

Whose Existence? A Deflationist Compromise to the Fregean/Neo-Meinongian Divide

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Abstract

The dispute between the Fregean and the Neo-Meinongian approach to existence has become entrenched: it seems that nothing but intuitions may be relied upon to decide the issue. And since contemporary analytic philosophers clearly are inclined towards the intuitions that support Frege's approach, it looks as if Fregeanism has won the day. In this paper, however, I try to develop a compromise solution. This compromise consists in abandoning the assumption shared by both Fregeanism and Neo-Meinongianism, namely that the notion of existence adds something to the content of a statement. To the contrary, we should think of existence as a redundant notion. In other words, I will argue that we should be deflationist about existence. Moreover, the kind of deflationism I propose relies on what I call the existence equivalence schema, a schema which follows the blueprint of the well-known truth equivalence schema. From such a perspective, we can say that Fregean philosophers rightly deny the status of a discriminating property to existence; and, conversely, Neo-Meinongians, too, rightly reject the view that existence is captured by quantification or expresses a universal property of objects. Finally, the argument that we should take a deflationist approach to existence builds upon an analysis of natural language (general) existential statements and their intuitive entailment-relations.

Keywords: Existence, Frege, Meinong, Deflationism

1. Introduction

There are few problems in philosophy on the solution of which there seems to be an overwhelming consensus. One of these exceptions is the interpretation of the notion of existence:¹ within contemporary (one should perhaps add analytic)

¹ In their statistical survey about what philosophers believe, Bourget & Chalmers (2014) draw attention to other, sometimes surprising, exceptions. Regrettably, however, they have not included in their survey the problem of existence. But they do record a consen-

philosophy, almost everyone seems to follow Frege's approach. Existence, according to this view, is essentially captured by particular, so called 'existential' quantification. Or, in other words, existence expresses the second-order property of a concept, namely that it has at least one instance. Or, again in different words, existence expresses a universal property, co-extensive with the property of being self-identical.² As Quine remarked, the appropriate answer to the question as to what exists should be adamant: everything.

This does not mean that there is no alternative to the Fregean approach: the consensus is overwhelming but not universal. What I have in mind is the infamous Meinongian or, more precisely, Neo-Meinongian view of existence. According to authors who follow this heterodox tradition, such as Routley (1980), Parsons (1980), and Jacquette (1996), existence should be deemed an almost ordinary property of objects: the set of objects may be divided in two classes, those that exist and those that do not.³

The problem with both approaches is that neither has an argument to back up its crucial presupposition. To wit, they have no argument to explain why 'something is such and such' should be equivalent to 'there is something such and such' as Fregean philosophers maintain (see McGinn 2001: 21, Mendelsohn 2005: 113);⁴ Or why statements of the form 'such and such a thing exists' should be considered on a par with statements of the form 'such and such a thing is red', as Neo-Meinongians claim (van Inwagen 2008: 58). Moreover, neither Fregean nor Neo-Meinongian philosophers have an argument to refute the opposite approach. For a while, it was believed that Fregean philosophers had the upper hand since Russell (1905) and Quine (1948) presented compelling arguments against the discriminating property-view of existence. But Neo-Meinongian philosophers (first of all, Routley 1980 and Parsons 1980) were able to counter-strike, so that we are back to square one. Thus, it seems that the only way we have to take a stance on this issue is by relying on our intuitions—or, at least, some philosophers involved in the debate saw themselves forced to draw this conclusion (see Lewis 1990: 27-28; Perszyk 1993: 178; van Inwagen 2008: 54).⁵ And since there is a consistent majority of philosophers whose intuitions speak in favor of the Fregean approach, this account should be the preferred

sus with respect to the truth of classical logic, which, arguably, embeds a given view of existence, i.e. Frege's.

² One may want to draw lines between these formulations, so that they are not equivalent. For instance, one may want to stress how the second, but not the first and third one, commits us to the existence of concepts (see Branquinho 2012). In the present context, I put such considerations aside.

³ For the sake of simplicity, I am focusing on the kind of Neo-Meinongianism that relies on a distinction between nuclear and extra-nuclear properties (i.e., the one defended by Routley, Parsons and Jacquette). The line of reasoning of this paper, however, may also be easily applied to other approaches that interpret existence as a discriminating property of objects, such as Zalta (1988) and Priest (2005).

⁴ Throughout the paper, I am assuming that the expression 'there is' is existentially loaded. This is, for instance, rejected by Parsons (1980). To him, the unwarranted presupposition of Fregeanism should be formulated as follows: statements of the form 'there is something such and such' are equivalent to statements of the form 'there is something such and such which exists'.

⁵ To say that the rival theory is unintelligible, as Lycan (1979: 290) and Horgan (2007: 620) consider it to be the case with Neo-Meinongianism (see Priest 2008a), may also be seen as pointing towards an irreducible clash of intuitions.

one. But there is no need to point out how this is a very unsatisfactory way of settling a philosophical dispute.

In what follows, I will attempt to break this stalemate. More precisely, I will try to argue for a compromise solution, or at least something that may be seen as a compromise: the notion of existence is neither a universal property nor a discriminating property of objects. The reason for this is that we should be deflationist about existence and abandon the assumption that we may find out something like the nature of existence. To be more precise, what I am going to argue for is a version of deflationism which relies on what I label the *existence equivalence schema* and its negative counterpart, the *non-existence equivalence schema*. As with the deflationary approach to truth (and falsity), whose blueprint I am following, the equivalence schemata provide us with everything we can and should say about existence.

The structure of the paper is as follows. First, I develop an argument that relies upon an analysis of quantified, i.e., general statements to support the deflationist approach to existence. Second, I show how the same analysis may be applied to different sets of statements, and, most crucially, to a set of statements which involve modal notions. Third, I address the challenge raised by intentional statements about indeterminate objects—a challenge which is notably exploited by Neo-Meinongians in order to further their stance. Finally, I underline the difference between the version of deflationism defended in the present paper and the one recently advocated by Thomasson (2014).

