*The Existential Import of Singular and General Propositions*

Goettingen, August 31, 2023

**Varieties of Non-Existents and Modes of Non-Being**

Friederike Moltmann

CNRS, Université Côte d’Azur

**1. Introduction**

The approach

Natural language ontology, a branch of metaphysics, that is, descriptive metaphysics

Descriptive metaphysics has as its subject matter the ontology reflected in our metaphysical intuitions (rather than the ontology of what there ultimately is).

Natural language ontology is desciptive metaphysics that gives priority to intuitions reflected in natural language.

Plan

1. Standard data regarding existence / nonexistence

2. Conclusions from the linguistic data

- ‘Nonexistent objects are needed as semantic values of NPs

- Non-existents as semantic values do not come for free, but require constitutive conditions.

- Difference between intentional objects and fictional objects

- No univocal notion of existence, but different modes of being

3. New data regarding existence – nonexistence

- Existence predicates of for planned events: *take place*

- The difference between planned events and plans

- Obtaining and validity as ways of existing

4. Conclusions

Natural language reflects not only a non-univocal notion of existence (different modes of being), but also a non-univocal notion of nonexistence (different kinds of non-being)

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**2. Methodology**

Descriptive metaphysics:

metaphysics that gives priority to metaphysical intuitions

Natural language ontology:

descriptive metaphysics that focuses on intuitions reflected in natural language

Ontology goes along with compositional semantics.

The ontology of appearances vs. the ontology of what there ultimately / fundamentally is.

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**3. Standard cases of non-existents**

Fact:

Reference and quantification in natural language is neutral as regards existence / non-existence (unless particular restriction is intended).

Standard cases of non-existent objects

(1) The golden mountain / Pegasus does not exist.

(2) a. The building that is described in the guide does not exst.

b. The women John mentioned does not exist.

(3) a. The house John is imagining does not exist.

b. The house John is imagining and in which Bill lives exists.

(4) The e [that building e is described in the guide] does not exist.

[1] Objects of reference, description, mentioning

[2] Objects of imagination, conceiving, thinking about

Objects of quasi-referential acts

unsuccessful or pretend referential mental or linguistic acts

Nonexistent objects (in standard examples) act as semantic values *only in virtue of* unsuccessful or pretend acts of reference

Nonexistent objects as semantic values of NPs do not come for free:

they require the description of a quasi-referential act in the sentence, or at least an implicit reference to such an act.

Nonexistent objects act as semantic values and are needed for the compositional semantics of sentences with intentional verbs (*imagine, conceive, think about, refer to, mention, intend*),

Not every non-referring description ‘generates’ a nonexistent object:

(5) a. ?? The church in the village does not exist.

b. The church *mentioned* in the guide does not exist.

(6) a. ?? There is a house that does not exist.

b. There is a house John *described* that does not exist.

Implicit reference to a referential act in subject position

implicit reference to a quasireferential chain:

(7) ??? The blue apples in this room do not exist

(8) [The golden mountain / Pegasus]i does not exist.

Relation between quasi-referential acts and non-existent objects

Not a causal relation, but a generative relation of ‘ontological’ dependence (Irmak 2021)

‘Nonexistent objects’ as entities ‘generated by’ unsuccessful or pretend referential (mental or linguistic) acts (or states)

The difference between nonexistent objects (intentional objects) and (existing) fictional characters

(9) a. The *fictional character* Hamlet exists.

b. Hamlet does not exist.

c. The *fictional horse* Pegasus does not exist.

d. The myth of Pegasus exists.

Nonexistent objects as entities generated by quasireferential acts

[1] *Intentional objects*:generated by quasireferential referential acts (or better by chains of *coordinated* quasi-referential acts, cf. Fine 2007).

[2] *Fictional characters:* ‘existent’ entities that are the *intended products* of pretend acts of reference, generated also by the intention to produce a story.

Fictional characters exist *as part of* a story.

Two sorts of ontological dependences

[1] Quasi-referential acts (involving attributions of properties)

[2] Mental state of intending a fictional character / story

Dependence on 1: intentional object

Dependence on 1 and 2: fictional character.

This means that a piece of fiction about a single entity generates two sorts of objects, one of which has the status of ‘nonexistent’.

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**2. Existence and modes of being**

Fact

Natural language does not reflect a univocal notion of existence, but rather different modes of being, with different kinds of existence predicates.

Existence predicates: *exist, occur, happen, take place, obtain, be valid.*

The distinction between *exist* and *occur/happen* reflects the way entities relate to space and time:

*Exist* vs. *happen* / *occur* / *take place*:

(10) a. The building / Tree / Novel / Opera exists.

b. The riot occurred / happened / ??? existed yesterday.

c. ??? The rain still exists.

(11) a. For an entity d and a temporal or spatial location t, exist(d, t) iff d is *completely*

*present* throughout t.

b. For a time t, occur(d, t) iff d extends over t

*Take place* vs. *occur, happen*:

(12) a. The demonstration took place yesterday.

b. The demonstration happened / occurred yesterday.

