The selection problem

FRANCESCO BERTO

Abstract: In *Fiction and Fictionalism*, Mark Sainsbury has recently dubbed "Selection Problem" a serious trouble for Meinongian object theories. Typically, Meinongianism has been phrased as a kind of realism on nonexistent objects: these are mind-independent things, not mental simulacra, having the properties they have independently from the activity of any cognitive agent. But how can one single out an object we have no causal acquaintance with, and which is devoid of spatiotemporal location, picking it out from a pre-determined, mind-independent set?

In this paper, I set out a line of response by distinguishing different ways in which a thing may not exist. I show that the selection problem (a) does not arise for past, currently nonexistent objects; (b) may not arise also for future existents (provided one massages naïve intuitions a bit); and (c) even for mere *possibilia*; but (d) is a real snag for *purely* fictional objects, such as Holmes or Gandalf. As for (d), I propose a solution that forces Meinongianism to introduce a kind of ontological dependence of purely fictional nonexistents upon existents. The strategy complicates the intuitively simple, naïve Meinongian framework a bit, but looks quite promising.

> On Meinongian views, it is true of Holmes, before Conan Doyle started writing any Holmes stories [...] that he will live in Baker Street. This is not true of the equally nonexistent Anna Karenina, nor of a highly Holmes-like nonexistent who lived in Dover Street but otherwise was as like Holmes as can be. Conan Doyle needs to make sure he's creatively investing Holmes, rather than Anna or the pipe-smoking inhabitant of Dover Street, with the property of living in Baker Street, and it's mysterious how he could do that.

Mark Sainsbury, *Fiction and Fictionalism*

Intuitively, things that belong only to the past, like the long-gone dinosaurs and the not-so-long gone Tasmanian devils, or dead people like George Washington and Michael Jackson, do not exist (give and take certain beliefs on the immortality of the soul). The same may be said of future things, like the dawn of tomorrow or the first newborn of the XXII Century. Merely possible things,

like a talking donkey, also do not exist according to some. And the same goes for purely fictional objects, i.e., objects mentioned and described in tales, stories, operas, such as Gandalf or Sherlock Holmes;[1] and for ideal objects introduced by scientific theories, like frictionless planes and perfect gases; and for things postulated by scientific theories that turn out to be false, like Vulcan (the planet); and for some targets of intentional states, such as Vulcan (the god) and the other inhabitants of the pantheon worshipped by the ancient Greeks.

According to the standard view on quantification and existence, though, to say that talking donkeys, Greek gods, or fictional characters do not exist just amounts to saying that there are no such things; whereas, for Meinongians, it means that those things are nonexistent. Echoing the Kantian motto that "Existence is not a (real) predicate", the standard view (typically, though not always) denies that existence is a property of individuals; and claims that the notion is fully captured by the quantifier: to say that there is something, such that... or that something is such that..., is to say that the thing exists. The Meinongian view, on the contrary, has it that existence is a perfectly ordinary ("first-order") property of individuals – not all of them, though: some things have it, some lack it, and more or less all the aforementioned objects are usually taken as belonging to the latter group. Quantification, then, is not ontologically, in the sense of existentially, committing as such: "Some things do not exist" can be perfectly meaningful – and true at that. More generally, according to the Meinongians one can *refer to* nonexistent objects, both in the mental sense of thinking about them – having them as targets of full-fledged, *de re* intentional states –, and in the linguistic sense of naming them, describing them, quantifying on them, and being able of saying true things of them.

But how can this be? This is the question addressed in the present paper.

Meinongians are usually *realists* on nonexistent objects. This is taken here as meaning that classical nonexistent objects like Holmes, Gandalf, or Pegasus, are what they are, and have the properties they have, independently from the cognitive activities of sentient and thinking beings like us (realism does not mean, of course, that they *exist* independently of us, since those things simply do not exist). One of Meinong's main aims when he formulated his original theory was to provide an account of the phenomenon of intentionality; and he always denied that nonexistents, as the targets of intentional states, could be reduced to cognitive representations and mental simulacra.

---

[1]   Called *purely* fictional in order to distinguish them from non-purely fictional characters, that is, historically real figures that also appear in fiction, like Virgil in Dante's *Comedy*, or Napoleon in *War and Peace*.

Now in his recent and beautiful book *Fiction and Fictionalism* Mark Sainsbury has dubbed "Selection Problem" (SP, from now on) a threatening trouble for Meinongian object theories – a problem summarized precisely by the question: how can one refer to nonexistent objects so conceived?

In order to address the SP, I will develop the paper as follows: In § 1, I am exposing the basics of Meinongianism, with particular reference to a version of the theory I have elsewhere labelled *Modal Meinongian Metaphysics* (MMM). This is based on a modal semantics including non-standard worlds, also called impossible worlds, and, above all, on a qualified "Comprehension Principle" for objects. The idea goes back to Graham Priest's work, and has been applied by me to the treatment of the semantics and ontology of fiction in various essays.[2] In § 2 I introduce the SP, and discuss both its cognitive and its semantic version. § 3 stresses the importance of acknowledging that nonexistents come in different kinds: it is shown that the SP does not arise for past, currently nonexistent objects, and may not arise also for future existents (provided one massages naive intuitions a bit) and for mere *possibilia*. In § 4, though, the SP turns out to be a real hitch for purely fictional objects like Holmes or Gandalf. In § 5, a solution to the SP for these objects is proposed by introducing a kind of ontological dependence of purely fictional nonexistents upon existents. This is backed up by some philosophical considerations to the effect that artistic and authorial creativity, even if they involved bringing something into existence, could not be *reduced* to this.

