

WHAT 'X DOES NOT EXIST' SAYS ABOUT WE WHO DO EXIST

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DRAFT OF 6/29/20

1. Overdetermination

Imagine an empty world e . *Dogs exist* is going to be false in a world like that. But *why* is *Dogs exist* false in e ? We are pulled in two directions, I think. One reason *Dogs exist* is false there is the lack of dogs in e . Another, though, seemingly just as good, is the lack of *anything* in e . Unless the two reasons are somehow in competition, the falsity of *Dogs exist* is (very slightly) overdetermined.

How strange should we find this? Not very. Explanatory overdetermination is not uncommon.¹ Say the doorbell button was depressed by you yesterday, and a snowball today. Did the bell ring “for the same reason” both days? Yes, since *something* pushed the button both days. And yet no, since it was only yesterday that *someone* pushed it. But then it seems there were *two* reasons at work yesterday: someone’s pushing the button, and something’s pushing it.

Consider now whether *Dogs exist* is false for “the same reason” in e as in a world f that contains cats, but no dogs. Thinking of e ’s absolute emptiness as the falsemaker, we want to say no. Thinking of the lack of dogs, we want to say yes. It is hard to see how these judgments can be reconciled without allowing that *Dogs exist* is false in e both because e is empty, and because it is free of dogs.

If the falsity of an existence-claim can be overdetermined in this way, then the question arises whether one falsemaker could be in play without the other. Certainly we can imagine a nonempty world which is lacking in dogs— f was one—but I am wondering

¹Sider [2003]

about our same old empty world e . Could there be an existence-claim $Xs\ exist$ that is false there solely because e has nothing in it whatsoever— not because of any fact about Xs in particular.

Objection 1: If the world is empty, then a second fact obtaining in it is that it is free of Xs . And the second fact is surely another falsemaker for $Xs\ exist$. Plausible as this seems, the argument has a gap. That e is empty ensures there is a fact obtaining in it about the number of Xs , only if facts like that are available in the first place. Sometimes a predicate is semantically defective in a way that prevents it from figuring in the specification of facts. It might be a nonsense or dummy predicate, for instance, like *whatsit*. *Whatsits exist* is false in e , not because e is free of whatsits, but because nothing exists in e whatsoever.

Objection 2: Doesn't the fact that *Whatsits exist* contains a nonsense-word make it unevaluable? The principle invoked here seems doubtful. For one thing, it is often thought—see below—that $A\&B$ can be false wholly on account of whatever it is that makes A is false. Whether B is false, whether it is even evaluable, is beside the point; it might be pure nonsense. $0=1 \& BLAH$ is false, then, even if $BLAH$ lacks truth-value, because of facts about 0 and 1. *Whatsits exist* is admittedly not a conjunction. But it appears at least to be logically equivalent to a conjunction, viz. *Some things exist, and among the existing things are some whatsits*. Since the first conjunct here is false in e , the conjunction must presumably be false too. Assuming that logical equivalents agree in truth-value, *Whatsits exist* will have to be false in e as well.

2. Propositions

Discussions of nonexistence often proceed on the assumption that a sentence is evaluable only if it expresses a proposition. Here is Kripke, for instance, on the apparent falsity of *Bandersnatches exist*:

[A] certain sentence about bandersnatches seems to have a truth-value, but this does not mean that sentences containing 'bandersnatch' express

ordinary propositions. And this I regard as a very substantial problem (Kripke [2011b], 65)

There is no such “ordinary proposition” as the proposition that bandersnatches exist, because the term *bandersnatch* lacks a referent. If the sentence strikes us as evaluable, that, Kripke suggests, is because we associate with it (by a kind of semantic courtesy) a higher-order proposition to the effect that there are no true propositions about bandersnatches to the effect that they exist. Similarly *Holmes exists* is false only insofar as we associate with it the second-order proposition that there is a true proposition about Holmes to the effect that he exists.

One might wonder why, if the name’s emptiness makes trouble for the alleged proposition that HOLMES EXISTS, it doesn’t make trouble as well for the proposition that THERE IS A TRUE PROPOSITION ABOUT HOLMES TO THE EFFECT THAT HE EXISTS. Kripke points in reply to a difference in how the names are used. *Holmes* occurs in the first sentence in a referential position. But not the second; “the phrase ‘about Holmes’ [has in the second sentence] a special sort of quasi-intensional use.”

Before getting into the details of this special usage, it is puzzling why *S* should go unevaluable, in Kripke’s view, when there is no such thing as the proposition that *S*. The observation above, that $0=1 \ \& \ B$ would normally be counted false just on the strength of its first conjunct, was made by Kripke himself in “Outline in a Theory of Truth.” Given that initial conjunct, whether *B* is paradoxical, or nonsensical like *BLAH* or *Bandersnatches are frumious*, or fails for these or other reasons to express a proposition, doesn’t save the conjunction from falsity.² $0=1 \ \& \ B$ looks like a counterexample, then, to the notion that *S* is evaluable only if “the proposition that *S*” exists, assuming at least that there can be no proposition that $A \ \& \ B$ unless there is a proposition that *B*.

A second, related, point, is that it should be enough for *S*’s falsity that it says *something* false— even something which, for whatever reason, cannot be regarded as *the* proposition that *S*.

²Kripke [1975].

A third point grows out of what Kripke calls “the risky nature of truth.” Evaluability is too variable across worlds to be underwritten by an on-off property like proposition-expressingness. Just as “heterological” puts clear demands on “short” but not on itself, a sentence may put clear demands on some worlds while making no logical contact with others. $0=1 \ \& \ \text{BLAH}$ gets traction in every world. But suppose that $0=1$ is replaced with a contingent falsehood like *Mars is inhabited*. *Mars is inhabited* & *BLAH* gets traction in our world, but not in worlds where Mars is inhabited. *Whatsits exist* gets traction only perhaps in the empty world.

One might ask, on the theory that a sentence inherits its truth-value from the proposition it expresses—what it overall says—how *S* can be true or false if there is no such thing as what it overall says. This is a fair question, but it is not unanswerable. While propositions in the what-is-said sense figure in one model of truth-value acquisition, it is not the only model available. Another associates sentences with truthmakers and falsemakers, and links *S*’s truth-aptitude in *w* to the issue of whether any -makers obtain there. This model appears indeed to lie behind the Strong Kleene valuation scheme alluded to above, on which $A \vee B$ is true provided a disjunct is true, and $A \ \& \ B$ is false when a conjunct is false. These are the truth-tables you’d expect if

- i truth (falsity) goes with possession of a truthmaker (falsemaker),
- ii disjunctions inherit their truthmakers from their disjuncts, and
- iii disjunctions inherit their falsemakers from their conjuncts.

Thus Kripke’s puzzle about the truth of nonexistence-claims can be accused of overlooking Kripke’s theory of truth. Sentences are true, on that theory, not because of “what they say all in all,” but because their truth is grounded *somehow or other* in the non-semantic facts. More generally *S* gets traction (is evaluable) in *w* if it has a truthmaker or falsemaker there. The point is not just that other putative -makers need not obtain in *w*. They may not

even “make sense” in w , as it makes no sense to speak of something being a bandersnatch in the empty world.³

3. Traction

The sentence *Bandersnatches exist* strikes us as false. How can it be false, Kripke asks, when it fails to express a proposition? Of course Kripke is talking about falsity in our world, but the question arises already for e , the empty world. How can *Bandersnatches exist* be false in e , when it fails to express a proposition?⁴

The view we’ve been toying with is that there is more than one possible reason why an existence-claim might be false. The specific reason, to do with K s in particular, indeed fails for bandersnatches. But the general reason—that nothing exists—holds in e in full glory. And it is all one needs to falsify *Bandersnatches exist*. Once again, *Bandersnatches exist* does not need to express a proposition to be false.

