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A FREGEAN CONCEPTION OF SINGULAR EXISTENCE

Abstract. A perplexity about singular existence statements (for example, ‘Socrates exists’) is that for their negations to be true their subject terms do not name anything. For example, in ‘Pegasus does not exist’ ‘does not exist’ is *not* said in respect to the referent of ‘Pegasus’ since there is none. But, then, in respect to what is that said? The paper answers the question by proposing a metalinguistic interpretation of singular existence statements, according to which singular existence statements are about names. It is argued that this interpretation fits in well with Frege’s views on existence, presupposition, and his idea that names have senses.

Keywords: Frege; Kant; Hume; Descartes; singular existence statements; names; free logic; classical logic

Introduction

This paper argues for a metalinguistic interpretation of singular existence statements. In calling the account a Fregean conception I do not intend to attribute it to Frege. As Frege in his later writings after *Begriffsschrift*¹, e.g., in “Über Sinn und Bedeutung” [Frege, 1952, pp. 56–57], explicitly rejected the metalinguistic interpretation of identity statements,

¹ In *Begriffsschrift* Frege says that equalities concern names, not contents of names. For example, he writes “[...] with the introduction of a sign for equality of content, all symbols are necessarily given a double meaning—the same symbols stand now for their own content, now for themselves.” [Frege, 1952, pp. 10–11]. In their occurrences in those sentences of his concept-script which are free of a symbol for equality of content, names stand for their contents. But in their occurrences flanking the symbol for equality of content, names stand for themselves.

it is not obvious that he would have adopted it for singular existence statements either.² Rather my goal is to make plausible the idea that a metalinguistic interpretation of singular existence statements similar to what I shall propose fits in well with three components of Frege's philosophy of logic: first, Frege's account of general existence statements ("Cows exist"); second, his presuppositional account of proper names; third, his idea that proper names have senses, and that each such sense purports to present an object.

1. A historical perspective

Descartes held that existence was a perfection, and thereby presupposed that existence was predicable. [Descartes, 1990, Fifth Meditation]. If so, just as it makes sense to say of *Socrates* that he was courageous, it makes sense to say of *him* that he exists.

Hume suggested that an idea of (say) an existing cow is nothing more than the idea of a cow, in which case the *only* "non-logical" idea which would enter into the thought that cows exist would be an idea of a cow [Hume, 1967, Book I, Part II, Section VI]. If so, the thought that cows exist is not the same in kind as, say, the thought that cows moo. How then should we understand the thought that cows exist?

It might be thought to be the thought that cows are cows. Yet, that cannot be the thought that cows exist, since if it were then the thought that unicorns exist would be a true thought, since it would then be the thought that unicorns are unicorns, and that is a true thought. So, the thought that cows exist is not the thought that cows are cows.

So what is the thought that cows exist?

We might look at it this way. If the idea of an existing cow is simply the idea of a cow, and the idea of an existing horse is simply the idea of a horse, then there is no such thing as an idea of *existence*. And that seems pretty clearly to have been Hume's view. If so, then *if* we take the sentence 'Cows exist' as a generalization of such sentences as 'If Bessie is a cow, then Bessie exists' (as we can take 'Cows moo' as a generalization of such sentences as 'If Bessie is a cow, then Bessie moos') then the sentence simply fails to express any complete thought. For what are we to make of the sentence 'Bessie exists' if there is no idea of existence? It

² The *Begriffsschrift* conception of identities and the "Über Sinn und Bedeutung" conception of identities are discussed in [Hugly and Sayward, 2000, pp. 195–205].

would then seem to be on all fours with ‘Bessie kalumphs’, which clearly fails to express any complete thought. But it is clear that ‘Cows exist’ expresses a complete thought, and a true one at that.

The lesson here is that ‘Cows exist’ is not, if Hume is right, and despite grammatical appearances, a sentence in which ‘exists’ serves as a predicate. That is, if Hume is right then to think that cows exist is *not* to think that they are some way which is predicable of them e.g., that they have a certain property called ‘existence’. So, if Hume was right, then, it seems, Descartes’ presupposition was wrong.

