

SAY HOLMES EXISTS; THEN WHAT?

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1. Introduction

Singular (non)existence claims are mystifying. There seem to be three main reasons for this. It is mysterious what *Vulcan does not exist* could possibly be about, if it is true. Not the planet Vulcan presumably, for if it is true, then there is no such thing. This – the Problem of Aboutness, call it – has led philosophers to postulate alternative subject matters: the term *Vulcan*, or the concept of Vulcan-hood, or an abstract artifact of some sort (a “failed posit”). *Vulcan does not exist* says on such views either that

- the term lacks a referent
- the concept lacks instances
- the artifact is not a planet,
- or, Walton’s view...a certain type of referring attempt misfires.

Now we run into a second problem, that of explaining how our subject-matter intuitions could be so mistaken. *Vulcan does not exist* certainly does not seem like it ascribes emptiness to a name, or non-planethood to an abstract object. Call this the Problem of Indirection.

The third problem is that *n exists* (*n does not exist*) ought to say the same thing— express the same hypothesis— whether true or false. Suppose that *Vulcan does not exist* turns out to be false; there really is such a planet. It is false, in that case, not because it misdescribes a name as non-empty or a concept as lacking instances, but because it misdescribes an existing concrete object *v* as nonexistent. How can people disagree, then, about whether Vulcan exists? The proposition (that *v* exists) whose truth would vindicate the one is

not the proposition (that, say, *Vulcan* refers) whose falsity would vindicate the other. Normally when there is no shared proposition to which disputants want to assign different truth-values, we say they are talking past each other. Call this the Problem of Equivocation.

2. Disavowal accounts

Three problems, then: *Aboutness*, *Indirection*, and *Equivocation*. Walton sketches a pretense-based account of (non)existence claims that seems to help with all of them.¹ A background assumption throughout is that sentences have, or can have, both literal contents and (what I'll call) real contents. *S*'s literal content is its compositional content, deriving from the lexical meanings of the words involved and their mode of combination. *S*'s real content is its cash value, or the information it conveys, or what someone uttering *S* would typically be asserting.

Imagine that I have just said *n does not exist*. The point of uttering the name *n*, for Walton, is to put a kind K_n of attempted reference on display. I accomplish this by *making as if* to engage in a referring attempt of that type—making as if, because there was, or need be, no real attempt to refer (to *Vulcan*, say, or *Falstaff*, or what have you). What I do with the rest of the sentence is “disavow” or “repudiate” attempts of the exhibited type by portraying them as unsuccessful; there is nothing for K_n -type acts of purported reference to glom onto.

How does the rest of the sentence (*does not exist*) enable me to portray K_n -type acts as unsuccessful? You might expect a story here about pretending to predicate *does not exist* of *n*'s as-if referent. But initially at least, Walton wants the pretense to extend only as far as the referring attempt.

To say “*Falstaff* doesn't exist” is to say

Falstaff: *That didn't work*.

[T]he demonstrative “that” refers to the kind of attempted reference illus-

trated by the utterance of the name. (Walton [2014], 102)

The words *do not exist* are used directly, as it were, to repudiate (disavow, declare unsuccessful) reference attempts of the indicated type.² No explanation is offered of how the trick is pulled, and Walton is not sure an explanation is needed:

There may be simply a brute convention to the effect that to attach the predicate “exists” or “does not exist” to a subject is to declare the indicated kind of referring attempt successful or unsuccessful” (Walton [2014], 106).

Call that *DA*, for the disavowal account. A variant *DA** does try to explain how the words *does not exist* carry out their repudiational task.³ We play not only at referring with *Vulcan*, but at describing the referent with *does not exist*. More generally one pretends that *exists* is meaningful (it isn't) and that it is true of certain entities and false of others.

The point of the game, as before, is to enable us to express facts about which sorts of referring attempt succeed. But the method is different. *DA** appeals to a *general* mechanism known as “prop-oriented make believe.” (Prop-oriented make believe is a way for as-if assertions of *S*, in a game *G*, to underwrite real assertions of the facts taken by *G* to license these as-if assertions.) This is not the place to go into details (Walton [1993], Yablo [2001]) but the idea is clear enough. What makes *DA** explanatory is that *does not exist* plays its representational role through the operation of an independently accredited expressive mechanism.

So far we have been talking about the real contents of nonexistence-claims, not their literal or compositional contents. No literal contents can be assigned, Walton says. This is clearest if the claim is (intuitively speaking) correct. The compositional content of a

name, if it has one, is its referent. Empty names making no compositional contribution whatever, the “proposition” has a gap where an object should go, which is a polite way of saying that no proposition is expressed.⁴ Words like *Falstaff* and *Vulcan* function only as pragmatic devices for getting something onto the table: a type of attempted reference.

What sets *DA* and *DA** apart is that there is still no proposition expressed even if the name refers. A predicate’s compositional content, if it has one, is its literal meaning: the associated concept or property or what have you. If it has no such meaning (as Walton conjectures⁵), then the predicate contributes nothing. *Vulcan does not exist* thus fails on two counts to possess a literal meaning. The name doesn’t hold up its end, and the predicate doesn’t either. *Exists* functions only as a device for associating oneself (or not) with the type of attempted reference brought into view by the name.⁶

3. Pros and cons

How do these ideas help with the problems we started with: Aboutness, Indirection, and Equivocation? Let me take a rough initial stab at all three, starting with Indirection.

The reason it “feels like” we are talking about a planet, rather than a type of referring attempt, when we say *Vulcan does not exist*, is that we are caught up, when we pronounce the name, in a make-believe game. What we are pretending to do in the game is speak (or attempt to speak) of a certain planet. If semantic phenomenology is dictated by what one is making as if to do, then it stands to reason that our use of the name will be experienced as referential.