This is all well and good, but what we really want to know is not how can *Bandersnatches exist* be false in the empty world, when it fails to express a proposition, but how it can be false in a nonempty world like our own. Does the idea extend to worlds that are populated?

Imagine a world v stipulated to contain only concrete, as opposed to abstract, objects. Why is it false in v that the Russell set ($\{x \mid x \notin x\}$) exists? Again the result seems overdetermined: the sentence is false both for logical reasons—nothing *could* satisfy its existence-conditions—and metaphysical ones—sets are abstract and v contains only concreta.

³The point can be taken further. Although all truths have a truthmaker on the Strong Kleene version of Kripke’s theory, they may not on other versions. $B \vee \neg B$ is true on the supervaluational scheme because its structure ensures that it is true on the (possibly false) hypothesis that B is evaluable. The most we can ask in such cases is an *account* of why S counts as true (false), for instance, that S is entailed by a truth P (entails a falsehood Q). Not that we’ll be pursuing this in the present paper, one may want to keep an open mind on whether a theory of negative singular existentials must provide truthmakers for these statements, as opposed to reasons of some other sort—an account of why they are true.

⁴It is not sufficient just to be able to say that it is false, [if there is to be a proposition] one has to be able to say under what circumstances it would have been true, if any” (Kripke [2011a], 68).

Now let's consider instead the Russell *shmet*: the shmet of all x that do not belong to themselves. *Shmets* here are a made-up category, like *whatsits*, except that shmets are stipulated to be, like sets, abstract. Does the Russell shmet exist in v ?

The set failed to exist because $\{x \mid Fx\}$, if it exists, contains all and only F s, and this leads to contradiction if F expresses non-self-membership. But the shmets are subject to no such principle—not because they violate the principle, but because they are radically underdefined. Of the two reasons we gave for the Russell set not existing, then, the first does not apply. The Russell shmet does not fail for *logical* reasons to show up in v . That still leaves, however, the second reason, that the Russell shmet would be abstract, and v contains only concrete things.⁵

But although this is progress, it is not much help with bandersnatches. For one thing, bandersnatches are supposed to be concrete, not abstract. Also the actual world is, it seems, more ontologically varied than v . But there is a deeper problem. Sets are not just *supposed* to be abstract, they on many views *have* to be abstract.⁶ And it is not clear that bandersnatches *have* to be concrete.

4. Contingency

What is the necessity involved when one says that sets “have to” be abstract? The phrase could be understood metaphysically, to mean that sets are essentially, or by nature, abstract. It could be understood semantically, to mean that sets are analytically abstract. Or it could be understood epistemically, to mean that set are abstract as an a priori matter. Any of these “have to”s could be used to argue that sets’ abstractness prevents them from existing in v .

⁵A third reason to count the sentence false will be brought in later. The Russell shmet exists only if something is a shmet; something is a shmet only if it satisfies the predicate \hat{x} (x is a shmet); nothing does satisfy that predicate. See [Stalnaker \[1977\]](#).

⁶Pace Lewis on the empty set ([Lewis \[1986\]](#)).

Now, bandersnatches are in some sense *supposed* to be concrete. Whether they *have* to be concrete in any of the three ways suggested is a further question, and there are reasons to doubt their destiny is quite so inescapable as that of sets.⁷

Metaphysical: That things of kind *K* are necessarily concrete would ordinarily be sourced either in the generic essence of the kind, or the individual essences of its instances. But neither party exists in this case. Bandersnatches have no essence that needs respecting, since there aren't any around to set the standard. Here I am echoing Kripke on unicorns. Just as one can't say of a possible beast that to be a unicorn, it needs to be of the same kind as *these* unicorns, one can't demand of a candidate bandersnatch that it be of the same kind as *these* bandersnatches.⁸

Semantical: Bandersnatches are not analytically concrete either. They have been often been regarded, by those who believe in them, as abstract, even the frumious ones portrayed as concrete in the poem. This is the view, for instance, of Nathan Salmon.⁹ Salmon's theory of bandersnatches may be mistaken, but it is not *analytically* wrong.

Epistemic: Could it be *epistemically* necessary (a priori) that bandersnatches are concrete, or that Vulcan is closer to the Sun than Mercury? Kripke's notion of reference-fixing seems to provide a model here.

- (1) Suppose the reference of *n* is fixed by *the F*.
- (2) Then we know a priori that *n if it exists is an F (and nothing else is F)*.
- (3) *n exists* thus a priori implies that *Something is F*.
- (4) To learn *n doesn't exist* is to learn that some such implication is false.

⁷Similar questions could in principle be raised about sets.

⁸Kripke [1980].

⁹Salmon [1998]

But it is the rare name that has its reference fixed by a description in the strong sense here supposed.¹⁰ This is why Kripke quickly moves on to his preferred model of initial baptism followed by chains of reference-preserving intentions.

Some have argued that the initial baptism has no chance of success unless a sortal comes in to disambiguate, and that we know a priori that the sortal attaches if the referent exists. Kripke considers this in connection with referents that do exist and strongly rejects that they must turn out to be of the kind initially stipulated or supposed:

Even if a sortal is used to disambiguate an ostensive reference, surely it need not be held a priori to be true of the object designated. Couldn't Dobbin turn out to belong to a species other than horses (though superficially he looked like a horse), Hesperus to be a planet rather than a star, or Lot's guests, even if he names them, to be angels rather than men? (Kripke [1980], 116, note 58)

If an existing animal like Dobbin could turn out not to be a horse, it is hard to see why other animals, thought to be nonexistent, could not surprise us both on the score of existence and biological type. Why should unicorns, if there are any, not turn out to be a previously unknown sort of horse; this is one of the likelier scenarios, surely, on which unicorns turn out to exist. But then it is not a priori that unicorns, if there are any, are non-horses.

That names do not tend to be *acquired* ostensively only strengthens the point. Suppose that someone has "picked up the name by a chain of communication leading back to an ostension." Why in that case would

the sortal allegedly used in the ostension be, in any sense, part of the 'sense' of the name for them? An extreme case: A mathematician's wife overhears her husband muttering the name 'Nancy'. She wonders whether

¹⁰"I also think, contrary to most recent theorists, that the reference of names is rarely or almost never fixed by means of description. And by this I do not just mean what Searle says: "It's not a single description, but rather a cluster, a family of properties that fixes the reference." I mean that properties in this sense are not used at all." (Kripke, I&N, 157 in Munitz)

Nancy, the thing to which her husband referred, is a woman or a Lie group.
(Kripke [1980], loc. cit.)

To bring this closer to our present concerns, there is also the possibility that Nancy, who is figuring let's suppose in the husband's dream, does not in fact exist. Nancy might turn out to be a living thing, or a group, or nothing at all. Suppose it's the third option that obtains: there is no such thing as Nancy. Although she turns out not to exist, she *might* have turned out, if existent, to be either a group or a living thing. She might even have turned out to be a group *played* in the dream by a human being, e.g., the so-called Monster group played by a monstrous woman. Just as bandersnatches might turn out, if they exist, to be mathematical objects played in the story by monstrous animals.¹¹

Now we begin to see how a nonexistent item, presumed to be of one ontological category, could if existent have turned out to be another kind of thing entirely. The wife might conjecture, based on particulars of the muttering, that Nancy, though figuring in the dream as a woman, is really the Monster group. This would be to conjecture, of an unreal concrete thing, that it was a real non-concrete thing. The wife is wrong, as we've told the story, but she could have been right. And this gives us a model of how bandersnatches could have turned out to exist otherwise than as concreta (see also footnote 12 in the next section).