1. MMM

Meinongians usually start by distinguishing the *Sein* of a thing – the existential status – from its *Sosein* – its being so-and-so, its having (certain) properties. Meinongian objects are characterized by specifying properties, or sets thereof, and must in some sense have the properties they are described as having. Original, naïve Meinongianism was based on what Parsons has called an "Unrestricted Comprehension Principle" for objects (UCP):[3] given any condition α[x] expressing a bunch of properties, such as *x is a detective, x lives in 221b Baker Street, x has amazing powers of observation and deduction*..., etc., some object is characterized by α[x]. Call the object so characterized "Holmes", *h*. Then Holmes has the relevant set of properties: α[h].

2   See Priest 2005, Berto 2008, 2010a (part III), 2010b and 2010c.
3   See Parsons 1979b, 1980.

However, naïve Meinongianism famously collapsed under criticism by Russell:[4] first, taking into account inconsistent characterizing conditions the UCP forces one to admit not only *possibilia* (merely possible objects not actually existing), but also impossible objects, such as Quine's (in)famous round square cupola of Berkeley College. Next, we can run a generalized ontological argument to prove the existence of whatever we want: pick $\alpha[x] =$ "x is golden $\land$ x is a mountain $\land$ x exists". Existence being a perfectly normal first-order property for Meinongians, the UCP gives us, totally *a priori*, an existent golden mountain.

Neo-Meinongian theories usually blame for this disaster the lack of constraints on properties in the naïve rule, and restrict the class of properties that can figure in a comprehension principle for objects. So-called *nuclear* Meinongianism introduces a subclass of predicates (the "nuclear" ones), and restricts the Comprehension Principle to nuclearity: only conditions a[x] on nuclear properties deliver objects (and, in particular, existence is not a nuclear property). Providing a clear criterion to distinguish between nuclear and extranuclear properties is a traditional problem of the approach,[5] but we need not enter into this.[6]

The neo-Meinongian view proposed by Priest in his clever book *Towards non Being*, and picked up by me under the label of Modal Meinongian Metaphysics (MMM), adopts a different strategy. It is based on a non-standard modal approach (basically, a modal semantics including non-standard or impossible worlds, besides possible ones),[7] and on a comprehension principle with no restrictions on the properties that may deliver objects, provided the having of

---

[4]   See Russell 1905a-b.

[5]   Some examples from Terence Parsons 1979a, 1980: nuclear predicates, "is blue", "is tall", "kicked Socrates", "was kicked by Socrates", "kicked somebody", "is golden", "is a mountain"; extranuclear predicates, *Ontological*: "exists", "is mythical", "is fictional"; *Modal*: "is possible", "is impossible"; *Intentional*: "is thought about by Meinong", "is worshipped by someone"; *Technical*: "is complete", "is consistent". Admittedly, the move of distinguishing nuclear and extranuclear properties may not provide a clear-cut solution to the problem of inconsistent characterizations: since round and square are both nuclear properties, nuclear Meinongianism is still committed to objects that, albeit nonexistents, are round squares. In Parsons' writings, (1980, p. 39-40) this is conceded, but it is remarked (somewhat unconvincingly) that, since the negation of a nuclear property is not itself a nucleat property, something's being round and square does not entail its being round and not round (or square and not square), as a matter of its "nuclear" status.

[6]   I shall also not take into account another version of Meinongianism, whose main exponent is Edward Zalta (see Zalta 1983), and in which the naïve Comprehension Principle is revised by adopting a special kind of predication called *encoding* (on which, more in another footnote below). My main aim is to see how the kind of Meinongianism I favour can deal with the Selection Problem. This leaves open the issue, to what extent the proposed solution can be extended to Meinongianisms of different kinds.

[7]   For an introduction to impossible worlds, see Berto 2009.

properties is suitably modally qualified.[8] Let's call it the Qualified Comprehension Principle:

(QCP) For any condition α[x] with free variable x, some object satisfies α[x] *at some world*.

In this approach, our Meinongian objects can always satisfy the relevant condition α[x], no matter which properties are packed into it – provided they do it, not necessarily at this world, but at *others*. Non-standard worlds take care of inconsistent characterizations delivering such things as Quine's round square cupola, which is, naturally enough, round and not round, or square and not square. We have non-standard, logically impossible worlds at which contradictions may hold (and we don't need to admit true contradictions, or even possibly true ones: Quine's cupola is not round and square at the actual world, nor at any possible world, but at the impossible worlds that realize the characterization).

Formal semantics making these ideas precise have been presented in Priest's book as well as in my aforementioned essays. In these works, various applications of the formal apparatus are developed, ranging from a general treatment of intentional predicates and operators, to the semantics and ontology of fiction. We need not enter into the formal details; what concerns us here is that the modal frames at issue, both in Priest's version and in mine, all are *constant* domain worlds semantics.

