

Brentano's Legacy, Display Theory and Non-Existence

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Mark Sainsbury's recent book *Thinking about Things* (2018) promises to "explain

- how intentional mental states are attributed
- what their "aboutness" consists in
- whether or not they are relational
- whether or not any of them require there to be nonexistent things." (p. 1)

These issues have bugged philosophers throughout the last 150 years, and probably much longer. Certain approaches to them have shaped a good deal of 20th-century and contemporary philosophy. Sainsbury's interlocutors are, for example, Ockham, Reid, Brentano, Meinong, Husserl, Frege, Russell, Prior, Anscombe and Quine.

The book offers brilliant and refreshing ideas on all these questions. But it is also a short book. The innovative ideas are presented in an understated, minimal style that leaves a lot to the reader to work out for him or herself. So in this contribution, I shall seek clarification on some of the loose ends left in the book. I shall begin by trying to explain some of the background that in my view makes the book so important, and by tracking the extent to which Sainsbury agrees with Brentano's account of intentionality. Then I will explain Sainsbury's masterful display theory of intentional attitude attribution, raising some questions along the way. Finally, I will ask whether Sainsbury's solution to the problem of nonexistence is available independently of the negative free logic approach to empty names.

I Brentano's legacy

For the uninitiated it is hard to appreciate the significance of the issues treated in the book: intentionality, non-existence and the attribution of intentional states. So let me begin by explaining why they seem so significant at least to me.

In 1874, Brentano introduced the view that a distinctive characteristic of mental states is that they are "directed towards an object" (1874, p. 106). The intentional objects in Brentano's theory were not propositions but objects like, for instance, a glass of water. When I believe there is a glass of water, or when I desire a glass of water, I am directed towards an intentional object (though in different ways).

We can distinguish (as Sainsbury does) between attributions of intentional states that specify the intentional state with the help of a complete sentence, as for example in “Ana hoped that her team would win.” or “Ben believes it will rain.” and those that do not, as in “Ana hoped for victory.” or “Ben expects rain.”. Brentano took the non-sententially attributed states as basic and assimilated the sententially attributed ones. So Ana’s intentional object is victory in both cases, whereas Ben’s intentional object is rain. (see Brandl & Textor 2022). This may seem unusual to typical contemporary readers, for the dominant approach today assimilates in the opposite direction: Ana’s intentional object is the proposition that her team will win in both cases, while Ben’s intentional object is the proposition that it will rain.

Russell (1912) was worried that treating judgements as relating thinkers to a single intentional object would make falsehood impossible. For example, if Othello’s belief that Desdemona loves Cassio has as its object Desdemona’s love of Cassio (as it would be on Brentano’s approach), then Othello can enter into the belief relation with that object only if there exists such a thing as Desdemona’s love of Cassio. In other words, the belief could only occur if it is true. But it is crucial for the plot of Shakespeare’s play that Othello’s belief is false: there is no such thing as Desdemona’s love of Cassio. So the object of judgement must be something else. This worry led Russell to develop the multiple relation theory of judgement, according to which the belief relation is a multigrade relation that relates a thinker with a varying number of objects (such as, in the current example, Desdemona, the love relation and Cassio).

Later (1918, 1919), Russell was happy to speak of *propositions* as the relata of the belief relation. But this was supposed to be compatible with the idea that thinkers are directly related with the constituents of propositions, as in the multiple relation theory. Thus, on Russell’s account (as well as on Moore’s), beliefs relate thinkers directly with real objects. This contrasts with those of Russell’s Brentanian contemporaries who wanted to allow for a mediating “content” between the thinking subject and the real objects thought about. It also contrasts with the idealists, who allow for a content of thought, but reject talk of any reality that is being represented (see Textor 2021, ch. 9). This is why famously Russell, when answering Frege’s letter, was so adamant that Montblanc with all its snowfields is a constituent of the

proposition that Montblanc is a mountain (see Russell's Letter to Frege 12/12/1904, in Frege 1976).