5. Turning out

The idea that unreal characters might have turned out to be real— might indeed, not that this is expected, turn out to be real— runs deep in our understanding of existence-statements. Kripke says that "I of course acknowledge that it might turn out that there really are unicorns." How would this occur? Holmes was supposedly based on Joseph Bell, a "scientific surgeon" for whom Doyle had clerked at the Edinburgh Royal Infirmary.

¹¹If it seems strange that a group would be personified, consider this from *Wikipedia*: "The Monster group (also known as the Fischer-Griess Monster, or the Friendly Giant) is the largest sporadic simple group, having order [about] 8×10^{53} ...The Monster group contains 20 other sporadic groups as subquotients. Robert Griess has called those 20 groups *the happy family*, and the remaining 6 exceptions *pariahs*."

Holmes is *not* Bell, as matters stand; otherwise we should say Holmes exists. or existed. But one can imagine tweaking the scenario so as to make an identification plausible.

What sort of tweaks would be needed? When Kripke allows that there might turn out to be unicorns, or that it might *have* turned out that there *were* unicorns, he is careful not to confuse that scenario from the one we imagine when considering what is true according to the unicorn myth. Whether unicorns are thus and so, according to the myth, is going to depend in considerable part on how the myth depicts them. But whether they will have turned out to exist, if it turns out that *P*, is somewhat independent of how they are traditionally depicted:

one shouldn't regard this question [of their turning out to exist] as simply a question about whether there is an animal matching the description in the myth (Kripke [2013], ch 2).

In wondering whether unicorns turn out to exist, if *P*, we are guided more by the origins of the myth than its descriptive content. It is the same presumably for bandersnatches, Kripke imagines at one point that Carroll was writing about a genuine sort of animal, albeit perhaps misdescribed in the poem:

I once read a hypothetical story about Lewis Carroll in which it turned out that that was the case. Contrary to what we thought, he was writing a straightforward report about bandersnatches. (Actually I didn't read a story; it was a comic strip.) At any rate this could turn out to have been the case. Suppose we had asked him and he said he was quite surprised that people thought he was talking about imaginary animals here; why, he himself used to be warned to avoid them when he walked through the park as a child, and that is what they were always called in his little region, though apparently the term has passed out of usage. So one could discover that, contrary to what we thought, bandersnatches are real (Kripke [2013], ch 2).



Suppose that it was Tibetan Mastiffs, a particularly scary sort of dog, that Carroll ran into in the park. They were called bandersnatches in his corner of Oxford, or maybe he believed this to be their name. Carroll meant on this hypothesis to be using the word literally in the poem, in reference to an actual class of animals. Perhaps he was writing a report about these animals; in that case the poem may describe them more or less accurately. More likely he was taking liberties with the dogs' properties so as to weave an appealing yarn. This is the case that primarily interests us. Bandersnatches exist on the taking-liberties hypothesis but are not quite as portrayed in the poem.¹²

Let me change the example slightly to make the scenario more vivid. I used to tell bedtime stories about the family dog (Sparky). The stories made him out to be extraordinarily clever and brave, which was not strictly the case. I was anticipated here by Kurt Vonnegut, who, believe it or not, has a story of this type about a dog of the same name.¹³ How does that story go?

Vonnegut's narrator, call him Al, lived next door, he says, to Thomas Edison in Menlo Park, New Jersey. Edison was working, as Al tells it, on something called an "intelligence

¹² Our position where bandersnatches are concerned is not so different from the wife's with respect to Nancy. Carroll was a mathematician after all. It seems not out of the question epistemically speaking that some group was endowed with animal-like properties in one of his dreams, a dream he later set to verse as "Jabberwocky." Bandersnatches would in that case have turned out to be groups.

¹³"Thomas Edison's Shaggy Dog," by Kurt Vonnegut.

analyzer." Al makes a jokey suggestion: "Mr. Edison, sir, let's try it on the dog." I will let Vonnegut take it from here:

I wish you could have seen the show that dog put on when I said it! Old Sparky barked and howled and scratched to get out. When he saw we meant business, that he wasn't going to get out, he made a beeline right for the intelligence analyzer and knocked it out of Edison's hands. But we cornered him, and Edison held him down while I touched the wires to his ears. And would you believe it, that needle sailed clear across the dial, way past a little red pencil marker on the dial face!

'Mr. Edison, sir,' I said, 'what's the red mark mean?'

'My boy, it means that the instrument is broken, because that red mark is *me*.'

But it wasn't broken. No, sir. Edison checked the whole thing, and it was in apple pie order. It was then that Sparky, crazy to get out, gave himself away

We had him locked in, see? There were three locks on the door: a hook and eye, a bolt, and a regular knob and latch. That dog stood up, unhooked the hook, pushed the bolt back and had the knob in his teeth when Edison stopped him.

Yes! And then is when Edison showed me what a great scientist he was. He was willing to face the truth, no matter how unpleasant it might be. 'So!' said Edison to Sparky. 'Man's best friend, huh? Dumb animal, huh?'

That Sparky was a caution. He pretended not to hear. He scratched himself and bit fleas, anything to get out of looking Edison in the eye.

'Look,' said Sparky, 'why not keep quiet about this? You forget all about it, destroy the intelligence analyzer, and I'll tell you what to use for a lamp filament.'

The last words Sparky ever spoke were, 'Try a piece of carbonized cotton thread.'

Later, he was torn to bits by dogs that had gathered outside the door, listening.

Imagine for example's sake that Vonnegut wrote this story for his children about a dog known to all of them (along the lines of the stories told at 395 Washington Street, in 2006 or so, about the not especially brave resident cockapoo). Old Sparky would then have turned out to really exist.

This is the kind of decision-point we are confronting when we ask about the existence or not of a character encountered in fiction. Vonnegut's Sparky turns out to exist in the given scenario. But he could equally have turned out not to exist. I don't in fact know whether the Sparky in "Thomas Edison's Shaggy Dog" turns out to exist.¹⁴ How much of a grip does the contrast here give us on the content of singular existence claims?

6. To exist is to be one of US

What is it that we are excluding, Kripke asks at one point, when we say that Holmes does not exist? One thing we are excluding is that Holmes turns out to be "one of us" along the lines suggested. Turning this around, Kripke ventures the guess that perhaps we use *Holmes doesn't exist* (*Bandersnatches don't exist*, etc.) to "express the fact that such a discovery hasn't occurred" (Kripke [2013], ch2).

This goes too far. Certainly it *follows* from Holmes, or bandersnatches, not existing that such a discovery has not occurred. The reverse implication fails, since the discovery might occur tomorrow. The discovery might *never* be made, because we die before stumbling on the relevant information. Only a verificationist could think that their existence never being established means that bandersnatches never existed.

Now, if we could discover that bandersnatches are real, we could also discover (and presumably have discovered) that bandersnatches are *not* real. We could learn, for instance, that Carroll told his friends that he made the idea up out of whole cloth, that there is no evidence that he is lying or misremembering, and so on.