In a sense, this is quite natural an option for Meinongians. Mainstream modal semantics usually employ *variable* domains: different things may exist at different worlds. One of the reasons for this is to account for the idea of contingent existence: I exist at the actual world but, at the worlds where my parents never met, I am never born and I do not exist. In the received view on existence, this is not a property of individuals, so contingent existence has to be represented by having the domain over which the quantifiers range vary across worlds. In the Meinongian framework, though, existence *is* a property. So it is natural to simply take the domain of each world as the unique *totality* of objects; next, that some object o exists at world w_1, but not at world w_2, is accounted for simply by having o satisfy the existence predicate at w_1 and not at w_2, and all the epicycles of Kripke's variable domain semantics[9] are left behind. *Simplex sigillum veri* – or so it seems.

---

8   As it appears, before the aforementioned Priest 2005 came out, the idea had been foreshadowed by Daniel Nolan 1998 and Nick Griffin 1998.
9   See Kripke 1959, 1963.

Now, constant domain modal semantics in the context of MMM *encourages* – though by no means mandates – a *realistic* reading of the nature of objects: a world-invariant domain is a fixed set of objects that can be seen as being "already there", independently of the activity of cognitive agents. When one such agent thinks of a nonexistent object (and, say, pins a name on it), this is intuitively supposed to be more like picking out the object from this pre-determined domain, than like producing it. Hence comes the trouble we are about to uncover.

2. SP

Meinongian nonexistent objects, realistically conceived, are what they are independently from our referring to them, both in the intentional sense of "referring" (thinking about them, remembering them, focusing our attention on them, etc.), and in the linguistic sense (pinning a name on them, mentioning them, talking about them). Since they do not exist, though, we have no ordinary causal relations with them. They are also devoid of spatiotemporal location, for they are nowhere to be found in the physical world. However, in the realist perspective, we are expected to pick them out from a pre-determined set: in order to give a name to a nonexistent, characterize it, and make true claims on it, we need to single *it* out in the domain of the totality of objects. How? This is the Selection Problem.

A structurally similar trouble affects *nonactualists* – where by "nonactualist" (as distinct from the Meinongian) we shall mean here a philosopher who does not believe in nonexistent objects, but who believes in objects that exist as residents of worlds distinct from the actual one. A typical nonactualist philosopher in this sense would be David Lewis with his famous modal realism: Lewisian *possibilia* do exist, but they inhabit other possible worlds; they are therefore causally and spatiotemporally isolated from us.

The SP has a cognitive side and a (closely connected) linguistic one, uncovered by the aforementioned ambiguity of the verb "to refer". Cognitively speaking, the SP concerns the phenomenological individuation of the relevant objects: how can we single out things we cannot perceive with our senses or causally interact with, selecting them in the overall context of our experience, and distinguishing them from other objects?

Notice that this is not, at least *prima facie*, a problem of (criteria of) *identity*. It is well known that *possibilia* like Quine's possible fat man in the doorway have been criticized for lacking identity criteria. However, that having clear criteria of identity is a prerequisite for admission in a safe and sane ontology is, at the very

least, controversial.[10] Even if it wasn't, all the main neo-Meinongian theories on the market have their own criteria of identity for objects (for instance: objects sharing the same set of nuclear properties are identical; objects encoding exactly the same properties are identical;[11] etc.). It may even be granted that identity criteria can sometimes help us in our individuation practices. However, our issue is now perfectly general and epistemic, not metaphysical. If Holmes had his features and properties (at various worlds) independently from Doyle, how could Doyle single out precisely *that* object in a bunch of nonexistents, and think about him, in order to write his stories on him? How did he succeed in bringing before his mind the right thing, as distinct from any other, and in particular from any other nonexistent object? Ordinary Meinongian object theories usually have comprehension principles for objects such that, if they allow things like Holmes, they also allow objects extremely similar to Holmes, such as, for instance, a detective precisely like Holmes, save that he lives in Dover Street. Isn't it the case that there were too many things quite similar to Holmes out there to allow Doyle to specifically pick out that one? Nonexistent Meinongian objects were supposed to account for the phenomenon of intentionality and, in particular, of *de re* intentional states. But how can we intend them with our cognitive faculties in the typical Meinongian framework? Referring to the notion of unactualized *possibilia*, Linsky and Zalta have thus claimed:

> There are good reasons for not using 'possible objects' of any sort in the analysis of intentionality, the most important being that there are too many candidates to choose from as the object of a *de re* intentional attitude. Which of the many things that could have been a fountain of youth (or which of the many possible fountains of youth) was the unique object of Ponce de Leon's search? If it is possible that a fountain could confer eternal youth, then certainly many different 'possible fountains' could have.[12]

On the side of language, the SP concerns the way in which we can refer to nonexistents via linguistic items: how can we pin a singular term on a thing that does not exist? Broadly speaking, there are three kinds of singular terms: proper names, demonstrative expressions, and descriptions. It is natural to assume

---

[10]   On this controversy, see e.g., Loux 1978, Jubien 1996 and Carrara 2001.