The difference in approach between Russell and Frege is still very familiar. We still distinguish Russellian from Fregean conceptions of propositions. However, both of them share the same propositional outlook, according to which intentional mental states involve a relation between thinkers and propositions, and not, as in Brentano, between thinkers and non-propositional objects. This "propositionalism" has come to dominate philosophy in the 20th century. But non-sentential attributions of intentional states have always been an unresolved problem for propositionalists (cf. Montague 2009, Forbes 2013, Grzankowski 2015). Neither Russell nor Frege delivers an easy account of a true non-sentential attribution such as "Ponce de Leon was looking for the fountain of youth." (Sainsbury, p. 14).

In *Thinking about Things*, Sainsbury frees himself from sentential or propositional dominance by going back to Brentano's basic question about the nature of intentional states. This enables him to propose a novel and general account of the relationality of intentional states and of how they are attributed. Officially, he leaves open the possibility that ultimately non-sententially attributed states might still be propositional after all. However, the solutions he offers do not depend on propositionalism and on the contrary, in so far as propositionalism was motivated by problems created by Brentano's thesis and by the search for suitable intentional objects, the theory of intentionality here offered removes an important reason that has motivated propositionalism in the first place.

The starting point of all the problems is Brentano's 1874 conception of the mental as essentially representational. According to Brentano, all mental states, and only mental states, are characterised by "intentional in-existence of an object", i.e. directedness towards an object, or towards a content ("Inhalt"). Another way Brentano puts his thesis is that all mental states involve representation ("Vorstellung"). Sainsbury articulates Brentano's thesis thus:

BT Every intentional state has an intentional object: this is what the intentional state is directed on, or is of, or is about.

It may be useful to distinguish three sub-theses, so that they can be discussed separately.

BT1 Intentional states are relational.

BT2 Intentional states relate the thinking subject to an intentional object.

BT3 The intentional object of an intentional state = what the state is about.

(BT2 is supposed to entail BT1).

Now, the propositional mainstream seems able to accommodate BT1 and BT2 when it comes to sententially attributed mental states: Ana's hope that her team will win is directed at the proposition that her team will win and can be thought of as consisting in Ana being hope-related to that proposition. But that proposition is not what her hope is about, as BT3 would then require. Her hope seems to be about her team and about winning. So, if BT3 explains or defines what "intentional object" is to mean in BT2, this threatens also BT2.

If we look at non-sententially attributed states, the propositionalist mainstream has little to offer. Suppose Ana is thinking about unicorns. Then, according to BT3, the intentional object are unicorns, and BT2 requires that Ana stand in a relation (corresponding to "thinking about") to unicorns. Thus for Ana to be thinking about unicorns, there must be unicorns. For otherwise she couldn't be related to them as required by BT2.

The options seem to be these: (a) One can fully accept BT and allow that what Ana is thinking about does indeed exist, and with it all the other things one can think about, hope for, imagine, etc. (b) One can accept the relationality of intentional states as in BT1 and BT2 but reject BT3 and go for an intentional object that is not identical to what Ana is thinking about. (c) One can accept BT1 but reject BT2: intentional states are relational, but the relation is not one to an intentional object. (d) One can reject BT1 and BT2, i.e. deny that all intentional states are relational.

Option (d) can be accompanied by a restricted version of BT1–3: restricted to those cases where the intentional object exists. On such a view, the intentional state where Ana is thinking about horses is one where she is related to the intentional object horses. But the intentional state where Ana is thinking about unicorns is fundamentally different—the former governed by (the restricted version of) BT1–3, the latter not.

This way of opting for (d) runs afoul of one of Prior's desiderata (Prior 1971, 130): Ana's thinking about horses and Ana's thinking about unicorns should be states of the

same fundamental kind. One could mitigate the violation of the desideratum by thinking of that the thought of unicorns as an unsuccessful attempt to enter a state of being related to a certain intentional object—unsuccessful because of there is no object of that kind.