But if bandersnatches' nonexistence does perhaps follow from discoveries of these sorts, the reverse implication is now in trouble, for the same old verificationist reasons. Bandersnatches might fail to exist, though this is never established. Apparently then we do not use *Bandersnatches don't exist* either to express that a certain positive discovery has not occurred (that's too weak), or that a negative discovery has occurred or will occur (that's too strong).

¹⁴For those who want to dig deeper, Vonnegut's own dog was named Pumpkin, while the Sparky in *Breakfast of Champions* was modelled on a dog of his brother's.

All this is to state the obvious, that we mean to be talking in the ontology room not about our discoveries, but what was there to be discovered (or not, as the case may be). How do we move the spotlight over to the second issue, what was there to be discovered?

Suppose that x_1, x_2, x_3, \dots are all the things that exist. Then for Holmes to exist is for Holmes to be one of x_1, x_2, x_3, \dots ; and for Holmes not to exist is for Holmes to be none of x_1, x_2, x_3, \dots . Whether Holmes is x_2 , or x_{1019} , seem in principle like factual questions open to empirical investigation. Crucially though, if we want to use these mini-questions to get a handle on the larger question of Holmes's existence, it must be possible to ask (and ideally, answer) them without prejudging the issue of whether he does or not.

How someone could think this clearly impossible is beyond me. There might be Holmes-free properties Q such that if a thing is in actual fact Q , then it is Holmes. (Q would involve, one imagines, being thus-and-so connected to Doyle and his use of *Holmes* when he was conceiving and writing the stories.) Then to discover that x_i is Q would be a way of discovering that $x_i = \text{Holmes}$; and hence (given our stipulation that the x_i s are the existing things) that Holmes exists.

Then too, there might be properties R such that if a thing is R , it is not Holmes. To discover that each x_i has some such property (presumably different in each case) would be a way of discovering that each $x_i \neq \text{Holmes}$, and hence (given our stipulation that the x_i s are the existing things) that Holmes does not exist.

Importantly the issue of whether any x_i has a Q -type property (a "qualifying" property) makes sense quite independently of any investigations we might undertake, nor does it prejudge the results of those investigations. We don't have to know beforehand that Holmes exists, to discover that x_i is Q , and thereby come to know of his existence. Similarly the issue of whether each x_i has an R -type property (a "disqualifying" property) makes sense independently of whether Holmes exists. (For those who think that no sense can be attached to *if a thing is Q , it isn't Holmes* unless Holmes exists, I offer this alternative formulation: a thing like that isn't Holmes, *even assuming that Holmes exists*. More on the alternative formulation below.)

A tempting first hypothesis about the cognitive cash value of *n does not exist* is this. It says that every *x* has properties such that if a thing has those properties, it is not Holmes (even if Holmes exists). I prefer a second and cleaner version that leaves out the properties. *n does not exist* says that $\forall x x \neq n$, or perhaps, $\forall x (x \neq n \text{ even if } n \text{ exists})$. No doubt it is because of Mike Pence's properties that we *think* he is not Holmes, even if Holmes exists. But reasons for believing a thing are not usually brought into the thing believed. The cognitive difference between *Holmes does not exist* and *Vulcan does not exist* is akin to that between $\forall x (h \text{ exists} \rightarrow x \neq h)$ and $\forall x (v \text{ exists} \rightarrow x \neq v)$. More on what this difference amounts to in section 10.

7. Quasi-intensionality (1)

Kripke starts from the fact that there is no such "ordinary proposition" as the proposition that Holmes exists, because the term *Holmes* lacks a referent. We argued in section 2 that there does not need to be such a proposition for the sentence to be evaluable. *S* can have a falsemaker in *w* even if there is no such thing as what it overall says. Or it can be groundlessly false—false without benefit of falsemaker—provided an account is available of why the truth-value it groundlessly possesses is FALSE rather than TRUE. The proposal in section 6 was that this falsemaker, or account, could take the form: every *x* is distinct from Holmes.

You might wonder whether any real progress has been made. What does it mean for *x* to be distinct from Holmes, when there is no such person? This seems hardly clearer than the meaning of *Holmes does not exist*, when there is no such person. Kripke considers an analogue of this problem for his own account, and gestures at a response that we can build on. *Holmes exists* counts as false, Kripke says, because we associate with it a higher-order proposition to the effect that there are no true propositions about Holmes to the effect that he exists. If one asks why the name's emptiness does not deprive *There are true propositions about Holmes....* of meaning, the way it did *Holmes exists*, Kripke replies that *Holmes* is used

referentially in the latter sentence, while it has in *propositions about Holmes* “a special sort of quasi-intensional use.”

Let us inquire into this special use, because it relates to our own use of *Holmes* in the theory now under development. Quasi-intensionality first comes up in connection with “reportorial” claims like *Holmes is a great detective, according to the story*. The question as ever is, how can this be true, in the absence of a proposition about Holmes for the story to endorse.

‘The story has it that Sherlock Holmes is a great detective.’ What is it that the story has it that? There is supposed to be no such proposition as that Sherlock Holmes is a great detective which the story has it that. I said of this, ... that one should speak of a kind of proposition which is being asserted to exist and to be true. The story has it that there is a true proposition about Sherlock Holmes, namely that he is a great detective. (Kripke [2013], Lecture 6).

A proposition’s nonexistence doesn’t prevent the story from endorsing “it,” if it exists according to the story. Nor do empty names in *P* make *According to the story, P* unevaluable, Kripke thinks, if the story assigns them referents. This is because of something called the *Pretense Principle*:

Isn’t it a problem for Mill’s theory, where there cannot be names with no referent, as appears to be the case in fiction? Well, no, ..., because when one writes a work of fiction, it is part of the pretense of that fiction that the criteria for naming, whatever they are, are satisfied. I use the name ‘Harry’ in a work of fiction; I generally presuppose as part of that work of fiction, just as I am pretending various other things, that the criteria of naming, whatever they are....are satisfied. That is part of the pretense of this work of fiction. Far from it being the case that a theory of the reference of names ought to make special provision for the possibility of such works of fiction,

it can forget about this case, and then simply remark that, in a work of fiction, it is part of the pretense of that work of fiction that these criteria are satisfied. Perhaps what makes it a work of fiction is that these criteria are not in fact satisfied (and usually other things in the story), but the pretense is just that: a pretense. (Kripke [2013], Lecture 1, 23-4)

Kripke never doubts for a moment our ability to *pretend* or *imagine* that Holmes exists. We do it every time we read the story; we treat the sentences as true and continue along the imaginative path thereby indicated. And this is all we need to make sense of sentences of the kind indicated. For Holmes to be a great detective according to the story amounts to the following: those on the right imaginative path will suppose, *of a person they're already imagining to exist*, that he is a great detective. *Holmes* is used quasi-intensionally, I suggest, when it serves to indicate an imaginative path—in this case, the one we are meant to be on when considering whether Holmes is a great detective, with a view to evaluating *He is a great detective, according to the story*.

8. Quasi-intensionality (2)

Of course Kripke's real interest is less in using an empty name *n* to convey the content of a story, but its use in the phrase *proposition about n* that is supposed to explicate *n does not exist*. Uttering *Holmes does not exist* is said to be a way of conveying that there are no true propositions about Holmes to the effect that he does exist. Quasi-intensionality is brought in to explain how *Holmes* functions in the phrase *proposition about Holmes*. If our use of *Holmes* here is really quasi-intensional, there ought to be some sort of imaginative path we are traveling when we ask ourselves whether there are true propositions about Holmes to the effect that he exists.