The impression that Falstaff and Neptune are what we speak of is explained by the fact that we are pretending that this is so—or rather, we pretend to refer successfully by means of the names and to attribute properties to the referents. (Walton [2014], 102)⁷

The Equivocation problem has *Vulcan does not exist* saying one thing if it is false—that *v* fails to exist—and another if it is true—that *K_v*-type acts don't come off. But suppose with Walton that *exists* lacks a literal meaning. Then the first scenario (*Vulcan does not exist* is false) is not possible. Certainly *Vulcan does not exist* cannot be false on account of misdescribing an existing object as nonexistent; meaningless words do not describe objects correctly or otherwise. And so there is nothing else for *Vulcan does not exist* to say, if it is false, than that *K_v*-type acts do not come off. Which is just what it says if true, according to Walton!

This leaves Aboutness. If the name and predicate are both meaningless, then *Vulcan does not exist* is not literally about anything, nor does it ascribe any feature or possess a truth-value. But this is not to say that speakers are not talking about anything when they produce the sentence, or that no evaluable claim is made. We use the sentence to describe a kind of referring attempt as unsuccessful. It is only if one wants the sentence itself to be true, as opposed to the claim made by its means, that the lack of a literal subject matter causes trouble.

All this counts in favor of Walton's account. But there are worries, too. The proposed reply to Indirection assumed that semantic phenomenology is dictated by what one is pretending to do, rather than what one is really doing. It would be one thing if indirect speech followed this rule more generally. But the opposite is the case. *Would you be kind enough to move your car?* is experienced as a request, not a factual query. *You are getting on my last nerve* feels like a complaint, not a piece of pretend neurophysiology. It takes work, when one Xs by Y-ing, to perceive the Y-ing through the act one performs with it—the act which was after all the point of the exercise.

Equivocation is not strictly possible, if one of the supposed readings is unavailable. But there can still be the *feeling* of equivocation, if people *think* it's available. *Gregor was interested in insects* expresses different hypotheses, one naively imagines, in connection with Gregor Samsa and Gregor Mendel. A reminder that nothing is really *said* in the first case does not diminish this appearance at all. It's the same with *Vulcan does (did) not exist*. It should, if Walton is right, *appear* to say one thing if true—that a referring attempt misfires— another if false. For it seems, in the second case, to attribute to Vulcan a property that it lacks: nonexistence. That *Vulcan does (did) not exist* strikes us as saying the same either way is hard to reconcile with *DA's* account of what it says if Vulcan indeed fails to exist.

Does the Aboutness problem go away, if we stop expecting *Vulcan does not exist* to come out (literally) true, as opposed to facilitating the expression of truths? No, for it does equal violence to our aboutness intuitions for the truths (non-literally) expressed to concern referring attempts. Walton suggests as much himself:

To say that Neptune or Falstaff doesn't exist is to say that such referring attempts do not succeed. This sounds strange. We seem to be talking about Neptune and Falstaff, not about kinds of attempted reference (notwithstanding the fact that there is no Falstaff to talk about). After all, the sentences we use consist in the name, "Neptune" or "Falstaff," with a predicate attached. (Walton [2014], 102)

Can we really have been talking the whole time about the success of acts of attempted reference without knowing it? (Without perhaps even knowing what acts of attempted reference are supposed to be?)

A second worry about the proposed response is that it asks us to stop expecting *Vulcan does not exist* to come out (literally) true. I for one am not quite ready to do that. Probably

most of us share his incredulity when Walton asks,

[H]ow could it even occur to anyone to imagine that ordinary occurrences of “Falstaff does not exist” and “Neptune exists” are metaphorical? (Walton [2014], 90)

They are non-metaphorical for Walton because there is no literal meaning to play on. But to deny these sentences a literal meaning makes them in a way *stranger* than metaphorical. Ideally ordinary occurrences of “Falstaff does not exist” and “Neptune exists” would be saved from metaphoricality, not by being literally meaningless, but literally true.

4. Denial in a new key

Now an account in the same spirit as Walton’s, but different in almost every detail.⁸

Suppose we agree with Walton that one pretends to speak of Vulcan, when really one regards any such attempt as unsuccessful. That the speaker only pretends to refer makes it hard to see how they could be speaking literally. There appears to be some sort of conflict between pretense figuring in the use or cognition of a sentence and our taking the sentence at face value.

How to block the inference from “as if” to “non-literal” is not obvious, but let’s not give up just yet. For the truth-conditions of certain sentences are explained in pretense terms as a matter of course. Take *According to the stories, Holmes smoked a pipe*. This is true, it seems, if readers of the Holmes stories are to play a make-believe game that calls on them to pretend that there is a man Holmes whose habits include pipe-smoking. If *Holmes does not exist* were amenable to a paraphrase along *According to the stories,...* lines, this would give us a way of taking *Holmes does not exist* literally while preserving the role of pretense in its cognition and evaluation.

No such paraphrase is possible, it would seem. But consider a neighboring construction, *If P then Q*. Fictional truth has been explained in conditional terms going back

at least to Lewis's "Truth in Fiction" (Lewis [1978]). According to P, Q corresponds (roughly) for Lewis to *Had P been told as known truth, it would have been that Q*. (Further adjustments are needed to prevent extraneous worldly facts, like the date of the Norman Conquest, from worming their way into the fiction's content, but this is the basic idea.) We can for present purposes simplify the analysis to $P \Box \rightarrow Q$: *had it been that P, it would have been that Q*.

This is of course a subjunctive or counterfactual conditional. Adams' famous example is *If Oswald hadn't killed Kennedy, he would not have been killed*, which he contrasts with the indicative conditional *If Oswald did not in fact shoot Kennedy, then Kennedy shot*. Lewis might have made the wrong choice here, for fictional truths tend to remain so when prefixed by *actually...*; imagine someone maintaining that Holmes smokes a pipe in the stories, but doesn't in the stories *actually* smoke a pipe. That Q and *Actually, Q* are not freely substitutable in the consequents of counterfactuals is a familiar point, e.g., *Pigs fly* $\Box \rightarrow$ *Pigs fly* is a lot more plausible than *Pigs fly* $\Box \rightarrow$ *Pigs actually fly*. The *actually*-equivalence is thus lost on a Lewis-like view.

