

Theory and History of Ontology (www.ontology.co) by Raul Corazzon | e-mail: rc@ontology.co

Bibliography on the Problem of Nonexistent Objects

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all?'. In different ways they argue that the *nihilist* hypothesis that there might be just nothing can be set aside, either because it is impossible for there to be nothing (Lowe 1996: 118) or because this hypothesis is 'as improbable as anything can be' (van Inwagen 1996: 99). By contrast I shall here defend the nihilist hypothesis. The point at issue does not simply concern the metaphysics of existence. It also connects with debates concerning modal concepts. David Lewis explicitly declares 'there isn't any world where there's nothing at all. That makes it necessary that there is something' (1986: 73). The reason for this, as Lewis explains, is that because he conceives a world as a maximal mereological sum of spatiotemporally interrelated things, there cannot be an empty world, since mereology does not permit 'empty sums'. A little surprisingly, David Armstrong, whose combinatorial theory of possibility is in many respects opposed to that of Lewis, also embraces this conclusion, because 'the empty world is not a construction from our given elements (actual individuals, properties and relations)' (1989: 93). Armstrong takes this view despite the fact that his theory permits the construction of representations of 'contracted worlds' which lack actual individuals, properties and relations because he conceives of worlds as maximal states of affairs and holds that where there is nothing at all, there is no state of affairs. Thus for both Armstrong and Lewis the nihilist hypothesis is to be rejected because the conception of a possibility (or world) has sufficient substance, as a mereological sum or a state of affairs, to demand the existence of something *as a part or constituent*."

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"Following Bolzano, I suggest that there are two types of entity: those that are states of other things and those that are not. The second type includes, not only substances, in the traditional sense, but also such abstract objects as numbers, attributes and propositions. It is argued that the theory of states, when combined with an intentional account of negative attributes, will yield a theory of negative entities and of events."
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"There are genuine references to non-existent objects, as can be seen through elucidating reference in common language and applying the criteria enumerated to expressions used in writing and speaking about fiction. The concept of a fictitious entity is simply accepted in the adoption of the language-game' of fiction and has no undesirable ontological consequences. To think otherwise is to fail to attend to the conceptual status of such talk. Accounts of fictional discourse by Russell, Ryle, and Chisholm are found objectionable. The concept of existence is touched on, and consequences concerning reference to abstract and other objects and also concerning method in ontology mentioned."
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The volume contains 13 new papers concerning the semantic and metaphysical issues arising from empty names, non-existence, and the nature of fiction. The contributors include some of the most important researchers working in these fields. Some of the papers develop and defend new positions on these matters, while other papers offer some important new perspectives and criticisms of the existing approaches. The book contains a comprehensive introductory essay by the editors which provides a survey of the philosophical issues concerning empty names, the various responses to these issues, and the literature to date. The book is composed by three parts: I. Empty names; II. Pretense; III. Ontology.
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"The main philosophical question about non-existents is whether there really are any. My own view is that there are none. But even if this is granted, we may still ask what they are like, just as the materialist may consider the nature of sensations or the nominalist the nature of numbers.
On this further topic, there seem to be three main divisions of thought, which may be respectively labelled as:
(i) platonism /empiricism;
(ii) literalism /contextualism;
(iii) internalism / externalism.
Let me attempt a rough characterization of these divisions. More refined formulations will come later. On a platonic conception, the non-existent objects of fiction, perception, belief and the like do not depend for their being upon human activity or upon any empirical conditions at all; they exist, or have being, necessarily.
Under an empirical conception, on the other hand, these objects are firmly rooted in empirical reality; they exist, or have being, contingently. On an extreme conception of this sort, these objects are literally created and are brought into being by the appropriate activity either of or within the agent.
(...)

All in all, the three divisions provide for 8 ($= 2^3$) combinations of positions. Each, I think, is coherent, but some are more natural than others. For example it is natural, though not necessary, for the 'platonist' to accept internalism and for the 'empiricist' to accept externalism; for the means by which the objects are individuated will naturally be taken to provide conditions for their existence or being.

My own view on these questions is given by empiricism, contextualism and externalism, not that this is a common combination in the literature. This view will be defended in the second part of this paper. In the present part, I am concerned to discuss a view that combines internalism with contextualism and platonism; and in the third part, I shall discuss the literalist position, mainly in association with platonism and internalism. I have not attempted systematically to consider all of the possible combinations of position. I have only looked at the more prominent or plausible of the views, though what I say on them should throw light on what is to be said of the others.

