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# The Objects of Thought



TIM CRANE

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UNIVERSITY PRESS

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*To Mike Ratledge*

If I have an idea of the god Jupiter, this god is my presented object, he is 'immanently present' in my act, he has 'mental inexistence' in the latter . . . This intentional experience may be dismembered as one chooses in descriptive analysis, but the god Jupiter will not be found in it. The 'immanent', 'mental object' is not therefore part of the descriptive or real make-up of the experience, it is in truth not really immanent or mental. But it also does not exist extramentally, it does not exist at all . . . If, however, the intended object exists, nothing becomes phenomenologically different. It makes no essential difference to an object presented and given to consciousness whether it exists, or is fictitious, or is perhaps completely absurd.

(Husserl 1901: V, §11)

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Chapter 1: from ‘What is the Problem of Non-Existence?’ *Philosophia* 40 (2012) 417–34. Published by Springer.

Chapter 2: from ‘Existence and Quantification Reconsidered’ in Tuomas Tahko (ed.) *Aristotelian Metaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 44–65.

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# Preface

This is my third book on intentionality—a fact that calls, if not for an apology, at least for an explanation. My first book, *The Mechanical Mind* (1995) was an elementary exposition and critique of how the computational theory of mind can give an account of mental representation (that is, intentionality). A second book, *Elements of Mind* (2001) presented the main concepts of a general theory of intentionality, and a defence of intentionalism, the thesis that all mental phenomena are intentional. In that book, I argued that intentionality is not a relation to its objects, because of the phenomenon of thought about the non-existent. But I gave no proper account of what it means to think about the non-existent, and in the years since that book was published I have come to realize that unless we understand non-existence we cannot understand intentionality. Hence the present book.

In the time I have been working on this book, I have been greatly helped by discussions with many people. My first attempts to think about these things were guided by the knowledge and insight of Tamar Gendler, Mike Martin, and Zoltán Szabó. Since then, I've profited from discussions with Jody Azzouni, Hanoch Ben-Yami, Bill Brewer, Ray Buchanan, Dave Chalmers, John Collins, Sacha Golob, Andrew Janiak, Mark Kalderon, Steve Makin, Hugh Mellor, Kevin Mulligan, Stephen Neale, Graham Priest, Panu Raatikainen, Greg Restall, Mark Sainsbury, Jonathan Schaffer, Barry C. Smith, Gianfranco Soldati, Alberto Voltolini, and Ed Zalta, in addition to those mentioned below. As ever, Katalin Farkas has been my closest philosophical discussant; every single thing I have said here is something I have discussed with her (sometimes many times) and every page bears her influence.

I am very grateful to the participants in a series of research seminars on existence and non-existence at the Institute of Philosophy in London between 2005 and 2008: many thanks here to Keith Allen, Stacie Friend, Colin Johnston, Rory Madden, Ian Phillips, Sarah Richmond, and Lee Walters. In the spring of 2010, I presented a draft of this book to a seminar in Cambridge, and benefitted greatly from the constructive criticism of Tim Button, Emily Caddick, Fraser MacBride, Makoto Suzuki, Rob

Trueman, Tatjana von Solodkoff, Adam Stewart-Wallace, Nathan Wildman, and Richard Woodward. My students Jamie Burns, Tom Graham, and Jeff Kaplan saved me from a number of errors.

In 2008, I had the honour to be the Seybert Lecturer at the Philosophy Department of the University of Pennsylvania. This allowed me to present the first version of this book, and gave me the opportunity to discuss my views in the excellent environment of that department. I would like to thank the Penn department as a whole, but especially Liz Camp, Gary Hatfield, and Michael Weisberg for their hospitality and much philosophical conversation. In 2010, the University of Umeå invited me to give its Burman Lectures, which were based on a heavily revised version of the Seybert lectures; special thanks to Sten Lindström and Pär Sündström for their hospitality and for very helpful discussion. In the spring of 2011, Katalin Farkas and I gave the Carnap Lectures at the University of Bochum, at the kind invitation of Albert Newen. My Carnap lectures summarized the main themes of the book as it had developed over the years since my first attempts to deal with this problem.

Various institutions have also provided helpful support along the way, and I would like to thank them here: the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council for a term's research leave in 2004; the (now sadly defunct) Collegium Budapest for a fellowship in 2003–4; David Chalmers's Centre for Consciousness at the Research School of the Social Sciences at the Australian National University for a fellowship in 2008; and the Philosophy Department of the Central European University in Budapest for a visiting professorship in 2011.

Peter Momtchiloff of OUP has provided typically generous and indefatigable support for the project, and he also gathered substantial critical comments from three referees. The final version of the book was written in response to their comments. I doubt if I will have entirely satisfied them; but I hope the disagreements that remain are the result of substantive differences of opinion rather than misunderstanding, confusion, or ignorance. I am deeply grateful to Peter for all his help, and to the referees for their excellent comments.

