

Nonexistence, Vague Existence, Merely Possible Existence

Iris Einheuser*♦

Duke University

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Abstract

This paper explores a new non-deflationary approach to the puzzle of nonexistence and its cousins. On this approach, we can, under a plausible assumption, express true *de re* propositions about certain objects that don't exist, exist indeterminately or exist merely possibly. The defense involves two steps: First, to argue that if we can actually designate what individuates a nonexistent target object with respect to possible worlds in which that object *does* exist, then we can express a *de re* proposition about "it". Second, to adapt the concept of *outer truth* with respect to a possible world – a concept familiar from actualist modal semantics – for use in representing the *actual* world.

1 Three Puzzles

Nonexistence, vague existence and merely possible existence might be seen to generate three puzzles that run in parallel.

Nonexistence. To assert that something does not exist, it appears, we must refer to that something and say of it that it does not exist. But we can only refer to what exists. So we cannot correctly assert that something does not exist.

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Vague existence. Suppose PARTICLES, a collection of particles, compose OBJECT just when the particles stand in RELATION. It may sometimes be indeterminate whether PARTICLES do stand in RELATION and thus compose OBJECT. So, it appears, OBJECT may sometimes exist indeterminately. To ascribe vague existence to OBJECT, we have to refer to OBJECT, but we can refer to OBJECT only if it exists. And whatever exists, exists determinately. So we cannot correctly assert that anything exists indeterminately.

Merely possible existence. To assert that something exists merely possibly, it appears, we must refer to that something and say of it that it exists merely possibly. But what exists merely possibly does not actually exist and can therefore not be referred to. So we cannot correctly assert that something exists merely possibly.

Richard Cartwright has distinguished between two solution strategies to handle the first problem, the problem of nonexistence¹: *Inflationists* maintain that in order to deny the existence of something, that something has to be referred to, and they assume that things that don't exist nonetheless have some kind of being that allows them to be targets of reference. *Deflationists*, on the other hand, reject the idea that denials of existence require reference to things that don't exist and help themselves to machinery developed by Bertrand Russell in order to interpret claims of nonexistence in purely qualitative terms.

The difference between an inflationary and a deflationary approach to nonexistence can usefully be framed in terms of the assumed character of the propositions expressed when ascribing nonexistence. Deflationists construe negative existentials as expressing *general* propositions to the effect that some property is not instantiated. For instance, 'Pegasus does not exist' is construed as expressing the general proposition that there is no creature with the properties described in a certain myth. Inflationists, on the other hand, can be seen as construing negative existentials as expressing *singular* propositions, propositions about a particular individual in the sense that their truth-value relative to any possible world turns on how things stand "there" with respect to that very individual. Since the individual with respect

¹ Cartwright (1960).

to which the proposition expressed by 'Pegasus does not exist' is presumed to be singular does not exist (in the ordinary sense of 'exist'), inflationists posit a suitable proxy for the nonexistent in question to facilitate tracking "that" object through the space of possibilities. For example, Alvin Plantinga assumes that for any merely possible individual there is a necessarily existing property, an "essence" as he calls it, instantiation of which is necessary and sufficient for being that very individual.² Propositions about nonexistents are then construed as involving these essences rather than the objects themselves. Bernard Linsky and Ed Zalta assume that entities that intuitively exist merely possibly actually *do* exist, but that they are actually (and contingently) *nonconcrete*.³ They could, however, have been concrete. Their actual nonconcreteness accounts for our intuition of their nonexistence, and their concreteness with respect to some other possible worlds tracks our intuition that the entities do exist relative to those worlds. The inflationist approach to nonbeing and merely possibly being has been subjected to much criticism, most recently by Karen Bennett, who refers to it as *proxy actualism*.⁴ "Proxy" because it introduces proxies to replace mere possibilia and track their whereabouts through the space of possibilities, "actualism" because the proxies are assumed to be actually existing entities. But as the many critics point out, this kind of view is quite ontologically extravagant.

In light of the unattractiveness of inflationism, most philosophers nowadays opt for the deflationist strategy to dissolve the original problem of nonexistence. This strategy has proven useful in handling vague and merely possible existence as well. Kathrine Hawley has recently proposed what amounts to a deflationist strategy to deal with the puzzle of vague existence:⁵ We do not say of an object that it exists indeterminately. Rather, we express a general proposition to the effect that it is indeterminate whether there is something that has a certain property. Applied to the example from the beginning of the

² Plantinga (1974).

³ Linsky and Zalta (1994) and Linsky and Zalta (1996).