[11]   The notion of *encoding* is central in Edward Zalta's "dual-copula" Meinongian theory (see Zalta 1983): here nonexistent objects are taken as abstract objects that can encode properties, besides exemplifying them – encoding being a special way of having properties, distinct from ordinary exemplification.

[12]   Linsky and Zalta 1996, p. 285.

that the reference of proper names depends upon prior successful reference via descriptions or demonstratives. Now reference via demonstratives cannot take place in the case of nonexistent objects, due to their lack of the appropriate spatiotemporal and causal features. So if we are to pin a name on a nonexistent, we should, to begin with, be able to single it out by means of a definite description. Can we?

It seems not. Descriptions like "the golden mountain", "the tallest talking donkey", "the winged horse captured by Bellerophon", which were supposed to designate some typical Meinongian objects, intuitively apply to too many things; this speaks against the semantic definiteness of the descriptions, and their achieving successful singular reference. There might be lots of winged horses captured by Bellerophon out there, which differ with respect to other, even minimal, features (one is one inch taller than the other, both weigh some grams more than a third, and so on). We cannot dub exactly one of them "Pegasus", for we haven't managed to single *it* out. Meinongians want to do justice to the idea that we can talk about nonexistent things, refer to them via proper names like "Pegasus", and take pride in the superiority of their position with respect to (attempted) eliminative paraphrases à la Russell-Quine. But precisely the Meinongian metaphysical account of these things makes such a reference very difficult to achieve in practice.

The most serious form of the objection adds that, given the impossibility of singular reference to nonexistents, also the Meinongian quantification on these things is compromised – thereby radically vindicating the Quinean motto that to be (to exist) is to be the value of a (bound) variable. The idea, of Fregean origins, is that quantification on a domain is possible only presupposing that singular reference to the objects in that domain is possible. *Ex contrapositione*, Meinongian quantification is senseless.

The Meinongian line of response may begin by noticing that it is at the very least controversial that quantification is dependent upon singular reference – the Russellian-Quinean approach itself reverses the Fregean view by reversing the dependence order. Besides, it is a fact of ordinary language that people quantify on things that, *prima facie*, do not exist, and the meaningfulness of this is not put at stake by our incapacity of referring to these things by means of singular terms. Remember that we are talking of a realist attitude towards nonexistents: they are what they are independently from our language and our thought processes. Serious realism entails that, in many cases, ontological and linguistic issues should be clearly distinguished: whether there are such objects is one thing, how

we can refer to them is another – after all, we may not be able to individuate, and therefore give a name to, existent objects like subatomic particles, etc.

These are still weak answers, though. Our initial problem is to explain a fact of natural language, namely our capacity of speaking of things like Holmes and Gandalf, of referring to them via singular terms, and of making true claims on them. This is what becomes unintelligible – says the objection based on the SP – if one follows the Meinongian view according to which these are things that, on the one hand, do not exist, and on the other are independent from us, as far as their properties and features are concerned.[13]

3. Past Existents, Future Existents, Mere *Possibilia*

I believe that the right preliminary move to make for the Meinongian consists in highlighting that not all nonexistent objects are alike. There are many distinct ways (perhaps with overlaps) for something not to exist: it may not exist after having existed in the past; or not exist yet; or not exist despite being possibly existent; or insofar as its existence has been postulated by some false theory; or because it's purely fictional.

For instance, it should be clear that there is no selection problem for past existents, insofar as there are appropriate causal chains for them. For instance, George Washington doesn't exist, but still bears lots of properties: the property of having been a president of the United States; the property of being self-identical (after all, it's George Washington); the property of being thought about by me right now; etc. There is no problem in referring to this full-fledged, nonexistent property-bearer via the proper name "George Washington", and in making true claims on him, such as that George Washington is believed to have had wooden teeth. If something like the so-called "causal theory of reference" is right, we have a causal chain, starting with George Washington's baptism by his parents who gave him this name, and continuing via the speakers' intention of using "George Washington" to refer to the very person that was so baptized.

---

[13] As Francesco Orilia has pointed out to me, one straightforward way of addressing the SP would consist in taking (fictional) nonexistents at face value as *incomplete* objects: if Holmes has exactly the properties ascribed to him in the Doyle stories, while being undetermined with respect to any other property, the SP can be solved by claiming: Holmes is identical to whatever object has exactly the properties ascribed to him in the Doyle stories. However, such a move is not available in the kind of Meinongianism I favour, in which fictional nonexistents have additional properties with respect to the ones they are characterized as having (for they are entailed by these given a suitable notion of entailment, or imported from the actual world, etc.).