The plan of the present part is as follows. In section A2, I discuss general methodological issues facing any philosophical study of nonexistents and, in particular, defend the claim that one can say what they are like without presupposing that there really are any. In section B, I try first to delineate more precisely the subjectmatter of our theories and then to describe the problems of providing identity and existence conditions with which any such theory should deal. In section C, I give an initial formulation of an internalist theory, which is successively refined in section D. Finally, in section E, I give two major criticisms of the theory as thus developed. A more detailed account of each section is given in the list of contents.

It is of the greatest importance to note that the present part does not contain my own views on the subject. It is only in the last section of this part that the internalist position is criticized, and it is only in the second part of this paper that my own, more positive, views are developed." (pp. 97-99)

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Review of: Terence Parsons, *Nonexistent Objects*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980.

"There has recently been a rebellion within the ranks of analytic philosophy. It has come to be appreciated that, in the debate between Russell and Meinong, Russell was perhaps mistaken in his criticisms and Meinong was perhaps correct in his views. As a consequence, an attempt was made to rehabilitate the Meinongian position, to defend it against the most obvious attacks and to develop it in the most plausible ways. T. Parsons was among the first of the contemporary philosophers to make this attempt, (1) and so it is especially appropriate that his views should now be set out in a book.

I should say, at the outset, that I thoroughly approve of the Meinongian project. As Parsons makes clear (pp. 32— 38), we refer to non-existents in much the same way as we refer to other objects. It is therefore incumbent upon the philosopher to work out the principles by which our discourse concerning such objects is governed. Not that this is necessarily to endorse a realist position towards the objects of the resulting theory. Nominalists and Platonists alike may attempt to set out the principles that govern arithmetical discourse; and it is in the same spirit that the realist or anti-realist may attempt to set out the principles of our fictional discourse. Despite my approval of the project, I must admit to some misgivings as to how Parsons has carried it out. These misgivings are of two kinds. There are first some internal criticisms, requiring only change within Parsons' basic approach. There are then some external criticisms, requiring change to the basic approach.

These criticisms, though, should not be thought to detract from the merits of Parsons' book. It is, in many ways, an admirable contribution to the field.

It gives weight both to the interest and the legitimacy of the Meinongian enterprise; it pinpoints the difficulties which any satisfactory theory must deal with; and in its

solution to those difficulties, it sets up a theory with a degree of rigour and systematicity that should serve as a model for years to come. As a well worked-out and accessible contribution to object theory, there is no better book." (pp. 95-96)

(1) Others include Castafieda [1], Rapaport [7], Routley [8] and Zalta [9].

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Abstract: "Many who think that some abstracta are artefacts are fictional creationists, asserting that fictional characters are brought about by our activities. Kripke (1973), Salmon (1998, 2002), and Braun (2005) further embrace mythical creationism, claiming that certain entities that figure in false theories, such as phlogiston or Vulcan, are likewise abstracta produced by our intentional activities. I here argue that one may not reasonably take the metaphysical route travelled by the mythical creationist. Even if one holds that fictional characters are artefact one ought not further hold that mythical objects are, too."
43. ———. 2017. "On Inadvertently Created Abstracta, Fictional Storytelling, and Scientific Hypothesizing." *Res Philosophica* no. 94 (1):177-188.
Abstract: In my "Creatures of Fiction, Objects of Myth" (2014), I present and defend an argument for thinking that mythical creationism—the view that mythical objects like phlogiston and Vulcan are abstract artifacts—is false. One intriguing sort of objection to my argument has been recently put forth by Zvolenszky (2016); she claims that a crucial premise is seen to be unjustified once one considers the phenomena of inadvertently created abstracta—specifically, inadvertently created fictional characters. I argue here that even if we admit inadvertently created abstracta into our ontology, my argument survives. I ultimately defend a view on which fictional characters (if real) may be countenanced as created abstracta whether purposefully created or not, yet mythical objects are best taken to be discoverable, Platonic abstracta (if real). We can see that such a hybrid ontology is justified once we take proper note of the nature of the sorts of authorial activities involved in fictional storytelling and scientific hypothesizing."
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"Some years ago, I published an article about Meinong's theory of objects. (1) I listed there four main theses of Meinong's view:
(1) The golden mountain (and other nonexistents) has no being at all.
(2) Nevertheless, it is a constituent of the fact that the golden mountain does not exist.
(3) Furthermore, it has such ordinary properties as being made from gold.
(4) Existence is not a constituent of any object."