That was an example of undergeneration, but counterfactuals also overgenerate. Had *Metamorphosis* been told as known truth, there would have been more cases of people turning into insects than really in fact occur (1 is more than 0). But it is not true according to *Metamorphosis* that people turn into insects more often than in actual fact. The book takes no stand on the actual, extra-fictional, facts here, and for good reason: it presents the events it speaks of as really occurring. If it is not so in *Metamorphosis* that people never actually turn into insects, then it is not true there either that Samsa's turning into an insect lifts the number of such transformations above the actual number.

Indicative conditionals $P \rightarrow Q$ do better on this score. *If P is the case, then Q* is equivalent more or less to *If P is the case, then actually, Q*.⁹ As for the overgeneration problem, indicatives of the form *If P, then the number of so and so's exceeds the actual number* are unassertable, except possibly in the context of a reductio.¹⁰ An account that equates *According to P, Q* with $P \rightarrow Q$, rather than $P \Box \rightarrow Q$, has the advantage of *not* predicting that it is true according to *Metamorphosis* that the story overestimates how often people turn

into insects, and more generally not predicting that it is true according to *Metamorphosis* that the story is false.

A more important point, given our interest in reconciling “as if” with “literally,” is that *If P, then ...* has a lot in common cognitive-processing-wise with *According to P, ...* One in both cases treats *P* as true—without necessarily believing it—in order to work out how things look under the scope of that assumption. Ramsey puts it where indicatives are concerned like this:

If two people are arguing *If P, will 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*.¹¹

“Adding *P* hypothetically to one’s stock of knowledge” is often modeled as imagining, or pretending, that a reliable informant says: *P*.¹² The element of pretense is closer to the surface in Quine, who calls the conditional “a dramatic idiom,” assessed by “feign[ing] belief in the antecedent and see[ing] how convincing we then find the consequent” (Quine [1960], 222).

Take a paradigm indicative conditional like *If Oswald did not kill Kennedy, then someone else did*. How do we make up our minds about it? Certainly the conditional is not *about* the imagined upshot of learning the antecedent, nor do we contemplate any such learning experience in evaluating it. Rather we imagine learning in a first-order way that Oswald did not kill Kennedy; we then ask ourselves, under the scope of that imagining, whether someone else killed Kennedy. Deciding “on that basis” that someone else must have is how we decide, outside the scope of the pretense, that someone else killed Kennedy, if it wasn’t Oswald.

None of this matters to negative singular existentials unless *n does not exist* is more amenable to a paraphrase along the lines of *If P, then Q* than *According to P, Q*. It sounds unlikely here is a (fanciful!) proof of concept for the idea. Everyone is familiar with “monkey’s uncle” conditionals. One uses *If that’s a Picasso, then I’m a monkey’s uncle* to deny that it is a Picasso. More generally let “ \perp ” be some acknowledged absurdity. Then to assert *If P, then \perp* is tantamount

to denying (asserting the negation of) the antecedent. Negation is indeed sometimes *defined* (e.g. by intuitionists) in these terms: $\neg P =_{df} \text{If } P, \text{ then } \perp$. Which suggests *If Vulcan exists, then \perp* as an elucidation of *Vulcan does not exist*.

To model nonexistence claims on per absurdum conditionals is not a million miles from Walton's own account. Both have us making as if to do something (refer with *Vulcan*, accept that *Vulcan* exists) as a prelude to critiquing the very act we have made as if to perform. "Vulcan...that didn't work" and "Say *Vulcan* exists....whoops, now we're in trouble" are clearly partners in crime. But the per absurdum account has advantages where our three initial problems are concerned.

Aboutness. *If Vulcan exists, then \perp* cannot be metaphysically about *Vulcan*; its truth-value cannot really turn on how matters stand where *Vulcan* is concerned. The most one can ask is that it be *cognitively* about *Vulcan*. It is, on the per absurdum account. When we hypothesize that *Vulcan* exists, we take ourselves to be thinking and talking about *Vulcan*. And we are right to do so, for we are, if *Vulcan* exists, thinking and talking about *Vulcan*.¹³

Indirection. No surrogate object—name, concept, or type of referring attempt—is forced on us (by the fact that *Vulcan* is not available for the role) as the thing "really" under discussion. *Vulcan* is properly *treated* as under discussion in the conditional's antecedent, since we are imagining the name to be nonempty. It is to that extent properly treated as under discussion in the conditional as a whole. There is in another sense *nothing* under discussion in the conditional as a whole; we are simply following out the consequences of a hypothesis.

Equivocation. Recall the worry. (i) *Vulcan does not exist*, if false, expresses a singular proposition attributing nonexistence to *Vulcan*. But then (ii) since there is no such proposition if the sentence is true, the *Vulcan*-accepter and the *Vulcan*-denier are talking past each other. Against (ii), metaphysical disputes *often* do not concern the truth-value of a shared singular proposition, e.g., *That is a dog* expresses one singular proposition if true, another if false (assuming dogs are essentially dogs). Against (i), suppose that *Vulcan does*

not exist is false, because Vulcan exists. Then it is false as well that if Vulcan exists, then \perp . (If *Vulcan exists*, then Q can be true, by modus ponens, only if Q is true, which \perp isn't.) But then the per absurdum conditional presents potentially a unitary content for *Vulcan does not exist*—a content whose holding explains why the sentence is true, if it is, and whose failure explains why it is false, if Vulcan exists.

5. Specifying content

What will Walton think of all this? A lot of it will be viewed by him with suspicion. I said in expounding *DA* that one pretends to speak (or pretends to attempt to speak) of “a certain planet.” Why not just come right out and say that one pretends to speak of Vulcan? That is how I put it when sketching my Ramseyan reworking of the disavowal account. But Walton would, I think, find this kind of talk hard to make sense of. Recall the “or rather” rider in a passage already quoted:

The impression that Falstaff and Neptune are what we speak of is explained by the fact that we are pretending that this is so—or rather, we pretend to refer successfully by means of the names and to attribute properties to the referents. (Walton [2014], 102)

Why would he rather not say that we are pretending to refer to Falstaff? Nobody likes to use empty names in spelling out what is really the case. But Walton is wary too of using them to specify what is pretended to be the case.