⁴ See Bennett (2006). For earlier criticism of this type of view, see Adams (1981), McMichael (1983) and Fine (1985).

⁵ Hawley (2002).

paper, it is said to be indeterminate whether PARTICLES compose an object, and so the proposition expressed by 'OBJECT exists indeterminately' is not singular with respect to OBJECT. Finally, a widely adopted actualist approach to handling the puzzle of merely possible being employs a deflationary strategy as well:⁶ We do not say *of* an object that it might have existed but rather that it is possible that some object with a certain set of properties exists. Again, on this approach, the proposition expressed by 'Pegasus might have existed' is taken not to be singular with respect to Pegasus but rather to represent that the property of being a winged horse owned by Bellerophon might have been instantiated.

In this paper, I swim against the deflationist tide and explore an inflationary strategy on which we can, in a sense to be made precise, "say of" *some* objects that do not actually determinately exist that they do not exist, exist indeterminately or exist merely possibly. The strategy I propose does work with proxies but is not ontologically extravagant in the way proxy actualism is. Instead, it relies on facts about what propositions we can actually express and what possibilities we can actually represent. It provides an attractive alternative to those who feel that, with respect to a certain class of ascriptions of nonexistence, vague existence or merely possible being, deflationism is too flat-footed, but who sensibly shy away from full inflationism because of its ontological excess.

The core claim of this paper is that, under a plausible assumption to be mentioned in due course, we can express true so-called *quasi-singular propositions* to the effect that some particular object does not exist, that it exists indeterminately or that it exists merely possibly. Quasi-singular propositions, which will be introduced in section 3, behave semantically like singular propositions but, unlike singular propositions, they do not ontologically depend on the objects they are about. To establish the core claim, two obstacles have to be overcome. First, we need an account of how a proposition can be quasi-singular with respect to an object that does not (determinately) exist. This challenge will be taken up in section 3. Second, we need an account of what makes such propositions actually true given that the

⁶ Not all actualists are deflationists, though. The authors mentioned in footnotes 2 and 3 are notable exceptions.

objects on which their truth-value hinges do not actually exist. This challenge will be taken on in section 4.

Before developing the machinery to properly express and defend my core claim, however, I will, in section 2, contrast several types of negative existentials to help motivate my approach.

2 Intuitive Motivation

Contrast the following three negative existentials. First, let 'PEGASUS' refer to the winged horse described in Greek mythology.

(1) PEGASUS does not exist.

Second, for the final project in my 5th grade art class, I was supposed to paint a picture of the Taj Mahal, but never did. Let 'PICTURE' refer to the picture that would have resulted had I put brush to canvas.

(2) PICTURE does not exist.

Third, a carpenter has in his workshop four table legs L_1, \dots, L_4 and a table top T . To obtain a table he only needs to put them together in the right way. But he abandons the project and no table made from these parts ever comes into existence. Let 'TABLE' refer to the table that would have resulted had the carpenter joined L_1, \dots, L_4 and T .

(3) TABLE does not exist.

Neither of the three negative existentials is about a particular object because none of the names employed actually refers. But the third case differs in an important way from the first two. The only way to understand the first two is as expressing fully general propositions such as *There is no winged horse that has the characteristics mentioned in Greek mythology* and *There is no picture of the Taj Mahal that Iris Einheuser painted in grade 5*. What object is relevant for falsifying the negation of (1) and (2) differs across the possible worlds. In some possible worlds I paint one picture, in others, I paint another picture. In some possible worlds Bellerophon rides one winged horse, in others he rides another one. Intuitively, there are no unique merely possible objects that (1) and (2), respectively, are about. In contrast, the carpenter makes the same table in every world in which he joins L_1, \dots, L_4 and T .

The same (actually nonexistent) object is relevant for falsifying the negation of (3). Intuitively, there is a unique merely possible object that (3) is about. Since there really are no merely possible objects, this very natural way of putting the intuitive difference has to be taken with more than a pinch of salt.

Without the salt, and less informatively, the intuition is that propositions about TABLE are "more singular", more "about" a particular object than propositions about PEGASUS and PICTURE. The account developed in this paper is meant to capture this intuition.

3 Singular Propositions and Rigid Reference

Singular propositions exhibit a special semantic behavior. The truth-value of a singular proposition relative to any possible world always depends on the same object. That is what makes the proposition *singular* or *de re* with respect to the object in question.⁷ Such propositions contrast with *general* ones whose truth-values may depend on different objects relative to different possible worlds.

