What are we referring to when the object of thought is not an object that genuinely exists? What is T. Crane's solution to the problem of non-existent objects?
By Ben Clark

This essay follows Frege (1892) in understanding *reference* as the use of signs, words and combinations thereof to *refer to* or *designate* a particular object. It is common to use terms which seem to refer to objects which do not genuinely exist, e.g. objects which have no spatiotemporal, physical materialisation, which are fictional, mythological, hypothetical or otherwise non-existent. Yet in using such terms, the problem arises of how words or thoughts can refer to something which, by definition, does not exist. Quine (1953, p.1) entitles this problem 'Plato's Beard': that 'Nonbeing must in some way be'.

Crane (2013) follows Brentano (1874) in defining an 'object of thought' as an *intentional object*: anything which a mind could be directed towards, which a mental state could be about. This does not imply an entity or a physical object. He maintains that objects of thought are not merely bundles of attributes, but appear to us, phenomenologically, as whole objects. By this view, thinking about Gandalf does not mean thinking about an imaginary humanoid with a long beard, grey/white hat and clock etc., but thinking about Gandalf directly as an entire object. This perspective may seem to correlate with everyday experience, but it is contestable, particularly since it seems hard to conceive an object without envisaging some things which could be construed as properties of it.

Crane follows a similar line to Frege (1892, p. 215) in suggesting that 'the thought remains the same whether "Odysseus" exists or not'. An object of thought is unaltered by whether there is a genuine object to refer to or not. A thought about Socrates is the same, whether he was real or whether he is fictional. Though the thought may be the same, there is a difference between what is said about objects of thought which refer to existent objects and those which do not exist.

This problem is compounded if it is held that there are truths about non-existent objects. In addition to negative existential statements, such as 'Unicorns don't exist', there are also statements like 'Unicorns have a single horn' or 'I am thinking about Gandalf', which seem to be true, and statements like 'Unicorns have seven horns', which appear to be false.

To contend that there are truths about non-existent objects means that it is insufficient to propose that non-existent objects simply 'fail to refer' whilst basing one's notion of truth in reference. To allow truths for non-existent objects runs counter to the approach taken by Frege (1892), who contends that speaking of non-existent objects has a sense but no referent. For Frege, it is not possible to make truth claims about non-existent objects: 'It is the striving for truth that drives us always to advance from the sense to the referent' (p.

216). As Russell (1905, p. 484) puts it, Frege takes non-referring terms 'to denote the null-class', so truth evaluations are not possible.

Nor is it easy to dismiss the problem of non-existent objects by suggesting that we are referring to our ideas, our objects of thought, when we talk about non-existent objects. Quine (1953) counters this line of thought by comparison to our ideas about existent objects: when I say that the Ashmolean exists, I am not talking about my Ashmolean-idea, but about the actual, physical Ashmolean. Thus, saying 'Gandalf does not exist' is not saying 'my Gandalf-idea does not exist', but that 'the actual Gandalf-object I am referring to does not exist', which is contradictory. Similarly, if I say, 'Gandalf is a hobbit', it would not be possible for others to correct my misapprehension if we take this to refer to my idea.

An alternative approach is to grant a different ontological status to non-existent objects, and to call this 'being' or 'subsistence', but to deem this to be less than full 'existence'. Russell (1905) suggests that it 'is self-contradictory to deny the being of anything', but this does not mean they exist. By this view, hobbits subsist but do not exist. Crane (2013) argues that this approach is unsatisfactory since it seems reasonable to make truth claims about non-existent objects, but this is impossible if one has excluded them from existence and takes existence as a basis for truth.

A more liberal ontological approach would take non-existent objects to exist in some way. For example, this could be to regard 'any grammatically correct denoting phrase as standing for an object', as Russell (1905) suggests Meinong's approach to be. So even phrases such as 'the present King of France' or 'round square' are permitted to be objects. But, as Russell argues, taking non-existent objects to exist commits one to accepting contradictions, e.g. Gandalf exists and does not exist; the round square is round and not round, etc. Quine (1953) similarly argues that taking non-existent objects as mere 'possible entities' would imply that we should allow un-actualised possible entities, which leads to contradictions such as the round square; and it is impossible to test the validity of contradictions.

Quine's solution is to argue that the most that we can do is to say that 'there is something which takes a particular set of bound variables' (Quine, 1953), i.e. that it is only necessary to say that something has the qualities it has, each of which take values within a certain domain. In doing so, he argues against the presupposition that there must be an object for a singular term to be meaningful. In separating the meaning of statements from their existence, Quine sidesteps the problem of non-existent objects. This results in a similar position to Frege, saying that statements about non-existent objects are meaningful without providing a basis for assessing truths about non-existent objects.

Throughout these approaches – broadly speaking – being too permissive with what is considered to be existent results in contradictions, whilst being strict results in an inability to assert that certain truisms are true. It is in response to this that Crane (2013) suggests a way of permitting truths to be held about non-existent objects, but to restrict what can be held to be true about them by reducing them to truths about things that do exist, without implying that they exist (or even subsist) in any sense.

Crane departs from Quine by recognising the importance of specifying which things exist and arguing that, when we say 'there are *xs*', we do not commit ourselves to an ontology containing *xs*. Crane contends that using the term 'there is' need not imply existence. He suggests disambiguating the use of the existential quantifier symbol (∃) between its quantifying use (saying 'some...', 'all...') and the ontological commitment of 'there exists'. He thus follows a 'free logic' approach in which singular terms can be used without implications of external reference. This implies a clear distinction between things which exist and things which do not, and non-existent objects are not part of reality. All objects of thought are representations of some kind, but some do not refer to existent objects.

Crane considers some properties to be existence-entailing (or substantial) properties (such as 'being a coin') whereas other properties are not (e.g. 'being circular'). He utilises Schiffer's (2003) idea of 'pleonastic attributes' to refer to properties which we can mean or believe without entailing actual existence. But these things and their properties are what McGuinn (2002) calls 'representation-dependent', which means that they rely on being represented in some way, e.g. in a picture, in a book, in thought, etc. (The only property which non-existent objects have which is not representation-dependent is that of non-existence). This reductionist approach bases truths about non-existent objects in truths about what exists. For example, Gandalf is represented in novels; if I were to claim that 'Gandalf is a hobbit', someone could refer me to a passage in a novel to refute my stance.

This approach is similar to the aforementioned approach which suggests that non-existent objects refer to our ideas. Crane avoids Quine's criticism, however, by distinguishing between statements like 'the Ashmolean is a museum', which is existence-entailing, and 'Gandalf is a fictional wizard', which is not and does not imply existence, and then by altering the basis of truth from solely one of reference to the object itself, by an incorporation of references to other objects – such as text, pictures, language – to which a truth can be reduced.

Overall, Crane proposes a clear solution to the problem of non-existence, on one hand avoiding contradiction and the need to grant ontological status to non-existent objects, on the other enabling truths to be asserted about them. Crane's thesis is not beyond criticism: It

is unclear whether his argument that thought can be based on objects rather than attributes is entirely watertight. It may also be possible to criticise Crane's argument as 'begging the question', by supposing that non-existent objects are just mental objects (though Crane challenges this criticism). These concerns aside – which a longer essay might address – Crane's solution appears logically consistent, conforms to many common-sense notions of reality and accounts for truisms about non-existent objects which other theories have not.

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