Suppose that Sally, recounting a novel, says, “And then Tom Sawyer attended his own funeral.” In presenting this as true, Sally seems to be gesturing at the existence of a prescription to pretend (in the relevant game, should the question arise) that Tom Sawyer attended his own funeral. A first exposure to Walton’s theory of fictional truth suggests that this is what he himself would say. But it isn’t.

Sally’s assertion (“Tom Sawyer attended his own funeral”) is about a kind of pretense that I dubbed kind *K*. I know of no informative individuating

description that can be given of this kind of pretense. To pretend in this way is not to pretend to assert the proposition that Tom Sawyer attended his own funeral, if there is no such proposition. It is to pretend to make an assertion, more specifically, to pretend to assert *de re* of someone that he attended his own funeral. But not all acts of pretense of this sort are of kind *K*. We need not insist that an individuating description be provided, however. The reference of "*K*" can be fixed by pointing to examples, such as the pretense Sally herself displays, although the meaning of "*K*" is not tied to any particular instances. (Walton [1990],402)

Sally cannot be pretending to assert the proposition that Tom Sawyer attended his own funeral, because she knows full well that no such proposition exists; indeed she cannot be pretending to assert *it* given just that no such proposition exists, whether she knows of its nonexistence or not.

To see why someone might say this, suppose that *N* is a nonsense sentence like "The slithy toves gimble in the wabe," or "Glumph." I can pretend that *N* is true, because I know what truth is, and I know the identity of the sentence *N*. I have no idea, though, what toves, gimbles, and so on, might be, or when a world is glumph-y. And neither does anyone else; the words lack meaning. As a result, one cannot easily pretend that *N*: that the slithy toves gimble in the wabe, or that glumph. There is nothing there *to* pretend. Likewise with Tom Sawyer attending his own funeral.

Well, but can't I *pretend* that there is something there to pretend, by pretending that *N* means, say, that pigs fly at sunset? I can, but it doesn't help. Remember, we are interested in the possibility of pretending that glumph. Pretending that (i) *Glumph* means that so and so, and (ii) *Glumph* is true, does not seem, however, like a way of pretending that glumph; it's a way at best of pretending that so and so. To pretend that *S* by pretending the sentence true, we would need *S* to retain, in the pretense, its actual literal meaning:

that *S*. And that it cannot do, if *S* is a nonsense sentence without literal meaning. The same arguably holds if *S* contains an empty name like *Tom Sawyer*.

Though it goes beyond anything Walton actually says, I propose the following as a reconstruction of his thinking. If I want to genuinely pretend that *S*, I will have to get into a state whose content is the same as, or is strongly informed by, *S*'s literal meaning. The problem with pretending that glumph is that "Glumph" *has* no literal meaning capable of being slotted into this scheme. This applies as well to so-called pretending to talk about Vulcan. What sort of pretense is intended, when there is nothing to serve as the literal meaning of *Vulcan*? And it applies as well to pretending to ascribe existence. This form of words does nothing to circumscribe a form of pretense, if there is no such thing as existence. One might as well speak of pretending to ascribe glumphishness.

6. Obstacles to pretendability

Is it really so that we can pretend that *S* only if *S* has literal meaning? Certainly our difficulties in pretending that *S* may *sometimes* relate to *S*'s meaninglessness, as in the "glumph" and "slithy toves" examples. But there is more going wrong in a nonsense sentence than lack of meaning. One has little idea of what *Glumph* is even *supposed* to mean, of the kind of thing we are to *imagine* it meaning.

Compare *Santa brought the skateboard* or *Holmes is a great detective*. These too lack literal meaning, going by Kripkean orthodoxy. But they do not strike us as nonsense. Doubts are rarely expressed about the possibility of parents pretending for their children's sake that the skateboard was brought by Santa. Does anyone think that all one can really do is pretend that the sentence *Santa brought the skateboard* is true? Surely not. The question arises what the difference could be between *Santa brought the skateboard* and *Glumph*, that one would be more pretendable than the other.

Kripke hints at an answer in his 1973 Locke Lectures ([Kripke \[2013\]](#)). "Isn't it a problem for Mill's theory," he has an interlocutor ask, "where there cannot be names with no

referent, [that this] appears to be the case in fiction?" (Kripke [2013], Lecture 1, 23-4). He finds the objection puzzling:

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)

Any obstacles that a name *n*'s emptiness might seem to put in the way of pretending that ...*n*... just evaporate he suggests, when we remember that it is *also* part of the pretense that the name is *not* empty, that it stands for a specific sort of object, related to *n* in the appropriate way, e.g., by a chain of uses going back to some kind of initial dubbing. This bears on the issue of how *According to the story, Holmes is a great detective* can be evaluable, when the embedded sentence, starting with the fictional name, fails to express a proposition.

'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," Kripke seems to be saying, if it exists and takes a recognizable shape in the story. Nor do the empty names in *P* make *According to the story, P* unevaluable, if the story assigns them referents. The report is true just if players of the relevant game, invited to pretend that *P*, should accept the invitation. The invitation may not make sense to outsiders; there is no such thing, for them, as the proposition that *P*. But then they are not the ones being invited. Players of the Holmes game do recognize such a proposition, and are free to consider whether to make as if to believe it. *According to the story, P* is true just if the invitation is one they ought to accept.

7. Derived contexts

An analogy may be helpful. Imagine someone insisting that France must really have a king, for it to be pretendable that the king of France is wise. This is wholly implausible. It's enough if the pretender, call him Larry, *believes* that France has a king. Indeed he need not even believe it. Larry can pretend that the king of France is wise if he takes care to pretend first that France has a king. To insist that this tactic can succeed only if the presupposition is really true—never mind that it is treated as true— seems just silly.

Where *The king of France is wise* presupposes that France has a king, *Holmes is irascible* presupposes that there is such a person as Holmes. If Louise wants to pretend that Holmes is irascible, Kripke's advice is to pretend as well (or "first") that there is an individual Holmes around to have properties in the first place— as Larry had to pretend first that France had a king. This is not going to bother Louise, for she was already pretending, when invited to pretend that Holmes is irascible, to be in the sort of world depicted in the stories. The sentence *Holmes is irascible* means in that sort of world that Holmes is irascible. Shouldn't this put her in as good a position to pretend that Holmes is irascible, as Larry

was to pretend that the king of France is wise? To insist that the attempt must fail unless *Holmes is irascible* expresses in *our* world the proposition concerning Holmes that he is irascible seems again hardly plausible.

