

Modes of Being and Non-Being: Existence, Occurrence, and Validity

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Abstract

Existence as reflected in natural language is not a univocal notion, but divides into different modes of being, such as existence (in, roughly, the sense of endurance) and occurrence. One aim of the paper is to distinguish sharply between abstract artifacts and non-existent objects (e.g., plans vs. planned events that fail to occur); another is to argue for validity as a mode of being distinct from existence, as well as for corresponding distinctions among non-being.

1 Introduction

It is generally acknowledged that existence in natural language can be conveyed by existence predicates, foremost of course the predicate *exist*. The standard view about existence in philosophy has been that existence is a univocal notion applying just to anything there is. Thus, Meinongians take *exist* to be a predicate that is true of existent objects and false of nonexistent entities; other philosophers try to avoid a commitment to nonexistent entities and take *exist* to apply to all entities and yield false sentences with a non-referring subject (in one way or another).

This is not the notion, though, that is reflected in existence predicates in natural language. Natural language rather displays different existence predicates for different types of entities. As has often been observed, *exist* is in fact reserved to enduring and abstract objects, whereas *occur* and *happen* apply to events and only events. In addition, there is the existence predicate *obtain*, which is specific to facts. The metaphysics reflected in natural language thus displays a notion of existence that divides into different modes of being for different types of entities, rather than constituting a univocal notion.

This paper has two aims. The first is to review our linguistically reflected Meinongian intuitions. I will argue for a sharp distinction between abstract artifacts which as existents come with the mode of being of existence and nonexistent, intentional objects which are

generated by pretend or unsuccessful referential acts. Abstract artifacts include stories and their parts (e.g., fictional characters) as well as plans and projects (realizable by acts or events).

The second aim is to argue for another mode of existence, validity. Validity (as conveyed by *is valid* and similar predicates in other languages) is the mode of existence of certain sorts of social objects, for example laws (Moltmann 2020). With laws, the predicate *be valid* seems to have the very same application conditions as *exist*:

- (1) a. The law still exists.
- b. The law is still valid.

However, validity constitutes a mode of being distinct from the mode of being conveyed by *exist*, and there are cases where *exist* and *be valid* apply to the same things, but convey different things.

2 The approach

Let me first clarify the methodological background. The approach that I will take is that of descriptive metaphysics that pays particular attention to intuitions reflected in linguistic data (or natural language ontology). Descriptive metaphysics in that sense has as its subject matter the ontology that underlies such linguistically reflected intuitions, rather than the ontology of what there ultimately is.

Taking that approach, it is quite apparent that natural language displays a Meinongian view.¹ First, reference and quantification in natural language as such is neutral as regards existence / non-existence (unless particular restriction of the quantifier domain is intended). Second, subjects of true negative existential sentences stand for nonexistent objects. The latter may not be so obvious from standard examples discussed in the philosophical literature as in (2):²

- (2) The golden mountain / Pegasus does not exist.

¹ The view should actually be attributed already to a range of philosophers preceding Meinong, starting with the stoics, see (Rami/Köpping 2023).

² See, for example (Sainsbury 2015) for an account of negative existentials without non-existents focusing exclusively on examples as in (2).

However, examples such as those in (3-4) require ‘nonexistent objects’ for the compositional semantics of the subject term:

- (3) a. The building that is described in the guide does not exist.
b. The woman John mentioned does not exist.
- (4) The house John is imagining and in which Bill lives exists.

That is, the occurrence of intentional verbs in the relative clauses in (3-4) sets up nonexistent, intentional objects which are then what the entire NP will refer to.³ The compositional analysis of such NPs goes along best with a syntactic analysis along the lines indicated in (5), where *building* is taken to originate from inside the relative clause as a complement of the intentional, non-existence-entailing verb *describe* (Moltmann 2015):⁴

- (5) The e [that [e building] is described in the guide] does not exist.

Thus, nonexistent objects act as semantic values and are needed for the compositional semantics of sentences with intentional verbs (*imagine, conceive, think about, refer to, mention, intend*). They are the objects of reference, description, mentioning, thinking about when those acts involve unsuccessful acts of reference or acts of merely pretending to refer. Nonexistent objects are also the objects of imagining and conceiving as acts involving acts of pretend reference. Acts of unsuccessful reference or pretend reference can be called ‘quasi-referential acts’ (Moltmann 2015). Nonexistent objects that play a role in sentences as in (3-4) thus depend on quasi-referential acts. Nonexistent objects act as semantic values only in virtue of unsuccessful or pretend acts of reference, as semantic values of NPs, they do not come for free: they require the description of a quasi-referential act in the sentence, or at least an implicit reference to such an act. Quantification over nonexistent objects is not possible

³ This may also be achieved by other modifiers than full relative clauses, such as *imagined, mentioned, and described (the described building, the imagined house)*, though these arguably are reduced relative clauses.