About existence Kant agreed with Hume and disagreed with Descartes [Kant, 1963, pp. 500–507]. Kant held that idea of a silver dollar and the idea of an existing silver dollar are one and the same. So here he agreed with Hume. From this he concluded that no *trait* or *property* is attributed to silver dollars when we say that they exist. Whatever the *grammar* of our judgment might be, that aspect of our existential judgments which expresses existence is not predicative in nature.

Hume said nothing about the expression of existence. Kant did. Kant held that existence is expressed by the *form* of our existential judgments. The term ‘exists’, as we ordinarily use it, e.g., to say that cows exist, indicates that *form*, not a bit of predicable content in addition to that supplied by the word ‘cow’. In consequence, according to the Kantian philosophy, the *concept* of existence is categorical, deriving as it does from a form of judgment. The concept of existence is thus *a priori* — though its *applications* (namely, in judgments of the form from which it is derived) are typically contingent and *a posteriori*.

For example, an existential judgement like ‘There are cows’ is *a posteriori*, even though the formal concept therein applied is *a priori*.

Kant’s conception incorporates Hume’s insight and then goes beyond it by identifying that aspect of an existential judgment whereby it expresses existence.

The next step was taken by Frege who provided a clear and rigorous formulation of the form of judgment through which existence is expressed. This he gave in his new theory of quantification (see, for example [Frege, 1972, pp. 130–135]). In terms of that theory, the judgment that cows exist has a canonical linguistic expression in the sentence

For some x , x is a cow.

The element of the above sentence which expresses *existence* is the Fregean quantifier

For some x , $x \dots$

the part of the above sentence which remains when the first-order concept-term ‘is a cow’ is deleted.

It is clear that the sentences

There are cows

Something is a cow

There is something which is a cow

There exists something which is a cow

and the like have, *in addition* to the element (‘cows’, ‘is a cow’) suitable for predicating something of some object, something which combines with that element to form a sentence but which is not itself suitable for predicating something of some object. The “elements” in question are the phrases

There are ...

Something ...

There is something which ...

There exists something which ...

These may be called “natural language quantifiers”. Frege’s point, and Kant’s as well (though he lacked the theory needed for so stating it), is that existence is expressed by such quantifiers which are part of the *logical* apparatus of a language.

We say such things as that cows exist and single horned horses do not exist. In holding that we possess no *idea* of existence, Hume and Kant resisted seeing the above sentences as generalizations the same in kind as, say, cows moo and horses neigh.

Kant further held that we have an *a priori* concept of existence, and that it derives from the *form* of existential judgements.

In effect, what expresses existence is not some categorical term *within* the judgment, but rather a particular way of forming judgments from such terms. This Kant called a “logical function”.



2. Frege, classical logic, free logic

A central feature of the quantifiers is that they directly apply to predicative terms, not singular terms. So, for example, it makes no sense to say e.g.,

There are Socrates

or

There exists something which Nebraska

for at least the reason that these aren't even sentences.

So on the Kant-Frege view, whatever sense it may make to say e.g., that *Socrates* exists, saying that Socrates exists is not analogous to saying that cows exist, for the symbol sequence

For some x , x Socrates

is simply ill-formed.

We may, of course, be able to make clear sense of the quite different symbol sequence

For some x , x is Socrates

since this is at least grammatically well-formed. Its form may be more sharply rendered by writing

For some x , $x = \text{Socrates}$.

But this sentence says that Socrates *exists* only if that "trait" is one and the same as that of *being identical with something*.

We could, of course, decide to let this sentence *fix* the sense of 'Socrates exists', and thereby provide what may be a perfectly good sense for that sentence. But if we do, then what thereby gets said of Socrates in saying that he exists is that something is identical with him.