Stalnaker makes a related point in his discussion of belief attributions.¹⁴ Suppose I want to attribute a belief to Jones with a sentence *S*. Must *S* really express a proposition, or express one in *my* view, for this to work? That it fails to express a proposition in the worlds that *I* have not ruled out (the “basic” context) does not mean that it fails to express one in the worlds that Jones hasn’t ruled out. It is normally the second set of worlds (the “derived” context) that controls the interpretation of *S* in belief attributions. The attribution is supposed to be telling us how matters look in certain respects to Jones. It stands to reason that the sentence best encoding how they look in one respect to Jones may be suited to the purpose only because of how they look in other respects to Jones.

This is clear enough when it comes to the sentences that Jones herself uses to convey her beliefs. She says, “Both of them look suspicious” because she takes us to be looking at *two* individuals. We need to grant her this for interpretive purposes, even if we ourselves think that there is only one person there. The same applies, Stalnaker says, to the sentences that *we* use to convey Jones’s beliefs. We ourselves need in many cases to understand her as drawing a line through her context, the derived context, rather than our own.

Derived contexts are further supported by an argument to the best explanation. That there are two different contexts involved helps to explain why principles governing the interpretation of free-standing asserted sentences have counterparts for embedded sentences. One such principle concerns presupposition. We assert *S* only when it is taken for granted that *P*, for each presupposition *P* of *S*. Likewise we hesitate to attribute belief in *S* to people who don’t take it for granted that *P*.

Just as “Harry regrets accepting the bribe” is appropriate only in a context in which it is presupposed that a bribe was offered, and that Harry accepted it, so the statement “Phoebe believes that Harry regrets accepting the bribe”

requires a derived context in which it is presupposed that a bribe was offered and that Harry accepted it. (Stalnaker [1999], 157)

Another principle concerns pronouns:

One can use *he* to refer to someone only if there is a unique most salient male in each of the possible situations in the context set. In a belief attribution, one needs such an individual in each of the possible situations in the derived context set. So we may say “Phoebe thought she heard a prowler in the vegetable garden last night. She believed that he probably came to steal one of her prize-winning zucchinis.” For all the speaker assumes or implies, there may really have been no such prowler, but the pronoun *he* can still be appropriately used to “refer” to the prowler, since he inhabits each of the possible situations in the derived context set. (Stalnaker [1999], 157-8)

If we agree with this, then it does not seem like *too* much of a stretch to extend the notion of a derived context set from belief attributions to attributions of make-believe. One can claim the same kind of license for using *Santa* in *She’s pretending that the skateboard came from Santa*, as for using *he* in *Phoebe believes he (the prowler) came to steal one of her zucchinis*. The word *Santa* can be used to “refer” to the legendary gift-giver, since he inhabits each possible world in the derived context— meaning this time, the context Phoebe makes as if to inhabit when the words *The skateboard is from Santa* come out of her mouth.

8. Explaining too much?

The worry was that it makes no sense to speak of pretending that *P*, unless *P* expresses a proposition. I am suggesting in a Kripkean/Stalnakerian spirit that sense can be made of it, if *P* is taken in the pretense to express a proposition, *and* we have a clear enough idea of the type of proposition involved. If the objection to per-absurdism is that

- (1) The antecedent *n exists* lacks literal content.
- (2) We don't know what it is to pretend that P unless P has literal content.
- (3) *If P, then Q* makes sense only if we know what it is to pretend that P.
- (4) \therefore *If n exists, then \perp* makes no sense.

then it can be resisted. The second premise is not plausible if one thinks the idea of pretending that P does make sense, provided that P is taken *in the pretense* to have a certain proposition as its literal content.

Is there a danger now of making it too *easy* to pretend that S? Let's agree that *Jane is pretending the skateboard is from Santa* can be true, though the embedded sentence is meaningless, provided it is meaningful *in Jane's derived context*: the context she pretends to inhabit. Why cannot *Jane is pretending that the toves gimble in the wabe* be rescued the same way, or even *Jane is pretending that glumph*? I take it that Jane is supposed to pretend, when reading *Jabberwocky*, that the words have some kind of meaning which for the moment escapes her. Somehow that is not enough for first-order pretendability. Otherwise to pretend that S when S is pure nonsense would be no more difficult than pretending that Santa brought the skateboard. What distinguishes ordinary seasonal Santa-pretending, which is possible, from toves-gimble (or glumph)-pretending, which is not?

Not to claim *too* much of a Kripkean imprimatur for this idea, look again at the passage quoted in section 6. The story has it, Kripke says, both that (i) there is a proposition of such and such a *type*— attributing great-detective-hood-to-Holmes— and further that (ii) this proposition is true. Readers are to pretend first that (i), it seems, and then, under the scope of that initial pretense, that (ii). Insofar as *attributing-great-detective-hood-to-Holmes* is a more definite *type* of proposition than *attributing-gimbling-in-the-wabe-to-toves*, we have a better idea of what we are meant to be doing, when we are asked to pretend that a proposition of the first type is true. This could be why we are happier being asked to pretend that Holmes is a great detective, than that glumph, or that toves gimble in the wabe.

But we are not out of the woods yet. Granted that to pretend that *S* requires only a sense of what an *S*-type proposition would be like, where is that sense supposed to come from, if *S* contains an empty name? One needs to know how *Holmes is a great detective*-type propositions are meant to look, as opposed to *Watson is a great detective*-type propositions, before one can pretend that Holmes is a great detective as opposed to Watson being one. It is hard to see how that distinction is going to be drawn, if not in terms of the names' bearers. But then it cannot be drawn at all, the objection goes, for they have no bearers.

