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MODAL MEINONGIANISM AND CHARACTERIZATION
REPLY TO KROON

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Summary

In this paper we reply to arguments of Kroon ("Characterization and Existence in Modal Meinongianism". *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 86, 23–34) to the effect that Modal Meinongianism cannot do justice to Meinongian claims such as that the golden mountain is golden, and that it does not exist.

1. *Introduction*

Meinongianism is the view that some objects do not exist. After some decades in the wilderness, the view is now, rightly, resuming its place on the philosophical landscape. In fact, it has been pretty orthodox for most of the history of Western philosophy: its period in the wilderness is an historical aberration (see Priest 2008). Given the developments in the techniques of logic since its falling from favour, the view can now be articulated with a precision and determination that it did not, before, enjoy. In fact, there are various such articulations on the market. In a recent paper, Fred Kroon raises interesting objections to one variation of it (Kroon 2012: page references are to this unless otherwise indicated). The point of *this* work is to reply to such objections.

The objections center around the *Characterization Principle*. This is a principle that tells us something about the properties of objects that may not exist. As a first cut, this is that an object, characterized in a certain way, has those properties it is characterized as having. It can be framed for either definite or indefinite descriptions. Since definite descriptions can be defined in terms of indefinite ones (*the so and so* is *a unique so and so*), we

will mostly employ indefinite descriptions in this essay. Using ε as such a description operator, then, when $A(x)$ is any condition with free variable x, one can understand the naïve Characterization Principle as claiming:

CP: $A(\varepsilon x A(x))$

No one, however—Meinongian or otherwise—can endorse this: in a two line argument, it leads to triviality. Let $A(x)$ be the condition $x = x \wedge B$, with arbitrary B. Let t be $\varepsilon x A(x)$. Then by CP, $t = t \wedge B$; and so, B (see Priest 2005, *viii*).

One approach to the problem is to restrict the Principle to a limited vocabulary, composed of predicates often called *nuclear* (see Parsons 1980, Routley 1980, who calls the predicates *characterizing*). Thus, CP_N is CP restricted to those $A(x)$ which contain only such predicates. A different approach, the so-called "dual copula" approach (Rapaport 1978, Zalta 1983, 1988), is to hold that $\varepsilon x A(x)$ does not instantiate $A(x)$ at all; rather, it bears the relation of *encoding* to it, $A_E(\varepsilon x A(x))$, where $A_E(y)$ does not entail $A(y)$: encoding is a relation different from the ordinary instantiation of properties by objects, typically expressed by the copula (hence the name of the approach). Quite generally, one can then have $A_E(\varepsilon x A(x))$.[1] Call this CP_E.

A third approach is now coming to be called *Modal Meinongianism* (MM): see Berto 2011, 2012, Priest 2005.[2] In a nutshell, it goes as follows. There are worlds other than the actual. Some are possible, and some are impossible.[3] According to MM, $A(\varepsilon x A(x))$ holds in full generality; but it may not hold at the actual world (though it may). All that can be guaranteed is that it holds in some world or other, namely those worlds that realize the situation envisaged by the person who uses the description. Call this version of Characterization CP_M. The name "Modal Meinongianism" is due to the fact that characterization is understood with reference to worlds other than the actual. Kroon's objections explicitly target MM.[4]

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1. Actually, even in this case there is a restriction on $A(x)$, namely that it not contain mention of encoding, or paradox results.

2. We shall refer to the last of these, *Towards Non-Being*, as *TNB* in what follows. The Berto references argue that Modal Meinongiansm is preferable to the other approaches.

3. Possible worlds are now common currency among analytic philosophers. For an introduction to impossible worlds, see Berto 2009.

4. Berto 2012 formulates the four versions of characterization slightly differently, without mentioning descriptions at all. CP: For any condition $A(x)$, something satisfies $A(x)$. CP_N: For any nuclear condition $A(x)$, something satisfies $A(x)$. CP_E: For any condition (which does not

Another feature of MM is that it limits, of necessity, what Meinong called the Principle of Independence of *Sosein* (the having of properties by objects) from *Sein* (their existential status). *Some* properties are independent from existence, but some others (typically, those involving the having of causal features, or spatiotemporal location) are not: they entail it—at the actual world and, arguably, at all possible worlds. Kroon's objections to MM target such a limitation, as well as the CP_M.