What is it? Kripke never quite says, and it is hard to see how the thing could work in principle. A pretense within which propositions can be assessed for Holmes-aboutness would seem to be a pretense within which Holmes exists. But, if we are pretending that he exists, then we are very much *not* pretending that there are no truths attributing existence

to Holmes. This is where Kripke's account runs into trouble, I think. He wants us on the one hand to pretend that Holmes is present, to give sense to the notion of Holmes-aboutness. But he wants us also to judge (within the pretense) that there are no true existence-propositions about Holmes. Why would there be (within the pretense) no true existence-propositions about him, if Holmes (within the pretense) exists?

This leaves us in a tight corner. The judgments that pretenders are called on to make, that confer truth outside the pretense on *Holmes does not exist*, cannot be to the effect that Holmes fails to exist, or that truths attributing existence to him fail to exist. We are looking on the contrary for judgments taking Holmes's existence for granted, as the intra-pretense judgment that Holmes is a great detective takes his existence for granted.¹⁵ The challenge then is to find Holmes-assuming statements *S* whose acceptance within the pretense affords a way of rejecting Holmes's nonexistence outside it. *Holmes does not exist* cannot play this role, for the reasons already mentioned. What can?

Actually we already caught a glimpse of what can in section 6. Consider the generalization $\forall x x \neq \text{Holmes}$, where the quantifier ranges over US, the (really) existing things. Or consider the conjunction of all sentences of the form $m \neq \text{Holmes}$, *m* ranging schematically over names of all (really) existing things. To judge within the scope of a Holmes-assuming pretense that he is at any rate not you, or me (and here we run through every last one of US) might be a way of judging outside the pretense that the world contains no such individual as Holmes. *Holmes is in my back pocket* is as good as false if my pocket is empty, because he is not, given its emptiness, in my pocket even if he exists. But then *Holmes is one of US...psst, the existing things* is as good as false too, because Holmes is not one of US even if he exists.

9. Finding the path

I said that *Holmes* is used quasi-intensionally when it serves to indicate a suppositional or imaginative path. The path it indicates in *According to the stories, Holmes did so and so*

¹⁵This is not to suggest that the pretenses at work in the two cases are the same!

is the one marked out by — and here we wave our hands at some texts in which *Holmes* occurs. We are to pretend, say, that the texts constitute true reports of interesting events. I said that it was obscure, at least to me, what path Kripke wants the name to put us on, when the question is whether Holmes exists.

The difficulty was *partly* met by replacing Kripke's candidate for the pretend-hypothesis to be pretend-accepted (*No true propositions attributing existence to Holmes exist*) with a different hypothesis compatible with Holmes' existence—*Holmes is not one of US*, where *WE* are the things that exist, as opposed to the things that exist if Holmes does. But this substitution does not tell us *how* to judge externally that Holmes does not exist while supposing internally that he does; it at most suggests that the idea is not incoherent. Against the background of what pretense, exactly, are we to assess whether Holmes is one of US?

Clearly we are not supposed to pretend in line with the stories, as we do when evaluating *Holmes noticed a curious fact about the dog in the night, according to "Silver Blaze"*. For one thing, we mostly do not exist in the stories. The real problem, though, is that those of us who do exist in them—Prince Albert, say— may not be credited with the properties that, as matters stand, distinguish them from Holmes. Holmes might even have been *identified* with Prince Albert, in a strangely neglected postscript to *A Study in Scarlet*. If so then Holmes *is*, in the relevant pretense, one of us (for Prince Albert is one of us). But that hardly means that Holmes is one of us, for Holmes = Prince Albert only fictionally.

The alternative to imagining in line with the stories is to imagine simply that Holmes exists, scholarly opinion to the contrary, or to imagine learning that scholars had reversed themselves on the issue. Traveling this alternative path, will we imagine that the stories give a true account of him? Not at all. More likely Doyle mucked with his properties, as Carroll mucked with the properties of Tibetan Mastiffs in *Jabberwock* (if that is what bandersnatches are) and Alice Lidell in *Through the Looking Glass* (if that is who Alice is).

The best approach for metasemantic purposes may be to imagine that a trusted informant has said: *Holmes exists*. This has the advantage of locating us (qua imaginers) in the

kind of referential tradition that gains one access to a proposition attributing existence to Holmes. The analogy with Kripke on reportorial claims should be clear. Just as the nonexistence of a proposition attributing great-detective-hood to Holmes does not prevent readers from endorsing “it,” provided it exists according to the story, the nonexistence of a proposition expressed by *Holmes exists* does not prevent would-be recipients of *Holmes exists* in testimony from endorsing “that proposition,” if it exists on the imaginative path they are now traveling.

10. If-prefixes and story-prefixes

Story-prefixes are not the same as if-prefixes (antecedents), but the two have much in common. Going in the one direction, *S, according to fiction F* has often been explained as a conditional— along the lines of *If F is the case, then so is S*, or *If F were told as known truth, then S would be the case*.¹⁶ Going in the other, we’re encouraged by Ramsey and others to process a conditional by pretending that we have been informed of the antecedent and assessing the consequent from that put-on perspective:

If two people are arguing ‘If *p*, then *q*?’ and are both in doubt as to *p*, they are adding *p* hypothetically to their stock of knowledge and arguing on that basis about *q*.¹⁷

The disputants in Quine’s version of this idea “feign belief in the antecedent and see how convincing [they] then find the consequent” (Quine [1960], 222). Given that we can sensibly ask, under the scope of a fictional pretense that assigns *Holmes* a referent, whether Holmes is a great detective, we should also be able to ask, under the scope of a factual supposition that assigns *Holmes* a referent, whether Holmes is identical to *x*.¹⁸

That supposition will have two parts: first, that Holmes exists, and second, that *x* has thus and such properties *S_x*, qualifying or disqualifying as the case may be. To decide

¹⁶Lewis [1978]

¹⁷Ramsey, “General Propositions and Causality,” in Ramsey and Mellor [ed.].

¹⁸I am influenced here and throughout by Hartry Field’s suggestion in Field [1977] that conditional probability may be all we need in a theory of sense.

whether x is identical to (distinct from) Holmes, if Holmes exists and x is S_x , we imagine ourselves (i) acquiring both pieces of information, and (ii) asking, under the scope of that imagining, whether x is (is not) identical to Holmes. Kripke seems to be engaged in some such exercise in passages like the following:

Without being sure of whether Sherlock Holmes was a person,... we can say 'none of the people in this room is Sherlock Holmes, for all are born too late, and so on'; or 'whatever bandersnatches may be, certainly there are none in Dubuque.' (Kripke [2011b], 71-2).

None of us in the room can be Holmes, even if he exists, for we all have properties (being born too late, e.g.), such that if a thing is Q , it is not Sherlock Holmes. I would add only that this applies not merely to the individuals in this room, but to every existing thing whatsoever. Every x that there is has properties Q_x given which it fails to be Holmes, even if Holmes exists; or, simpler still, none of us is, even if Holmes exists, identical to Holmes.

11. Content or truthmaker?

Earlier we put $\forall x (x \neq \text{Holmes, even if Holmes exists})$ — $\forall x (Eh \rightarrow x \neq h)$ —forward as a candidate for the role of *Holmes does not exist*'s cognitive content. Trouble is, $\forall x (Eh \rightarrow x \neq h)$ has Eh (*Holmes exists*) in it. Pending an account of *its* cognitive content, we seem not much further ahead.