As the reader will have noticed, what is conspicuously missing from the picture are singular statements, i.e., statements which are allegedly about definite objects. The reason is that the author of this paper is an acolyte of a different heresy than the Neo-Meinongian one, namely descriptivism: I do not believe that there are such things as genuine singular statements; these are just hidden quantified statements.⁶ If you like, you may thus think of this paper as proving—if anything—something about the notion of general existence. For any alleged notion of singular existence, a different account would have to be provided.

2. A Raw Intuition

Let me start with a terminological remark. Throughout this paper, by ‘existential statement’ I am referring to a statement in which the verb ‘to exist’ is embedded. Hence, my characterization is a strictly linguistic one. This I take to be the most suitable definition of existential statements since every statement which does not wear, so to speak, its existential character on its sleeve may be cast as a statement with the verb ‘to exist’. For instance, a statement such as ‘an existing dog is on the street’ is meaning-equivalent with the statement ‘a dog on the street exists’. Or the statement ‘there are some dogs’, where existence seems to be expressed by the expression ‘there are’, is also meaning-equivalent to the statement ‘some dogs exist’. Finally, the same applies to statements in which the noun ‘existence’ is embedded: the statement ‘the existence of dogs is uncontroversial’ may be rephrased as ‘it is uncontroversial that dogs exist’. Notice, moreover, that I am consciously leaving statements with a particular quantification out of this list: I am refraining from saying that ‘something is x’ is meaning-equivalent to ‘there are xs’ or ‘some xs exist’. Indeed, this is what Fregeanism

⁶ For a recent defense of descriptivism, see Orilia (2010).

and Neo-Meinongianism are arguing about, so that we cannot and should not take it for granted. The other equivalences, on the other hand, I take to be theoretically neutral.

Now, even before getting started on any philosophical lucubration about existential statements, I assume we would all agree that there is something peculiar about existential statements. And, in fact, there have been many attempts at rationalizing this difference well before Frege and Meinong or the Neo-Meinongian philosophers. To give just a few illustrious names, David Hume, Immanuel Kant and Franz Brentano have all tried to develop a philosophical theory which accounts for this peculiarity. The question with which I would like to start is thus the following: how can we give more substance to this shared intuition about the peculiarity of existential statements without bringing into play a given philosophical theory about them? Can we really do nothing better than say that this is our intuition? In other words, what I am looking for is some pre-theoretical intuition about the difference in the behavior of existential statements and non-existential ones, which may be the reason for our shared intuition about the peculiarity of the former—or, if not *the* reason, at least *a* reason.

First, let us consider the two following existential statements:

- (1) Something red does not exist.
- (2) It is not the case that something red exists.

It seems to me that there is a very strong connection between these two statements: if one of them is true, the same holds for the other, and conversely, if one of them is false, so is the other. At least *prima facie*, (1) and (2) mutually imply one another. Or, in more technical terms, the internal negation seems to be interchangeable with the external one. Let me provide a few more standard examples to substantiate this claim. To say that something which is golden and a mountain does not exist (shorter: a golden mountain does not exist) is equivalent to saying that it is not the case that a golden mountain exists. To say that something which is round and square does not exist (shorter: a round square does not exist) is equivalent to saying that it is not the case that a round square exists (and so on and so forth).

Someone may challenge the reading just advanced since it seems easy to point to a situation in which both (1) is true and (2) false. As it happens, the actual state of things seems to be just the right one to accomplish this feat. We would all agree that, on the one hand, red dragons do not exist and, on the other hand, some red things, such as for instance traffic lights, do. Thus, why not assume that (1) is true because red dragons do not exist, while (2) is false because a red traffic light exists? However, I take this to be a misconstrual of (1). If someone were talking about red dragons, he would have to make it explicit. Thus, he should not say ‘something red does not exist’ but rather ‘something which is a red dragon does not exist’. But this would be a very different claim than affirming (1).

The same point may be clarified in the following way. While having coffee with a friend of mine, we stumble upon the topic of redness, upon which I claim ‘something red does not exist!’ My friend then objects to my claim by pointing to the traffic light in front of the coffee shop. But then I go on to say that, of course, red traffic lights exist, but red dragons do not—which should be enough to make my claim warranted. What would my friend’s reaction to this explanation be? I suppose he would give me an incredulous stare and say something

along the following lines: ‘OK, what you really meant was that a red dragon does not exist. Yet this is a rather irrelevant remark to the topic of redness which we were just starting to discuss’.

Let us now turn to a very similar pair of sentences which, however, are not existential:

(3) Something red is not round.

(4) It is not the case that something red is round.

I gladly concede that this second pair, as probably the first, too, may sound awkward. Below, I provide a possible coffee shop scenario in which they may be uttered. Now, the difference between this second couple of statements and the first one is striking. Notwithstanding the very similar structure, we have lost the mutual—and for that matter any kind of—implication: the truth of (3) is compatible with both the truth and the falsity of (4). Conversely, the truth of (4) is compatible with both the truth and the falsity of (3). For it could always be the case that nothing is red. In other words, internal and external negations are no longer interchangeable.

True, someone may be tempted to interpret (3) as a hidden hypothetical, namely as really meaning that if something is red then it is not round. It may then be argued that such a hypothetical would indeed imply (4). Please set this interpretation aside: (3) should be read literally. An example of a literal reading of (3) and (4) is the following. I am still sitting in the same coffee shop as before and my friend points out that something red is round, namely the red traffic light. Without having any intention to contradict him, but just for the sake of conversation, I then say that it is also true that something red is not round, namely the red sports-car parked in the second row. This is the pre-theoretical linguistic intuition about the peculiarity of existential statements with which I wish to start my discussion.

I would like to stress that I am very well aware that not everyone would share this intuition. This is especially the case with philosophers, whose intuitions about existential statements have already been thwarted in one direction or another by their own theory about existence. Moreover, philosophers may stress that it is only on the background of a theory about existence that we may test the mutual implication of (1) and (2). For these reasons, I am labeling the intuition in question as *the raw intuition*. Now, I assume that even those who reject the raw intuition or have qualms about it should be interested in why one *may* have such an intuition. Thus, I will ask them to indulge me for a little while. I will come back to their worries at the end of section 2.3.