Kroon has two objections. The first is to the effect that "MM is […] much more unfriendly to central Meinongian intuitions than its proponents allow" (24). This hinges on the fact that, in the MM theory, actually nonexistent objects cannot actually have existence-entailing properties. They can be characterized as having such properties, e.g., being a mountain and made of gold, but they can satisfy the characterization only at worlds different from the actual. Thus "in particular, it is *false*, not *true*, that the golden mountain is golden", and "such an outcome is bound to strike many contemporary Meinongians as a reason to reject CP_M" (27).

The second objection is to the effect that MM "cannot even guarantee that the golden mountain doesn't exist" (23), it "cannot even endorse the Meinongian truism that an object like the golden mountain lacks existence" (24). Given the way nonexistent objects are dealt with in MM, "nothing in Priest's theory allows him to conclude that the golden mountain lacks all [the existence-entailing properties], yet it must lack all of them for it not to exist" (28). Kroon rightly takes this second objection as the more serious.

2. *Preliminaries*

We will explain in detail the first objection, and take care of it, in Sections 3 and 4. We will do the same with the second objection in Sections 5 and 6. Before we set about these tasks, though, we need to clarify some issues concerning MM, and indeed Meinongianism in general. Kroon does not pay a lot of attention, we think, to some important distinctions; highlighting them is a useful preliminary for addressing his criticisms.

mention encoding), something encodes $A(x)$. CP_M: For any condition $A(x)$, something satisfies $A(x)$ at some world. One can then add different accounts of descriptions to this machinery, possibly with some extra conditions. Kroon, however, formulates the variants of the CP as in the text, and we follow him in this.

The first thing to notice is that, as a metaphysical theory, MM is not generally supposed to rule out the existence of things *a priori*. Did Homer ever exist? The city of Atlantis? That of Troy? It is preposterous to think that armchair metaphysics can address these issues all on its own: they are open to empirical investigation. We should not, then, expect MM itself to rule out that the golden mountain lacks existence. What Kroon therefore means in his second objection is that MM, *plus* what we know, largely *a posteriori*, about the world, cannot rule out the existence of things like the golden mountain.

But secondly, what kind of thing *is* the golden mountain—or, what does the description "the golden mountain" refer to? Kroon claims that MM "preserves Meinongianism's traditional commitment to nonexistent objects but offers a new account of their nature as objects and of the properties they might be said to have" (23). However, there is nothing like a single "nature" for nonexistents, whether one is a modal Meinongian or one of a more traditional kind. Meinongians are not committed, just because they claim that some things do not exist, to the nonexistence of some specific kinds of entity rather than others. One kind on which more or less all of them agree comprises purely fictional objects like Sherlock Holmes, Superman, Anna Karenina and Mr. Pickwick. But some treat mythical objects like Zeus or Thor as on a par with fictional objects, while others disagree. Some include mere *possibilia*—things that exist at other possible worlds but not at the actual one, like Wittgenstein's merely possible oldest daughter. Some Meinongians take abstract objects as nonexistent too, while others follow Meinong's original view and allow abstract objects to exist, though in a way different from concrete existents (often called "subsistence").[5] One of us (FB), following Routley (1980), takes seriously the view that also past objects like George Washington or Socrates are currently nonexistent objects. Besides, one of us (FB again) considers fictional objects, unlike *possibilia* and past existents, as necessarily nonexistent, while the other (GP) disagrees: for FB, there is no possible world where Sherlock Holmes exists, while for GP, there is. It is a mistake, then, to treat Meinongianism, even only of the modal kind, as if it was committed to a unique view on what does not exist. Meinongianism, and also Modal Meinongianism, can come in very different kinds.[6]

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5. At least, this is so when the relevant abstract objects are consistent or well-defined: division by seven and the set of natural numbers exist/subsist, but division by zero and the Russell set do not. Thanks to Kroon for pointing this out.

6. *Quineanism* as well—as we may call the opposite view that everything exists—comes

The third issue we need to focus on is linguistic (semantic and pragmatic), and concerns the different ways in which referential expressions, in particular descriptions, acquire—when they do—a denotation. Meinongianism as such—as the claim that some things do not exist—does not commit one to any particular semantics and pragmatics of referential expressions, and specifically of descriptions. The admission of nonexistent objects *per se* does not even bring theoretical commitment to the claim that all singular terms denote (in all contexts of use). This is true of MM as of other forms of Meinongianism. Among Meinongians who subscribe to the nuclear version of the CP, Routley (1980) has all descriptions denote, whereas Parsons allows for non-referring ones, and claims that the issue is "primarily a linguistic question, or one of formulation" and does not entail "a serious ontological disagreement" (Parsons 1979, 653). Also, within MM, different accounts are possible—and actual: *TNB* goes for the view that all well-formed singular terms should denote, but Priest (2011a) and Berto (2012) explore versions with non-denoting terms.