This works also nowadays, when Washington no longer exists. As Fitting and Mendelsohn put it in their handbook *First-Order Modal Logic*:

> George Washington does not exist *now*. As a result, we have a rigid desi-gnator, "George Washington", that rigidly designates a nonexistent and further, one whose baptismal ceremony took place in another (earlier) world in the model, but not the actual (present) one. This further unders-cores the correctness of separating out the issues of rigidity and exis-tence. [...] So, the upshot is that rigid designators can be introduced for nonexistents. In another temporal world, the man exists and is so baptized; we intend to maintain that reference even though the man no longer exists. We can speak about him even though he doesn't exist.[14]

We cannot have causal chains moving forward to hook up to *future*, currently nonexistent objects. However, the SP might be circumvented at least for some of them. In *Quantifying In*, David Kaplan has christened "Newman-1" the first newborn of the XXII Century. Newman-1 is a future, and currently nonexistent, object to which we manage to refer. Why? Unlike "George Washington", the reference of "Newman-1" is not fixed by the causal history of the world up to now, for we are talking of future objects. And the future is open, unless we are determinists. According to philosophers like Nathan Salmon, though, the facts concerning the nonexistent individual, as designated by "Newman-1", are at least semantically, if not causally, determined:

> Kaplan fixed the reference of "Newman-1" *semantically* not by means of the description "the future person who is unpreventably going to be born first in the 22nd century", but by "the future person who *will* be born first in the 22nd century". The name's reference is even *causally* fixed to the extent that, given the way in which Kaplan introduced the name, it is already settled that the name now refers to whichever future individual will turn out to be the first child born in the 22nd century if there will be such an individual (and that the name is nonreferring otherwise).[15]

This means that the causal indeterminacy and our current ignorance on who will be the first baby born in the XXII Century doesn't change the fact that, whoever the newborn is, that individual is, already now, the referent of "Newman-1", "nor – Salmon adds – does that future individual's present nonexistence impugn

---

[14]   Fitting and Mendelsohn 1998, p. 237.
[15]   Salmon 1998, p. 289.

this fact, any more than Socrates' present nonexistence impugns the fact that 'Socrates' refers to him".[16]

We can manage to achieve singular reference to mere *possibilia*, that is (in this context), individuals that don't exist at the actual world, and count neither as past nor as future existents. Philosophers have invented clever techniques to build definite descriptions that achieve the result of referring exactly to one such individual. Here are some examples. The first one is due to John Divers; it has been devised to show how one can single out and refer to (existent) *possibilia* in the context of Lewisian modal realism, but it can be easily translated in Meinongian terms. The technique is based upon the fact that we can build definite descriptions that univocally single out *worlds*, starting from the actual one. For instance, we can isolate a proper part of the actual world, and call it p. Next, we consider the condition "x is a world and x is a perfect duplicate of p". Given a suitable principle of recombination for possibilities, the condition picks out at least one individual; and if there are no indiscernible worlds, that is, no numerically distinct worlds representing exactly the same possibilities, it picks out exactly one individual – nothing else is a world and a perfect duplicate of p. Next, we can expand the process by combinatorially building more and more complex singular terms that univocally refer to worlds, such as "the world consisting exactly of duplicates of parts $k, l, m, ...,$ of the actual world, standing in such-and-such relations". Finally, we can employ these descriptions to achieve singular reference to nonactual *possibilia*, characterized as objects that are the only ones having such-and-such features *at* the worlds we have singled out via those descriptions – e.g., "the tallest talking donkey at w", where "w" stands for (an abbreviation of) a description that refers uniquely to a world.[17]

Other techniques provide unique reference to *possibilia* without passing through definite descriptions that pick out worlds directly. One such technique is inspired by the works of David Kaplan and Nathan Salmon.[18] Let gamete s be a specific sperm cell of my fat her's, which hasn't been as lucky as the sperm cell I come from in finding an ovum to combine with. And let gamete o be a specific ovum of my mother's, which in its turn, unlike the ovum I come from, hasn't coupled with any sperm cell. Call "Znarf" the unique possible individual which would have been originated by s and o, had they united in the normal way to develop a zygote. The description I have just written apparently manages to refer to a single object – but that's a merely possible, nonexistent one: Znarf is a nonexistent brother of mine.

---

[16]   *Ibid*.
[17]   Notice the assumption: there must be no indiscernible worlds. This is independently motivated in Divers 2002, pp. 83-4.
[18]   See Kaplan 1973, Salmon 1987, 1998.

In the (metaphysically and/or physically and/or biologically) possible worlds at which things go as expressed in the counterfactual description, that is, at which *s* and *o* unite normally to form a zygote, Znarf has various properties, such as that of being a human being, or that of having the same parents as me. But also at the actual world Znarf has various properties, such as the one of having just been baptized with that name by me, or the one of being a human being at the afore-mentioned worlds. However, here at the actual world he is also a nonexistent and merely possible object.

We can also refer to nonexistent *possibilia* whose existence is vetoed (at least biologically, but perhaps also physically and metaphysically) by the causal history of the actual world up to now. Take the individual that would have originated from the ovum of my mother's from which, as a matter of fact, I was born, and from the aforementioned sperm cell *s* of my father's, had they united – call it "Ranfz". Ranfz and I (Franz) are, so to speak, trans-world brothers, but we are biologically (perhaps physically, perhaps metaphysically) incompatible: my conception has rendered the ovum I come from unavailable for *s*. All in all, it seems that we can successfully refer to several merely possible nonexistents.