That is, if we take 'Socrates exists' as the same in sense as 'For some x , $x = \text{Socrates}$ ' then in its occurrence in 'Socrates exists' the word 'exists' has the sense of 'is identical with something'. But in its occurrence in 'Cows exist' the word 'exists' has the sense of 'there are some'. And so the *kind* of thing said in saying 'Socrates exists' would sharply differ from the kind of thing said in saying 'Cows exist'.

This contrast is one Frege would draw by saying that if we take 'Socrates exists' to say the same as 'Something is identical with Socrates',

then in its occurrence in ‘Socrates exists’ the word ‘exists’ denotes the first-level concept *being identical with something*, but in its occurrence in ‘Cows exist’ it denotes the second-level concept *there being some*.

Part of what makes these remarks useful is the prevalent conception that we can extend the idea of existence from the general to the particular by defining ‘exists’ in terms of quantification and identity. (See, for example, just about any upper level logic text to come out in the last five years.) But that does not make the ‘exists’ in ‘Socrates exists’ mean the same as the ‘exist’ of ‘Men exist’.

Of course, there may be nothing problematic about ‘For some x , $x = \text{Socrates}$ ’, and thus, perhaps, nothing problematic about taking ‘Socrates exists’ as just another way of expressing that Socrates is identical with something.

But even if ‘Socrates exists’ is thus understood, the ‘exists’ of ‘Socrates exists’ is not thereby brought any closer to the ‘exist’ of ‘Cows exist’.

But why suppose that the assertion that Socrates is identical with something expresses the thought that he exists?

To this the answer might be that the sentence ‘For some x , $x = \text{Socrates}$ ’ is true *only if* Socrates exists — since if he didn’t there then would be no *him* for anything to be identical with.

But exactly the same sort of thing can be said of ‘Socrates is white’ — for this sentence also is true only if Socrates exists — since if he doesn’t then there is no *him* to be white. That is, the kind of connection with existence which appears to make of ‘For some x , $x = \text{Socrates}$ ’ an assertion of or implying his existence obtains equally for each of vastly many other sentences using the name ‘Socrates’. Thus, it cannot be in virtue of the circumstance that ‘For some x , $x = \text{Socrates}$ ’ is true only if Socrates exists that this sentence says that he exists.

To this the natural reply is that ‘Socrates exists’ entails ‘For some x , $x = \text{Socrates}$ ’ but does not entail ‘Socrates is white’. So in one case we have only ‘only if’ whereas in the other we have both ‘if’ *and* ‘only if’.

But there is in turn a reply to this, for note that it seems to be entailed both that if Socrates exists, then he is or is not a philosopher, and that if he is or is not a philosopher, then he exists. And it would be implausible to equate ‘Socrates is or is not a philosopher’ with ‘Socrates exists’.

Some philosophers will deny that the truth of ‘Socrates is or is not a philosopher’ entails that Socrates exists since the sentence ‘Socrates is or is not a philosopher’ is true no matter what. (Reason: The sentence

is logically valid and all logically valid sentences are true.) But, they hold, if Socrates does not exist then the sentence ‘Something is identical with Socrates’ is false.

But to this we can reply that since ‘Socrates is identical with Socrates’ is a logically valid sentence, it too must be held to be true, and ‘Something is identical with Socrates’ is a logical consequence of ‘Socrates is identical with Socrates’ and so must also be true.

To this these philosophers will reply that it *isn’t* a logical consequence.

We are now in the arena of “free logic”. The constructions of free logic exhibit the possibility of a certain use of terms, one on which we extend ‘true’ to certain sentences (e.g., to each and every sentence of the form ‘ $a = a$ ’) and lay down rules whereby ‘For some x , ... x ...’ is not derivable from ‘... a ...’. Given this, ‘For some x , $x = \text{Pegasus}$ ’ will not *follow* from ‘ $\text{Pegasus} = \text{Pegasus}$ ’, so that assenting to the latter will not logically commit us to the former.

