

Lecture 3 - The problem of non-existent objects

Suggested reading

- Crane (2013) *Objects of Thought*, Ch 4 & 5
- Quine (1948) 'On what there is'
- Kripke (2013) *Reference and Existence*, Lecture III
- Friend (2007) 'Fictional characters', *Philosophy Compass*

Recall the inconsistent triad:

- (A) Intentional states are relations between thinkers and the things thought about.
- (B) Relations entail the existence of their relata.
- (C) Intentional states can be about things that do not exist.

1 Non-existence

Non-existent objects are problematic because there are straightforward truths about them. But reality does not contain more than what exists. Truth depends on reality.

- (1) Vulcan was a planet postulated by Le Verrier in 1859 to explain the perturbations in Mercury's orbit.
- (2) Harry Potter was born on 31 July 1980.
- (3) Sherlock Holmes is more famous than any living detective.

So what makes these statements true?

Perhaps we should construe claims about the non-existent as containing an implicit operator, e.g. 'In the fiction...'

- *In the fiction*, Harry Potter was born on 31 July 1980.
- *In Le Verrier's theory*, Vulcan was a planet.

But this does not work for every claim about a non-existent object. It does not work for (3), for this is not mentioned in any of the fictional works about Sherlock Holmes.

2 Representation as a basic fact

Last week we saw that there are at least three types of intentional state:

- The object-directed intentional states (love, hate, seeing) that must be directed on real objects.
- Intentional states that can be about the non-existent:
 - Some can be construed as propositional attitudes (belief, desire)
 - Those described by intensional transitive verbs resist reduction to propositional attitudes (fear, admiration, expectation, etc.)

Is there a way of understanding intentional content that can apply across all of these?

- While propositionalists aim to provide an analysis of intentionality in non-intentional terms, non-reductive accounts take the mind's ability to represent as a basic or fundamental fact.
- According to Crane, every representation has at least one of the following features: (*OoT*, Ch 4)

- **Aspect.** Objects of representation can be represented in different ways.
- **Accuracy.** Representations can be inaccurate.
- **Absence.** Representations can represent things that don't exist.
- The content of a representation is the way the object of representation is represented.
 - Mental representations can still have propositional content, by representing something that is capable of having a truth value.
 - Non-propositional mental representations, like seeing, loving, admiring, etc., represent something under some aspect rather than another.
- What all intentional states have in common is that they involve representing objects in some way. Representation is taken as a basic fact - there is no attempt to account for intentionality in non-intentional terms.

3 Non-relational intentionality

- Crane's account solves the problem of non-existence by denying (A). Intentional states are *not* relations between thinkers and the things thought about. Rather, intentional states are, fundamentally, states which represent objects in a certain way.
- E.g. Le Verrier's postulation of Vulcan. To postulate something is a way of representing that thing by claiming that that thing exists. Vulcan has the representation-dependent property of being postulated by Le Verrier, in the year 1859, etc. It was attributed non-representation-dependent properties like having a circular orbit and a particular distance from the Sun, but of course it is not true that Vulcan has a circular orbit. Rather, it is true that Vulcan was postulated to have a circular orbit. (See *OoT* Ch 5 for more examples.)
- Why 'fundamentally'? This is to allow that some intentional states still can involve a relation between the thinker and the object of thought (e.g. causal relation). The relation is just not what makes the state an intentional state – it is not *essential* to the intentional state that it involves that relation.
- This ensures a unified account of intentionality while allowing that intentional states are heterogeneous. Some intentional states are directed on real objects, some are directed on propositions, some are directed on non-existent objects. What they all have in common is that they essentially involve mental representation.

4 The object-directed states

- But what about the object-directed states that *must* be directed on real objects, like seeing, loving and hating? Are these also fundamentally states which represent those objects in a certain way?
- It seems to be essential to the object-directed states that they involve a relation between the subject and the intentional object.

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