⁴⁴ *Describe* actually has two readings, one on which it is not existence-entailing and one on which it is:

- (i) a. John described a unicorn (as a white horse with a single horn).
b. John described his cat (as a huge fluffy thing).

On either reading, the complement does not give the content, but only the object of the description, as the *as*-phrases, which serve to indicate the content, make clear.

when no quasi-referential act is mentioned, as seen in the contrast between the a-examples and b-examples below:

(6) a. ?? The church in the village does not exist.

b. The church *mentioned* in the guide does not exist.

(7) a. ?? There is a house that does not exist.

b. There is a house John *described* that does not exist.

The quasi-referential act need not be explicitly described as in (3-4). The examples standardly discussed in the literature involve implicit reference to a chain of quasi-referential acts associated with the subject position, as indicated below:

(8) [The golden mountain / Pegasus]_i does not exist.

This is apparent from the contrast to (9), on the most natural reading on which (9) does not involve implicit reference to a chain of quasireferential acts:

(9) ??? The blue apples in this room do not exist

Negative existentials do not permit subjects that are just empty descriptions which are not associated with a quasireferential act.

The relation between quasi-referential acts and the non-existent objects on which they depend is not a causal relation (which would be inapplicable), but is better considered a generative relation of ‘ontological’ dependence (Irmak 2021). ‘Nonexistent objects’ thus are entities ‘generated by’ unsuccessful or pretend referential (mental or linguistic) acts (or states). Nonexistent objects, or what I will call ‘intentional objects’, need to be distinguished from (existing) fictional characters. The latter lead to true existence statements when referred to by close appositions as in (10a), whereas the simple name in (10b) can only stand for the intentional object:

(10) a. The *fictional character* Hamlet exists.

b. Hamlet does not exist.

(*Fictional*) *character* is a sortal for a fictional object, which enables reference to a fictional object in (10a), whereas a sortal like *horse* is not. Thus, the two sentences below appear true, where again *myth* is a sortal for the intended product of the referential act (the myth):

- (11) a. The *fictional horse* Pegasus does not exist.
b. The *myth* of Pegasus exists.

Nonexistent, intentional objects thus are generated by quasi-referential acts (or better by chains of coordinated quasi-referential acts, in the sense of coordination as intended coreference, as roughly in Fine 2007). By contrast, fictional characters are ‘existent’ entities that are the intended products of pretend acts of reference, generated also by the intention to produce a story. Fictional characters in fact exist in virtue of being part of a story, which is the product of the fiction-creating act. Fictional characters as parts of fictions exist just in case the fiction exists. There are two sorts of ontological dependence: intentional objects depend on quasi-referential acts (involving attributions of properties); fictional characters depend mental state of intending a fictional character / story. This means that a piece of fiction about a single entity generates two sorts of objects, one of which has the status of ‘nonexistent’.

3 Existence and modes of being

Natural language does not reflect a univocal notion of existence, but rather different modes of being, that is, existence predicates for different types of objects. Thus, the existence predicate *exist* is actually reserved for enduring objects (e.g., material objects) as well as abstract objects (e.g., mathematical objects). By contrast, *occur*, *happen*, *take place* are the existence predicates for events (Hacker 1982, Cresswell 1986, Moltmann 2013, 2020):

- (12) a. The building / tree / novel / opera exists.
b. The riot really occurred / happened / ??? existed.
c. ??? The rain still exists.

The distinction between *exist* and *occur/happen* reflects the way entities relate to space and time. Given how part-related expressions (e.g., *part of*) apply in natural language, material objects have parts only in space and not in time, in contrast to events, which can have parts in time. Then the meaning of *exist* can be formulated as endurance in the sense of complete

presence throughout a time, as in (13a), whereas the meaning of *occur* will roughly be as in (13b) (Moltmann 2013, 2020):⁵

- (13) a. For an entity d and a temporal or spatial location t , $\text{exist}(d, t)$ iff d is *completely present* throughout t .⁶
- b. For an entity d and a time t , $\text{occur}(d, t)$ iff for any two distinct parts t' and t'' , there are distinct parts d' and d'' of d such that d' is at t' and d'' at t'' .