But we might say that ‘ $\text{Pegasus} = \text{Pegasus}$ ’ is neither true nor false (and thus not true) since ‘Pegasus’ is a word of fiction. If we stick to this, then the inference from ‘ $a = a$ ’ to ‘For some x , $x = a$ ’ can be allowed to hold – since it won’t take us from an acknowledged truth to some non-truth. Alternatively, we might say that ‘ $\text{Pegasus} = \text{Pegasus}$ ’ is to be held true since it is of the form ‘ $a = a$ ’ but not allow the inference.

But why not allow the inference? Well, for the reason that ‘Pegasus’ is or might be a word of fiction.

Whichever tack we take, we still need to reject certain sentences for *quite special reasons* e.g., that they use words of fiction, not that they get things wrong. If we adopt the classical mechanism, the special reason crops up in respect to our rejection of certain identities. If we adopt the “free logic” mechanism, the special reason crops up in respect to our rejection of certain identity generalizations (“Something is identical with ...”).

It is hard to see how anything *fundamental* turns on the decision to go the route of standard, classical logic or instead the route of free logic.

The requirement that Socrates exist is no part of the *content* of these vastly many sentences employing ‘Socrates’ in referential positions. Rather, it seems to be something somehow implicated by our simply *using* the word ‘Socrates’ in referential positions (and thereby so using it as to purport to refer to something).

3. Frege on presupposition

At one point Frege says that “there is a presupposition” that proper names have reference, but that this forms no part of the content of sentences which *use* proper names [Frege, 1952, pp. 61–63]. If, as seems to be the case, he is right about this, then that presupposition no more shows that

For some x , $x = \text{Socrates}$

asserts existence than it shows that, say, the sentence

Socrates is white

asserts existence. And, of course, it doesn’t show *that* at all. On the other hand, these considerations would not serve to show that ‘For some x , $x = \text{Socrates}$ ’ *doesn’t* assert the existence of Socrates.

And what if, in a particular case, the presupposition fails? Then, according to Frege, the sentence fails to have a truth-value.

Frege wrote:

Is it possible that a sentence as a whole has only a sense, but no reference? At any rate, one might expect that such sentences occur, just as there are parts of sentences having sense but no reference. And sentences which contain proper names without reference will be of this kind. The sentence ‘Odysseus was set ashore at Ithaca while sound asleep’ obviously has a sense. But since it is doubtful whether the name ‘Odysseus’, occurring therein, has reference, it is also doubtful whether the whole sentence has one. [Frege, 1952, p. 62]

Thus any atomic sentence resulting from attaching a predicate to names at least one of which is ‘Odysseus’ lacks a truth-value if ‘Odysseus’ lacks reference. Generalizing, it is a principle of Frege that an atomic sentence is neither true nor false if one or more of its names do not name.

If so, the sentence

Pegasus flies

is neither true nor false. So *if* a sentence has a truth-value *and* there occurs within it a proper name to which nothing has been assigned as its referent, then the position of that proper name within that sentence

will not be referential. So, since ‘Pegasus’ has not been given a referent, if the sentence

Pegasus exists

is false, and thus truth-valued, the position of ‘Pegasus’ in that sentence is not referential. In that case, in its use to form sentences from proper names, the expression

exists

does not function as a predicate. And that means that the position occupied by ‘Socrates’ in

Socrates exists

also is non-referential.

So *if* ‘Socrates exists’ and ‘Pegasus exists’ are both truth-valued, then it must be affirmed that ‘exists’ is a predicate *neither* in its application to general terms, *nor* in its application to proper names. So though we say both that cows exist and that Socrates exists, in neither case is anything predicated of any object.

This is an interesting view.

What do we know for sure about a sentence of the form ‘a is identical with a’? This much at least: it is not false. But then ‘a is self-identical’ is not false.

Is it then *true*?

Suppose we count it true. Then ‘is self-identical’ will yield a true sentence even when the term gets applied to nothing whatsoever. There is, of course, nothing wrong with this. What reason could there be for disallowing a term which invariably forms a true sentence when attached to a singular term, quite independently of whatever else may be the case with that singular term?