Quasi-Singular Propositions. Singular propositions are usually construed as *Russellian* – as literally containing the objects they are about – and therefore as ontologically dependent on these very objects.⁸ But we can usefully divorce the concept of a proposition characterized primarily by the semantic *behavior* typical of singular propositions from the concept of a Russellian proposition which is characterized by an *implementational* feature. Just like possible worlds and universals, singular propositions are theoretical entities employed in philosophical theorizing. We use these entities to model and account for various phenomena of philosophical interest. For the majority of applications, all that matters is the theoretical behavior of these entities, not their underlying nature. For instance, the possible worlds apparatus is usefully employed in characterizing various notions of supervenience. For that application, it is immaterial whether possible worlds are

⁷ Here, I restrict attention to singular propositions about a single object, as opposed to singular propositions, such as that expressed by 'Tim is taller than Tom' that are singular with respect to more than one individual. Everything I say here can easily be generalized.

⁸ For a very helpful recent overview, see Fitch and Nelson (2007).

construed (Lewis-style) as concreta, (Stalnaker-style) as maximal properties, or (Plantinga-style) as maximal states of affairs. In software engineering it is customary to hide the implementational details of a module and just ensure that its users can expect it to behave in a certain way. I suggest that likewise in philosophical modeling, we do well to set aside the implementational details of the theoretical entities employed and rely mostly on their theoretical behavior. To be sure, at some point philosophers may turn to investigate the underlying ontological features of the theoretical entities they employ. And it may in some cases turn out that a given kind of theoretical entity can play a given role only if it is thought of as having a particular set of ontological features. For instance, it may turn out that possible worlds can play their characteristic theoretical role only if they are construed as concreta.⁹ But this kind of investigation of how to implement the philosophical apparatus of theoretical entities should be kept separate from the employment of that apparatus.

The notion of a *Russellian* proposition, I suggest, belongs on the implementational side. There is conceptual room for a type of proposition that is characterized primarily by the semantic behavior of singular propositions but that is not required to contain the object it is about. Let us refer to propositions of this new type as *quasi-singular*, since the term 'singular proposition' has come to be associated with a type of proposition that combines a specific implementational with a specific semantic feature.

The very concept of a quasi-singular proposition allows for the possibility of such propositions being about "objects that do not actually exist". For every singular proposition there actually is an individual such that that individual's fate across the possible worlds determines the proposition's modal profile, that is, the distribution of its truth-values throughout the space of possible worlds. The modal profile of a quasi-singular proposition, on the other hand, might depend on what is, intuitively, a merely possible individual. There is, however, a *prima facie* problem. In order to express a quasi-singular proposition about an object that does not actually exist, we need a way to track a merely possible object through the space of possibilities. That is, we need to ensure that the truth-value relative to a

⁹ This is what Lewis (1986) would have us believe.

world of the proposition expressed always depends on the same object, without that object's actually existing.

Rigid Reference. We typically use a referring term rigidly to make the modal profile of the proposition we express depend on a particular individual. Rigid reference is here conceived of as involving two aspects: First, actual reference to an actually existing object, and second, reference to the same object relative to all possible worlds. In fact, actual reference to an existing object *enables* reference to a unique object relative to all possible worlds. But conceptually, rigid reference – reference to the same object relative to all worlds relative to which the term does refer – does not require actual reference, that is, reference to an actually existing individual. To be sure, in the absence of successful actual reference rigid reference across the merely possible worlds and hence expression of a singular proposition is hard to achieve. The obstacle here is generated by the problem of transworld identity for merely possible individuals, which, unlike the problem of transworld identity for actually existing individuals, cannot be solved by a mere stipulation. No actual utterance of 'Pegasus does not exist', 'Pegasus might have existed', or 'Pegasus will exist once our genetic engineering program has been successfully implemented' expresses a quasi-singular proposition about Pegasus because 'Pegasus' fails to pick out any particular object, both relative to the actual state of the world and relative to any possible state of the world. Similarly, while we can express general propositions regarding Quine's merely possible fat man in the doorway – propositions whose truth-value relative to a world turns on how things stand with the fat man, if any, located in the doorway in that world – we cannot express any quasi-singular proposition whose truth-value relative to a possible world turns on how things stand with a particular possible fat man in the doorway, because we have no way of making it depend on the same individual in every world.¹⁰ In cases like these, the terms we use do not rigidly designate, and so we fail to individuate a proposition whose modal profile depends on the actual and counterfactual career of some *particular* actual or possible object.

¹⁰ Quine (1948).