Granted, one can from an *engaged* perspective see a difference between two types of proposition: *attributing-great-detective-hood-to-Holmes* and *attributing-great-detective-hood-to-Watson*. But it disappears when we stop make-believing in Holmes and Watson. Which is bad, because theorists are supposed to be *disengaged*. If we as theorists cannot make sense *to ourselves* of what it is to pretend that Holmes is a great detective, as opposed to Watson being one, then it is hard to see how we can rely on such a distinction in our theory. The only distinction available to the theorist, the thought goes, is that between pretending of *Holmes is a great detective*-speakers that they speak truly and pretending this of *Watson is a great detective*-speakers.

9. Theoretical discourse

Call this the “disengaged-theorist objection” to our claim that readers can in some cases pretend that *S*, e.g., that Holmes exists, or that Holmes is a great detective, even if *S* fails to express a proposition. The type of pretense involved is not identifiable, according to this objection, anyway not as the pretense that *S*, from the disengaged vantage point occupied by the theorist.¹⁵ Pretending that Holmes is φ cannot be distinguished from pretending that Watson is φ by way of the propositions pretended, if there are no such propositions and we are not pretending there are. But there may be a disengaged way to draw the distinction.

Take first the reader. She was already feigning belief in an individual with properties ψ_H , including that of being named *Holmes*, and one with properties ψ_W , including that of being named *Watson*, when the invitation came to pretend that Holmes (Watson) is φ . Pretending that Holmes (Watson) is φ is pretending anaphorically, of the first (second) individual, that *he* is φ . The game calls on us to accept the one anaphorically framed invitation while rejecting the other. The predicates ψ_H and ψ_W need not be limited to properties attributed to Holmes and Watson in the stories. They may include, as well, metasemantic properties like being thus-and-so causally related to occurrences of *Holmes* and *Watson* in the text. In imagining herself to be reading a report in which the two names figure, she imagines herself to be in whatever sort of causal contact with their referents may be necessary for *de re* thought about the named individuals themselves.

The Ramseyan conditionalizer is *not* already feigning belief in a certain named individual, when the invitation comes to pretend that “he” is φ . But the situation is otherwise similar. Suppose that *P* contains *Holmes*, or to change the example a bit, a name like *Moses* that may or may not be empty. The conditional we want to evaluate is *If Moses was pulled from the bulrushes, that was a lucky break*. Applying the Ramsey test, we imagine receiving *Moses was pulled from the bulrushes* as reliable testimony. To imagine this much is to imagine being in the right kind of causal contact, via our informant, with the referent to enable us to speak and think of Moses by use of that word. To think of it as extending only as far as the alleged truth of *Moses was pulled from the bulrushes* gets the content of the imagining quite wrong. If the testimony is true, and means that Moses was pulled from the bulrushes (availing ourselves here of the causal chain extended by our informant), then what could stop us from imagining that Moses was pulled from the bulrushes?¹⁶

That we pretend that *P*, not only that *P* is true, is crucial if we are to get the right results about conditionals like *If Moses never entered the promised land, then he died unhappy*, or *If God loves us, he is doing a poor job of showing it*. The “he” in the consequent has got to be

treated as anaphoric on the name in the antecedent. This will not be easy if the name is only mentioned. (Compare, *If “God loves us” is true, he is doing a poor job of showing it.*) The name has got to be used. One has to imagine God loving us, to be in a position to ask whether *he* is doing a good job of showing it.

Imagining that God loves us is easy, if we believe in God. But the God-loves-us conditional might also be asserted by an atheist. A conditional very much like it was asserted, or at least accepted, by the atheist Russell. Asked what he would say to his maker on encountering him after death, he replied, *why did you not provide more evidence of your existence?* That he took the name to be empty did not stop him from thinking that God, *if he exists*, has been keeping a low profile. One may even attempt to justify one’s atheism by conditioning on God’s existence, arguing that if God exists, then BLAH, where BLAH is false or absurd.¹⁷

10. The expressive challenge

One challenge the atheist faces us that of *defending* her negative ontological verdict about God. A bigger challenge, from the perspective anyway of this paper, is that of *expressing* the negative verdict. Our idea was that one asserts $\neg \textit{God exists}$ by adopting the opposite hypothesis and running it into the wall: $\textit{God exists} \rightarrow \perp$. But one would like a deeper understanding of what the atheist is getting at with this exercise.

The intuitionistic logic analogy is suggestive here. A state \mathbf{s} verifies $A \rightarrow C$ in (the standard semantics for that logic) just if every extension \mathbf{t} of \mathbf{s} that verifies A also verifies C . \mathbf{s} verifies $\neg A$ just if no extension \mathbf{t} of \mathbf{s} verifies A . This is why, letting \perp (“bottom”) be verified by no states whatever, \mathbf{s} verifies $\neg A$ iff it verifies $A \rightarrow \perp$.¹⁸

Does n does not have to refer in state \mathbf{s} , for \mathbf{s} to verify $n \textit{ does not exist}$? Not on the face of it. All it takes for \mathbf{s} to verify $A \rightarrow \perp$ is that the hypothesis of a \mathbf{t} that, despite extending \mathbf{s} , does verify $n \textit{ exists}$, is untenable. It is enough, in other words, that a state’s extending

s prevents it from verifying *n exists*. This admittedly leaves the question of what may be going on in *s* to preclude the piling on of further details whereby, say, *God exists* is verified. Presumably *s* would accomplish this by *leaving no room* for God, as opposed to containing a God-surrogate to which it applies a nonexistence-surrogate.

Kripke hints at something along these lines in a paper on vacuous names (Kripke [2011]). He gives an example there of a claim *n exists* where (i) we seem to know *If n exists, then Q*, even though *n* is an empty name, and (ii) that conditional begins to show why there is no room in a world like ours for an entity such as *n* was supposed to be.

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 [2011], 71-2).

Even if Holmes exists, still none of us in the room can be Holmes, Kripke thinks, since we all have properties that Holmes (assuming him to exist) lacks. Letting *h* be *Holmes* and *a_k* ($1 \leq k \leq n$) name the people in this room, there are facts about the *a_k*s given which

(0) \bigwedge_k (*If h exists, then $h \neq a_k$*),

or, what seems to be equivalent,

(1) *If h exists, then $\bigwedge_k h \neq a_k$* .