With these provisos under our belt, we can start addressing Kroon's objections directly.

3. *Against literalism*

Kroon's first objection is to the effect that MM is contrary to "Meinongian intuitions" (24) or to the "spirit" of Meinongianism (27), or even plainly "strikingly counterintuitive" (24). Unlike naïve or nuclear Meinongianism, MM claims that characterized objects often don't really and literally have their characterizing properties at the actual world. In particular, nonexistent objects actually lack the existence-entailing properties they are characterized as having: "it is at the very least misleading for MM to claim that CP_M offers a viable sense in which the golden mountain is golden when it admits that no golden mountain is actually golden" (32).

Now, we demur from the thought that Meinongians perforce intuit that the golden mountain is literally golden and a mountain. The home of Meinongianism is the theory of intentionality. We can think of, and have other intentional relations to, objects, and some of these do not exist.

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in extremely diverse forms. Some Quineans reject abstract objects, others admit them; some are presentists, other eternalists; some may count two or more objects in the same portion of spacetime, others always count at most one; some claim that *being* is spoken of in different ways, others that it is univocal, etc.

Thus we can think of the golden mountain. The object we think of had better be golden and a mountain in some sense—or what on earth are we thinking about? However, this does not have to be a literal sense (this does not, therefore, impact on the ability of the theory to "deal with the usual issues of interest to Meinongians", contra Kroon, 28). Indeed, it had better not be. Such a claim is not only false, it is opposed to common and much more robust intuitions. Let us see why, by focusing on what all Meinongians take as the most uncontroversial kind of non-existents: purely fictional objects like Sherlock Holmes.

The alleged "intuition", shared by naïve and nuclear Meinongianism but not by MM, consists, in fact, in the former views' being affected by what Kit Fine (1982) called *literalism*: the idea that non-existents like Holmes literally and really have the (nuclear) properties they are characterized as having (in the relevant fictions). Clearly, nuclear features, like those of being a detective and of living in 221b Baker Street, are ascribed to Holmes in the Doyle stories. Naïve and nuclear Meinongians want these properties to be had by Holmes at the actual world. MM denies this, as Kroon rightly stresses (26f.): for modal Meinongians like us, Holmes is a detective and lives in 221b Baker St., only at the worlds that realize the characterization provided by Doyle, not in actuality.

Now, we ask literalists: how could Holmes literally possess those features? In reality, Baker Street 221b hosted an enterprise, the Abbey Road Building Society, and it has never been the house of any private detective. It is literally *false*, not true, that 221b is, or has ever been, Holmes' home. In one of the Doyle stories we are told that Holmes has tea with William Gladstone (the example is due to Woods 1974). How can this be literally true? William Gladstone is a real (past) existent, who certainly never had tea with any purely fictional object.

One may claim that Holmes actually lived in a nonexistent 221b Baker Street, or had tea with a nonexistent doppelganger of Gladstone. But this multiplication of objects is itself counterintuitive. Fictional stories include lots of references to nonfictional objects, which are only represented in the stories as interacting with purely fictional ones. Napoleon features in *War and Peace*, and Napoleon was a very existent man. MM is not forced to treat "Napoleon" as ambiguous, as it happens in forms of realist abstractionism about fictional objects à la van Inwagen (1977, 51): (a) normally denoting the historical character, i.e., the concrete and (formerly) real man; but also (b) referring to a quite different abstract object, when the name occurs in extra-fictional discourse on the literary character of *War*

and Peace; and, perhaps, also (c) denoting nothing at all, when it occurs in the intra-fictional discourse of *War and Peace*. Such ambiguities seem to be introduced *ad hoc*, because they are not confirmed by the intuitive data: competent speakers have no sense of the postulated ambiguity. As the Wikipedia entry on *War and Peace* claims: "There are approximately 160 real persons named or referred to in *War and Peace*".[7]