On the other hand, of what use is such a term?

Suppose we simply never wrote out anything of the form ‘a is identical with a’. Suppose we set up rules which precluded the formation of such symbol sequences. Would there be any loss in this? I think not.

If so, then what is central to “free logic” is the decision to treat as true such sentences as ‘Pegasus = the winged horse’ and the like. But what

shows that we treat such sentences as true? Just this: we interchange the terms flanking the “=” sign to move from one sentence to another. This presupposes that we have other types of sentences in which such terms occur e.g., ‘Pegasus had white wings’. But suppose we regarded none of these sentences as true. Then it doesn’t matter how we interchange. So we must also count some of these sentences as true. And we can. There can be no error in this. What bar could there be to so using the word ‘true’. After all, we will be quick to add such remarks as “It’s all stories of course”.

Consider next the sentence

For some x , $x = \text{Pegasus}$.

If Frege is right, this sentence lacks a truth-value (which does not mean that this sentence is not entailed by sentences used to tell stories which have come down to us from the ancient Greeks), in which case the same holds for its negation

For no x , $x = \text{Pegasus}$.

So *if* we were to take ‘Pegasus exists’ as having the sense of ‘For some x , $x = \text{Pegasus}$ ’ and thereby take ‘Pegasus does not exist’ as having the sense of ‘For no x , $x = \text{Pegasus}$ ’, then ‘Pegasus does not exist’ would lack a truth-value and thus, at any rate, not be *true*.

Thus, since our only motive for counting ‘Pegasus exists’ as making sense is to have it be false and its negation be true, we have yet another reason for not regarding ‘exists’ in its use to form sentences from proper names as saying what is said by ‘For some x , $x = \dots$ ’, and analogously for ‘does not exist’.

To this someone might object in the following words: But how then are we to say *with truth* that Pegasus does not exist if not by speaking just as we have just now spoken?

The answer, however unhelpful, of course is this: *If* something true or false is said in saying that Pegasus does not exist, then to say this we need only use the sentence

Pegasus does not exist

And then to say with truth that Socrates does exist we need only use the sentence

Socrates exists.



But then this sentence is not about *Socrates* — it predicates nothing of *him*. Thus,

Pegasus exists

can be false, for since it does not even purport to say anything *about* something, that nothing is picked out by ‘Pegasus’ about which something might be said is no bar to its having a truth-value.

4. Frege on names having senses

In Frege’s philosophy of logic expressions divide into two basic classes: function names and proper names. Function names are incomplete. Proper names are complete. The sense of a function name is incomplete, and each such sense purports to present a function, which is also incomplete. The sense of a proper name is complete, and each such sense purports to present an object, which is also complete.

The considerations raised in the preceding section are connected with well-known and longstanding perplexities about existence statements. The sentence ‘Pegasus does not exist’ is such that we feel that it is a condition of its truth that ‘Pegasus’ does not name anything. And we also feel that this sentence is true. From the correctness of these convictions it directly follows that the above sentence is true even though its subject-term has been assigned no referent. So, ‘does not exist’ is *not* said in respect to the referent of the proper name to which it is attached since there is none.

But, then, in respect to what is that said?

Frege might have said that it is said in respect to the *sense* of the name ‘Pegasus’, for he held in general that if a sentence is true and contains a proper name lacking reference in its standard occurrences, then in this sentence it names (designates, refers to) its standard sense. But *what* is thereby asserted of that sense?

Presumably this, that there is nothing of which it is a sense. And so the sentence ends up equivalent to this:

For no x , the sense of ‘Pegasus’ presents x ,

a sentence which, since it only mentions but does not use ‘Pegasus’, will not fail to have a truth-value due to the failure of reference of ‘Pegasus’.

5. What if proper names lack senses?

In a theory that refrains from or even denies the attribution of senses to proper names, an analogous account might be given by saying that what will be said by attaching ‘does not exist’ (or ‘does exist’) to a name will be something about the name itself (as, in more obvious fashion, attaching ‘begins with the letter B’ to a name says something about that name rather than about what, if anything, it names).