We are still a long way from *Holmes exists* $\rightarrow \perp$, since there is nothing absurd about $\bigwedge_k h \neq a_k$ (about Holmes being distinct from everyone here). Perhaps Holmes exists as one of the entities outside the room. This is why I said that (0) only *begins* to bring out why *Holmes does not exist* is true.

Whether Holmes is in the room or not, he has to be *something*—one of the existing things—if he exists. And the prospects do not seem to get better as we widen our gaze to the rest of the universe. Let *a₁*, *a₂*, ..., *a_ω*, ..., *a_K*, ... be names for all the things that exist

(inside the room or out). If Holmes exists, he has got to be either a_1 or a_2 ...or a_k or etc; there are no other candidates:

(2) *If h exists, then $\vee_k h = a_k$.*

Now consider the contrary conditional, which is like (1) except in casting its net more widely:

(3) *If h exists, then $\wedge_k h \neq a_k$.*

This seems more than plausible. It is not as though we in this room are uniquely ill-qualified for the Holmes role. *Every* existing thing has properties given which $\text{Holmes} \neq$ that thing, supposing Holmes to exist. $\text{Holmes} \neq$ my car, if he exists, because he is a person if he exists, not a car. $\text{Holmes} \neq$ Narendra Modi, if he exists, because Modi was born too late. $\text{Holmes} \neq$ my grandmother Masha, if Holmes exists, because Doyle had thoughts about Holmes (if he exists), and Doyle never contemplated Masha. He did have thoughts of Joseph Bell, a surgeon at the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh for whom he apprenticed. And Bell served as inspiration for Holmes. But it is clear from Doyle's correspondence with Bell that Holmes, if he exists, is not Bell (Doyle considered himself a likelier candidate).

So what, you may say, if Holmes is not Joseph Bell or my great-grandmother. Holmes could be absolutely anyone, if he exists! This mistakes the dialectic. The burden is not on me to run down all the contenders and detail their failings. That might be appropriate if I was trying to *convince* you that Holmes did not exist. But you are already convinced. The challenge here was only to find a way of expressing this shared view of ours that is not ruined by the fact that *Holmes* is an empty name.

Keeping all this in mind, do we Holmes-deniers believe (3) or not? I think we do believe it. Suppose to the contrary that we thought that the properties of some existing x left it open whether x was Holmes. Then we would be *undecided* about whether Holmes exists — which is not our attitude whatsoever. The historical reality of Moses, or Solon, we may be unsure about, but Holmes we believe *not* to exist. And now it is a short step to

the desired per absurdum conditional. From (2) and (3) we get (on standard views of the logic of if/then)

(4) *If h exists, then $\vee_{\kappa} h = a_{\kappa} \ \& \ \wedge_{\kappa} h \neq a_{\kappa}$.*

The consequent is absurd, since $\vee_{\kappa} h = a_{\kappa}$ is the negation of $\wedge_{\kappa} h \neq a_{\kappa}$. (4) is thus of the form $A \rightarrow \perp$, a form which plausibly defines $\neg A$. In saying that Holmes exists only if \perp , (4) says at the same time that Holmes does not exist. A more colloquial variant, using *US* for the things that in fact exist, is

(5) *None of US is Holmes, even if he exists; though one of US must be Holmes, if he exists.*

To affirm that none of US is Holmes, if he exists, even as one of US must be Holmes, if he exists, is a way of denying that Holmes exists. The difference with other proposed models of singular existence-denial is that this one is not self-defeating. *Holmes is nonexistent* no longer presupposes that there is such a thing as Holmes when we read it as a conditional of the form *If Holmes exists, then \perp* . That he is not presupposed does not prevent us from being cognitively/phenomemologically en rapport with Holmes, for to imagine learning the antecedent is to imagine being in causal contact with Holmes via one's informant.

11. Categorical import

What is the existence-denier getting at, in saying *n does not exist*? The paraphrase we've suggested is *If n does exist, then \perp* , where \perp is some acknowledged absurdity, e.g., *n is both none of US, and one of US*. Maybe this misunderstands the question, however. What is the existence-denier getting at "in the world"? What are the facts out there "making it true" that *If Holmes exists, then \perp* ?

Not everyone thinks indicative conditionals $P \rightarrow Q$ are truth-apt in the first place. Even assuming they are, it is wildly unclear what the facts are that fix their truth-values. The Ramsey test puts us in mind of the facts that P -hypothesizers rely on in deciding whether Q . These are likely to vary from thinker to thinker, though. And they are often

only evidentially relevant, rather than bearing on why $P \rightarrow Q$. That a mushroom looks poisonous does not tell us why *Al died if he ate it* is true, only why we should think, on the supposition that he ate it, that Al died.

Another approach asks what the underlying doxastic difference is between those who believe $P \rightarrow Q$ and those who deny it. The believers mostly think that the mushroom is poisonous, never mind their evidence for that view. Perhaps the poisonousness is what they are “getting at.” Applying this method to (5), or *Holmes exists* $\rightarrow \perp$, what is the difference between those who believe these things and those taking a different view? I am not sure what to point to here. We believe them because of some combination of (a) world knowledge about how the name came into the language, (b) metasemantic knowledge about how names come to stand for things, and (c) plausible reasoning about the unlikelihood of a name with that kind of history winding up *malgre’ lui* with a referent. All these considerations involve the word *Holmes*, which may account in part for the popularity of the metalinguistic theory. But unless we are verificationists, that our route to *Holmes does not exist* runs through metalinguistic facts tells us nothing about the sentence’s worldly import.

A third approach asks what the differences are between worlds where *If Holmes exists, then* \perp is true and worlds where it is false. But again, there could be all kinds of differences. Some Holmes-less worlds will be that way because they are empty. Some will be that way because they are devoid of thought. Others will contain *candidates* for identity with Holmes, as Doyle and Bell are candidates in our world. These worlds’ Holmes-less-ness is due to whatever it is that ultimately unsuits the candidates for the role.