Besides implying claims that are in point of fact false, literalism severs intuitive nexuses between properties, and specifically between various properties and existence—which, to Meinongians, is but yet another non-blanket feature of individuals. As a nonexistent, Holmes cannot literally have features that entail existence, like living in a real street, having tea with Gladstone, or being a detective. If something is a detective and lives in a London street, then it is natural to think that it is a human being, a physical object, a spatiotemporal occupier, and endowed with causal properties. Asking where the person is, or why, as a detective, they cannot help the metropolitan police to solve crimes, is quite sensible: things lacking real existence cannot really have existence-entailing properties involving causal features or spatiotemporal location.[8]

The "Meinongian intuitions" discharged by MM are precisely literalist intuitions. We claim that they *have* to be disrespected, because they are just wrong. Nor is MM the only form of non-literalist Meinongianism on the market. Dual copula Meinongianism also denies that Holmes literally is a detective living in Baker Street. As a nonexistent object, for dual copula

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7. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/War_and_Peace. As Kroon pointed out to us, some combinations of descriptive expressions and names, like "the Napoleon of *War and Peace*", may still provide some support to the ambiguity view: cf. "The Napoleon of *War and Peace* is a cleverly constructed character, very different from the real Napoleon". Berto (2011) proposes that even these fail to force a multiplication of referred objects: both "the Napoleon of *War and Peace*" and "the real Napoleon" refer to the one Napoleon. The price to be paid is that one needs to paraphrase something away: the former expression should be read as something like "Napoleon, as represented in *War and Peace*", and the latter, as "Napoleon, as he really is/was".

8. Here's how the point is nicely made by Nathan Salmon: "Undoubtedly, existence is a prerequisite for a very wide range of ordinary properties—being blue in colour, having such-and-such mass, writing *Waverley*. But the sweeping doctrine that existence universally precedes suchness has very clear counterexamples in which an object from one circumstance has properties in another circumstance in virtue of the properties it has in the original circumstance. Socrates does not exist in my present circumstance, yet he has numerous properties here—for example, being mentioned and discussed by me. Walter Scott, who no longer exists, currently has the property of having written *Waverley*. He did exist when he had the property of writing *Waverley*, of course, but as every author knows, the property of writing something is very different from the property of having written it. Among their differences is the fact that the former requires existence" (Salmon 1998, 290f.).

Meinongians Holmes only encodes these properties, encoding being distinct from exemplification. Holmes can exemplify and literally have lots of properties, such as being nonexistent, being self-identical, being thought of by us, etc. But the features ascribed to him in the Doyle stories are for the most part only encoded, not literally exemplified, by Holmes. So MM's non-literalism does not even make it an isolated faction among the Meinongian tribes.

And not only are those literalist "Meinongian intuitions" wrong: they are not even *common-sense* intuitions. We agree with the arguments of Sainsbury (2010, 26ff.), to the effect that people don't even share the belief that Holmes really is or was a detective, and really lives or lived in 221b Baker Street. People do not believe such claims as "Holmes lived in 221b Baker Street" to be correct descriptions of actuality. It is generally agreed that, if someone believed something like this, she would stand in need of being corrected by those who know better.

Think of a London policeman replying to a tourist asking where 221b Baker Street, the famous residence of Sherlock Holmes, is located: "Sir, Sherlock Holmes does not exist and has never existed; it's just a fictional character due to the novelist Conan Doyle. Baker Street, well, that does exist: it's just down there. But Holmes didn't really live there: he only lived there according to Doyle's stories".

The policeman gets it right, in the non-literalist way, by just relying on common sense. Intra-fictional ascriptions of existence-entailing properties like being a detective or living in Baker Street are to be understood as implicitly prefixed by an "according to the story", non-factive clause. This is often omitted in conversation but contextually easily understood (as noted in *TNB*, 117, fn. 2). We move seamlessly from truth in reality to truth according to a fiction and back all the time. An historian lecturing on the ancient Greeks' religion claims: "Zeus is the king of the Greek pantheon, living on Mount Olympus, …" etc. We understand him as speaking the truth, for we know he means: that was so according to the Greek mythology, not in reality.