At the very end of his *Life*, Brentano himself seems to have gone for option (d) and thereby to have taken back Brentano's thesis, i.e. the thesis that says that mental states are relations to intentional objects (Brentano 1911/2008, p. 391–2/ 1874/1995, p. 212). In the appendix to the sequel to the 1874 book, Brentano says that mental states are merely “relational-ish” (“relativlich”), i.e. only appear to be relational, while not being genuinely relational in a sense that requires the existence of both relata. He says only the existence of the thinker is required, not the existence of the intentional object.¹

Sainsbury goes for option (c) for he rejects BT2: “we don't need intentional objects to explain intentionality” (p. 19) and accepts BT1: he thinks that intentional states are relational. They relate a thinker to a representation, even if that representation is not the intentional object or what the intentional state is about. Thus, Ana's thinking about unicorns involves her being related to the concept of a unicorn (concepts being representations).

Adducing both Brentano's remarks in 1874 and the 1911 appendix, Sainsbury claims that the best interpretation of Brentano's remarks about mental states containing an object within themselves construes these objects as representations (p. 147). Thus, he takes Brentano's intentional objects to be representations, which amounts to option (b). But since Sainsbury expresses approval of Brentano's view, thus interpreted, this suggests that Sainsbury's own account is also quite close to option (b). What separates Sainsbury from option (b) is merely that he takes BT2 to be tied to the BT3 idea that the intentional object of a mental state must be what the state is about. This is not so in the view Sainsbury attributes to Brentano, for that

¹ To be fair to Brentano, the issue may not have seemed so urgent to him in 1874, because he was operating under the assumption that both mental and physical phenomena are merely that: phenomena, i.e. appearances. He didn't mean to say anything about the underlying reality of which these phenomena may be manifestations. The remarks appear in the appendix to the 1911 continuation of Brentano's 1874 book, and it is headed “Clarifications, defences and corrections”. It is not clear whether he regarded this point as a correction or merely a clarification of what he had already said in 1874.

involves the immanent object being a representation. What also separates Sainsbury from (b) is that he uses the term “object” in such a way as to entail existence and ontological commitment (I will return to this in §3 below). Thus in this sense it is only terminology that separates Sainsbury from (b). Moreover, he approvingly attributes option (b) to Brentano.

Thus, Sainsbury preserves quite a lot of the Brentanian point of departure. Despite the unclarity of what exactly Brentano actually thought about the relationality of mental states, Sainsbury’s account does capture two key elements that are associated with Brentano. Like Brentano, Sainsbury thinks that intentional mental states involve representation. And as Brentano seems to do at least in 1874, Sainsbury thinks that intentional mental states are relational. But they relate thinkers to representations and not what the states are about: here Sainsbury departs from Brentano’s thesis (even if not from Sainsbury’s own best interpretation of Brentano).

2 Display theory

This fundamental relationality of intentional states, Sainsbury claims, is “covert” because attributions of intentional states do not have relational form. Ana’s thinking about unicorns is fundamentally a relational state in which Ana is related in a way that corresponds to the expression “thinking about” when combined with the indefinite plural (call that relation “R”) to the concept UNICORN. Our typical attribution of that state, using the intensional verb “is thinking about”, is not correspondingly relational, for it does not refer to the concept UNICORN, which is one relatum of the R-relation in this intentional state. Using Sainsbury’s theory, we *could* attribute the mental state in an overtly relational way that corresponds to the fundamental relationality of the state: we could say “Ana is R-related to the concept UNICORN”. But as a matter of fact, attributions of intentional states in ordinary English do not refer to concepts but they *display* them.