2.1. Fregeanism

Having introduced you to the raw intuition, I would like to explore how a Fregean and a Neo-Meinongian philosopher might make sense of it. This, moreover, will provide us with the opportunity to rehearse some theses and arguments of these two arch-enemies.

Let us start with Fregeanism. According to this approach, we should go Procrustean and amputate (1) from our language. As classical logic (the formal arm of Fregeanism) teaches us, there is only room for a universal predicate of existence in our formal language, which may be defined by means of quantification and identity (Hintikka 1966):

$$E!(a) =_{def} \exists x(x = a)$$

Thus, the formalization of (1), if we take the verb ‘to exist’ as expressing the predicate of existence, would yield us a contradictory statement (see, e.g., Lewis 1990: 25), which should be formalized as follows:

$$(1^*) \exists x(Rx \wedge \sim E!x)$$

On the other hand, (2) may be formalized without further ado into the somewhat redundant (2*):

$$(2^*) \sim \exists x(Rx \wedge E!x)$$

Thus, according to Fregeanism, the puzzle of the raw intuition is resolved to the extent that, while stating (1), we cannot really mean what we say. Rather, if we are reasonable agents, what we mean is (2). Or, from a different perspective, one may prefer to say that language is misleading because both (1) and (2) express the same logical form (2*).⁷

What is the philosophical reason for the Fregean approach to the raw intuition, namely that we should get rid of (1)? As it happens, it is nothing over and above a strong intuition which philosophers and non-philosophers alike seem to share, namely the *predication principle* (PP):⁸

(PP) If something instantiates a property, then it exists.

Arguably, this is the principle Russell (1919: 170) had in mind while talking of a robust sense of reality. A most common formulation of the principle is to say that statements of the form ‘something is such and such’ are equivalent to statements of the form ‘there is such and such a thing’ (see Frege 1883?: 63).

2.2. Neo-Meinongianism

Let us turn to a short exposition of the Neo-Meinongian strategy. Neo-Meinongianism rejects (PP): non-existent objects may instantiate properties. Thus, the domain of objects is divided into two classes, namely, existent and non-existent ones. As a consequence, quantification is existentially neutral in that it has to range over all objects. To a Neo-Meinongian such as Routley, (1) does not have to be interpreted away or even be amputated from our language. Rather, (1) finds a streamlined logical interpretation as (1**) (read Px as the existentially neutral particular quantifier):

$$(1^{**}) Px(Rx \wedge \sim E!x)$$

The fact that Neo-Meinongianism is in a position to provide such a streamlined logical interpretation of (1) does indeed count as one of the main advantages of this position, as stressed by Routley (1980: 31-32). The logical form of (2), on the other hand, turns out as follows:

$$(2^{**}) \sim Px(Rx \wedge E!x)$$

⁷ McLeod (2011: 260) rightly stresses this second option: a Fregean philosopher does not have to claim that the expression ‘some’ in natural language always must have existential import (although Frege himself did). However, the difference between these two strategies is minimal. If pressed, a Fregean may only provide the following answer to the question as to why the superficial grammatical form (1) should be seen as hiding the deep logical structure (2*), namely that otherwise it would have to be interpreted as the contradictory (1*).

⁸ Routley (1980: 21) labels (PP) as the Ontological Assumption, thus introducing some terminological bias against it.

Notice that a Fregean philosopher cannot refute a Neo-Meinongian philosopher by recurring to (PP). The problem is that Neo-Meinongians reject (PP), so that this strategy would be question-begging.⁹ From our perspective, instead, the problem a Neo-Meinongian is confronted with is the following: he has to show how some additional premises are responsible for the fact that from (1) we may infer (2), and the other way around—premises which should of course not allow to infer (4) from (3) and (3) from (4).

One such premise is the *restricted characterization principle* (RCP):¹⁰

(RCP) For any condition α that does not embed extra-nuclear properties, an object satisfies exactly this condition.

I do not wish here to enter into the details as to why (RCP) must be restricted to nuclear properties and strengthened so that the object instantiates no other property besides those embedded in the characterization (the object satisfies the condition *exactly*).¹¹ Nor am I interested in the philosophical reason behind (RCP), namely that, against (PP), for any nuclear property, an object exemplifies these properties. Here, I would simply like to point out how (RCP) is needed in order to make sense of the raw intuition. Indeed, it is only if we concede (RCP), or something sufficiently close to it, that we are in a position to say that, if a given condition α is not satisfied by an existing thing, then it is satisfied by a non-existing one. And this is exactly what we need in order to infer (1) from (2).

One should note that (RCP) leads to an inconvenience with respect to the second couple of statements: (RCP) would by itself validate (3), so that if (4) is true, so is (3). A Neo-Meinongian is thus led to reinterpret the quantification in (3) and (4) as implicitly restricted to existing objects. Otherwise we could not think of a situation in which (4) is true but (3) is not.¹²

The real problem, however, is that Neo-Meinongianism is not in a position to make sense of the inference from (1) to (2). As far as I can see, a Neo-Meinongian philosopher has only one option to rescue this inference. He has to sacrifice (1) and reinterpret it as really meaning ‘everything which is red does not exist’. In other words, a Neo-Meinongian philosopher has to take the superficial structure of (1) to be misleading, since what is really expressed should be formalized as follows (thus abandoning 1^{**} for 1^{***}) (read Ux as the Neo-Meinongian universal quantification):

(1^{***}) $Ux(Rx \supset \sim E!x)$

Indeed, it is clear that this reading of (1) would vindicate both inferences, from (1) to (2) and from (2) to (1). This, however, dramatically relativizes the advantage of Neo-Meinongianism vis-à-vis Fregeanism: the former, exactly as the latter, is forced to reinterpret (1) and extract an allegedly deeper logical form to make sense of the raw intuition. The crucial selling point, stressed both by Meinong and Neo-Meinongians, that their approach does justice to the superfi-

⁹ This strategy is very common in the literature. It usually takes the following form: some x does not exist implies by (PP) that some existing x does not exist, i.e. a contradiction. A first instance of this strategy is at work in Frege (1883?: 65-6).

