Lecture 3 - The problem of non-existent objects

Suggested reading
- Crane (2013) *Objects of Thought*, Ch 4 & 5
- Quine (1948) ‘On what there is’
- 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)
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- **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 intentional object (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.