Sainsbury’s display theory of attribution is inspired by Davidson’s paratactic theory of “says that”- attributions (Davidson 1968). It is based on the idea that an attributor of an intentional state displays a representation and thereby provides clues about the representation in the addressee’s mind. By merely *displaying* a representation, an attributor does not incur the commitments she would incur if she were to exercise the representation ‘seriously’, as it were. Thus, when making the

attribution “Ana fears the ghost in the attic.”, my representation “the ghost in the attic” is in the scope of the intensional transitive verb “to fear” and therefore merely on display. This is why it does not commit me to there being a ghost in the attic. When I use the expression “the ghost in the attic” outside the scope of an intensional verb, as in “The ghost in the attic is noisy tonight.”, I suffer whatever penalty there is for using a non-denoting definite description—perhaps it’s a presupposition failure and I fail to say something (Strawson). But the success of my attribution to Ana does not depend on this, because the point of displaying the representation within the scope of “fears” is to provide information about the representation in the mind of the attributee. It is the attributee who needs to believe that there is a ghost in the attic (cf Schoubye 2013) for my attribution to be successful.

Typically, an attribution will have the form “*S V-s D.*”, where *S* denotes the attributee, *V* is some suitable intensional verbal construction and *D* is the complement of the intentional verb and therefore a representation on display. The correctness of an attribution “*S V-s D.*” requires that the attributee *S* be related in the way indicated by *V* (*V*-related) to a representation appropriately related to the displayed representation *D*. What is the appropriate relation between the *D* and the attributor’s representation? Typically, Sainsbury says, a relation of *match* will be sufficient: “the displayed representation is a token of the same narrowest representational type as that tokened in the [attributee’s] intentional state” (p. 62). Thus, for the attribution to Ana to be correct, it is sufficient that Ana to be *V*-related to a token of the same narrowest representational type as my displayed representation “the ghost in the attic”. What the *V*-relation is is indicated by “fears”—it would be different, if the intensional verb in the attribution had instead been “admires” or “longs for”.

However, there is one important complication: *de re* occurrences within a displayed representation. Consider my attribution “The ghost in the attic is noisy tonight. Anna fears him.”. As mentioned, since I have used “the ghost in the attic is noisy tonight” outside the scope of the intensional verb “fears”, I am committing myself to there being a ghost in the attic, and to him being noisy. But because “him”, which is within the scope of “fears”, is bound by “the ghost” in the attic, it can be said to occur “*de re*”. This means that the attribution is neutral as to the concept used by Ana to represent what she fears. It could be correct even if she thinks of him not as a ghost, but as a burglar who has entered the attic, or as a witch. What matters for the

truth of the attribution is that the representation to which Ana bears the relation corresponding to “fears” must be a representation of the same object as my displayed “him”. This leads Sainsbury to beef up the rough sufficient condition for correctness provided by *match* and articulate necessary and sufficient conditions for the correctness of attributions:

- (5) *The stark condition*: An attribution displaying D (so D falls within the scope of the intensional concept, BELIEVES, WANTS, or whatever) is true just if there is a conceptual structure, S, present in the mind of the subject, meeting these conditions:
- (a) S and D are overall isomorphic
 - (b) every concept occurring de dicto in D has as its S-correlate a token of the same narrowest conceptual type
 - (c) every concept occurring de re in D has as its S-correlate a token with the same reference or extension
 - (d) the subject is related to S by the relation expressed by the attribution’s ITV. (p. 74)

If I understand him correctly, Sainsbury intends the notions of de re and de dicto occurrences within the stark condition to be syntactic: “de re occurrence of a concept in a display” means that the expression is bound by an expression outside the scope of the intensional verb, as for example in “Seeing Peter, the rabbit, Hayley believed he was a Hare.” (p. 72, slightly modified). The expression “he” is bound by “Peter, the rabbit”, which is outside the scope of “believes. So the correctness of the attribution does not require Hayley to think of Peter as a rabbit. A de dicto occurrence is simply one that is not de re.