¹⁰ See Parsons (1980: 19), Routley (1980: 260-4), and Jacquette (1996: 85-6).

¹¹ As is well-known, the restrictions are put in place to address the objections by Russell (1905) and Quine (1948).

¹² As Routley (1980: 27) says, “existential loading is a contextual matter”.

cial grammatical structure of our language is, at least to some extent, jeopardized.

2.3 *The Attempt at a Compromise: A Deflationary Account of Existence*

What should we do? Should we give preference to our intuition that predication implies existence and thus amputate (1) as contradictory? Or should we rather deem existence to be an almost perfectly ordinary discriminating property of objects and strongly revise our understanding of (1), so that its real meaning is captured by (1***)? To me, both look like bad solutions: they both are Procrustean in the sense that they force us to amputate some statements (in the case of Fregeanism) or stretch them so as to make them almost unrecognizable (in the case of Neo-Meinongianism). (The reader will remember that the legendary bandit had two opposite ways of torturing his victims, either by amputating their limbs if they did not fit the Procrustean bed, or by stretching them if they did not fill it up.) In other words, neither of the two options is really in a position to do justice to the raw intuition. So, the question should rather be: is there really no better option?

My suggestion will be the following. We can avoid all amputations and reach a streamlined interpretation of the raw intuition by exploring a third possible explanation of existence. To wit, we should abandon the assumption, shared by both accounts, that existence has a nature which we may be searching for, be it that of a pleonastic or of a discriminating property. More generally, following Lewis (1970: 19), we should rather say that there is no connection between the notion of existence and any aspect of the world, be it a property or anything else. Instead, we should consider existence to be a redundant notion, whose meaning is entirely exhausted by the following *existence equivalence schema* (EES) and its negative counterpart, the *non-existence equivalence schema* (NES):

(EES) n exist(s) if and only if s_n .

(NES) n do(es) not exist if and only if it is not the case that s_n .

As the reader will have noticed, (EES) and (NES) follow the blueprint of the equivalence schemata of the deflationary account of truth and falsity: $\langle p \rangle$ is true if and only if p and $\langle p \rangle$ is not true (false) if and only if it is not the case that p . Not surprisingly, however, there are crucial differences. First, ' n ' should be understood as a variable for any particular quantified nominal expression, no matter whether in singular or plural form (e.g., 'something red' or 'some red things', respectively). Second, ' s_n ' should be understood as a variable for the sentence which may be extracted from the nominal expression in question (e.g., 'something is red' or 'some things are red').¹³ Finally, a further important difference is that (EES) and (NES) do not involve any metalinguistic shift: there is no device to name linguistic entities, be it sentences or propositions (the square brackets).

One may wonder at this point whether we may apply the equivalence schemata to existential statements with universally quantified nominal expres-

¹³ How, then, are we supposed to interpret 'something exists' and 'something does not exist'? The sentence we may extract from 'something' may only be 'something is somehow' or 'something is of some kind'. Thus, (EES) and (NES) yield us, respectively, 'something is of some kind' and 'it is not the case that something is of some kind'. See below, section 5, for further discussion of this pair of statements.

sions such as ‘everything red exists’ or ‘everything red does not exist’. These, however, strike me as ill-formed statements which no one really makes use of. As a descriptivist, moreover, I should point out that I am committed to the thesis that all existential statements with proper names may be cast as quantified statements (roughly put, from ‘Pegasus exists’ to ‘something Pegasizing exists’), so that we do not need any special equivalence schema for such statements.¹⁴

A further remark is required. The equivalence relation I take to be expressed by (EES) and (NES) is neither an extensional, material one, nor a metaphysical, necessary one. Instead, it must be an analytical equivalence. Only from such a perspective may we say that there is no connection between the notion of existence and any aspect of the world, and that we are, instead, dealing with a redundant notion. Indeed, since nothing expresses a notion of existence on the right-hand side of the equivalence, we may say that the notion of existence is redundant on the left-hand side.

By way of clarification, let us apply (EES) and (NES) to ‘something red exists’ and ‘something red does not exist’ (i.e., (1)), respectively:

- (5) Something red exists if and only if something (is) red.
- (6) Something red does not exist if and only if it is not the case that something (is) red.

In both (5) and (6), ‘something is red’ is the sentence which may be extracted from the nominal expression ‘something red’ (I highlight this by putting the sentence-forming device, i.e., the copula, in parenthesis). The deflationist theory I propose is that there is nothing more to be said about existence than what (EES) and (NES) and their instantiations tell us.

Now, from the perspective of our line of reasoning, the crucial advantage of the deflationary account of existence which we have just proposed lies in the streamlined explanation of the raw intuition. Indeed, if we apply (EES) to (2) we get:

- (7) It is not the case that something red exists if and only if it is not the case that something is red.

It follows thence that both (1) and (2) are equivalent with another since the application of (NES) to (1) and (EES) to (2) shows that they are both equivalent to a third, identical statement: ‘it is not the case that something is red’. We have thus explained their mutual implication.