I have resisted the temptation to attribute particular insights or criticisms to particular individuals in footnotes. I hope this general acknowledgement here will suffice to record my gratitude to all those mentioned above.

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PART I

Objects

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# 1

## The Problem of Non-Existence

Discourse which is not ‘about reality’ is ‘about unreality’; and unreality is just that: it is not another reality.

(Cartwright 1960: 639)

### 1.1 ‘About’

Whenever someone thinks, they think about something. Or in other words: whenever someone thinks, there is something they think about. Some of the things they think about exist, and some of them do not. There are truths and falsehoods about the non-existent things they think about. And yet the entire world—the real world, reality, being, the universe, call it what you like—does not contain more than what exists.

The aim of this book is to defend these truisms.

Some philosophers will claim that they are not truisms, because they are not even *true*. They will say that it is not true that when someone thinks, there is something that they think about. So they will deny that this is another way of saying ‘whenever someone thinks they think about something’. Nor is it true, they will say, that some of the things we think about exist and some do not. They may even deny that there are any genuine truths about non-existent objects, since something has to exist for there to be genuine truths about it. I think these philosophers are wrong. So one of the things I have to do is to explain why they are wrong.

But I have to do more than this. It’s not enough to correct the mistakes of others. We all make mistakes—but not all are worth correcting. Nor is

it enough to defend truisms—not all truisms are worth defending. One must also have some reason for defending them. My own reason for defending these truisms is to defend a certain conception of the mind. The guiding thought behind this book is that we have no adequate understanding of the mind unless we also have an understanding of the non-existent.

My conception of the mind has at its heart the idea of intentionality, what Brentano (1874) called ‘the mind’s direction on its objects’ (see Crane 2009a). Our mental life seems to involve the presence to the mind—or apparent presence to the mind—of things in the world. These things can be mental or material, concrete or abstract, and—so I say—existent and non-existent. I believe that there are general characteristics of intentionality which apply to all, or almost all, intentional states and episodes. One of these is that every intentional state or episode has an object—something it is about or directed on. Another is that every intentional state or episode has a *content*—the way it represents what it is about or directed on. A third is that every intentional state involves what I call (following Searle 1983, 1992) an intentional *mode*, what some (e.g. Chalmers 2004) call a ‘manner’, or what many others call an ‘attitude’. By this I mean the psychological type by means of which the mind is directed upon its object, via a content: whether it is through belief, memory, hope, fear, etc. All these things I call intentional modes.

The notions of mode and content can be criticized; they form the beginnings of a theory of intentionality, and some might want to theorize about intentionality without using these notions. My fundamental starting point, however, is the notion of an intentional object, or an object of thought (and desire, fear, etc.—but for ease of expression, I will not always make this qualification). And I do not see how, or why, this notion should be rejected by anyone who takes the phenomenon of intentionality seriously. *Intentional objects* are, by definition, those things in the world which we think about; or those things which we take, or pretend, or otherwise represent to be in the world; or which we merely represent in thought. If there is such a thing as thinking about ‘things’ (in these various senses of ‘thing’) then there are intentional objects.

In this book, I will argue that thought about the non-existent is best construed, as my ‘truisms’ above suggest, in terms of thought about *non-existent intentional objects*. It is of the greatest importance to emphasize at the outset that by saying this, I do not mean that there is a special category of

*entities* or *quasi-entities* or *pseudo-entities* called ‘intentional objects’ or ‘non-existent objects’. Nor am I committing myself to—nor do I believe in—more *entities* than those that really exist. There are no non-existent entities. All entities exist. As my last truism makes explicit: reality does not contain more than what exists.

So the claim that there are non-existent intentional objects is not an ontological claim. It is simply another way of saying that we can genuinely think about things that don’t exist, and that we can think about them in the same way in which we think about existing things. I use the term ‘non-existent intentional object’ to describe what it is that we think *about* when we think about the non-existent. I believe that if we want to think of intentional states in terms of ‘aboutness’ at all, then we should also think in terms of what intentional states are about; and what intentional states are about are (by definition) intentional objects. Since we can think about things that don’t exist, it follows that some intentional objects do not exist. But if we accept this claim, we are already on the way to accepting one or more of the ‘truisms’ above.

I think we should accept these truisms because they form part of the best phenomenological account of intentionality. The notion of an intentional object should be the central notion of a theory of intentionality, and some intentional objects do not exist. Hence the theory of intentionality cannot do without the notion of a non-existent object. This is the first main thesis of this book.