To this some might reply that when we use ‘Pegasus does not exist’ we are saying that *Pegasus* does not exist, and are not saying anything about the *word* ‘Pegasus’. In similar fashion someone might say that when people use ‘Boston begins with the letter B’ they are saying that *Boston* begins with the letter B and are not saying anything about the word ‘Boston’.

That is half right. Of course they *are* saying that Boston begins with the letter B — those are the very words they use and you can always properly *use* a sentence to say what it is the sentence says so long as it says something.

But by emphatically repeating a sentence you do no more than to emphatically say again whatever it is you originally said. To speak in such fashion — i.e., emphatically — neither refutes nor confirms this or that claim as to what is said in saying that. What one says in saying

In saying that Boston begins with the letter B people say
that *Boston* begins with the letter B

is true enough, but also trivial enough. Its truth settles nothing about what is said in saying that Boston begins with the letter B.

To this it might be replied that if we take ‘Boston begins with the letter B’ *literally* it says something false of a city. But what is it to take that sentence literally? If it is to take it for what it says as ordinarily uttered, what it literally says is something about a word. That the sentence ‘Boston begins with the second letter of our alphabet’ is about a city and says something false of that city when used among those who observe those special conventions is irrelevant for its *ordinary* use.

So, from the fact that it is entirely true to say that ‘Boston begins with the letter B’ says that *Boston* begins with the letter B it does not follow that this sentence does *not* say something about ‘Boston’. In particular, it does not follow that this sentence does not, in saying that

Boston begins with the letter B, say of ‘Boston’ that it begins with the letter ‘B’. And in fact it does say that.

The point currently being urged is not that ‘Boston begins with the letter B’ does *not* say that Boston begins with the letter B (of course it says *that*) but only that in saying that Boston begins with the letter B the sentence says something about the word ‘Boston’.

As is evident, that in virtue of which the sentence ‘Boston begins with the letter B’ is true is a fact concerning the spelling of the *word* ‘Boston’ (anyone who asserted this sentence could meet a challenge to defend their assertion of it by writing down the word and pointing to its first letter). That shows that the sentence ‘Boston begins with the letter B’ (as ordinarily used) is about the word ‘Boston’ and the letter ‘B’.

This in fact is not in dispute. Even those who conform their usage to the special conventions alluded to above recognize that in its ordinary use the sentence ‘Boston begins with a B’ is about a name and a letter. In order to fit this fact to the structure of the sentence it is commonly said by logicians and philosophers that in this sentence both ‘Boston’ and ‘B’ function autonomously — as names of themselves — a bit of grammatical theory/explanation.

It should be equally readily acknowledged that when someone says that Pegasus exists they are saying that *Pegasus* exists (that Pegasus *exists*, that *Pegasus exists*) — for, as always, there is no error in *using* a sentence to say what it is the sentence says so long as it says something.

But also no insight.

And, as the Boston example shows, from the fact that ‘Pegasus exists’ says that *Pegasus* exists, it does *not* follow that the sentence is not about the word ‘Pegasus’.

In the Boston case we recognize that ‘Boston begins with a B’ is *true*. We might as well acknowledge the common view that ‘Pegasus exists’ is false (so that ‘Pegasus does not exist’ is true). The question in the Boston case was this: Given the truth of the sentence, of what does it speak? In virtue of what is it true? Here too we must ask: Of what does ‘Pegasus exists’ speak? In virtue of what is this sentence false?

One entirely natural thing to say here is this: It is in virtue of the fact that ‘Pegasus’ names nothing at all that this sentence is false.