Another way to state the same point would be to say that (NES) reveals to us why (1) is not really a case of internal negation: (1) is really equivalent to a statement with external negation. One may indeed think of the syntactical predicate ‘to exist’ as a linguistic device to stress the external negation, in the case of negative statements, and to stress the absence of negation, in the case of affirmative statements. Yet nothing is really added to the content of the statement, since

¹⁴ As far as other natural language quantifiers different from the particular and universal ones are concerned, it seems to me that we may apply (EES) and (NES) to them as well. For instance, the quantified existential statement ‘at least one red thing exists’ would yield us by application of (EES) ‘at least one red thing exists if and only if at least one thing is red’. Or, to take an example suggested by an anonymous reviewer of this paper, the quantified existential statement ‘more tigers than lions exist’ would yield us by application of (EES) ‘more tigers than lions exist if and only if more things are tigers than lions’.

the expression ‘to exist’ does not refer to a property or nature. This, moreover, is all we need in order to explain the different behavior of (3) and (4), since (3) really confronts us with an internal negation and a predicate which is not merely syntactical but actually adds something to the content of the statement.¹⁵

The crucial argument developed in this section may now be cast as a trilemma. Let us assume that we want to make sense of the raw intuition. The verb ‘to exist’ expresses a universal property, a discriminating property, or a redundant concept whose whole meaning is entirely captured by (EES) and (NES). If ‘to exist’ expresses a universal property, then we have to amputate (1) as contradictory. If ‘to exist’ expresses a discriminating property, then we have to stretch our language, for (1) can no longer be taken at face value and hides a universal quantification instead. Finally, if the meaning of ‘to exist’ is entirely captured by (EES) and (NES), then we need neither amputate nor stretch (1). Moreover, if the meaning of ‘to exist’ is entirely captured by (EES) and (NES), then we need not to revise the general rule according to which internal negation is not interchangeable with external negation, since (1) no longer constitutes a case of genuine internal negation. Furthermore, since I assume that (i) we neither want to amputate nor stretch our language, and (ii) we also have an interest in upholding the general rule that internal and external negation are not interchangeable, we should conclude that the meaning of the syntactical predicate ‘to exist’ is entirely captured by (EES) and (NES).

Let us now return to any qualms the reader may have with the raw intuition. To such a reader we may say that the deflationary account of existence we have just put forward is not essentially dependent upon endorsing the raw intuition. One may very well not share the intuition that (1) and (2) imply one another. They are, after all, problematic statements, where it is perhaps out of place to rely on intuitions to determine their entailment-relations. Rather, they are statements which should be interpreted in the light of a theory. But then again, even abstracting from the raw intuition, we still have an interest in following the deflationary account of existence. The reason is that going deflationist provides us in any case with a good compromise between Fregeanism and Neo-*Meinongianism*.

On the one hand, by going deflationist, we avoid the problem of Fregeanism highlighted by Neo-*Meinongians*: negative existentials of the form ‘something such and such does not exist’ are no longer contradictory. (I thus assume that we have at least an intuition about the non-contradictory character of such statements.) On the other hand, we equally avoid any Neo-*Meinongian* distinction between existent and non-existent objects and the epicycles which have to be coupled to this distinction, i.e., the target of the objections raised by Fregean philosophers. It is because the theory concedes something to both contenders that the deflationist approach to existence should be seen as a compromise.

¹⁵ The talk of existence as a merely syntactical predicate that adds nothing to the content of our statements clearly brings to mind both what Kant and Hume had to say about existence. And, indeed, it is tempting to consider both philosophers as defending a kind of deflationism (see Thomasson 2014: 191).

3. Other Raw Intuitions

As remarked at the end of the last section, I am persuaded that the deflationary account of existence is independent of a pre-theoretical endorsement of the raw intuition. But what I cannot and do not want to say is that the account is independent of any linguistic intuition: if the account is convincing, it has to be in conformity with other intuitions a given speaker may have. In other words, the application of (EES) and (NES) to existential statements in the vernacular should not lead to counterintuitive results. Or, at least, we must reach a kind of reflective equilibrium between our intuitions and the deflationary account of existence, so that some intuitions support the theory, while the theory itself should help establish other intuitions. In section 4, I address some (kinds of) existential statements which may seem, in this respect, especially problematic. In this section, however, I would like to draw attention to other intuitions which seem to support the theory. First, I am going to present the reader with a second raw intuition. Then, I am going to introduce a modal declination of the first raw intuition.

3.1. A Second Raw Intuition

Let us consider the following pair of statements:

- (8) Something round and square does not exist.
- (9) Something round does not exist.

Here it may very well be the case that the former is true and the latter is false (the implication goes only the other way round). Yet things are rather different with the following pair of non-existential statements:

- (10) Something round and heavy is not red.
- (11) Something round is not red.

Evidently, the former implies the latter: if (10) is true, so is (11).

How would the Fregean and the Neo- Meinongian approach deal with this further raw intuition? As with the previous one, Fregeanism and Neo- Meinongianism would lead, respectively, to an amputation and stretching of our language. If we follow the Fregean approach, we would simply have to amputate statements such as (8) and (9). If we follow Neo- Meinongianism, on the other hand, we should stretch (8) to 'everything round and square does not exist'. In this case, the inference to (9) would clearly not be allowed. If we follow the third way, instead, we may rescue all our intuitions about these statements and at the same time provide an explanation for the alleged bad behavior of existence. The application of (NES) to (8) and (9) yields us (12) and (13), respectively:

- (12) Something round and square does not exist if and only if it is not the case that something (is) round and square.
- (13) Something round does not exist if and only if it is not the case that something (is) round.

We may now spell out the reason as to why (8) does not imply (9). As a look at the right-hand side of (12) and (13) will show, the reason is that the falsity of a conjunction does not imply the falsity of the conjuncts. Thus, we have once more seen how the deflationary view of existence fares better than Fre-

geanism and Neo-Meinongianism in, as it were, cashing out a pre-philosophical linguistic intuition.

3.2. *The Modal Raw Intuition*

The time has come to turn to the more complex case of modal existential statements, i.e., statements that involve both the verb ‘to exist’ and a modal notion. Some philosophers maintain that these kinds of existential claims are the most challenging (think of Moore’s ‘this might not exist’). In the present section, I would like to focus on a modal version of the raw intuition. First, let us consider a couple of existential modal statements:

- (14) Something that might be red does not exist.
- (15) It is not the case that something which might be red exists.

As with the non-modal version of the raw intuition, we may again say that at least some of us share the intuition that there is a strong connection between (14) and (15): they mutually imply one another. Notice, moreover, that this would not be the case if we were dealing with something other than existence, and more precisely what everyone would consider a garden-variety property:

- (16) Something that might be red is not round.
- (17) It is not the case that something which might be red is round.