Quasi-Reference: Rigid Reference without Actual Reference. Sometimes, it appears, we can introduce rigid designators for objects that do not (yet, actually, or determinately) exist, designators that do not actually refer but that do pick out the same object with respect to any possible state of the world relative to which they *do* refer. We can do so if we can pick out the actually and presently and determinately existing *individuators* of these objects.¹¹ Consider:

Future objects. The carpenter considered earlier has not yet but will soon fasten table top T to table legs L_1, \dots, L_4 . Let 'SOONTOBETABLE' refer to the unique table that will result from the carpenter's appropriately joining L_1, \dots, L_4 and T .

If a table's identity is essentially determined by its being a table and its being made of a particular collection of parts, then we can refer, relative to possible worlds in which the parts are joined, to a unique table. So we can refer rigidly, *now*, to an object that does not (yet) exist. Similarly:

Merely possible objects. The carpenter never actually fastens table top T to table legs L_1, \dots, L_4 . Let 'TABLE' refer to the unique table that would have resulted from the carpenter's appropriately joining L_1, \dots, L_4 and T .

Again, under the above assumption, this stipulation enables *actual* rigid reference to an object that does not actually exist. And likewise for (some) indeterminately existing objects. Let 'PARTICLES' and 'RELATION' be as before and let 'DOOMED', 'IN SPE' and 'IN LIMBO' refer to the objects, if any, composed by PARTICLES standing in RELATION in the following examples of vague existence:

Doomed objects. Yesterday PARTICLES stood in RELATION and so constituted DOOMED. Today, PARTICLES have shifted around and it is now indeterminate whether they stand in RELATION.

¹¹ I use the term in Jonathan Lowe's sense: An object i , or collection of objects I *individuates* an object o just in case i or the I make o the very object it is. (Lowe (2003)). An object's individuators can help us track the object through the space of possible worlds.

Objects in spe. PARTICLES have never determinately stood in RELATION but they will soon stand determinately in RELATION and constitute IN SPE. At present, it is indeterminate whether they stand in RELATION.

In limbo objects. PARTICLES have never, don't now and will never determinately stand in RELATION and constitute IN LIMBO. At present, they don't determinately stand nor do they determinately not stand in RELATION.

Again, the way we fixed the counterfactual reference of the designators in question, we ensured that they are rigid: they pick out the same object with respect to any possible state of the world relative to which they pick out an object at all.¹²

The ability to rigidly refer to an object that does not yet exist, does not determinately exist or does not (and never will) actually exist depends crucially on the actual availability of essential individuators for the target object. Note that for some actual things, like objects and properties, to play the role of essential individuators, it is not sufficient that being related to these things be essential to the target object. Many properties regarded as essential, such as the property of being human, are shared by many (actual and possible) individuals and so cannot serve to track a unique object through the space of possibilities. While this is a high demand to meet, it is plausible to assume that for some kinds of objects there are essential individuators. For instance, a particular table is plausibly individuated by its major parts and their arrangement.

This gives us a way of cashing out talk of rigid reference to nonexistent or indeterminately existing objects: We cannot literally refer to such objects, but for some such objects we can use rigid designators defined in terms of their actually existing individuators. That allows us to actually refer to such objects with respect to states of the world relative to which they *do* exist. To "refer" to a nonexistent or indeterminately existing object, then, is merely to use

¹² If you think that PARTICLES standing in RELATION may constitute more than one object, say because the statue and the clay are distinct yet coinciding objects, you need to enrich the definition of the designator by appeal to a sortal: Say, 'IN SPE' is to refer to the unique statue, if any, constituted by PARTICLES standing in RELATION. This slight complication does not upset the basic point made here.

a rigid designator that does not actually or presently pick out an object but picks out the same determinate object with respect to every possible state of the world with respect to which it picks out anything at all. Since the term 'reference' is well-entrenched as standing for a relation whose relata actually exist, let us use the term *quasi-reference* (with the corresponding verb to *quasi-refer*) for this new kind of reference relation. For instance, 'IN SPE' does not now refer to an object, but since it refers relative to future states of the world at which PARTICLES determinately stand in RELATION, and it refers to the same object relative to all such states, we say that it quasi-refers to IN SPE. Similarly, 'TABLE' does not actually refer to an object, but it refers relative to possible states of the world in which L_1, \dots, L_4 and T are appropriately joined. Since it refers to the same object relative to all such states, we say that it quasi-refers to TABLE.

