significant. It will have shown why our talk of the non-existent is so robust (why it can't, for example, be analysed or explained away in Russellian fashion), without this requiring that there be something non-existent for us to talk about.

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²⁹ The view is presented in his 1976 John Locke Lectures (see also Evans, *The Varieties of Reference*). Kripke thinks that the truth of relational claims like "John admires Holmes" as well as the truth of a claim like "Holmes is a fictional character" require an abstract fictional object, *Holmes*. Ordinary claims about fiction ("Holmes was a detective," say) can be understood more simply in terms of the pretense that there is a concrete person, Holmes, of whom the Holmes stories are a reliable record. There are a number of other philosophers who laud Walton's introduction of the notion of pretense, but think that Walton's attempt to do without any fictional and mythological objects is doomed to failure. See, for example, Amy Thomasson, *Fiction and Metaphysics*.

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