And I argued in that paper that only thesis (1) is true. In particular, I insisted that (3), which I consider to be the most characteristic feature of Meinong's view, is false.

Since then, there have been quite a few discussions of Meinong's view. I would like, in response to some of these works, to reiterate my earlier criticism of Meinong. My purpose is threefold. Firstly, I would like to state once more my own view, which is a version of Russell's theory of definite descriptions, as clearly as possible.

Secondly, I shall defend my past contention that the golden mountain is not golden against some recent objections. And thirdly and most importantly, I want to describe the dialectic of the philosophical problem as I perceive it. It seems to me to be an exasperating shortcoming of the discussion that most participants do not clearly state the basic options and their reasons for preferring some to others."

(1) Meinong's Doctrine of the *Aussersein* of the Pure Object', *Noûs*, 8 (1974, pp. 67-81. See also my *Meinong* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1974).

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Abstract: "Terence Parsons has recently given a consistent formalization of Meinong's Theory of Objects. The interest in this theory lies in its postulation of nonexistent objects. An important implication of the theory is that we commonly refer to nonexistent objects. In particular, the theory is committed to taking fictional entities as objects of reference. Yet it is difficult to see how reference to fictional entities can be established if Parsons' theory is correct. This difficulty diminishes the attractiveness of the theory and also raises questions as to the ability of the theory to give a satisfactory account of intentional attitudes towards fictional entities."
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 "What follows is not an historical exercise. The basic concern is neither with Meinong's nor his disciples' and advocates' reasons for thinking the theory of nonexistent objects (= nonsubsistent objects in Meinong's sense of the word 'nonsubsistent') important. Instead I shall try to set aside preexisting reasons — there are lots of these — on behalf of the importance of the theory of nonexistent objects, and adduce a couple of unbiased reasons — what Hugues Leblanc sceptically calls "excuses" — aimed at vindicating the development of theories of such objects. It will not follow from this discussion that one must believe in nonexistent objects anymore than one must believe in ideal objects important as the latter are (in the minds of many) to the interpretation of the theory of classical mechanics.
 The reasons on behalf of the importance of the theory of nonexistent objects to be advanced are not mutually exclusive, the first having to do with utility or applications of the theory of nonexistent objects, and the second with the smoothness of essentially classical logical theory with identity." (p. 439)
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 Abstract: "In Thomistic metaphysics, the domain of ens rationis pertains to a hazy region of "non-real" being, laying outside of the proper scientific subject of metaphysics. In addition to negations and privations, a very important domain of