4. Purely Fictional Nonexistents

Even if one accepted the picture so far, the specific case of purely fictional nonex-istents like Holmes or Gandalf, as well as of mythological objects like Pegasus and Zeus, is the most difficult to deal with – and it is to this kind of nonexistents that Sainsbury's SP primarily refers to. It seems that in these cases we lack the (however thin) links to the actual world we would need to fix the unique reference of the relevant singular terms. These things do not exist, have never existed in the past, and are not future objects like Newman-1 or the dawn of tomorrow. And the strategy employed for possible, nonexistent people like Znarf doesn't work either – at least, not for most purely fictional and mythological objects. There simply appear to be, so to speak, too many objects that are out of reach – and these are the most important ones, those that are usually claimed to be nonexistents *par excel-lence*. We simply seem to lack definite descriptions that achieve unique reference in these cases. We could find such descriptions in the case of my aforementioned brothers, taken as nonexistents that can be univocally characterized by resorting to recombinations of actuality: one could select Znarf by selecting specific gametes that are existent (or past existent) at the actual world to begin with. It is not clear at all how the procedure might be extended to Homes or Pegasus. It is therefore not clear, if Holmes and Pegasus are what the Meinongian view claims them to

be, how we manage to do what we should do, namely single them out in the pre-determined, mind-independent, realistically conceived set of all objects, and pin a name on them.

It is likely that Saul Kripke was persuaded by something similar to the SP to withdraw his previous claim that purely fictional objects like Holmes are nonactual objects that exist at other worlds – for there are too many nonactual people who have the properties ascribed to Holmes in Doyle's stories; if any of these is Holmes, all are – which is absurd:

> I hold the metaphysical view that, granted that there is no Sherlock Holmes, one cannot say of any possible person, that he would have been Sherlock Holmes, had he existed. Several distinct possible people, and even actual ones such as Darwin or Jack the Ripper, might have performed the exploits of Holmes, but there is none of whom we can say that he would have been Holmes had he performed these exploits. For if so, which one? I thus could no longer write, as I once did, that "Holmes does not exist, but in other states of affairs, he would have existed".[19]

5. Ontologically Dependent Nonexistents

The SP might be especially pressing not for Meinongianism as such, that is, for the claim that some things are nonexistent, but for the *realist* stance of Meinongians, indiscriminately held for all kinds of nonexistents. Perhaps the mistake lies in assuming that all nonexistents are out there, and have the properties they have, independently from our cognitive activities (and independently from the activities of existing things in general). But if there are distinct ways for a thing not to exist, so that nonexistents come in different kinds, it might then be tempting for a Meinongian to explore an *anti-realist* option for the class of purely fictional nonexistents. This option has been outlined by Graham Priest and by me in a couple of blueprint works[20] – and the story goes as follows.

After all, unlike past and future existents, and perhaps also unlike mere *possibilia*, purely fictional characters bear a special relation to the authors that originally introduced them. Meinongians have always stressed the intuitiveness of their account, preserving most of our ordinary discourse and the intuitions that go with it, beginning with the literal truth of such claims as "Holmes doesn't exist". However, we also ordinarily make such claims as "Doyle *created* Holmes", and

---

[19] Kripke 1980, pp. 157-8.
[20] See my book, Berto 2010a, Chapter 9, and Priest's (as yet) unpublished 2010.

realist Meinongians have often preferred to read these ones metaphorically. For instance, here is Parsons:

> I have said that, in a popular sense, an author creates characters, but this […] is hard to analyze. It does not mean, for example, that the author brings those characters into existence, for they do not exist. Nor does he or she make them objects, for they were objects before they appeared in the stories.[21]

Let us now take these creationist claims at face value, too. Philosophical terminology becomes tricky here, starting with the very couple "realism"/"antirealism". Realism on nonexistents, as we have seen, cannot mean that they exist independently from us, since they do not exist. The same goes for antirealism: one cannot *create* nonexistent and purely fictional objects like Holmes or Gandalf, *if* by "creating" one means "bringing into existence". The objects at issue, though, are now conceived as such that they don't have the properties and features they have on their own, and are not available in the domain of quantification, independently from other objects.

What we have in mind in the antirealist approach is a kind of ontological dependence of purely fictional nonexistents upon existents: Holmes and Gandalf depend for their properties and features on someone else. Who? Well, the natural answer is that these are *existent* objects, to begin with, and specifically, the authors of the relevant stories. Some nonexistents – the purely fictional ones – supervene (at a given time and world) on the properties and activities of cognitive, sentient beings. Holmes is available to be referred to, and as an object in the domain of quantification of our world, as a result of Doyle's narrative and inventive activities. It is thanks to these activities that Holmes has intra-fictional features like being a detective, or living in Baker St 221b (and, in the MMM approach, he has them at the worlds that realize Doyle's stories).

From the formal point of view, it is very easy to adjust the semantics of MMM so that its intuitive interpretation supports antirealism on purely fictional objects, and makes room for supervening nonexistents. Instead of a fixed domain D of objects, identical across all worlds, we have a function d from worlds to sets of objects, so that $d(w)$ is the domain of objects that count as the available referents for names, and over which quantification can take place, at world w. Domains are not fixed once and for all, for they might be expanded by the activity of sentient beings insofar as purely fictional nonexistents are concerned. We might also

---

21   Parsons 1980, p. 188.

speak of ordered couples <world, time> since the intuition now is that domains can change across time.[22] The tricky part is not the technical setting, though, but its philosophical motivation.