Quasi-Singular Propositions about Nonexistents. Rigid designators that quasi-refer to nonexistent objects allow us to express quasi-singular propositions about objects that do not actually or presently or determinately exist:

- (4) SOONTOBETABLE will exist later today.
- (5) TABLE would have existed, had the carpenter finished his project.
- (6) IN SPE will exist determinately once it has come together properly.
- (7) IN LIMBO would exist determinately if PARTICLES came together properly.

We succeed in expressing singular propositions because, in each case, the rigid designator allow us to identify a particular (albeit non-actual or non-present) individual on whose (actual, counterfactual, past or future) career the truth-value of the proposition depends.

The nature of quasi-singular propositions can be construed in parallel to that of singular propositions. A singular proposition, on the standard view, is a structured abstract entity that contains, as one of its constituents, the object it is about. A quasi-singular proposition can be thought of as a structured abstract entity that contains, as one of its constituents, an objectual *proxy* – an actually existing object that

is sufficient to uniquely track the object the proposition is about through the space of possibilities.

The prime objection to the use of proxies by metaphysicians like Plantinga, Linsky and Zalta is that commitment to a proxy for an object is typically just as strong as commitment to the object itself.¹³ For instance, for Plantinga, the relevant proxies are what he calls "essences", properties instantiation of which is necessary and sufficient for being the object corresponding to the proxy. A property suitable to play the role of essential proxy for a given object *o* is the property of being identical with *o*. So if *o* exists, a suitable proxy can be abstracted from *o*. But for objects that don't exist, it is hard to see what would justify the assumption that the property of being identical with that object exists. We don't save on ontological commitments by helping ourselves to proxies for merely possible objects rather than to the objects themselves.

For some mere possibilia, however, the assumption of actually existing proxies is justifiable. These are the mere possibilia whose individuator actually exist. For instance, TABLE does not exist, but its parts do and since being a table made of those parts is necessary and sufficient for being TABLE, we can, with the help of the sortal *table*, abstract an intensional proxy for TABLE from those parts. Such intensional proxies figure in quasi-singular propositions just like ordinary objects figure in singular propositions.

On this construal, singular and quasi-singular propositions have close structural similarities and share their semantic behavior: Their truth-value relative to a possible world always depends on the same object. These two features allow us to account for the intuition that 'TABLE could have existed' expresses a proposition that is "more singular" or "more *de re*" than the proposition expressed by 'PICTURE could have existed'.

4 Actual Truths Directly About Nonexistents

There is a final hurdle: The rigid designators considered above refer with respect to some non-actual or non-present states of the world, yet they don't presently or actually pick out any objects. The quasi-singular propositions expressed with their help are "directly about"

¹³ See the critics mentioned in footnote 4.

objects that don't actually and presently exist. But then how do we evaluate singular propositions like those expressed by (4)-(7) with respect to the actual world and the present time? It is not enough for the non-deflationist that there *be* quasi-singular propositions attributing nonexistence, vague existence or merely possible existence to nonexistent entities. These propositions also have to be *true*. What, if anything, makes them actually and presently true? I propose to adapt some machinery from actualist modal semantics to answer that question.

Inner and Outer Truth. Many actualists distinguish between two ways in which a proposition may be true relative to a possible world:¹⁴

OUTER TRUTH. A proposition is true *at* a world, if the world is as the proposition represents it.

INNER TRUTH. A proposition is true *in* a world, if it exists in that world and the world is as the proposition represents it.

The concept of outer truth is meant to make it possible for a singular proposition to be true relative to a world in which the object it is about does not exist: Singular propositions are traditionally thought to be ontologically dependent on the objects they are about. If Socrates had not existed, then no propositions about Socrates would have existed either. Yet it is true, with respect to a Socrates-free world, that Socrates does not exist. Thus, the proposition that Socrates does not exist is true *at* yet not *in* such worlds. We can correctly characterize a possibility in terms of objects that would not have existed had that possibility been actualized. With respect to the actual world, inner and outer truth of singular propositions coincides.

Parallel to the distinction between inner and outer truth we can introduce a distinction between a possible world's *inner domain* and its *outer domain*: The world's inner domain consists of all those individuals that exist relative to that world. The world's outer domain is meant to collect all those *actually* existing individuals in terms of

¹⁴ The labels 'inner truth' and 'outer truth' are Kit Fine's. See Fine (1985). Robert Adams draws essentially the same distinction – between truth in and truth at a world – in Adams (1981). For extended discussion and a defense of the distinction against recent criticism see Einheuser (2012).

which that world can be correctly characterized, regardless of whether these objects are among the things that exist relative to that world. Thus, if Socrates does not exist relative to a world, then Socrates is not a member of that world's inner domain but he is a member of its outer domain – because he actually exists and the possible world in question can be characterized by appeal to him.