Sainsbury is not out to defend the stark condition come what may. But he presents it as one good way in which a display theory of attribution can be semantically implemented. He considers many examples that could be used to motivate modifications. But he also develops two pragmatic manoeuvres that can be used to defend the stark condition without modification. In particular, following the model of Kripke’s idea of “speaker’s reference” (Kripke 1977), Sainsbury introduces the idea of “speaker scope” as opposed to “semantic scope”, i.e. scope as dictated by the stark condition. For example, Dretske tells the story about how his brother snatches away a seat on the tram from an old lady. Dretske then says “the lady realized that my brother was not going to move.” It seems obvious that it is not required for the correctness of this attribution that the old lady represent Dretske’s brother *as* Dretske’s brother, and not, for example, as “that rude man”. The occurrence of “my brother” is naturally

read, and meant by Dretske, as outside the scope of the intensional verb “realizes”, even though syntactically it is clearly in its scope and not bound by anything outside it. So we can say that while according to semantic scope, “my brother” is in the scope of “realizes”, speaker scope locates it outside. The sentence is used as if it had been “Concerning my brother, the lady realized that he was not going to move.”.

There are more examples that are handled quite well with the pragmatic tool of speaker scope. Even indexicals in attributions like “Sally believed that yesterday was sunny.” can be credibly be treated as semantically incorrect but pragmatically correct, when Sally was exercising the concept “today”. But there are also examples where, as Sainsbury puts it, an expression—apparently on display—really lies outside the intensional verb’s scope (without the intensional verb being in its scope). For example, consider the situation in which John does not have the concept of a sloop, but he has seen a specific sloop and just wants something similar (but not the one he has seen). The attribution “John wants a sloop.” would seem to be true, but according to the stark condition it is false, because the concept SLOOP on display does not match John’s state. In this case it does not help to claim that “a sloop” has wide speaker scope, as in “Some sloop is such that John wants it.”. For John’s state is unspecific: it is not directed at any specific sloop. So what the speaker intends here is not that “wants” be in the scope of “a sloop”, but rather that “a sloop” be outside the scope of “wants” in a different way, namely as in “John wants some boat—is fact a sloop.”.

After showing how to defend the stark condition using these two tools, Sainsbury seems to engage in a project of conceptual engineering. As an upshot of the previous discussion of examples, he articulates three different, potentially competing, desiderata for attributions of intentional states:

1. Good attributions should be faithful to the representational state of the subject.
2. Good attributions should reveal how subjects are related to the world through their intentional states.
3. Good attributions should be useful to the audience, typically by exploiting concepts that the audience can happily exercise. (p. 91)

Sainsbury claims that English only offers us the semantics of the stark condition in combination with pragmatic tools to serve these aims (p. 99). But there could be a language, the “superscript language”, which would “provide a convenient way of displaying nuances about attitude attributions that are not easy to express in ordinary

English” (p. 98). In English, “Hannah counted 13 hens.” leaves open whether “13 hens” is supposed to match Hannah’s counting or the actual number of birds. In Superscript, we could say “Hannah counted [13 hens]^{S+W+}”, thereby communicating that she counted correctly, or “Hannah counted [13 hens]^{S+W-}” communicating that her count yielded 13 but she miscounted, or “Hannah counted [13 hens]^{S-W+}”, communicating that there were 13 hens, but that her count yielded a different result. Presumably, we could also say “Hannah counted [13]^{S+W+}[hens]^{S+W-}” when Hannah subjected 13 geese to her counting and arrived at the result “13 hens”, i.e. mistaking the geese for hens.

If Superscript was meant as a proposal for how to improve English attributions of intentional states, it would probably struggle to compete for attention with other proposals of language engineering that are being promoted. Nevertheless it seems a neat piece of engineering that would allow us to meet desiderata 1. and 2. in a concise way at least in many cases. However, Superscript also raises some questions.

Sainsbury mentions (p. 96) that the Superscript translation of the English sentence “Hannah counted 13 hens.” would be “Hannah counted [13 hens]^{S W}”, with the missing plus and minus indicating that the attributor is neutral as to whether the world matches the representation “13 hens” on display, and also neutral as to whether Hannah’s representation matches it. Now, it seems to me that if English follows the semantics of the stark condition then this Superscript sentence does not express what the English sentence *semantically* means. The stark condition presumably predicts that the translation is “Hannah counted [13 hens]^{S+W}”, because “13 hens” is in the scope of the intensional verb “counted”, thus requiring *match*.