(13) a. The attack to place / happened / occurred yesterday.

b. The meeting took place / ?? occurred / happened yesterday.

(14) a. The meeting did not take place

b. ??? The rain / the tempest did not take place.

Precondition for an event to ‘take pace’:

needs to have been planned, perhaps coordinated with others.

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**3. Nonexistent objects vs corresponding artifacts**

Plans vs planned events

Events seem to easily have the status of abstract artifacts: plans, projects, organized future events.

As such they permit the application of *exist*:

(15) a. The plan (of our trip) exists.

b. The project (of a major demonstration) exists.

The same for material artifacts

(16) a. The project (of a new building) already exists.

b. The plan of a future construction exists.

Musical works

Musical works as abstract artifact vs concrete performances.

(17) a. The opera exists, but it has never been performed.

b. The performance of the opera ??? existed / ok took place yesterday.

Plans contrast with event descriptions in the scope of the intentional verb *plan*

(18) a. The planned demonstration took place today.

b. ? The planned demonstration existed already yesterday.

Differences of plans w. r. t. planned events

1. Existence without realization

2. Take the predicate *exist* even if the realizations are events.

What are plans?

abstract artifacts produced by intentional acts (‘attitudinal objects’)

They have the existence conditions of artifacts.

In addition, they have satisfaction or realization conditions:

Plans are realized by actions or material objects.

Plans and fictional characters

Intuition: fictional characters exists just in case the fiction exists.

Fictions are abstract artifacts, just like plans.

Fictional characters are *parts of* fictions.

Correlations

Plans – fictional characters

Planned events – fictional horses

Potential puzzle

*Exist* is the existence predicates for ‘eventive’ plans and projects, even though *exist* is inapplicable to events.

Explanation: plans and projects as abstract artifacts are completely present throughout a time, just like abstract objects in general.

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**4. Validity as a mode of being**

German *bestehen* ‘obtain’

Attitudinal objects

(19) a. Es besteht die Hoffnung, dass es regen werde.

‘There is the hope that it will rain.’

b. Die Hoffnung besteht, dass es regnen werde.

‘The hope exists that it will rain.’

(20) a. Es besteht die Annahme, dass S.

It obtains the assumption that S.

b. Die Annahme besteht, dass S.

The assumption obtains that S.

Modal objects

(14) a. Die Moeglichkeit besteht, dass Hans gewaehlt wird.

‘The possibility exists that John will be elected.

b. Das Angebot besteht, die Villa zu mieten.

‘The offer exists to rent the villa.’

Laws, habits, and rules

(15) a. Das Gesetz besteht, dass S

‘The law obtains that S.’

b. Hier besteht die Gewohnheit, dass man morgens Kaffee trinkt.

here obtains the habit that one drinks coffee in the morning

Validity as the mode of being conveyed by *obtain*.

*Is valid* and *obtain* in English:

(16) a. Her claim is still valid.

b. The law is valid / obtains.

c. The offer / invitation is still valid.

*Obtain* and *bestehen* are applicable to other propositional objects:

Facts, states, states of affairs

Not all attitudinal objects can have validity (in the relevant sense)

Not result-like objects: judgments, conclusions

Not descriptive objects: remarks, observations

(17) a. ?? The judgment is valid.

b. ?? Joe’s remark is valid / obtains.

Only attitudinal and modal objects whose production involves a *declarative speech act*

Validity vs. existence

Apparent equivalence

(18) a. The law still exists.

b. The law still obtains

c. The law is still valid.

Statements of existence and validity are not always equivalent.

Existence concerns ‘all’ levels, not so validity:

(19) a. John’s thesis / claim is no longer valid. (locutionary act is still ‘around)

b. ? John’s thesis / claim no longer exists.

Different presuppositions when existence predicate is not time-relative

(20) a. The rule that S is invalid.

b. The rule that S does not exist.

(20b) presupposes attempted act of reference to the rule, but not (20a).

(20a) presupposes statement of the rule with unsuccessful declaration of its validity

e.g. successful *locutionary act* (in Austin’s sense), but not illocutionary act.

Validity for artifacts that have a material base

Invitations:

(21) a. The invitation was sent out.

b. The invitation is no longer valid.

c. ? The invitation no longer exists.

Coins, stamps:

(22) a. The coin is no longer valid.

b. ??? The coin no longer exist.

(23) a. The stamp is no longer valid.

b. ??? The stamp no longer exists.

Coins and stamps can exist without being valid, unlike unwritten laws, rules, invitations.

What determines the lifespan of abstract artifacts like rules and laws?

Intended validity.

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**5. Conclusions**

‘Nonexistent-objects’ as semantic values require constitutive conditions being in place.

Different constitutive conditions for different types of non-existents

[1] Standard cases:

Require quasi-referential acts.

[2] Planned events (which ‘take place’):

Require coordinated plans (or alike)

[3] Laws, rules etc (objects that can be valid or obtain)

Require locutionary objects: entertainings, saying, proposals

Upshot:

Not only existence as reflected in natural language divides into different modes of being, but also non-existence divides into different modes of non-being.

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