A natural way to highlight the difference of the MMM antirealist approach is via a counterfactual claim: had Doyle not written his stories (for instance, since he devoted himself to politics instead of becoming a writer), Holmes wouldn't have been in the domain of quantification at the actual world, and he wouldn't have had the properties he has at the worlds that make Doyle's stories true.

This doesn't change the fact that, at the actual world, Holmes doesn't *exist*. We cannot kick him, nor kiss him, nor can we find him anywhere in space and time. Doyle conferred to Holmes various properties (at various worlds, including the actual one), but not that of existing (at the actual world). If we believe that "to create" means or entails "to bring into existence", we'll just say that Holmes ontologically depends on Doyle. If one accepts that something can be created in this sense, without thereby being brought into existence, we'll even manage to take at face value the claim that Doyle has created Holmes.

Is the anti-realist Meinongian not only being linguistically revisionary, but also challenging the English vocabulary itself here? Well, not quite. To begin with, creationists on fictional characters often draw on loose analogies: just like the craftsman creates a chair, so Doyle creates Holmes, etc. This overlooks an obvious difference between the two processes: once the chair has been created, it is there for us to stumble upon it, find it in the room, grab it, kick it, etc. None of these things can be done with Holmes, for even after he has been created by Doyle, he is still nowhere to be found in space-time. In short: after the chair has been created, it exists; after Doyle has been created, he still doesn't exist.

Secondly, as Harry Deutsch has forcefully observed, authorial or artistic creation in general can have little to do with bringing into existence also when it does require that some things be brought into existence. One cannot create an artistic painting if one doesn't bring it into existence; but the process of putting paint on canvas, thereby creating painted canvas, can have little to do with the creativity involved in creating an artistic painting, that is, in the creation of an artwork: "the concept of artistic creation is not even *approximated* by the crude ontological notion of bringing things into existence".[23] This is why, Deutsch stresses, good dictionaries don't usually list *only* "bringing into existence" as

---

[22]   The formal details can be found, again, in Berto 2010a, pp. 261-3, and in Priest 2010.
[23]   Deutsch 1991, p. 211.

the meaning of "create", but have (at least) another definition, in which to create is *to invent via (or in) one's imagination.*

What is distinctive of creativity in the artistic sense, it seems, is the idea of making up things (contrast this with finding them out). This is mirrored in our intuitions to the effect that the author that created a fictional character, in a sense, could not be wrong: Doyle *stipulated* what Holmes had to be like, so that it wouldn't make sense to blame him for providing an incorrect description of Holmes. Doyle said that Holmes was a detective: could he have been wrong on this? Notice that this does not hold for people picking up a character that has already been introduced: if I set out to write a new story on Holmes, with the explicit intention of referring to Doyle's character, then I had better avoid declaring that Holmes has never been a detective. After all, Holmes was not created by me, so there is a sense in which I am limited, much more than Doyle, in making up things on Holmes. Once they have been created, reference to purely fictional, nonexistent objects is a public phenomenon, and people are corrigible on this. If I tell you that I wrote a story on a guy called Sherlock Holmes, and who has a long, white beard, dresses in red, flies around the world on Christmas eve bringing presents to Children… You may stop me and claim something like: "Look, you're not speaking of Holmes here, but of Santa!".

Now, back to the SP: it should be clear that it is easily solved in an antirealist Meinongian environment. Explaining how one can single out a specific nonexistent, individuate it, and christen it "Sherlock Holmes" becomes quite simple. Doyle created Holmes, in the artistic, non-existence-conferring sense (if one still wants to stick to the idea that creation is inseparable from the conferring of existence, we'll just say that Holmes ontologically supervenes on Doyle's intentional activities). It is thanks to Doyle's creativity as a writer of fiction that Holmes is available for quantification and reference at the actual world. Doyle's cognitive faculties had no need to select a nonexistent that was already out there, so there is no selection problem. It has been enough for Doyle to think, say circa 1886, that he was willing to write a crime story, told neither from the viewpoint of policemen, nor from that of criminals; and that he wanted his main character to be a smart private citizen, and one who loved forensics, and… . Doyle didn't need to select, but only to imagine and, perhaps, to start writing. He had no difficulties in introducing the name "Sherlock Holmes" to denote the relevant object – neither do we have problems in using "Sherlock Holmes", with the intention of referring to the very same object produced, characterized and christened by Doyle, in a referentially successful way.

Admittedly, this is still a very rough account of the process of authorial and artistic creation. The process itself might be mysterious and difficult to explain – but now, this is not a problem *specific* to Meinongianism (and perhaps to similar nonactualist theories of fictional objects) and, moreover, not the problem under discussion in this paper. The point is that purely fictional characters now need not be selected from a ready-made domain, for there are no relevant objects around before the creative auctorial activity takes place. Fictional nonexistent objects are individuated by the acts that make them available for reference and quantification. These are (largely) intentional acts performed by existing cognitive agents, and in this sense the former objects supervene on the latter.