Complete presence of an entity d at a location d roughly means all the (essential) parts of d are present at t . Given (13a), *exist* will not be applicable to events, since events applicable to abstract objects if abstract objects are taken to exist at every time. With (13b), *occur*, *happen*, and *take place* will not be applicable to enduring objects since those won't have temporal parts that could cover an interval.

There are interesting semantic selectional differences regarding event-related existence predicates:

- (14) a. The demonstration took place yesterday.
b. The demonstration happened / occurred yesterday.
- (15) a. The attack took place / happened / occurred yesterday.
b. The meeting took place / ?? occurred / happened yesterday.
- (16) a. The meeting did not take place.
b. ??? The rain / the tempest did not take place.

For an event to 'take pace', it needs to have been planned, perhaps coordinated with others. In fact, the notion of a plan of an event is rather interesting in the context of existence.

The contrast between nonexistent, intentional objects and fictions, including fictional characters appears also in the domain of events, namely in contrast between planned events in the one hand and plans, organizations, and projects on the other. Plans are products of acts projecting events into the future and are distinct from planned events, which are nonexistent events. Actual or merely planned events only allow for event-specific existence predicates. By contrast, plans and projects themselves permit the application of *exist*:

⁵ The complete presence condition is due to (Wiggings 1980), but see (Fine 2006) for an account without that notion.

⁶ *Exist* can also be relativized to a spatial location, see (Fine 2006) and (Moltmann 2020).

(17) The planned event did not take place / # did not exist.

(18) a. The plan (of our trip) exists.

b. The project (of a major demonstration) exists.

Exist is of course equally applicable to plans for material objects:

(19) a. The project (of a new building) already exists.

b. The plan of a future construction exists.

Musical compositions have the same sort of status as abstract artifacts as plans and they contrast with concrete performances in the way plans contrast with planned events. That is, musical compositions exist or fail to exist, whereas concrete performances take place or fail to take place:

(20) a. The opera exists, but it has never been performed.

b. The performance of the opera ??? existed / ok took place yesterday.

Semantically, the contrast is due to the different contributions of *plan* as the head of an NP and *planned* as an adnominal modifier:

(21) a. The planned demonstration took place today.

b. ? The planned demonstration existed already yesterday.

Planned as a modifier refers to the quasireferential act that generates an intentional, nonexistent object; *plan* as the head of an NP ensures that the NP itself refers to the abstract artifact that is the plan. Plans differs from planned events in that they can exist, and exist without realization, planned events if they won't take place are non-existents, or rather non-occurents.

Plans are abstract artifacts produced by intentional acts. They are what I call 'attitudinal objects' (Moltmann 2017, 2019). They have the existence conditions of artifacts, being existence-dependent on the act that created them. In addition, they have satisfaction or realization conditions: plans are realized by actions or material objects.

Plans are on a par with fictional characters, which are parts of pieces of fiction. Both are abstract artifacts and have the mode of being of abstract artifacts, as conveyed by the predicate *exist*. As plans match fictional characters, planned events are intentional objects (like fictional horses).

Why is *exist* the existence predicate for plans and projects that concern events, even though *exist* is inapplicable to events? The explanation can simply resort to the endurance condition (13a) conveyed by *exist*: plans and projects as abstract artifacts are completely present throughout a time, just like all abstract objects, whether representing objects or events (and whether they are realized or satisfied by objects or events)

How long do fictions last? Clearly, intuitions that they last as long as there is a concrete realization, a physical copy or a memory (Thomasson 1998). In the case of plans, there is also an intuition that a plan is no longer valid even if it is still ‘around’, that is entertained, as a plan that no longer holds. This leads us to another mode of being, validity.

4 Validity as a mode of being

Validity, I want to argue, is a third distinctive mode of being. With some objects, *is valid* and *obtains* appears to mean just the same as *exist*, namely laws, rules and alike:

(22) The law still exists.

(23) a. The law still obtains.

b. The law is still valid.

What determines the lifespan of abstract artifacts like rules and laws is not that they are physically manifest, e. g. written down. Rather what matters for the lifespan of an abstract artifact like a law or rule is their intended validity. That validity may have been established at an initial declaration or else subsequent acts of maintaining or terminating it.⁷

There are a range of entities that have only validity and not existence as their mode of being, or so our linguistically reflected intuitions tell us. These include certain types of attitudinal

⁷ *Obtain* and German *bestehen* convey a somewhat weaker form than *is valid*, applying not only to laws but also habits:

(i) a. Das Gesetz besteht, dass man Steuern zahlen muss.

‘The law obtains that one needs to pay taxes.’

b. Hier besteht die Gewohnheit, dass man morgens Kaffee trinkt.

‘Here obtains the habit that one drinks coffee in the morning.’