But the proposed Superscript translation also fails to express what the English sentence pragmatically means. According to Sainsbury’s linguistic intuitions, the sentence can be used to make a commitment to how many hens there are, to how many hens Hannah thought there are, or both. I can see how this can be explained pragmatically given the stark condition. For example, in a context where Hannah is known to be a reliable counter, it will follow from Hannah’s thinking there are 13 hens that there are 13 hens. This explains a commitment to both.

It is not clear, what kinds of commitments the Superscript sentence “Hannah counted [13 hens]^{S W}” would allow us to make. If there is no commitment to the

world matching the display, and also no commitment to Hannah's mind matching the display, the displayed representation "13 hens" becomes completely pointless. It looks like Superscript sentences can only be useful if they indicate that the displayed attitude matches in some way of other.

Sainsbury praises Superscript as "more flexible than crude scope distinctions" (p. 96). One way in which it is more flexible is surely that Superscript can indicate that an indefinite ("a sloop") in a display need not be matched without moving the indefinite outside the scope of the intensional verb, thereby removing unspecificity. He also insists that the sentences of Superscript do not give "readings" of English sentences. But the narrative of defending the stark condition using pragmatic tools seems to be in tension with this claim. The different commitments one may make with "Hannah counted 13 hens" do seem to constitute at least a kind of pragmatic ambiguity: these are not merely different ways of satisfying an unspecific truth condition, but rather constitute potentially competing meanings.

We can use Sainsbury's own original ambiguity test from chapter 4.2, which he uses to argue, quite skillfully, against Quine's claim that "John wants a sloop." is ambiguous between a notional and a relational reading. The test works like this: suppose some sentence *s* has several ways of being true. If a denial of one of these ways of being true can justify a denial of *s*, then that way is a meaning of *s* (p. 107).

There seems to be at least two ways in which "Hannah counted 13 hens" can be true:

- (a) Hannah applied her counting skills to 13 hens (whether or not she reached the result "13 hens").
- (b) by Hannah reached the result "13 hens" (whether or not she applied her counting skills to 13 hens).

There are more ways for the sentence to be true (as indicated above, e.g. when Hannah counts something other than hens). But let us check for these two ways of being true, whether they are both meanings of the sentence:

- D(a) "Hannah counted 13 hens". — "No she didn't. It was 12 hens to which she applied her counting skills."
- D(b) "Hannah counted 13 hens". — "No she didn't. The result of her count was 12 hens."

Thus we get the result that the sentence has at least these two meanings.

A far as I can tell, the ambiguity test works fine. I find the illustrative examples convincing, and I find it convincingly employed against Quine. But I am sure that it is a test that establishes ambiguity at best only in a very broad sense that can include pragmatic ambiguity. So claiming that sentences attributing intentional states are in this broad sense ambiguous is not incompatible with the stark condition semantics proposed for Sainsbury's display theory.

3 Nonexistence and negative free logic

As we saw in §1, Brentano's 1874 thesis is often thought to be that intentional states involve that the owner of the state stands in some relation to the intentional object of the state, the intentional object being what the state is about. So if Ana is thinking about unicorns and Brentano's thesis is true then unicorns must exist. Sainsbury rejects Brentano's thesis in this form but tries to stay close to the spirit of Brentano's ideas, as pointed out in §1. In particular, he preserves that intentional states are fundamentally relational, but the relation has as its relatum a representation (and not the intentional object of the state, what the state is about).

Now, since Ana's thinking about unicorns does not require her being related to unicorns, as in Brentano's original thesis, Sainsbury escapes the conclusion that unicorns must exist for Ana to be thinking about them. For all that is required is the existence of Ana and the existence of a representation (the concept UNICORN).

