

書評 (Book Review)

A Review of Tim Crane's *The Objects of Thought*

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The Objects of Thought

Tim Crane

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182pp.

The Objects of Thought has an ambitious goal: to give an account of the non-existent. How is it possible to think about what does not exist? How to make sense of the truth and falsehood of thoughts about the non-existent? Crane's book addresses these questions and aims to provide a reductionist solution that is phenomenologically adequate. According to Crane, the proposed answer is reductionist because there are genuine truths about the non-existent, yet they are explained in terms of truths about the existent; the framework is said to be phenomenologically adequate, because an adequate understanding of the mind must do justice to the fact that representing the non-existent is a pervasive feature of our thought, and that intentionality, thought's representational power, does not discriminate between the existent and the non-existent.

Crane takes himself to be a defender of the following "truisms": (i)

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whenever one thinks, there is something one thinks about; (ii) some of the things one thinks about exist, some do not; (iii) there are genuine truths and falsehoods about the non-existent things one thinks about; (iv) the reality contains only what exists. However, each of these claims taken by itself, as well as taken all together, is not uncontroversial. Their justification is thus no simple task. At the heart of the project is a general theory of the structure of thought and the nature of intentionality: the view of intentionality developed must be applicable to both the existent and the non-existent; on top of that, it needs to explain how thought and talk about the non-existent can be true, without falling into the murky depth of metaphysics. It involves making a number of fine-grained distinctions, including the difference between aboutness and reference, the descriptive and the revisionary conceptions of language, the logical and the metaphysical approaches to the truth of the non-existent, and the contrast between substantial and pleonastic properties and relations, among many others.

The book consists of six chapters and is cleverly divided into two parts—Objects and Thought. The first three chapters outline Crane's ontological framework, according to which ontological commitment is to be separated from quantification, because quantification over the non-existent is ubiquitous, intelligible, and truth-evaluable. Crane distinguishes himself from those that adopt the negative free logic (Burge, 1974; Sainsbury, 2005) and the noneists (Routley, 1980; Priest, 2005); he protests that the former admits too few truths regarding the non-existent, the latter too many. Crane's own stance is a middle path. He differentiates between two types of properties—the existence-entailing substantial properties and the representation-dependent pleonastic properties—and holds that non-existent objects of thought have

the pleonastic properties only.¹ Having so delineated the nature of existence and non-existence, Crane is in a position to account for the truth or falsehood of our thoughts about the non-existent.

In the next three chapters, Crane presents his theory of thought. He names the basic elements of the theory of intentionality, which include intentional modes, contents, and objects; he also argues that not all intentional states are propositional: some are relations to existing objects, while others are non-relational yet object-directed (that is, directing towards non-existent objects). Based on this account of intentionality, Crane contends that truths about non-existents are not to be translated or paraphrased; instead, they are to be explained in terms of truths about what exists. Because some of such truths are truth about psychological states, this view is both reductionist and psychologistic. Finally, Crane takes up thoughts about specific things, including thoughts about one particular object and those about pluralities of objects. He offers an alternative account of specific thought, not in terms of acquaintance (in either the epistemological or metaphysical sense), but in terms of the cognitive role of the thought. Crane explains also how there can be specific thoughts about non-existent objects, and how to understand claims of identity about them.

The Objects of Thought tackles an ancient problem with clarity. A variety of wide-ranging issues are elegantly weaved together and mapped onto the framework of Crane's psychologistic concept of the mind. I am extremely sympathetic to Crane's overall objective and find many of his arguments illuminating. Indeed, one can think about things that do not exist. Sometimes this happens intentionally, but sometimes not. For instance, Conan Doyle created Sherlock Holmes, arguably the most famous detective whose story

¹ Crane cautiously notes, "with the exception of the property of being non-existent, and logical properties like self-identity, if they have these at all" (Crane, 2013: 69). I will discuss these in more detail later.

fascinates readers to this day. Urbain Le Verrier postulated the existence of Vulcan, using exactly the same method that correctly predicts the existence of Neptune. Doyle's thinking about Holmes is elaborate and by no means an error; but Le Verrier's thought about Vulcan, despite good faith, is a mistake. In anyway, thinking about the non-existent is ubiquitous and shares many general features with our thoughts about the existent.

Crane's explanation of the truths and falsehoods about the non-existent also has some intuitive appeal:

- (1) Vulcan does not exist. (True)
- (2) Vulcan is a planet. (False)
- (3) Sherlock Holmes is detective. (False)
- (4) Le Verrier is thinking about Vulcan. (True)
- (5) Sherlock Holmes is a fictional detective. (True)

Since Vulcan does not exist, the negative existential (1) is true. (2) is false because planets have “substantial” or “existence-entailing” properties, that is, planets occupy space and time. Vulcan obviously does not occupy space or time, so Vulcan is not a planet. Similarly, the predication in (3) is false because Sherlock Holmes does not have any substantial properties. This analysis has the advantage over the Meinongians who claim that even “the golden mountain is golden” is true, in some sense. To explain the truth of (4) and (5), Crane appeals to what he calls “pleonastic” or “representation-dependent” properties (McGinn, 2002)—properties “which depend upon the fact that the object is being represented in some way: in thought, language, pictures and so on. [...] [B]eing a fictional detective is a representation-dependent property, since it depends on there being a fiction in which something is represented as a detective” (Crane, 2013: 68). Nevertheless, Crane maintains that there is no systematic account of the

truths of the non-existent. As the non-existent is not a homogeneous category, there can be only piecemeal explanations, worked out on a case-by-case basis.