Obtain and *bestehen* are applicable also to objects such as facts, states, and states of affairs.

objects, such as hopes, assumptions, claims, as well as modal objects such as possibilities and offers.⁸ German *bestehen* ('obtain') applies particularly well to such objects:

(24) a. Es besteht die Hoffnung, dass es regnen werde.

‘There is the hope that it will rain.’

b. Die Hoffnung besteht, dass es regnen werde.

‘The hope exists that it will rain.’

(25) a. Es besteht die Annahme, dass S.

It obtains the assumption that S.

b. Die Annahme besteht, dass S.

The assumption obtains that S.

(26) a. Die Möglichkeit besteht, dass Hans gewählt wird.

‘The possibility exists that John will be elected.’

b. Sein Angebot besteht immer noch, die Villa zu mieten.

‘His offer still obtains to rent the villa.’

Not all attitudinal objects, though, can have validity (in the relevant sense); and for those that can't there do not seem to be suitable existence predicates. Thus, validity is not the mode of existence of attitudinal objects like judgments and remarks, but neither is existence:

(27) a. ??? Annas Urteil, dass der Vorschlag gut ist, besteht / existiert.

‘Ann’s judgment that the proposal is good obtains / exists.’

b. ?? Joes Bemerkung war gültig / bestand / existierte.

‘Joe’s remark was valid / obtained / existed.’

What is of particular interest is that validity and existence may diverge even for objects to which both notions are applicable. Attitudinal objects that involve commitment and can be made part of the ‘common ground’, such as claims, there is a sense in which they can be ‘around’ past the time at which they have been made, and even past the time at which the agent endorses them. In such cases, existence concerns ‘all’ levels. But this is not so for validity if the latter is withdrawn by the agent making the claim:

⁸ For the distinction between attitudinal and modal objects see (Moltmann 2017).

(28) a. John's thesis / claim is no longer valid.

b. ? John's thesis / claim no longer exists.

(28a) can be true even if the contribution of the locutionary act is still 'around', i.e., is part of what is accepted or entertained as common ground.

With modal objects such as rules, *exist* and *be valid* carry different presuppositions when the existence predicate is not time-relative:

(29) a. The rule that one should leave a tip is invalid in Japan.

b. The rule that one should leave a tip does not exist.

(29b) presupposes that there was an attempted act of reference to the rule, but not (29a). (29a) rather presupposes a statement of the rule with unsuccessful declaration of its validity. That is, it presupposes a successful *locutionary act* (in Austin's 1962 sense), but not illocutionary act, a declarative speech act instating the rule. Abstract artifacts that fail to bear their mode of being, validity, thus need to meet particular preconditions on their being relevant locutionary objects, entertainings, saying, proposals.

More generally, one needs to distinguish not only different modes of being, but also different modes of non-being. Entities of which existence or occurrence is denied generally require quasireferential acts on which they depend. Entities of which 'taking place' is denied require there to have been a plan or coordinated organization. Nonexistence or nonoccurrence, non-having taken place, and non-validity thus form different modes of non-being, imposing different conditions on the nonexistent entities to which they can apply.

Validity also holds for artifacts that have a material base, in which case there is a clear divergence of the mode of being of validity and that of existence (which applies to the material base). An example is invitations:

(30) a. The invitation was sent out.

b. The invitation is no longer valid.

c. ? The invitation no longer exists.

There is a reading of (30b) on which *exists* applies to the letter, but not the invitation with its modal force. Coins and stamps present another relevant case:

- (31) a. The coin is no longer valid.
b. The coin no longer exists.
- (32) a. The stamp is no longer valid.
b. The stamp no longer exists.

The truth conditions of (31a) and (31b) as well as of (32a) and (32b) are quite different. Coins and stamps can exist without being valid, unlike unwritten laws, rules, invitations.

Validity is the mode of being of entities whose endurance has to be declared or in some other way socially sanctioned. Such entities may come with a physical manifestation, which as an object in itself is an enduring material object that carries the mode of existence rather than validity. The difference is also manifest in the way *nonexistent* and *invalid* as adnominal modifiers are understood: a nonexistent stamp is one fails to be there materially, an invalid stamp is one that exists materially, but lacks validity.

5 Conclusions

This paper has clarified the distinction between artifacts with their satisfaction conditions and their parts (which may be of the sort of fictional characters); it has also argued for validity being a mode of being apart from existence (endurance) and occurrence (perdurance). Finally, it has shown that not only existence as reflected in existence predicates in natural language divides into different modes of being. There are also different modes of non-being to be distinguished for non-existence.

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