But if ‘Pegasus’ occurred in that sentence in the way it occurs in e.g., ‘Pegasus has a white hind leg’ then the sentence would not be false, since it would then be neither true nor false. So it does *not* so occur. How then does it occur? (This is like recognizing that ‘Boston begins with the

letter B' would *not* be true if 'Boston' here occurred as it does in 'Boston is an important city'. So we rightly conclude that it does *not* so occur and ask: How then does it occur? And in answer to this question we reply that it here occurs as a name of itself.) The comparable hypothesis for the existence-of-Pegasus sentence is that it speaks of the word 'Pegasus', so that 'Pegasus' here occurs as a name of itself. If so, 'exists' here says something *false* about that word. But what? The entirely natural hypothesis is that 'exists' here says of the word that for some x , it denotes x .

Suppose one points towards a painting of a house, says 'That is my house', and, as may well be the case, one's sentence is true. Then the gesture picks out via that painting something external to the painting and it is of the thing thus picked out that one says it is one's house. Suppose now another person points towards another painting, says 'That is a winged horse', and, again as may well be the case, that person's sentence is true. Then that person's gesture does not pick out via that painting anything external to the painting, since if it did the person's sentence would be false (since there are no winged horses). Nor is it that the person's gesture *purports* to pick out something external to the painting but fails to do so, for then nothing would be picked out, in which case the person's sentence would be neither true nor false. So the person's gesture is not here functioning either to pick out or to purport to pick out via the painting anything external to the painting. What then is going on with this sentence?

The natural hypothesis is that in this case the person's gesture terminates in the winged horse painting and thereby picks *it* out and that the rest of the sentence says something *true* about it, namely that it is a picture of a winged horse (that it shows what a winged horse might look like if there were any).

Indeed, the best way one would have of justifying one's assertion would be to say "Look at the painting—see how it is a painting of a horse with wings" or "See, that painting shows what a winged horse might look like if there were any".

Suppose a person again points with a gesture towards a winged horse picture and says "There are no such horses as that one". This sentence as here uttered is true. But suppose that, with similar gesture, this time towards a horse, the person had uttered this sentence. Then the sentence would be false. And if the person had uttered it with a gesture towards some non-horse, a cow, for example, then again the sentence would be false. In fact the sentence is true just when uttered in connection with

a gesture towards something like a picture of a horse of a type of which there are none e.g., a four headed horse or a mauve horse with purple polka dots. What, when true, is our sentence saying? Presumably roughly this: This picture shows how a horse might look if it had wings, and there are no such horses. (Much is left unspoken in the sentence here serving as our example. The context and the character of the picture may help to make it clear *which* feature is the one taken to be lacking in all horses. ‘There are no such horses as that winged one’ would be more explicit about the non-occurring feature.)

At this point someone might raise the objection that it makes perfectly good sense to say that Socrates might not have existed and that to say that *clearly* is not to say that the word ‘Socrates’ might not have referred to anything — for that is quite true, but has nothing to do with the possible non-existence of *Socrates*. When we say that Socrates might not have existed, we imagine e.g., that the woman who bore him could have died at her own birth — not that she had the child and he was named ‘Cephalus’ instead of ‘Socrates’!

This objection is, I think, decisive against the conjecture that ‘Socrates exists’ has the sense of

‘Socrates’ refers to something.

But it would not cut against the Fregean conjecture that this sentence is about the sense of the name ‘Socrates’ and says that there is nothing of which it is a sense. For *if* names have senses, then we may well say that to say that Socrates might not have existed is to say of the sense of that name that it might not have been the sense of anything.

But what if, as some have urged, proper names lack senses?

Well, even if proper names lack sense, each has a certain use. And so we might say that in ‘Socrates exists’ the word Socrates refers to itself *in its ordinary use* and the rest of the sentence says of that word in that use that there is something to which it refers. That is, we might say that *in its occurrences as a sentence of English*, ‘Socrates exists’ has roughly the sense of ‘For some x , ‘Socrates’ refers-in-its-use-in-actual-English-to x ’. Then, to say that Socrates might not have existed comes to roughly this: It is possible for it to be the case that for no x , ‘Socrates’ refers-in-its-use-in-actual-English to x .

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