My first worry with Crane's analysis concerns the "substantial vs. pleonastic" distinction. It strikes me that pleonastic properties are also existence-entailing. To begin, it seems fair to say that a pleonastic property, such as being a fictional detective, being famous, and so on, is a property of a representation. So, at the very least, a pleonastic property entails or presupposes the existence of representations. What's more, as Montague (2015) puts it, if "representation-dependent properties exist because they are properties of representations, and representations exist, then non-existent objects have existent properties." (Montague 2015: 337) When something has an existent property, it is only natural that it exists. The unexpected, paradoxical conclusion to draw is that a non-existent object, because it has representation-dependent properties, cannot be non-existent. Simply said, the contrast between substantial and pleonastic properties is not very substantive, if not self-defeating.

Here is a potential response: pleonastic properties are representation-dependent and thus entail the existence of representations; representations are, however, *mind-dependent*. In contrast, the existence of the sort of things that can have substantial properties, such as being a planet and being a detective, are *mind-independent*. So, although pleonastic and substantial properties are both existence-entailing, the kinds of existence they entail respectively are qualitatively different. My objection at this point is that such thinking easily leads to the Meinongian line—differentiating types of being or existence—that Crane tries hard to avoid. Therefore, the dilemma is that one either sticks with the "substantial vs. pleonastic" dichotomy, which leads to a contradiction, or takes the Meinongian path and embraces "exotic objects" (Sainsbury, 2010).

The second problem I have has to do with the criteria of phenomenological

adequacy. The phenomenological constraint—that intentionality must be taken at face value, that we must be as faithful as possible to what intentional objects appear to us—is one of the two major constraints (the other being reductionism) that Crane imposes on any acceptable solution to the problem of non-existence. He complains that the relational view of intentionality, which holds that thinking about something always involves standing in a relation to it, is “phenomenologically speaking, quite unrealistic” (Crane, 2013: 12). This is so because relations hold between existent things only, and if the relational view is correct, we can never have thoughts about the non-existent.² Yet it is not so clear to me that Crane’s theory is decisively superior. Consider Le Verrier’s thoughts about Vulcan. He is thinking of it as a planet, not as a postulated one; all the properties that Le Verrier associates with Vulcan are substantial properties, not some representation-dependent ones. Of course, just as our thoughts about the world are often incorrect, we sometimes make mistakes about our own thoughts. However, according to Crane, Le Verrier is massively erroneous about his own mental life. This also seems “phenomenologically incredible” (Crane, 2013: 11).

To put the matter in sharper focus, let’s examine, say, Le Verrier’s thoughts about Vulcan and mine. For Le Verrier, Vulcan is a planet and has all the real, substantial properties. For me, Vulcan is a postulated planet, and all properties it has are representation-dependent. The question is, are we thinking about the same thing?

The answer is tricky. On the one hand, Crane believes that one can have thoughts about specific non-existent objects and sketches a general mechanism of such thoughts in terms of the “mental files” metaphor (Recanati, 2012). On the other hand, he declares that “no identity without an entity” (Crane, 2013: 162): because the reality consists in only what exists,

² Crane takes *reference* to be a real relation. So a thought can be *about* Vulcan, yet fails to *refer*.

talks about non-existent objects being “the same” are not claims about identity, but really claims about similarity in representation. In other words, when we say people are thinking about the same non-existent objects, we are not talking about identity, just resemblance of properties. Be that as it may, the worry is that this reductionist explanation does not work in Crane’s advantage. Recall that in Crane’s theory, substantial and pleonastic properties are supposed to be fundamentally different, so Le Verrier’s mental representation of Vulcan and my mental representation of Vulcan must differ drastically in contents. Granted that similarity of representation is the guide of sameness, the two of us can never be thinking about the same non-existent object.

Here are a few more minor problems. First, I agree with Crane that in cases of identity statement regarding existent objects, the truth-maker of such statements is the existence of the objects in question. However, representations exist and are part of the reality. Why can’t they be the truth-maker of the identity statements regarding the non-existent? Second, Crane’s interpretation of the Geach’s (1967) Hob-Nob story strikes me curious. As Geach himself makes explicit, Hob and Nob need not have any particular witch in mind when they entertain their respective thoughts; nevertheless, their thoughts are purported to have a common focus. It is precisely this combination of an indefinite thought with an air of specificity, i.e. the “common focus,” that renders the Hob-Nob sentence so puzzling. Third, Crane speaks of “mere intentional identity” (Crane, 2013: 164) as if it is to be contrasted with real identity. But this contrast is misleading. As Geach himself makes clear, intentional identity is not limited to the non-existent. In other words, what’s really at issue with the problem of intentional identity is not metaphysics, but the coordination of thoughts and attitudes.³

³ This is evident in Geach’s own characterization of the phenomena—“We have intentional identity when a number of people, or one person on different occasions, have attitudes with a

To conclude, the problem of non-existence is not an easy question and it permits no simple solution. Crane offers a sophisticated view, yet I remain skeptical that it is the final answer. However, there is no doubt that *The Objects of Thought* is a major contribution to the debate. The book is lucid, engaging, and extremely rich in content. It has a lot to offer to anyone interested in exploring the terrain of non-existence and intentionality.

common focus, *whether or not there actually is something at that focus.*” (Geach, 1967: 627; my emphasis)

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