Also and independently, the idea of *if Holmes DOES exist* figuring in a statement of the content of *Holmes does NOT exist* sounds improbable. Why would one need to condition on an entity's existence, to form the thought that there is no such entity? An account of S 's cognitive content ought to respect our sense of what is involved in judging that S . If we don't find ourselves assuming, even provisionally, that Holmes exists, in judging that he does not exist, then the cognitive content of *Holmes does not exist* probably doesn't condition on such an assumption.

Maybe we got it wrong, then, when we suggested that $\forall x (En \rightarrow \rightarrow x \neq n)$ —ANI for short— gave the cognitive cash value of *n does not exist*. This does not necessarily make

ANI irrelevant to what *n does not exist* says. For as we saw in section 2, another line of attack on what *S* says is via the kind of fact that makes *S* true, or false. What about recasting (*ANI*) (or the fact it expresses) as *n does not exist*'s truthmaker? The paper could then end as follows: Just as *Holmes does not exist* is true in the empty world *e*, because there is nothing *there* for Holmes to be, it is true in our world @ because there is nothing *here* for Holmes to be. @ is not devoid of things altogether, but it is devoid of things that stand a chance of being Holmes.

So, shall we say that *n does not exist* owes its truth to the fact that (*ANI*)—the fact that $\forall x (Eh \rightarrow x \neq n)$? I am tempted by the idea. But various worries might be raised about the (*ANI*)-fact's suitability for the role of truthmaker.

One concerns subject matter. (*ANI*) looks to be about everything whatsoever. Does *Holmes does not exist* really owe its truth to a fact of such scope and generality? Granted that Attila the Hun and Mike Pence are not Holmes (even if he exists), these facts do not seem to play much of a role in *Holmes does not exist* winding up with *T* as its truth-value. Further along the same lines, (*ANI*) expresses different facts, it might seem, in worlds with differing populations. But then *Holmes does not exist* will have to be true for distinct reasons in our world @, and a world @⁺ just like it, except for an extra electron millions of light years away. Are we really to suppose that *Holmes does not exist* changes why it is true whenever a new electron pops into being? These are interesting questions but I want to put them aside in this paper, both because they're too broad—one could raise them equally about the standard equation of *The Eiffel Tower exists* with $\exists x x = \text{the Eiffel Tower}$ —and because we arguably *are* talking in the ontology room about everything.¹⁹

A more serious obstacle to treating “the fact that (*ANI*)” as a truthmaker for *Holmes does not exist* is that (*ANI*) has an indicative conditional in it. Indicative conditionals are widely suspected of not stating facts in the first place.²⁰ *Holmes exists* does not owe its falsity to

¹⁹At least in a weak, de dicto, sense of “about everything.”

²⁰They are often assigned assertion conditions, to do with the probability of the consequent conditional on that of the antecedent, rather than truth conditions (Adams [1975], Lewis [1976], Skyrms [1994], Bennett [2003], Yalcin [2011]) Any facts in the neighborhood are “subjective” facts of the wrong sort to serve as -makers.

anyone's personal credences; it is false for objective reasons that are the same for each of us.²¹

12. Unconditional truthmakers

Are there ways of getting the arrow out? A point of clarification before exploring the options. The question of why *Holmes does not exist* is true can be taken in two ways. One might be seeking an explanation in semantic terms of how given its compositional structure the sentence comes out true. Or one might be looking for an explanation of what *makes* the sentence true.

Take these in order. *Holmes does not exist* will certainly be true if we take the *not* to express strong negation, the connective taking truths to falsehoods and untruths (falsehoods and gaps) to truths.²²

TABLE 1. Negation

NOT- <i>A</i> is	if <i>A</i> is
false	true
true	false
true	neither

Holmes does NOT exist is true on this account provided that *Holmes exists* fails to be true. The name's emptiness, rather than preventing this outcome, ensures it, insofar as it prevents *Holmes exists* from being true or false. Whether a truthmaker is needed for NOT-*A* when *A* lacks truth-value is a good question. But not an urgent one, since the maneuver does not in any case get us quite what we wanted. Our feeling intuitively about *Holmes does not exist* is that its truth reflects, not that *Holmes exists* is gappy, but that it is false. If we can find a compositional structure for *Holmes exists* on which it comes out false, strong negation will not be needed.

²¹The subject-matter worry emphasizes variation across worlds, the objectivity worry variation across thinkers.

²²As observed by Salmon and others (Salmon [1998]).

The simplest way to arrange for the falsity of *Holmes exists* (Eh) is to let *all* atomic sentences with empty names be false, as is done in negative free logic.²³ But this is a pretty crude solution. What if we had, instead of a predicate E for existence, a predicate A for absence (nonexistence)? Then Ah comes out just as false as Eh did, which seems like the wrong result. Stalnaker develops a more nuanced approach in “Complex Predicates.”²⁴

Start with the fact that Rab is best read in some contexts—those where a is “topical”—as predicating $[\hat{x} : Rxb]$ of a , while in others it predicates $[\hat{y} : Ray]$ of b . *Descartes was born in France* predicates born-in-France of Descartes if we are talking about Descartes, birthplace-of-Descartes of France if we are talking about France. A subject-predicate sentence Fa generally predicates $[\hat{x} : Fx]$ of a , but it may occasionally predicate $[\hat{X} : Xa]$ of F , or something in the neighborhood of F .

How does it go with existence-claims? They certainly seem to be about their grammatical subjects. Thus it comes as a surprise that n is by the usual tests *not* topical in n exists. One test calls on us to identify the implied question, the one that *Pence exists*, for instance, would normally be taken to address. Most people judge it sounds strange as a reply to “What is Pence like?”, moreso anyway than if the question was “What is there?”²⁵ Plausibly then the name figures in the description that is being offered of something other than Pence: the existing things overall.²⁶ Can we find among them anything of which $[\hat{z} : z=p]$ is true? To say that Pence exists is to answer that we can; there really is such a thing. A plausible analysis of *Pence exists* thus puts *Pence* into the predicate: $\exists x [\hat{z} : z=p](x)$.

Incorporating n into the predicate has semantic consequences too, as Strawson observed in various places. When is $[\hat{z} : Fz]$ true (false) of an object \mathbf{o} ? The standard line is that $[\hat{z} : Fz]$ is true of \mathbf{o} if Fz is true of \mathbf{o} , and false of \mathbf{o} if Fz fails to be true of \mathbf{o} , either by being false of it or neither true nor false. In table form (TABLE 2),

²³See the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on free logic.

²⁴Stalnaker [1977]

²⁵Especially on a “mention some” reading of that second question. See Atlas [1988]

²⁶Compare *The king of France is bald*, uttered in response to *Tell me about the bald people*. Kripke discusses related cases in Kripke et al. [1973].

TABLE 2. Predication

$[\hat{z} : Fz]$ is	if Fz is
true of \mathbf{o}	true of \mathbf{o}
false of \mathbf{o}	false of \mathbf{o}
false of \mathbf{o}	neither of \mathbf{o}

Writing h for *Holmes*, that the name is empty means that $z=h$ is neither true nor false of any \mathbf{o} .²⁷ But then $[\hat{z} : z=h]$ is false of every \mathbf{o} , making $\exists x[\hat{z} : z=h](x)$ false simpliciter.²⁸ That completes our “explanation in semantic terms of how, given its compositional structure, *Holmes exists* comes out false.”

Welcome as this explanation is, we have mainly been looking in this paper for an account of what *makes* the sentence false. But, some might say, the semantic explanation puts one on our doorstep. For in addition to the sentence $\exists x[\hat{z} : z=h](x)$, we have the fact that $\forall x \neg[\hat{z} : z=h](x)$. That nothing is Holmes-identical certainly ensures the falsity of *Holmes exists*, when the latter is analyzed as $\exists x[\hat{z} : z=h](x)$. It seems at first to explain the sentence’s falsity as well. Maybe then the fact that nothing is Holmes-identical can serve as *Holmes exists*’s falsemaker.