However, accepting the truisms is not without problems. For one thing, they seem to be inconsistent with some widely-held views in contemporary philosophy (for example, the view that quantification and existence are intimately related). For another, they look as if they might be internally inconsistent: how can there *be* objects that do not exist if *being* and *existence* are the same thing? Even more fundamentally, perhaps, the very idea that there can be truths about non-existent things seems deeply problematic, once we accept the weakest possible assumptions about the relationship between truth and reality. If non-existent things are no part of reality, then how can there be any truths about them? This is what I will call the problem of non-existence. I think we should solve this problem by accepting that there are genuine truths about non-existent objects, but that we should be able to explain *why these truths are true* in terms of truths about existing things. This is the second main thesis of this book.

My aim is to combine two ideas. The first is a *phenomenological* conception of the objects of thought, a conception of what we think about that takes the appearances seriously and tries to preserve them as far as possible. And the second is a *reductionist* solution to the problem of non-existence. A reduction in this sense is an explanation of truths of one kind in terms of truths of another kind: in this case, truths about the non-existent in terms of truths about what exists. My ambition, then, is to accept the appearances as far as we can, while at the same time explaining them in terms of an underlying reality.

Having explained the overall aim of this book, I can now return to my truisms.

The first truism is that whenever someone thinks, they think about something. What do I mean by ‘thought’ and ‘thinking’ here? In one common usage, the word ‘thinking’ refers to mental episodes in which one is considering how things are, or are not, or might be. One can think (in this sense) about what is the case, what one wants to be the case, what one fears to be the case, what one hopes to be the case, and so on. Thinking in this sense need not be truth-directed: that is, one can be thinking about next week’s weather without this being a matter of mentally asserting, or claiming, that next week’s weather is a certain way. The words ‘I think that . . .’ can be used to indicate that one is making a judgement—that is, forming or expressing a belief that something is the case. In this book, I will not restrict ‘thinking’ to judgement, but will sometimes use it in a broader sense to encompass the other attitudes or modes just mentioned. In this broad sense, desire and fear (etc.) involve thinking; and it has some commonsense support too, since one can hardly desire or fear something without thinking about it.

Thinking is often conscious; indeed, I believe that the paradigmatic ordinary use of the word suggests consciousness. But there is also unconscious intentionality, although the distinction between the conscious and the unconscious will not be very important in what follows. This is not to say that consciousness itself is unimportant—on the contrary, conscious thought is one of the most important topics in the philosophy of mind. But consciousness is not especially central to the study of the non-existent. It is relevant that many thoughts about the non-existent are conscious, and I will often use examples of conscious acts of thinking. But I will not presuppose any particular account of it.

Next, aboutness. It is not possible for someone to think without thinking *about* something. They may be confused, misinformed, vague or in some way unspecific in what they are thinking, but they are aiming their thoughts at the world. As Brentano said, ‘in presentation, something is presented, in judgement something is affirmed or denied, in love loved, in hate hated, in desire desired and so on’ (1995: 88). As I have already made clear, these ‘somethings’ are what I call intentional objects.

I also call them objects of thought. In his posthumously published book *Objects of Thought*, whose title I shamelessly plagiarize with the mere addition of the definite article, A.N. Prior distinguished between two senses of ‘object of thought’ (1971). The first is *what we think*—when we think that something is the case. When we believe or judge, what we believe or judge is sometimes called the object of our thought; normally these things are called ‘propositions’ and states of thinking them are now called ‘propositional attitudes’ (the term comes from Russell 1921). But the second sense is what we think *about*: the objects of thought in what Prior called ‘a more natural sense’. Objects of thought in Prior’s second sense are intentional objects in my sense. Propositions *can* be intentional objects; but only when we think *about* propositions, not when they are simply what we think.

It should be obvious from what has been said so far that my explanation of the idea of an intentional object is in terms of the idea of ‘what a thought is about’, and so a lot in what follows will depend on the way I am understanding the idea of ‘aboutness’. I am using the word ‘about’ in a very liberal way, in the way John Hawthorne and David Manley (2012: 1, 9) call ‘loose’. Thoughts have a subject matter; what they are about may be the entire subject matter, or some part of it. The thought that the barbarians attacked the city is about the barbarians, about the city, and about the fact that they attacked the city: it is about all these things (see Ryle 1933). Context or interest may lead us to talk of one of these things rather than another as ‘what the thought is about’; but in fact, it is about all of them. In this way, this notion of ‘what a thought is about’ is similar to the linguist’s notion of *topic*. The topic of the sentence ‘The barbarians attacked the city’ might be the barbarians or the city, with these different topics sometimes picked out by emphasis. Thoughts, like sentences, can be about many different things. This is not, *pace* Goodman (1961) the same as saying they are about everything.