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"THINGS THERE ARE THAT DON'T EXIST"

ABSTRACT

1: My View

Contrary to historically prevalent opinion in analytical philosophy, I believe that there are things that never exist, and they play an important part in our mental life. This is clearest, I argue, when we have intentional attitudes that do not take propositional objects, but find nonexistent intentional objects when they reach into contexts of intentional representation.

2: Alternative Views about Nonexistent Objects

I place my view in a three-part spectrum of types of view that have generated interesting philosophical discussion about nonexistent objects and their place (if any) in the last 150 years. I classify the types of view on the basis of their answers to three questions:

- (1) Are there nonexistent objects, at least as intentional objects of thoughts, emotions, and attitudes?
- (2) Do they actually have the main properties they are represented as having?
- (3) Do they actually exist?

At one end of the spectrum, Extreme Realism, as we may call it, answers questions (1) and (2) in the affirmative, holding that there are indeed fictitious and imaginary objects, and they do actually have the main properties that they are represented as having. The form of extreme realism on which I will focus is that developed by the Austrian philosopher Alexius Meinong in the first two decades of the 20th century. As to question (3), whether fictitious objects actually exist, Meinong eventually answers it in the negative, but in the most half-hearted possible way, as I will explain.

At the opposite extreme Anti-Realism about fictitious and imaginary objects (or Eliminationism, as we could also call it) answers question (1) in the negative, denying that there are any such objects, and thereby either avoids questions (2) and (3) altogether or implies a negative answer to them.

Between these extremes is Moderate Realism, which answers question (1) in the affirmative and question (2) in the negative, affirming that there are fictitious and imaginary objects, but denying that they actually have the main properties they are represented as having. My own view, which I consider a form of Moderate Realism, gives a negative answer to question (3) as well, denying that fictitious and imaginary objects actually exist. But other philosophers whom I would classify as moderate realists answer question (3) in the affirmative. I will argue that our disagreement about question (3) is part of a disagreement about how it is that there are fictitious and imaginary objects.