13. Discerning truthmakers

If it was so easy to find a fact making *Holmes exists* false, why not mention this earlier? The falsity of *n exists* could have been blamed right from the start on the fact that

$$(ANI^*) \forall x \neg[\hat{z} : z=n](x).$$

The fact, or pseudo-fact, that

$$(ANI) \forall x (En \rightarrow x \neq n),$$

would not in that case have come into the picture at all. Something needs to be said about why we didn’t take this much quicker route, especially when (ANI^*) , being \rightarrow -free, does not run into the objectivity worries raised above for (ANI) .

²⁷This is where we depart from negative free logic.

²⁸This for Strawson is why *A bald person is the King of France* sounds falsier than *The King of France is bald*.

Here is why we should be reluctant to make this move. There is a danger, if we drop (ANI) for (ANI*), of all (false) singular existence claims winding up false for the same reason. One and the same nonexistence fact will have to explain the falsity of *Holmes exists*, *Vulcan exists*, and so on down the line. This is hard to take seriously. Singular existentials have, we think, *discerning* falsifiers— “one per nonexistent object,” so to speak. And they *need* to have discerning falsifiers, if the difference in content between *Holmes exists* and *Vulcan exists* is to be accounted for (as suggested in section 2) in terms of their verifiers and falsifiers

Holmes exists is false, to go by (ANI*), because every object \mathbf{o} is $\neg[\hat{z} : z=h]$, while *Vulcan exists* is false because every \mathbf{o} is $\neg[\hat{z} : z=v]$. Of course $\neg[\hat{z} : z=h]$ is a different (complex) *predicate* from $\neg[\hat{z} : z=v]$. But do they apply for different reasons? This will be so only if the predicates differ in semantic value— in, not to be fancy about it, the property they express. But, any difference on that score would have to derive from a semantic difference between the empty names involved. And the names are semantically indiscernible on present (Millian) assumptions. Thus both predicates express the same uninstantiated property, what we may as well call the null property. *Holmes exists* and *Vulcan exists* are both false (to go by ANI*) because nothing has the null property. True, $[\hat{z} : z=h]$ expresses the null property because one name is empty, while $[\hat{z} : z=v]$ expresses it because another is empty. But we are interested not in why the semantics spits out a certain truth-value (the names are admittedly relevant to that), but the worldly basis for that truth-value.

Again, one would like to think that *Holmes exists* and *Vulcan exists* express different hypotheses, failing for different reasons. There ought to be a separate hypothesis of this sort for, forgive the expression, each and every nonexistent object. But then a whole lot of discerning falsifiers will be needed. If we cannot get them from (ANI*), we are driven back to (ANI), the rogue conditional notwithstanding.

A possible upside should be noted concerning the truth-conditional contribution of empty names. Those who agree with Kripke that a name’s truth-conditional contribution

is in *most* contexts exhausted by its referent, or lack of one, often want to make an exception for epistemic contexts:²⁹

The entire apparatus elaborated in *Naming and Necessity* of the distinction between epistemic and metaphysical necessity, and of giving a meaning and fixing a reference, was meant to show, among other things, that a Millian substitutivity doctrine for modal contexts can be maintained even if such a doctrine for epistemic contexts is rejected. *Naming and Necessity* never asserted a substitutivity principle for epistemic contexts (Kripke [2011a], 158).

Whatever one thinks about epistemic contexts generally, the case for nonsubstitutivity in \rightarrow -contexts is overwhelming, given Ramseyan orthodoxy about how in practice we make our minds up about indicative conditionals.³⁰ One doesn't need a semantics for $P \rightarrow Q$ to know that any plausible clause will have to respect the deliverances of the Ramsey Test. This all by itself forces nonsubstitutivity on us, insofar as adding *Holmes is F* hypothetically to one's stock of knowledge and arguing on that basis about *Holmes is G* is a different exercise from adding *Venus is F* hypothetically to one's stock of knowledge and arguing on that basis about *Venus is G*.

The Ramsey Test puts constraints in particular on the conditions expressed by (i) $Eh \rightarrow x \neq h$ and (ii) $Ev \rightarrow x \neq v$. (i) holds of an object if, when we imagine ourselves hearing *Holmes exists* from a reliable informant, our (updated) information tells us that the object is not Holmes. (ii) holds of an object if, when we imagine hearing *Vulcan exists*

²⁹ Crucially this need involve no departure from Millianism. For instance some contexts $C(\dots)$ are "Abelardian": the name bears on the proper interpretation of the predicate (Noonan [1991]). In Quine's Giorgione example (*Giorgione was so-called because of his size*), the name employed sets the value of the explicit indexical in *so-called* (Quine [1956], Forbes [1997].) Alternatively the name may control the value of some unarticulated truth-relevant parameter, e.g., for counterpart relations, "normal ideas", cognitive roles, questions under discussion, or what have you. See Hintikka [1962, 1970, 1996], Lewis [1971], Kaplan [1979], Stalnaker [1986], Crimmins [1989], Zimmermann [1993], Moltmann [1997], and Forbes [2000]. (Quantified epistemic logic has a lot to offer in this connection too. Relevant recent work includes Aloni et al. [2001], Holliday and Perry [2014], Yalcin [2015], Ninan [2018], Moss [2018], and Aloni [2018].

³⁰ That names don't behave in standard Kripkean ways in "suppose" and "would have turned out" conditionals is a familiar point (Stalnaker [1978], Yablo [2002]). For non-referential contributions specifically in indicative conditionals, see Weatherson [2001] and Santorio [2012].

from that informant, our (updated) information leads us to judge that the object is not Vulcan. The conditions are distinct (and potentially not even coextensive) if we go into one state of mind when imagining we've been told that Holmes after all exists, another when imagining we've been told that Vulcan after all exists.

No one can seriously deny that we, as a matter of psychological fact, are disposed to update one way on receiving *Holmes exists* as testimony, another on receiving *Vulcan exists*. No one can deny either that the features of **o** that decide for us (post-update) whether **o** is distinct from Holmes—say, **o**'s relations to Doyle—are different from the ones that guide us in deciding whether **o** is distinct from Vulcan—say, **o**'s relations to Leverrier and to Mercury. But then, unless the Ramsey Test is totally off the mark, conditions (i) and (ii) ask different things of would-be satisfiers.

This helps with the cognitive significance issue as well. Suppose that I, while continuing to think that (ii) is always satisfied, develop doubts about (i). Then I may begin to wonder about *Holmes does not exist*, while my confidence in *Vulcan does not exist* is unshaken. Imagine that Doyle's deathbed confession is discovered. He expresses regret at the factual inaccuracy of what he says about Holmes's place of work; it was really the University of Edinburgh.³¹ Such a discovery might well weaken our resistance to identifying Holmes with "scientific surgeon" Joseph Bell, for whom Doyle had clerked at the Edinburgh Infirmary.³² Neither finding, however, is likely to change our minds about Vulcan's relations to a certain intra-Mercurial **o** observed (it is said) by Lescarbault in 1859.³³

14. Objectivity

What about the worry that indicative conditionals are not objective enough? The truth is that some strike us as more objective than others, depending, perhaps, on how rationally

³¹Or that psychological reports are found detailing Doyle's insistence that he was a novelist rather than a crime reporter.