4. *What we do all the time with "a/the F"*

Literalism is thus both false and unintuitive, and MM is right in rejecting it. A linguistic point is left open, though, and clearly spotted by Kroon in Section 3 of his paper. MM's non-literalism entails that, unlike what

happens with literalist (naïve and nuclear) Meinongianism, many definite and indefinite descriptions will have to refer to things that don't currently or actually satisfy the relevant conditions. Kroon's example, mentioned above, involves "the golden mountain" referring to something that is neither a mountain nor golden at the actual world. But we can equally well keep using Holmes as our chief example. According to MM, nonexistent Holmes is not really a detective, nor does he really live in Baker Street. However, we use such features to build descriptions apparently successfully referring to him. We felicitously refer to Holmes as "Doyle's detective living in 221b Baker Street". How come?

We reply that even this is not a theoretical minus of MM, because we do felicitously use descriptions to refer to things not actually or currently satisfying them all the time; nor is this an issue having specifically to do with Meinongianism, or nonexistence. Let us see why.

Donnellan's (1966) famous referential/attributive distinction might well be taken to show that we can use descriptions to refer to objects that don't actually or currently satisfy them. "The man over there with the champagne in his glass is happy" successfully refers to a man in the corner who is, as a matter of fact, happily drinking sparkling water. Kripke's (1977) rejoinder to Donnellan is also well-known. We should distinguish between *speaker referent*, the object a speaker intends to refer to, and *semantic referent*, what is literally referred to. Only the latter has to do with semantics properly, whereas investigation of the former falls in the realm of pragmatics. Our intention to refer to a person who, unbeknownst to us, has water in his glass, does not affect the proposition literally expressed by our utterance of "The man over there with the champagne in his glass is happy": this does not depend on the speaker's intentions but on the description's semantic denotation, which cannot be any non-champagne drinker.

But even if one accepts the distinction between speaker referent and semantic referent, it remains the case, as all may agree, that the semantic referent of a description is context dependent. Thus, in "The President wants to see you", "the President" will normally refer to different people if this is said in the White House or the Bundestag. And the person picked out in a context may not be the person who *actually* satisfies the condition. This can happen because of spatial displacement. Thus, suppose that we are in the USA, where the current president is Barack Obama. Yet we talk about Germany, and you say "The President may be the head of state, but actually, the person who runs the country is the Chancellor, Angela Merkel": "the President" would then refer to Joachim Gauk. Or, it can

happen because of temporal displacement. Thus, suppose that we are in the UK, and the monarch is Elizabeth II. However, we are discussing the life of Shakespeare, and you say that the Bard never met the Monarch: "the Monarch" would refer to Elizabeth I.

As so often happens, there is a modal analogue of this temporal phenomenon. The Earth is the third planet from the sun. However, suppose we are discussing an envisaged situation where the Solar System is pretty much as it actually is, but there is a sub-Mercurial planet, Vulcan. In this context, "the third planet from the sun" refers to Venus. Which brings, us, of course, very close to fictional objects. The smartest cocaine-using detective in London is probably some corrupt member of the Metropolitan Police Force. But if we are talking about the world as described by Conan Doyle, "the smartest cocaine-using detective in London" certainly refers to Holmes. Definite descriptions, then, can semantically refer to things that do not actually have the features in question. And this can be the case whether or not the object in question exists—as the previous examples make clear.

Semantic reference is, as we have noted, context-dependent. And what context we are in depends on many factors, one amongst which concerns the intentions of the speaker (does one mean to be talking about an historical epoch? Or about a hypothetical scenario? Etc.). So even for semantic reference, it is worth noting, intentions do get in the act. Incidentally, this is explicitly acknowledged in *TNB* (where choice functions are integral to the denotation of a description, as we shall see in detail in due course):

> The deployment of a choice function is a recognition of the fact that, as far as the formal semantics go, the denotation of the descriptive term is non-deterministic. That is, the denotation of the term is something that is determined by factors outside the semantics. Principal among these is context, and especially speaker intention. […] Thus, suppose you say (truly), for example: 'I saw a man on the tram I was on yesterday; he looked rather sad.' The referent of 'a man on the tram I was on' in this context is the particular man whom you saw, and to whom you now intend to refer. (Note that there could have been more than one sad-looking man on the tram; but you are talking about a particular one of them.) Of course, you could be lying: the man on the tram was not sad. The description refers to him none the less. Maybe you didn't even get on a tram at all. In that case, the description refers to the presumably non-existent object intended in your imagination. (*TNB*, 94)

5. De re *reference fixing*

We now turn to Kroon's second objection. He claims that MM, together with what we know about the world, "cannot even guarantee that the golden mountain doesn't exist". After stressing that characterized objects in MM may often lack the properties they are characterized as having at the actual world, he claims that what would be even "far less acceptable" (27) is the golden mountain's having existence-entailing properties at the actual world:

> Whatever is it like at the other worlds, at the actual world the golden mountain is not granitic or silver, nor is it located on Uranus, or in any other part of the universe, for it does not exist at the actual world, and to have any existence-entailing property at a world a thing has to exist at that world. And the reason we know it does not exist at the actual world is that nothing at the actual world is uniquely a golden mountain. (28)

However, Kroon continues, MM cannot accept this conclusion. Even once we know that nothing is a golden mountain at the actual world, MM cannot sustain the right reply to the question: "How do we know that nonexistence is among its [the golden mountain's] properties?" (28). We cannot say that the object characterized as *a/the A* "possesses no existence-entailing properties, *even* when we know that there are no *As*" (29). The theory licenses only the claim that the golden mountain exists at the worlds (or at least, at the possible ones) where it has the properties it is characterized as having, namely where it is a mountain and made of gold; but the theory is silent on the actual existential status of the object.

Which object? As we argued in the previous section, the referent of a description is usually context (and intention) relative. Then there is mostly no unique answer to the question. While Kroon apparently acknowledges this (as we will see), he develops most of his objection plainly talking of the golden mountain as if what was referred to by the description was, context-independently, a unique thing. This is not so, though. MM cannot give a *single* reply to Kroon's question, "How do we know that nonexistence is among the golden mountain's properties?" "The golden mountain" can refer to things of quite different kinds in different contexts, and quite different replies to the question will have to be given in such different contexts. Sometimes we will know that the object referred to by the description does not exist on the basis of our empirical information about the actual world. Sometimes we will know that it does not exist on

the basis of our knowing the kind of thing at issue (and, of our having the right ontological account of things of that kind). Sometimes we will even know that the thing at issue is *existent*—and also, if such be the case, that it is grey and granitic. Context and speaker intentions will make all the difference.

Here's one context where the description refers to an existent object. We often make up stories by intentionally referring to real, existent objects, which we nevertheless characterize via properties they actually lack: we use them as props in games of make-believe. Kroon acknowledges that "sometimes our imaginative activities are directed at existent things" (29). Children can pretend that the elm in the garden is a magic tree, or that their bike is a Harley 883. Similarly, we can start to tell the following story:

> Imagine that when Edmund Hillary first climbed mount Everest he discovered that, because of some peculiar geological phenomenon, its summit was largely made of almost pure gold. Soon expeditions were organized from different countries to reach the top of the mountain: everybody wanted to take advantage of the golden mountain and many international controversies began …

In the context created by our story, "the golden mountain" obviously refers to mount Everest. We single out an existent by telling a story *de re* about it. Then we refer to it as the golden mountain, and it is understood that the thing is only represented as being such within the story, without it actually being so.

In such a context, it is not true that "whatever it is like at the other worlds, at the actual world the golden mountain is not granitic or silver" (Kroon, 28) because it doesn't exist. We know what "the golden mountain" denotes in such a context, and we know that Everest is actually existing, grey and granitic.[9] This very existent object has the property of being golden at the worlds that realize our story, those of being grey and granitic at the actual world, and that of being a mountain both at those worlds and in actuality.

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9. We may take the Everest as grey and granitic for the sake of the argument. Having such properties is arguably a matter of degree for mountains. As it happens, anyway, mount Everest does include substantive amounts of grey stones and granite (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mount_Everest).

6. *Where Kroon is right*

In the sort of context last envisaged, one takes an existent object, refers to that *de re*, and then imagines a non-veridical situation about it. There is a quite different sort of context, however. And about this, Kroon has a very valid point to make. One can hypothesize or imagine a certain scenario, and then one can refer to an object in that scenario. Thus, one might postulate the existence of a sub-Mercurial planet, or imagine and start to write down a story about an eccentric detective. In this sort of situation, the reference of the description is not parasitic on some prior act of reference-fixing. In such cases, the CP_M itself determines how the reference of the description is fixed.

TNB, 92-3, formulates the CP_M as follows (simplifying slightly to avoid irrelevant complications, and where @ is the actual world):[10]

(i)   If something satisfies $A(x)$ at @, $\varepsilon x A(x)$ denotes one such thing.
(ii) If not, it picks out some object or other which satisfies $A(x)$ in the situation one is envisaging.