Everyone would agree that the truth of (16) would simply have no relevance whatsoever for the truth or falsity of (17), and *vice versa*. I am aware of the fact that this second intuition (the difference in behavior of (14) and (15) *vis-à-vis* (16) and (17)) is perhaps even more problematic than the first one: fewer readers are probably going to share it. Yet, as in the case of the first raw intuition, I kindly ask the reader who does not share this intuition to play along until the end of this section. Now, once more, the question we should ask ourselves is the following: why is it the case that in (14) internal negation is interchangeable with the external one?

The dilemma we are facing takes the following form. One option would again be to get rid of such oddities. This would be the path chosen by a Fregean philosopher. Or, more precisely, this would be the path of actualism, i.e., the modal declination of Fregeanism. As it happens, if we formalize (14) and apply the Fregean definition of existence, we will be stuck with a contradiction (let us assume a possible-worlds semantics with constant domains and no restriction on the accessibility relations between worlds):

$$(14^*) \exists x(\Diamond Rx \wedge \sim E!x)$$

An actualist could only make sense of (15), even though he would consider it partially redundant:

$$(15^*) \sim \exists x(\Diamond Rx \wedge E!x)$$

Again, as in the non-modal setting, a Fregean philosopher has two available strategies: he may either say that (14) is contradictory and should therefore be amputated from our language. Or he may say that (14) is just a misleading formulation of the logical form (15*).

What would the Neo-Meinongian alternative look like? According to Neo-Meinongianism, (14) is no longer a contradiction since it may be formalized as (14**) with a non-existentially loaded quantification and a discriminating property of existence:

$$(14^{**}) Px(\diamond Rx \wedge \sim E!x)$$

Furthermore, (15) and its formalization as (15^{**}) would no longer be redundant:

$$(15^{**}) \sim Px(\diamond Rx \wedge E!x)$$

But how can Neo-Meinongianism vindicate the fact that (14) and (15) mutually imply one another? If we start again by focusing on the inference from (15) to (14), we may see how (RCP) would again validate the inference. However, we may notice that in a modal setting we do not need such a strong principle. Most crucially, once such a principle is introduced, we would also have to grant the inference from a statement such as (18) to (19):

(18) It is not the case that something that could be a round square exists.

(19) Something that could be a round square does not exist.

This consequence may be unwelcome since it would introduce *impossibilia* in our modal logic. A Neo-Meinongian such as Routley would have no qualms with them (see Routley 1980: 83-95). But others may. Hence, in a modal setting, we may prefer to avoid any (RCP) and endorse possibilism: The inference from (15) to (14) is granted from the plain rationalist assumption that for every consistent set of modal properties we have an object that corresponds to it.

As in the non-modal setting, however, the real problem for Neo-Meinongianism or possibilism is the direction of inference from (14) to (15). True, the same option would of course be available as in the non-modal setting, namely reinterpreting (14) as meaning ‘everything that might be red does not exist’. This, of course, would lead to abandoning the straightforward (14^{**}) in favor of (14^{***}):

$$(14^{***}) Ux(\diamond Rx \supset \sim E!x)$$

Thus, the Neo-Meinongian (as well as the possibilist) is again forced to sacrifice (14), or more precisely, he has to stretch it to the point that it is no longer recognizable.

Having thus introduced the modal raw intuition and explained the challenge it poses to both Fregeanism and Neo-Meinongianism (or to actualism and possibilism), the stage is set for introducing the deflationary view of existence. The reader will have probably already guessed the thesis that I am going to put forward: the inferences which are at stake in statements about actual existence can easily be accounted for as soon as we apply our equivalence schemata. We thus may move away from (14) and (15) on to, respectively, (20) and (21):

(20) Something which might be red does not exist if and only if it is not the case that something might be red.

(21) It is not the case that something which might be red exists if and only if it is not the case that something might be red.

The mystery as to how internal negation is interchangeable with external negation is now easily dispelled. As in the previous case, the predicate ‘to exist’ does not express any property or nature. Rather, it may be considered a stylistic device to stress negation in the case of negative statements, or, alternatively, the absence of negation in the case of affirmative statements. This, again, is the crucial difference between existence and roundness: (16) is a genuine instance of internal negation. The advantages of the deflationist approach to existence may thus be confirmed in the modal setting too: as soon as we abandon the premise that the verb ‘to exist’ really expresses a property or a nature, there is no longer any need to amputate or stretch our language.

But what if the reader does not share the modal raw intuition? As with the non-modal raw intuition, I would argue that he still would have an interest in endorsing the deflationist approach. The reason is that going deflationist provides—once again—a good compromise between the modal cousins of Fregeanism and Neo-Meinongianism: namely, actualism and possibilism. On the one hand, we avoid the problem of actualism that negative existentials of the form ‘something which might be such and such does not exist’ become contradictory (I thus assume, with Moore, that we have at least an intuition about the non-contradictory character of such statements). On the other hand, we equally avoid the possibilist distinction between existent and non-existent objects and the problems which are coupled to this distinction. Thus, the reader who were to choose this perspective may accept the entailment relations between (14) and (15) in the light of this theory and without having to rely on blind intuitions.

It is worth noticing that the line of reasoning just presented may be declined in tensed contexts as well. Here we would have to say that the statement ‘something that was red does not exist’ and ‘it is not the case that something that was red exists’ intuitively imply one another (or, more prudently, one might have an intuition to this effect). Then, the same line of reasoning would lead us to deflationism, regardless of worries we might have about the intuition in question. Deflationism about existence thus opens the path for a compromise between the tensed declinations of Fregeanism and Neo-Meinongianism, i.e., what are sometimes labeled, respectively, as presentism and contingentism.