But since Ana is thinking about unicorns, she is thinking about something, isn't she? And doesn't Quine tell us that we are ontologically committed to what we quantify over? This would suggest an ontological commitment to unicorns. Sainsbury develops an elegant and liberating account of the English quantifier "something", "some things" and some similar expressions, that does not treat them as the existential quantifier we know from the formal languages of Frege, Russell and Quine. Sainsbury rejects Quine's criterion of ontological commitment. Sentences involving "something" do not generate their own ontological commitments. They merely inherit their ontological commitments from the "vindicating instances" from which they can be derived. "Ana is thinking about unicorns" only commits us to the existence of Ana and of the concept UNICORN, but not of unicorns. So if we infer that Ana is thinking about something, our ontological commitments are the same as before. No commitment to the existence of unicorns is made.

Sainsbury promotes a substitutional semantics of “something”-sentences. The general idea is exemplified by:

1. “Something is *F*” is true just if something of the form “_ is *F*” is a true vindicating instance. And
2. “X is *V*-ing something” is true just if something of the form “X is *V*-ing _” is a true vindicating instance. (p. 52)

“Peter is eating an icecream” vindicates “Peter is eating something.” (and even “Someone is eating something.”). Because one can eat only things that exist, any vindicating instances of “Peter is eating something” will carry ontological commitment to what Peter eats. “Peter wants something.” is for example vindicated by “Peter wants a dragon.” That does not carry ontological commitment to a dragon, for Peter can want a dragon without there being any dragon. So “Peter wants something.” does not carry commitment to the existence of what Peter wants, for what Peter wants may not exist.

Clearly, the fountain of youth doesn’t exist. This vindicates according to 1. that something doesn’t exist. Unicorns and dragons also don’t exist. This vindicates the plural claim “some things don’t exist.”.

But what about the claim that some things are nonexistent? Sainsbury rejects this, because according to him candidate vindicating instances are based on a scope confusion. “Dragon’s do not exist.” is true because it is the more idiomatic version of the wide scope negation “It is not the case that dragons exist.”. So “Some things don’t exist.” is fine. But “Dragons are nonexistent.” is not true, so it cannot be a true vindicating instance of “Some things are nonexistent.”. On Sainsbury’s view, the narrow scope attribution of nonexistence to dragons would carry ontological commitment to dragons, thus resulting in incoherence.

The idea seems familiar from negative free logic, as used by Sainsbury elsewhere (Sainsbury, *Reference without Referents*) in the context of dealing with empty names . This allows that atomic sentences formed with empty names count as false, while their negations are true (and indeed, in a footnote, Sainsbury uses the example “Pegasus does not exist.”, which is supposed to be true, as opposed to “Pegasus is a nonexistent.”, which is supposed to be false, see p. 19, fn 17.).

This raises the question whether the substitutional semantics of “something” is also available independently of negative free logic. Is there a way to justify that dragons

don't exist that is independent of the claim that this is a wide-scope negation of something false, namely an atomic claim involving an empty term?

Sainsbury claims that the semantics for “something” he proposes is independent of the display theory. But perhaps “exists” and “exist” could be treated as limiting cases of intensional predicates, which allow us merely to display concepts without incurring the commitments that their proper exercise would generate.

Another minor worry I have concerns Sainsbury's rejection of Tim Crane's (2013, p. 5) view that some intentional objects do not exist—a view that seems close to the view Sainsbury also attributes to Brentano (see §1). If Ana is thinking about unicorns, then it would seem to follow that

3. What Ana is thinking about is unicorns.

Given that unicorns do not exist, it would also seem to follow that

4. What Ana is thinking about does not exist.

This is all perfectly in line with Sainsbury's theory of intentional states that are fundamentally relations to representations, even though the representations are not what the states are about (for Ana's state is about unicorns but consists in her being related not to unicorns but to the concept of a unicorn).

But now consider again thesis BT3 from §1, and treat it as a definition of “the intentional object of an intentional state”:

- BT3 The intentional object of an intentional state =def what the state is about.

Then it clearly follows that

5. The intentional object of Ana's state does not exist.

for it is just another way of saying what 4. says.

This would seem to be in line with position (b) and Sainsbury's Brentano in §1. As long as we avoid saying that the relationality of intentional states relates them to their intentional objects, it should be fine to say that some intentional objects do not exist.

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