Formally, the picking out in each case is done by a suitable choice function; informally, this represents an intentional act (the intentional act can be construed in both a realist and a non-realist way: see Priest 2011a). Now there is nothing in this account which requires $\varepsilon x A(x)$ not to exist. Nor should there be, at least as far as clause (i) is concerned. Let $A(x)$ be "x is a sub-Mercurial planet responsible for the precession of Mercury's perihelion". Then, as a matter of fact, nothing existent satisfies $A(x)$. But had the world been different, the description could have referred to an existent object: had $A(x)$ been satisfied at @, the description would have denoted a planet, therefore a causally efficient object, therefore (for MM) an existent.

However, there is an issue with clause (ii). Nothing in this case requires $\varepsilon x A(x)$ to refer to a non-existent object either (as *TNB*, 92, does point

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10. Kroon, fn. 7, takes *TNB* to task for calling descriptions rigid, suggesting that what it should say is that the expression "the object represented as being the golden mountain" is rigid. But *TNB* means exactly what it says. Once the denotation of $\varepsilon x A(x)$ is picked out, the description refers to that object in every world (which is not, of course, to say that the object satisfies $A(x)$ in every world). Besides, a non-rigid semantics for descriptions is also possible, as explained in *TNB*, 93. Kroon also says, fn. 9, that for MM, if there is an actuality operator in the language, this must work differently at possible and impossible worlds. He cites Beall as showing that "this is a serious weakness". It is not, as is shown in Priest 2011b, 3.3.

out). But this seems wrong. In such cases the term should refer to a non-existent object. Thus, Vulcan does not exist; neither does Sherlock Holmes; neither does Zeus (where these names are to be taken as abbreviations for an appropriate description). Here Kroon is exactly right.

The change to the theory to rectify the matter is, however, very simple. Clause (ii) can be reformulated as:

(iii) If not, it picks out some *non-existent* object or other which satisfies $A(x)$ in the situation one is envisaging.

(Here the non-existence is actual: the object may well exist in the relevant non-actual situations, of course). With this change, if nothing satisfies the characterizing condition at @, the object referred to does not exist. So none of Vulcan, Sherlock Holmes, and Zeus, exists.

We can, in fact, pack clauses (i) and (iii) into one, showing how there is a uniform act of intentionality. Let α abbreviate "At @, some y is such that $A(y)$". If Φ is a choice function on sets of objects, then the denotation of $\varepsilon x A(x)$ is:

(iv) $\Phi(\{x : (\alpha \text{ and } A(x)) \text{ or } (\neg\alpha, x \text{ is a non-existent object, and the envisaged world is one where } A(x)\})$.

One worry one might have here is that this is an *ad hoc* modification of the theory. But it is not: it simply rectifies an oversight in the original formulation of *TNB*. When we construct a theory of intentionality with its denizens of objects, existent and non-existent, we are trying to account for the obvious data: that one can think of things whether or not they exist, that we can tell a story about mount Everest in which it is golden, and that Vulcan does not exist. All theorising, including our modification, is *ad hoc* in this unobjectionable sense. The new version of the theory simply takes into account a bit of data that had been overlooked. Such *ad hocness*, thus, is quite unlike the one mentioned in Section 3, where an ambiguity which is not supported by the data is needed to defend a literalist view.

One should note that, in the last instance, any theory of descriptions is constrained in such an *ad hoc* way. To illustrate: all can agree that if something satisfies $A(x)$, '$\varepsilon x A(x)$' refers to such a thing. The problem is what to do in the other case. If one is not a noneist, then, in such a situation, we have a case of reference failure. How then to proceed? One possibility (Frege's) is to assign the description an arbitrary denotation—say the

empty set. Let us take 'Sherlock Holmes' to be short for an appropriate description. Then this policy will make 'Sherlock Holmes exists' true. And what is wrong with that? Simply that it gets the data wrong.

Another policy is to make every atomic sentence false by definition (say the contextual definition of Russell). Alternatively, however, we might make every such sentence true by definition. And what is wrong with that? Again, it gets the data wrong. This policy makes 'Sherlock Holmes lives in Beijing' true. Any policy concerning descriptions must be constructed to do justice to the data in such a way. That is what the theory is *for*.