4. Intentional Statements

Intentional statements give rise to two well-known puzzles: failure of substitutivity of co-referring terms and failure of existential generalization. However, both puzzles are linked to the assumption that there are such things as genuine singular statements in our language. And, since in this paper I am abstracting from singular statements, I will set these two puzzles aside. The challenge raised by intentional statements in the present context is thus a different one and has rather to do with the distinction between *de re* and *de dicto* readings. More precisely, if it can be shown that we have *de re* intentional statements about non-existent objects, this would imply that Neo-Meinongians are right after all: the class of objects may be divided into two classes, namely, existent and non-existent ones.

Let us first consider a couple of intentional statements involving the notion of belief:

- (22) Meinong believes that something is a golden mountain.
- (23) Meinong believes that something which is a golden mountain does not exist.

One should add that both (22) and (23) are true: historically, Meinong really held those beliefs. Now, Neo-Meinongianism would provide us with a *de re* interpretation of these two intentional statements. Not only (22) and (23) are true, but also (24):

- (24) Something is such that Meinong believes that it is a non-existent golden mountain.

A Fregean philosopher, however, would clearly resist such an interpretation. To him, Meinong’s belief described in (23) is inconsistent in that it implies by (PP)

that there is something which is a golden mountain and does not exist. Similarly, Meinong's belief in (22) is interpreted as false: it is not true that there is something which is a golden mountain. Thus, even though (22) and (23) are true, this does not mean that (24) is true, as well. Or, in other words, we should reject the *de re* reading.

The deflationist view of existence, finally, is more generous towards Meinong and Neo-Meinongianism because it avoids any reference to (PP). The belief in (23) is not inconsistent. Nevertheless, the belief in (23) contradicts the belief in (22) for the very reason that to say that a golden mountain does not exist is, by (EES), tantamount to saying that it is not the case that something is a golden mountain. Thus, the deflationist view of existence allows for a different, more lenient, diagnosis of Meinong's inconsistency. This diagnosis, however, does enough work to block the *de re* reading of the intentional statements in question: (22) is not about a golden mountain because Meinong's belief that something is a golden mountain is false, and (23) is not about a golden mountain even though Meinong's belief that a golden mountain does not exist is true.¹⁶

But let us turn to a more challenging example of intentional statements:¹⁷

(25) Meinong imagines a golden mountain.

This intentional statement I take to be equivalent to (26):

(26) Meinong imagines that something is a golden mountain.

The reason why imagination is more challenging than belief is that in this case it seems that something really is a golden mountain, namely what is imagined by Meinong. Does Meinong not have a golden mountain, as it were, 'in front of his eyes' while imagining it? Moreover, since we all assume that golden mountains do not exist, it seems that we have provided a scenario in which both (27) and (28) are true:

(27) Something is a golden mountain.

(28) A golden mountain does not exist.

Or, in other words, it appears that we are forced to accept a *de re* reading of the intentional statement in question. This may be seen as a decisive argument for Neo-Meinongianism and thus a refutation of the view defended in this paper.

Nevertheless, are we sure we know enough about imagination to draw such a conclusion? For one, the following alternative interpretation deserves to be considered: imagination may be nothing else than the ability of our mind to mimic the perception of something. From such a perspective, one should rephrase (26) as (29):

(29) Meinong's mind mimics the perception of a golden mountain.

This seems to be a rather plausible explanation of imagination, which does not require it to be about non-existent mountains. Instead, what is required is simply

¹⁶ The same applies to Meinong's belief that a golden mountain is golden since this implies the belief that something is a golden mountain. This belief is not about a golden mountain either, because it is false. (Of course, Meinong's belief would turn out to be true if interpreted hypothetically: if something is a golden mountain, then it is golden.)

¹⁷ The example is equivalent to the one by Priest (2008b: 296) of John imagining an ugly monster. Priest considers such examples to be crucial evidence in favor of Neo-Meinongianism.

a sensory experience produced by Meinong's mind that mimics the experience he would have if he saw a golden mountain. Notice, moreover, that one may very well say that something is such that Meinong imagines it to be a golden mountain (thus, we may provide a *de re* reading). However, it is not really the case that it is a golden mountain. In fact, it is just an imitation of it.

The same strategy may be applied to intentional statements of desire. Crane (2013: 131-33) discusses the following example:¹⁸

(30) I desire an inexpensive bottle of Burgundy.

Since we would all agree that inexpensive bottles of Burgundy do not exist, we would again have an argument that allows us to regard existence as a discriminating property of objects. Yet, again, this conclusion may be too hasty. Indeed, it seems plausible to interpret desires as mental states that need to be grounded in imagination or perception: I desire things that I imagine or perceive and which—while being imagined or perceived—are accompanied by pleasurable feelings. If, then, we apply the same interpretation of imagination that was sketched above, we see how statement (30) does not imply any relation to a non-existent inexpensive bottle of Burgundy. To the contrary, what (30) implies is merely a mental event that mimics the perception of an inexpensive bottle of Burgundy.

Someone may object that this strategy, even if it may be effective in the case of imagination and desires, cannot be applied to other kinds of intentional statements. It clearly cannot be applied to the following example (I am considering a variation on this very common example, which does not suppose—according to the approach endorsed throughout this paper—that Ponce de Leon searched for a definite object):

(31) Ponce de Leon searched for a fountain of youth.

This, and similar examples, however, I take to be rather unproblematic. Every time we search for something, we are simply trying to establish a truth about something: namely, where it is.¹⁹ And, of course, in order to ask ourselves where something is, we have to believe or at least assume this something to be such and such. To return to our example, (31) implies that the famous Spanish explorer believed or assumed that something had the property of being a fountain of youth and that he was simply trying to figure out the truth about another statement: namely, the statement about its exact location. And since both the belief and the assumption that something is a fountain of youth are false, there is no reason to give a *de re* reading of (31). Thus, as far as intentional statements such as (31) are concerned, we should not be misled by the superficial analogy with, for instance, the statement 'John kicks a ball'. Instead, we should pay attention to what we mean by the verb 'to search'.