³²See <https://lithub.com/how-sherlock-holmes-got-his-name/> for more on Bell and on the origins of the fictional name. "He settled upon Holmes as his detective's surname, likely because of his and his family's fondness for the writings of Oliver Wendell Holmes." The American Holmes apparently visited London in 1886, a year before *A Study in Scarlet*, the first Holmes novel, appeared.

³³Leverrier for one was convinced.

obligatory the conditional credences $c(Q|P)$ are that fix the probability of $P \rightarrow Q$, or the availability of a factual R that “makes the difference” between P and Q (R is what Q adds to P).³⁴ We have a problem if, but only if, nonexistence claims are fully objective. Should they vary in objectivity too, and the connection with indicative if/then helps us make sense of this, then we may be dealing here with a feature rather than a bug.

Phlogiston is the paradigm in philosophical discussions of something that turned out not to exist. Flammable objects do not contain a substance that gets released, or consumed, when they burn. Lavoisier is often credited with this discovery; he showed that objects *gain* weight when burned rather than losing it. He introduced the term *oxygen* for the stuff, whatever it is, whose incorporation into burning objects explains the increase in weight.

Strangely, though, the discovery of oxygen is also often credited to Joseph Priestley—a friend of phlogiston and lifelong opponent of Lavoisier’s approach. How could a phlogiston fan like Priestley have discovered the thing that cut phlogiston out of the action? The answer is that oxygen didn’t in his view cut phlogiston out of the action. He thought of oxygen not as “dephlogisticated air” rather than a substance in its own right.

Oxygen is not, as we see things today, a dearth or absence of phlogiston; there is no such thing as phlogiston to be present *or* absent. But what about a reverse-Priestley position on which phlogiston is nothing but the absence of oxygen, or (another term I have seen) “negative oxygen.” Ridiculous as this sounds, a view somewhat like it is standard in electrodynamics.

Benjamin Franklin introduced electric current on the model of air and water current. Like them, it flows, he assumed, from positive (“high-pressure,” “high-altitude”) zones to negative (“low-pressure,” “low-lying”) zones. He believed too that electric current’s physical carrier was a charged particle—positively charged, presumably, since there are more of them at the place where current originates. You probably know what happened next:

³⁴[Yablo \[2016\]](#)

An assumption was made that a current was positive charges moving from positive to negative....However, it was later discovered that in the most common cases, currents in metal wires, it was in fact electrons (negatively charged) flowing in the opposite direction. The convention was in place to give the direction of a current ... as if it were positive charges on the move. There was no real need to change the convention, other than to help school children learning about electrical effects. (<https://www.quora.com/What-is-conventional-current-1>)

Thus did southbound current turn out to consist in the movement of north-going particles. That nothing else, and certainly nothing particulate, travels in the current's supposed direction was not taken to show that current did not exist. Instead it was identified (in the case of current running through wires) with negatively charged particles moving in the opposite direction.

Suppose for argument's sake that all this occurred via standard issue Bayesian update dictated by prior conditional credences. Those prior credences directed us to retain (positive) current in the absence of anything moving in the right direction, but not to retain phlogiston-discharge in the absence of anything moving in the right direction. It seems likely that inferential dispositions (conditional credences, \rightarrow -statements accepted) varied somewhat among the experts, with the preservative dispositions winning out in the case of electric current, and the eliminative winning out in the case of phlogiston. This is in each cases the proper outcome, let's assume. Positive current really does exist, and phlogiston-release does not.

Now imagine an intermediate case. The experts are evenly divided between those with preservative dispositions (credences, \rightarrow -beliefs), where a certain putative substance or entity Σ is concerned, and those with eliminative dispositions. This with all the details filled in looks like a case where there is no fact of the matter either way about whether Σ survives the relevant discoveries. The theory that Σ *does not exist* depends for its truth

on facts or quasi-facts of the form $\Sigma \text{ exists} \rightarrow Q$ explains this nicely; for reasonable people need not agree in which conditionals of this form they accept.

15. Uniformity

Nonexistence-claims should “say the same” whether true or false. One of Kripke’s main complaints about his own account, which has *Holmes does not exist* saying that there are no true propositions about Holmes attributing existence to him, is that it fails this test.

in some sense the analysis of a singular existence statement will depend on whether that statement is true. And this, of course, seems in and of itself to be absolutely intolerable: the analysis of a statement should not depend on its truth-value. (Kripke [2013], ch6)

The content of *Holmes does not exist* for us is given by truth- and falsemakers, expressed with conditionals like *Holmes is not Mike Pence, even if Holmes exists*. We should ask whether this conditional true for the same reason whether or not Holmes exists? It seems that the reasons change. If Holmes exists, it holds because two existing things (Holmes and Pence) are distinct. Whereas if Holmes does not exist, it holds (loosely speaking) because Pence is a poor candidate for the Holmes role, whether or not the role is occupied.

Does this mean that the conditional holds for distinct reasons in the two cases? Yes and no. A sentence’s truth may be overdetermined, we noted earlier. The truth of *Holmes is not Mike Pence, even if Holmes exists* is overdetermined, it seems to me, if Holmes exists. One reason *Holmes is not Pence, if Holmes exists* is true (assuming he does) is that its antecedent and consequent are both true; Holmes does exist and he and Pence are just two different items.³⁵

But there is a second reason for the truth of *Holmes is not Pence, if Holmes exists*. The second reason is that Pence is distinct-should-Holmes-exist from Holmes, quite regardless of whether he does exist. We may grant that *Holmes is not Pence, even if Holmes exists* does not hold for *exactly* the same reasons in either case—the overdetermination point— while

³⁵Given *Centering*—no other worlds are as close to actuality as it is to itself—*If P then Q* is implied by *P&Q*.

still insisting that it is true in both cases for *a* shared reason, namely that Pence \neq Holmes if Holmes exists. This in turn holds because Pence has properties (e.g. that Doyle never wrote about Pence) that unsuit him for the role.

16. Conclusion and questions

Singular nonexistence claims are true, when they are, because of facts like this: $\forall x (x \text{ is not Holmes, even if Holmes exists})$. Let me mention two prima facie difficulties for this proposal before signing off.

First, couldn't *Holmes does not exist* be true even if no such fact obtained? Perhaps something *x* exists that is so much the best *candidate* for identity with Holmes that: *x* is Holmes if Holmes exists? This is a good question which will not be discussed here. The claim will have to be that even the best candidate is not good enough, when we hold fixed enough of its properties.³⁶

Second, we know from elementary logic that $\forall x (P \supset Q)$ is equivalent to $P \supset \forall x Q$ if *x* is not free in *P*. That had better not hold for \rightarrow , or we would be forced to conclude from $\forall x (\text{Holmes exists} \rightarrow x \neq \text{Holmes})$ that $\text{Holmes exists} \rightarrow \forall x x \neq \text{Holmes}$, which is plainly absurd. The equivalence clearly fails for counterfactuals: it is true in the empty world *e* that $\forall x (\text{Pence exists} \Box\rightarrow x \text{ is married to Pence})$, but false there that $(\text{Pence exists} \Box\rightarrow \forall x x \text{ is married to Pence})$. It will fail for similar reasons on a closest-world world semantics for indicatives (like Stalnaker's). The same example works for indicatives assuming that $\forall x \varphi$ is automatically true in *e*, whatever φ may be. But the matter deserves further discussion.

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³⁶See "Nonexistence and Aboutness: The Bandersnatches of Dubuque," to appear in *Critica*.

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