Coming back to the present proposal, another worry one might have concerns how one manages to intend a non-existent object. Kroon himself raises this worry:

> [T]he response depends on an author's having the ability to intend a non-existent object, knowing *a priori* that the object she thereby selects is indeed nonexistent. It is difficult, however, to make sense of such an ability. How can the agent know *a priori* that the object she manages to select is *in fact* nonexistent? […] Couldn't the agent intend what she takes to be a nonexistent object, but just make a mistake? We can make mistakes when intending an existent object; we might be hallucinating "that mountain in the distance", for example. So why not when intending a nonexistent object? (32)

Now, first, on the above account, one cannot know *a priori* that the object intended does not exist, since one cannot know *a priori* that nothing at @ satisfies $A(x)$ (at least for possible conditions). As we made clear at the beginning of this paper, this cannot in general be settled by the MM theory as such: it depends on how things turn out in the world. In particular, one might intend the description to refer to an existent object (as did the scientists who postulated Vulcan), but the intention may not be realised.[11]

If, however, nothing actually satisfies $A(x)$, the denotation of the description, the object intended, is a non-existent object. One may hear Kroon as asking: How so? Indeed, how does one intend an object with any properties, particularly the one defining the set on which the choice function in (iv) operates? One answer is that it is the very nature of intentionality to single out an object of a certain kind, and given a bunch of objects, one can just point mentally to one, in the same way that, given a bunch of

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11. The distinction between intending to (aiming to) refer to a non-existent object, and the object actually intended (as the target of the act of reference) being non-existent, may clear up some misunderstanding in the personal communication referred to by Kroon (31).

physical objects, one can point physically to one of them[12] (indeed, an act of physical pointing presupposes the intentional act that goes along with it: otherwise, one could be pointing at many things). And if one imagines an object with certain properties then, *ex hypothesi*, what one does *is* imagine such a thing. This is not a defense of psychological infallibilism. We may, indeed, think that our mental state is something that it is not. Rather, it is the phenomenological analogue of Kripke's (1971) point that a possible world where Humphrey won the election is, *ex hypothesi*, a world where *Humphrey* won the election—and, we might add: *won the election*. At any rate, this is a quite general issue with MM, and the revised denotation conditions for descriptions do nothing to make the matter better or worse.[13]

Let us finally, in this section, see how the revised definition addresses Kroon's Hillary counter-example (32-3). This is as follows. At 8,848m above sea level, Everest is the tallest mountain in the world, and Hilary climbed it once. Suppose that Fred believes all this—except that he thinks that Everest is 10,000m above sea level. He then imagines the highest sub-9,000m mountain in the world which was climbed by Hillary twice—call it "H2". He is confident enough that this does not exist, but is not certain, so does not intend (aim) to refer to a non-existent object. Now, H2 presumably has ordinary modal properties, including the property that there is a world w in which H2 is the highest sub-9,000m mountain and was climbed by Hillary just once. The question for Kroon is how MM can rule out the actual world being such a w: if it is, then H2 is Everest and H2 does exist after all.

The answer is that it is the non-existence of H2 that rules this out. There indeed are worlds w of the kind described, but the actual world is not one of them. For let $A(x)$ be the condition "x is the highest sub-9000m mountain in the world and Hillary climbed x twice". According to the account just given, since nothing satisfies this condition at the actual world, $\varepsilon x A(x)$, that is, H2, does not exist. So while Fred did not intend to refer to a non-existent object, the object intended, hit by the act, was non-existent nonetheless.

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12. This answer is defended in Priest 2011b, 1.5. Some people find it more plausible that this can happen in the case of non-existents if the intentional act creates the object, in a certain sense: see Priest 2011c, and Berto 2012, Chapter 9. Of course, "create" here cannot mean "bring into existence". Rather, it means to extend the domain of discourse with a new object.

13. Though it certainly increases the theory's "intentional-metaphysical load", as Kroon put it in correspondence.

7. *Conclusion*

In the Preface to *Towards Non-Being*, Priest claimed:

> Nor do I take the version of the [MM] view presented here to be definitive.
> A number of the techniques developed in the book are relatively novel and
> untried, and I would be surprised, indeed, if better techniques could not
> sometimes be found. (Priest 2005, *x*)

Indeed so. Most of the points raised by Kroon in his paper can be addressed
by MM—and some of them quite easily, as we have seen. But Kroon's final
point forces us to declare the initial MM account, as presented in *TNB*,
in need of revision. We will still be surprised if no further revisions turn
out to be required in the light of future inspection. By triggering the one
just described, Kroon's paper is, we think, the most perceptive criticism
of MM to date.[14]

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