The connection between the two distinctions is as follows: A singular proposition can be true *in* a world only if the objects it is about are members of the world's inner domain. Since propositions true *in* a world draw only on objects from the world's inner domain, inner truth is closed under existential generalization. Outer truth, on the other hand, is not so closed: It is true *at* a Socrates-free world that Socrates does not exist, yet it is not true at such a world that there is an object that does not exist.¹⁵

Inner and Outer Truth with Respect to the Actual World. I propose that with a little modification the distinction between inner and outer truth as well as the conception of outer domains can be used to account for the truth of quasi-singular with respect to the *actual* world.

Start by distinguishing between two domains with respect to the actual world: First, the domain of those objects that actually and determinately exist. And second, what we may call an *outer domain* of objectual proxies, representing those will-be and would-be entities that don't exist but that can be quasi-referred to.

Next, we need to work with a slight modification of the conception of inner truth. Quasi-singular propositions are not ontologically dependent on the objects they are about but on the objects' *proxies*. The object's proxies exist whenever the object's individuator exists, and these may exist even if the object doesn't. It follows that propositions about TABLE may exist in worlds in which TABLE doesn't. The actual world is a case in point. So on the standard definition, a proposition about TABLE may be true *in* a world even when TABLE does not exist relative to that world. But inner truth is taken to be closed under existential generalization. In order to maintain this desirable feature of inner truth, we need to adjust our understanding of the inner truth of quasi-singular propositions. I propose the following revised definition:

¹⁵ For more details, see Adams (1981) and Einheuser (2012).

INNER TRUTH (modified). A proposition is true *in* a world, if the world is as the proposition represents it and the objects the proposition is about, if any, exist in the world.

This revision captures the original intuition behind the definition of inner truth in a setting in which the existence of a quasi-singular proposition is not tied to the existence of the objects it is about, while allowing us to hold on to the idea that inner truth is closed under existential generalization.

Let us see how this machinery may be put to work. The motivation behind the conception of outer truth is the thought that we can correctly characterize a non-actualized state of the world in terms of things that do not exist relative to that state. For instance, we may correctly characterize a non-actualized state of the world by saying that Socrates doesn't exist. Similarly, the actual world's outer domain, populated by essential proxies, gives us the tools to correctly characterize the actual world in terms of things that do not exist relative to the actual state of the world. We can state what it takes for such a proposition to be true at the actual world in terms of the individuator of the nonexistent object that the proposition is about. For instance,

(8) TABLE does not exist

is (outer) true just in case L_1, \dots, L_4 and T fail to be appropriately joined.

(9) It is possible that TABLE exists

is (outer) true just in case it is possible that L_1, \dots, L_4 and T are appropriately joined.

(10) IN SPE does not yet exist

is (outer) true just in case PARTICLES do not yet determinately stand in RELATION. Similarly,

(11) DOOMED exists indeterminately

is (outer) true just in case it is indeterminate whether PARTICLES compose an object. So while quasi-singular propositions about non-existents cannot be true *in* the actual world (because the objects they are about do not actually exist), they can be true *at* the actual world.

On the assumption that terms like TABLE, IN SPE and DOOMED are rigid, the above shows that it is possible to express true quasi-singular propositions about certain nonexistents and correctly say of "them" that they don't exist, exist merely possibly or exist indeterminately. This establishes my core claim.

5 Closing

The intuition that motivated this paper was that some negative existentials, like 'Pegasus does not exist' and 'The fat man in the doorway does not exist', are purely general while others, like 'TABLE does not exist', seem "less" general and "more" *de re* even though the *res* they purport to be about does not exist.

On the plausible assumption that the individuators of some non-existent objects actually exist, we can do justice to this intuition by construing negative existentials of this latter kind as expressing what I call *quasi-singular* propositions. These are *de re* with respect to nonexisting objects by virtue of containing essential proxies for those objects – intensional entities that individuate a unique merely possible object relative to those possible worlds in which that object exists. This allows for a modestly inflationary account of an important family of assertions of nonexistence, vague existence and merely possible existence. The account is inflationary because it doesn't treat the negative existentials in question as expressing purely general propositions. It is modest because it extends this non-inflationary treatment to only those negative existentials that are about possibilia whose individuators actually exist and that we can therefore quasi-refer to.

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