I would like to stress that in the present section I have not argued for a specific account of imagination, desiring, searching and so forth. What I have tried to point out is simply how certain interpretations are *prima facie* plausible and al-

¹⁸ What follows may also be easily applied to intentional statements about fear, where fear may be understood in an analogous way to desires: we fear things that trigger certain feelings when we imagine or perceive them. Examples of intentional statements involving the notion of fear are discussed by Routley (1980: 35-37).

¹⁹ This approach follows a suggestion by Montague (1969: 175), who regards 'to seek' as abbreviating 'trying to find'.

low us to uphold the deflationist view of existence. At the same time, it is crucial to highlight how the above given analyses of intentional statements do not rely on (PP) and thus (a) do not fall together with a Fregean approach and (b) are not question-begging with respect to Neo-Meinongianism.

5. Deflationism and Meta-Ontology

As addressed at the beginning of the paper, Thomasson (2014) recently defended a version of deflationism about existence, which, moreover, she links to a quietist approach to some ontological debates, such as for instance the existence of numbers. In this section, I would like to draw attention to some crucial differences between the version of deflationism I am advocating and Thomasson's. These differences, however, should not hide the common ground between Thomasson's deflationism and mine: we both share the anti-metaphysical stance according to which it is pointless to search for any deep nature of existence.

If we focus on the theory itself, Thomasson's deflationist approach to existence is characterized by establishing a strong link to deflationism about the semantic notions of truth and reference: "the concepts of truth, reference, truth-of, and existence are all interlinked by trivial rules, and deflationisms about any of these notions stand or fall together" (Thomasson 2014: 198). More precisely, Thomasson sees a strong link between the notion of existence and the notion of reference, which she ties by means of the equivalence schemata '<n> refers if and only if n exists' and '<P> refers if and only if Ps exist' (whereby 'n' stands for any singular term and 'P' for any general term different from existence). Then, via the notion of reference, the notion of existence may be tied to the notion of truth to form what Thomasson labels as a "conceptual circle".

The kind of deflationism defended in this paper is, by contrast, independent of deflationism about truth and reference, which of course may be seen as an advantage (if you are a deflationist about truth and reference) or a drawback (if you are not). In addition, the semantic notions of reference and truth are simply not part of the picture I have presented. This strikes me as a clear advantage of the approach I am defending. In fact, we all have a fairly good understanding of existential claims, but only philosophers are familiar with the semantic notion of truth and, especially, reference.

Turning to the meta-ontological implications, Thomasson (2014: 204-206) explicitly develops her brand of deflationism as providing us with a path to "easy ontology". According to this perspective, some ontological questions may be solved by looking at the world. For instance, to know whether red things exist, we have to rely on our conceptual competence and see whether the concept red refers to anything, i.e., whether we have instances of red things. Furthermore, other, less trivial, ontological questions such as the one targeting the existence of numbers, should be seen as trivial inferences from uncontroversial truths, which do not involve the concept at issue (for instance, from 'there are three cups on the table' to 'the number of cups on the table is three'). Thomasson, thus, broadly follows in Carnap's (1950) footsteps and draws a distinction quite close to the one between internal and external questions to a given conceptual framework.

The deflationism defended in this paper, by contrast, is not motivated by and does not have this kind of meta-ontological implications. True, I would agree that in order to assess the question as to whether red things exist we have

to look at the world (notice, though, that I am not bringing into play the notion of reference). But when, for instance, numbers are taken into consideration, the theory defended here does not prescribe any procedure. We may only say—via the application of (EES)—that something which is a number exists if and only if something is a number. The question whether some things are numbers, however, remains open and a legitimate object of ontological dispute.

What, however, is clearly ruled out by the deflationist view of existence defended here is both a Fregean and a Neo-Meinongian approach to ontology. The answer to the question which defines ontology, namely ‘what exists?’, should neither be ‘everything’ nor ‘the things which happen to have the property of existing’. These are signs of a misunderstanding of the question. Instead, in order to understand the ontological question correctly, we must look at possible answers to it, as for instance in ‘something red exists’ or ‘numbers exist’. All these answers tell us that something is somehow or of some kind (red, number, etc.). Thus, what the question of ontology really means is: what is of what kind? This should be seen as the result of the application of (EES): we have answered the question as to what exists if and only if we have answered the question as to what is of what kind (in other words, the sentence that has to be extracted from the subject ‘what’ is ‘what is of what kind?’). And, if the outcome of such an investigation is that nothing is of any kind, we may move to the nihilist claim that nothing exists, or, equivalently, that it is not the case that anything exists; if, on the other hand, at least something is of some kind, we may confidently state that at least something exists (in other words, the sentence that has to be extracted from the bare subject ‘something’ is ‘something is of some kind’).²⁰

6. Conclusions

In the present paper, I have outlined a possible deflationist compromise between Fregeanism and Neo-Meinongianism. According to this approach, the two arch-enemies are both right in their mutual criticisms: existence is neither a universal nor a discriminating property of objects. The reason is that we should simply abandon the assumption according to which existence is a notion that adds something to the content of a statement. Meinong (1904) is famous for having talked about a prejudice in favor of existence, by which he meant the prejudice according to which the only proper objects of scientific enquiry are existent objects. This paper, on the other hand, has argued against a different kind of prejudice in favor of existence, namely that the verb ‘to exist’ and its cognates express a substantive notion.²¹

²⁰ See above, footnote 14. These considerations lead to the following interpretation of (PP): ‘if something instantiates a property, then this something exists’ yields us, by application of (EES), ‘if something instantiates a property, then this something is of some kind’. According to this interpretation, (PP) is certainly true but rather vacuous.

²¹ This paper is a strongly revised version of chapters 10, 11 and 13 of my PhD thesis (Bacigalupo 2015). I would like to thank the members of the Jury Arkadiusz Chrudzinski, Claudio Majolino, Francesco Orilia, Juan Redmond and, especially, my supervisor Shahid Rahman for their helpful comments and remarks. I am also very grateful to the audience of the SIFA conference in L’Aquila (3-5 September 2014), where I had the pleasure to present an ancestor of this paper. Finally, I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their careful reading and comments.

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