- entia rationis pertains to that of relationes rationis, especially such relationes as play a role in human reasoning. Logic, studying these “non-real” relations, thus focuses on a unique, if hazy, realm of “non-being.” While this particular type of ens rationis receives the lion’s share of attention among Thomists, there is evidence that similar reflection should be given to two additional domains of experience, namely that of “moral being” and “artificial being” (i.e., the being of artifacts). This paper lays out the general metaphysical concerns pertaining to each of these domains, providing an outline of topics pertinent to a Thomistic discussion of the intentional existence involved in logic, moral realities, and artifacts."
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Abstract: "Towards Non-Being gives a noneist account of the reference of words which do not refer to existent objects—in the context, in particular, of intentional states. The account is a realist one, in the sense that the domain of objects is the same at each world, and so does not depend on the behaviour of objects which exist there. In this paper, I discuss an anti-realist version of the theory. What non-existent objects are available at a world supervenes on the behaviour of the existent—and, particularly, sentient—beings at that world. An appropriate formal semantics is given; and its philosophical ramifications—notably, with respect to the naming of non-existent objects— are explored."
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 "It is my contention (which I shall try to defend in what follows) that the text of the dialogue contains thoughts and ideas that closely correspond to those characteristic of modern logical semantics. The difficulties which Plato is coping with and the solutions proposed by him find their explicit counterparts in the discussions of contemporary logicians and semanticists.
 This statement, however, needs some qualification. The text of the dialogue is comprehensive and indefinite enough to allow for different readings and interpretations. It is only some interpretation of some of its fragments that may be said to yield that version of its problems which is suggested below. I would, however, contend that the interpretation advanced is a warranted one and the fragments so interpreted essential for the author's standpoint. One more point should be explicitly stated beforehand. Referring to what I call modern logical semantics, I mean by this a definite semantic theory: model theoretic semantics in its standard version, which might be regarded as a "classical" form of contemporary logical semantics. Some deviations from this use will be indicated in what follows. The most important philosophical content of the dialogue is contained in its second part (esp. in the paragraphs 237-264). The main problem concerns the semantic characteristic of falsehood and, involved in it, notion of not-being." (p. 123)
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 "This essay examines the role of non-existent objects in "epistemological ontology" - the study of the entities that make thinking possible. An earlier revision of Meinong's Theory of Objects is reviewed, Meinong's notions of Quasisein and Aussersein are discussed, and a theory of Meinongian objects as "combinatorially possible" entities is presented."
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 Abstract: "An account of non-existing objects called 'classical possibilism', according to which objects that don't actually exist do exist in various other ways, is implemented in a two-dimensional modal logic with non-traditional predication theory. This account is very similar to Priest's, but preserves bivalence and does not endorse dialethism. The power of classical possibilism is illustrated by giving some examples that makes use of a description theory of reference. However, the same effect could also be achieved in a more Millian fashion. It is argued that classical possibilism is ontologically more neutral than is commonly thought, because it allows for the formulation of various forms of reductionism within the object language."
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Abstract: "Alexius Meinong advocated a bold new theory of nonexistent objects, where we could gain knowledge and assert true claims of things that did not exist. While the theory has merit in interpreting sentences and solving puzzles, it unfortunately paves the way for contradictions. As Bertrand Russell argued, impossible objects, such as the round square, would have conflicting properties. Meinong and his proponents had a solution to that charge, posing genuine and non-genuine versions of the Law of Non-Contradiction. No doubt, they had a clever response, but it may not adequately address Russell's concern. Moreover, as I argue, genuine contradictions are inherent to the set of all nonexistent objects. And such contradictions lead to even further absurdities, for example, that nonexistent objects have and lack every property. Unfortunately, such implications of the theory make it too treacherous to adopt."
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"Non-existence provides big problems for ontology and modest for logic. Logical problems of non-existence consist in licensing inferences in which sentences with empty terms are involved. The standard predicate logic solves this question by

presupposing that every individual constant has an object to which it refers. This means that empty domains are excluded from semantics for the first-order logic. However, there is a temptation to consider logic without existential presuppositions. The ontological problem of non-existence leads to the question of the meaning of 'nothing'. We encounter "various conceptions of nothing" in the history of philosophy from Parmenides to our times. However, nothing (or nothingness) is always a negation of being.

Since we have distributive and collective (mereological) concepts of being, we also should distinguish nothing in the distributive and mereological meaning. This difference is important because only the former leads to the paradox of nothing of all nothings, analogical to the paradox of all sets. A closer analysis of the nothing in the distributive sense shows that any meaningful talk about non-existence requires a relativisation to a fixed domain of discourse. This seems to entail that the empty set is the formal model of nothing what means that the concept of absolute nothing in the distributive sense is simply inconsistent. To some extent, being and nothing are mutually dual. This motivates that the concept of nothing is governed by so-called dual logic connected with processes of rejection. More specifically, statements on "nothing" are not asserted but rejected."

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 "The authors develop precise statements of the conditions under which there are nonexistent objects and of the conditions under which any two such objects are identical. Essentially, for any describable condition on properties, there is a nonexistent object which includes (but doesn't necessarily exemplify) just the properties satisfying the condition. The logic of inclusion is developed in detail. It is shown how these nonexistent objects can serve as the denotations of the names of fictional characters."
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 Abstract: "My goal is to reflect on the phenomenon of inadvertent creation and argue that—various objections to the contrary—it doesn't undermine the view that fictional characters are abstract artifacts. My starting point is a recent challenge by Jeffrey Goodman that is originally posed for those who hold that fictional characters and mythical objects alike are abstract artifacts. The challenge: if we think that astronomers like Le Verrier, in mistakenly hypothesizing the planet Vulcan, inadvertently created an abstract artifact, then the "inadvertent creation" element turns out to be inescapable yet theoretically unattractive. Based on considerations about actually existing concrete objects featured in fictional works (as Napoleon is in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*), I argue that independently of one's stand on mythical objects, admitting fictional characters as abstract artifacts is enough to give rise to the challenge at hand; yet this very point serves to undermine the challenge, indicating that inadvertent creation is not nearly as worrisome as Goodman suggests. Indeed, the inadvertent creation phenomenon's generality extends far beyond objects of fiction and myth, and I will use this observation to counter a further objection. Taking fictional characters (and mythical objects) to be abstract artifacts therefore remains a viable option."