One more remark (again, due to Priest)[24] on the properties of nonexistent fictional objects, antirealistically conceived. The idea of an ontological dependence of such objects on the cognitive activities of existents does not entail that fictional objects have *only* the properties they are explicitly characterized as having by the relevant author(s). Despite depending on Doyle so tightly, Holmes can have properties that go beyond Doyle's ascriptions. For instance, Doyle never explicitly tells us in his stories (let us suppose) whether Holmes lived in Europe. However, Holmes is (in the worlds that make Doyle's stories true) a detective living in London, and at the actual world London is in Europe. It is therefore natural to claim that, at the worlds that realize Doyle's stories, Holmes has the property of living in Europe, even though Doyle hasn't ascribed it to him explicitly.

There are various subtleties a full-fledged MMM has to take into account, on how intensional operators such as "true in the story" ought to behave,[25] and, again, we need not enter into the discussion of these here, for this is not the problem under discussion in this paper (as Sainsbury has pointed out, how fictional operators should work is largely independent from the ontological status of fictional objects).[26] However, it is a reasonable view that default assumptions are correctly imported from the actual world to the worlds relevant for the evaluation of what is true in a story, absent contrary claims explicitly made by the authors. This is a way for ontologically dependent purely fictional nonexistents to have properties beyond those they are explicitly characterized as having by the authors upon which they depend.

Anti-realist Meinongianism on purely fictional objects is, so far, just the sketch of a theory. But it looks like an option worth pursuing, as it solves the SP for

---

[24]   See Priest 2010, § 2.
[25]   The classic paper on the topic is Lewis 1978.
[26]   See Sainsbury 2010, p. 74.

the kind of nonexistent objects for which it was a pressing trouble, while at the same time helping Meinongianism to do more justice to the intuition of artistic creativity than it has traditionally done.

University of Aberdeen,
Aberdeen, Scotland
f.berto@abdn.ac.uk

References

Berto, F., 2008, "Modal Meinongianism for Fictional Objects", *Metaphysica*, 9, pp. 205-18.

Berto, F., 2009, "Impossible Worlds", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2009 Edition), Zalta, E., ed., URL = http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2009/entries/impossible-worlds/.

Berto, F., 2010a, *L'esistenza non è logica*, Laterza, Rome.

Berto, F., 2010b, "Impossible Worlds and Propositions: Against the Parity Thesis", *The Philosophical Quarterly* (forthcoming).

Berto, F., 2010c, "Modal Meinongianism: Transworld Identity, Identification and Individuation", *Australasian Journal of Logic* (forthcoming).

Carrara, M., 2001, *Impegno ontologico e criteri d'identità. Un'analisi*, CLEUP, Padova.

Deutsch, H., 1991, "The Creation Problem", *Topoi*, 10, pp. 209-25.

Divers, J., 2002, *Possible Worlds*, Routledge, London-New York.

Fitting, M. and Mendelsohn, R.L., 1998, *First-Order Modal Logic*, Kluwer, Dordrecht.

Griffin, N., 1998, "Problems in Item Theory", talk given at the 1998 meeting of the Australasian Association for Logic.

Jubien, M., 1996, "The Myth of Identity Conditions", *Philosophical Perspectives*, 10, pp. 343-56.

Kaplan, D., 1973, "Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice", in J. Hintikka *et al.*, eds., *Approaches to Natural Language*, Reidel, Dordrecht, pp. 490-518.

Kripke, S., 1959, "A Completeness Theorem in Modal Logic", *Journal of Symbolic Logic*, 24, pp. 1-15.

Kripke, S., 1963, "Semantical Considerations in Modal Logic", *Acta Philosophica Fennica*, 16, pp. 83-94.

Kripke, S., 1980, *Naming and Necessity*, 2nd, exp. ed., Blackwell, Oxford.

Lewis, D.K., 1978, "Truth in Fiction", *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 15, pp. 37-46.

Linsky, B. and Zalta, E., 1996, "In Defense of the Contingently Nonconcrete", *Philosophical Studies*, 84, pp. 283-94.

Loux, M.J., 1978, *Substance and Attribute*, Reidel, Dordrecht.

Nolan, D., 1998, "An Uneasy Marriage", talk given at the 1998 meeting of the Australasian Association of Philosophy.

Parsons, T., 1979a, "Referring to Nonexistent Objects", *Theory and Decision*, 11, pp. 95-110.

Parsons, T., 1979b, "The Methodology of Nonexistence", *Journal of Philosophy*, 76, pp. 649-62.

Parsons, T., 1980, *Nonexistent Objects*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT.

Priest, G., 2005, *Towards non-Being. The Logic and Metaphysics of Intentionality*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.

Priest, G., 2010, "Creating non-Existents: Some Initial Thoughts", Unpublished MS.

Russell, B., 1905a, "Review of A. Meinong, *Untersuchungen zur Gegenstandtheorie und Psychologie*", *Mind*, 14, pp. 530-8.

Russell, B., 1905b, "On Denoting", *Mind*, 14, pp. 479-93.

Sainsbury, M., 2010, *Fiction and Fictionalism*, Routledge, Oxford.

Salmon, N., 1987, "Existence", *Philosophical Perspectives*, 1, pp. 49-108.

Salmon, N., 1998, "Nonexistence", *Noûs*, 32, pp. 277-319.

Zalta, E., 1983, *Abstract Objects. An Introduction to Axiomatic Metaphysics*, Reidel, Dordrecht.