The only rubric that I can think of under which all these qualifying features can be arranged is that they are all ways for it to be the case that nothing is λx (*Holmes exists* $\rightarrow x = Holmes$). One might wonder about the fixed *categorical* import of this universalized conditional. I don’t see why it has to have one. *Holmes does not exist* holds on the basis of different facts in different worlds, ranging widely across space and time (as the fact that a world is completely empty ranges widely). The appearance of a fixed, compact

truthmaker arises from the fixed phenomenology of hypothesizing Holmes's existence, then watching our hypothesis crash into the rocks.

12. Concluding inartful postscript

Wondering about the aboutness-properties of negative existentials is a bit like wondering who died, or what passed out of existence, when the funeral bells are ringing. Donne in a famous poem warns against a certain kind answer. One expects to hear of a "clod washing out to sea," or "a manor of thy friends," or whatever it is that is missing or was never there. Really the bell tolls for those who (still) exist, he thinks; it is we who are less than we might have been. I agree with Donne on this. Do not ask for whom the bell tolls, as though something there isn't, or never was, remained to be identified. It tolls for US.¹⁹

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¹ [Walton \[2000\]](#) in [Everett and Hofweber \[2000\]](#). Page references are to the reprint in [Walton \[2014\]](#).

² “Disavowal” has a performative ring that invites Frege-Geach worries. *Falstaff does not exist* can be embedded in larger contexts, such as *If he does not exist, then probably Ancient Pistol does not exist either*. How *Falstaff: That didn’t work* is supposed to contribute in the antecedent of a conditional is not obvious. Thanks here to Fred Kroon. The problem is mitigated if disavowals are given a propositional content.

³ I am not sure Walton singles this variant out for separate attention. But there is certainly room for it between theories he does recognize. *DA** agrees with *DA* that *Vulcan* and *exists* lack literal meaning. Where *DA* has us pretending only that *Vulcan* is meaningful, in *DA** we pretend that *exists* too is meaningful, and that it applies to certain things (Neptune) but not others (Vulcan). *Exists* according to a *third* account, “make-believe Meinongianism” (*MM*), really does have a literal meaning. It expresses an indiscriminate property/concept, one attaching to everything whatsoever. That property is treated in the make-believe, however, as discriminating, e.g., Neptune has it but not Vulcan ([Crimmins \[1998\]](#)).

⁴ Some would treat these gappy items as a special *kind* of proposition ([Braun \[2005\]](#)). This is not Walton’s view.

⁵ Allowing that “This is not an issue for me to stomp my foot about” ([Walton \[2014\]](#), 108).

⁶ Walton suggests in a footnote that functioning is this way could *be* the literal meaning. “Does “exist(s)” have a “literal” meaning which guides its use in characterizing referring attempts? One’s first reaction is likely to be this: the literal meaning of “exist(s)” just is its possessing the function of characterizing attempts to refer” (105). I am not sure how seriously we are meant to take this. His point is that “exists” is used metaphorically only given a *separate* literal meaning underlying the stated function. If the function itself is our best candidate for the meaning role, then the prospects for a separate literal meaning seem dim.

⁷ Note the qualification here (“or rather,...”); we return to it in section 5.

⁸ Thanks to Fred Kroon for discussion of what comes next.

⁹ [Weatherson \[2001\]](#) and [Santorio \[2012\]](#). Assume throughout that “actual” receives narrow scope.

¹⁰ I agree that the sentence is assertable if “actual” is used as a scope marker, to move the quantifier out of range of the antecedent.

¹¹ Ramsey, “General Propositions and Causality,” in [Ramsey and Mellor \[ed.\]](#)

¹² Let’s ignore the problems this raises in connection with so-called Thomason conditionals, e.g., *If I am being cheated, I don’t know it.*

¹³ Compare *If that little green man is real, he is laughing at us right now* (Evans).

¹⁴ [Stalnaker \[1988\]](#); see also [Kamp \[1988\]](#).

¹⁵ One may wonder why theorists have to be disengaged. Walton’s own view of critical discourse seems relevant here. He sees critics as working within an *unofficial* make-believe which has fictional characters existing alongside regular people. This is the platform from which they opine that Holmes is more famous than Watson *qua fictional character*, and more famous too than any real detective. Maybe theorists are playing an unofficial game of their own when they say that readers are to imagine that Holmes is irascible but not that Watson is, or that conditionalizers are to imagine hearing from a reliable informant that Holmes exists rather than Watson. But let’s consider the objection in its own terms, accepting that theorists ought to be disengaged.

¹⁶ It is no good saying that there is no such proposition to imagine. No proposition is expressed either by *They are both quiet today* (pointing at an empty room). Yet I can easily imagine they are both quiet today, if I imagine first that the room has two people in it.

¹⁷ Some say that (*) indicative conditionals are unassertible if the antecedent is thought (or known or commonly understood) to be false. One should really in that case speak subjunctively, e.g., *if Holmes had existed, then...* This might seem to cause trouble, given that no counterfactual individual, however otherwise eligible, counts as Holmes (for how will we choose among them)? But (*) is belied by Adams’ original Oswald example; we know both that he did kill Kennedy, and that if he didn’t, someone else did. (Ciardelli [2020] is an interesting recent discussion.) Subjunctive morphology does not prevent an indicative reading in any case (DeRose [2010], Khoo [2015]).

¹⁸ Alternatively we could give negation a “test semantics” of the kind suggested by Veltman for epistemic modals ([Veltman \[1996\]](#)). $\diamond\phi$ holds in *s* if *s* is amenable to updating by ϕ ; ϕ holds in *s* if the system crashes when this update is attempted. See [Berto \[2015\]](#).

¹⁹ I first heard Ken’s theory of negative singular existentials in 1988 or so. We were hiking with his son Greg (then 10, now a psychology professor at Stanford) on North Manitou Island in Lake Michigan. Holmes and Falstaff were discussed around the campfire one night, as the raccoons were attacking our camp. “I expect they didn’t appreciate the subtleties of our conversations about existence,” Ken says. I think the problem was more their flouting the prescription to see the tree stumps as bears. That, or a reluctance to fear fictions. Thanks for everything, Ken.