Non-existence  Problem thinking of (non-)existence as a property.

(1) 'x is BLAH' has meaning only if x exists.
(2) 'x exists/doesn't exist' has meaning only if x exists.
(3) 'x exists' is true if meaningful, 'x doesn't exist' is false if meaningful.
(4) 'x exists' can never be false, 'x doesn't exist' can never be true.

False existence claims and true non-existence claims are impossible. Ancients knew about this. Some concluded whatever exists at all is eternal. Macro-objects aren’t eternal, but micro-objects might be; this way lies atomism.

That’s an influential application of the problem, but we’re interested in the problem itself. It just seems utterly fantastic that there’s no way of truly claiming Pegasus doesn’t exist. Three main responses can be distinguished.

Meinong: It's true that an object must somehow "be there" to be talked about. That doesn't mean it's got to be in the realm of existence. Some things exist and some do not; the latter still have a toehold in reality, for they subsist. Nothing incoherent about saying of a subsistent thing that it lacks the further property of existence.

Parsons has a theory of these subsistent objects. One might think that for any set of properties, there (at least) subsists a thing with exactly those properties. Lots of these will be incomplete objects; the one associated with {golden, mountain} is neither warm nor cold. Can’t be any old properties though, for what about {golden, mountain, existing}? Make it any set of nuclear properties, intuitively regular ones: round and red as opposed to real, mythical, actual, possible, worshipped, complete.

Independence Principle: If X is a set of nuclear properties and F is a nuclear property outside X, then NOT: whatever has the X-properties has/lacks F.

Existence is extranuclear whatever has {unicornhood} lacks it. Impossibility is extranuclear because of {roundness, squareness}. And so on.

Not clear Meinong was refuted, so much as hounded off the stage. Russell speaks of “that feeling for reality which ought to be preserved even in the most abstract studies. Logic…must no more admit a unicorn than zoology can; for logic is concerned with the real world just as truly as zoology, though with its more abstract and general features… A robust sense of reality is very necessary in framing a correct analysis of propositions about unicorns, golden mountains, round squares, and other such pseudo-objects.”

Frege: Discussing (non)existence, we are really talking about certain concepts having or lacking instances. “The smallest prime number exists” does not predicate existence of a number, it says that the concept SPN(…) has instances. The logical form is this: EX(SPN(...)) applies the 2nd order concept of existence to the first order concept of being the largest prime number. “The largest prime number does not exist” is ~EX(LP(…)).
(Compare the modern notation $\exists x \text{LPN}(x)$.) Even if the object doesn’t exist, the concept does, so there’s always a subject matter.

**Russell:** Russell agrees with Meinong that "The golden mountain does not exist" ought to come out true. This means the golden mountain must "be" only if the function of "the golden mountain" is to pick out or denote an object. It isn’t as we’ll see. What would a Russelian have against the Fregean account? Compare the sentences “The even prime exists” and “The even prime is 2.” For Frege, "the even prime" stands first for the concept even prime, second for the number (the concept isn’t 2). Then in the second it stands for the number 2. Better to give a uniform account of what "the even prime" is doing in both sentences. “Of course the even prime exists, it’s 2.”

Non-referential meaning. Consider first indefinite descriptions. “A world leader is staying in my apartment.” The first three words aren’t contributing an individual, for any leader would make it true. “An F is G” just means “There is at least one F that is G.” This is a *contextual definition* of indefinite descriptions. Russell wants to do the same for definite descriptions. “The F is G” does not tie its wagon to one particular individual, for any unique F would do. It means

1. At least one thing $x$ is F. $\exists x \ Fx$
2. At most one thing is F. $\exists x \forall y (Fy \rightarrow y=x)$
3. Every F is G. $\forall x (Fx \rightarrow Gx)$

In one sentence: $\exists x (Fx \land (\forall y (Fy \rightarrow y=x)) \land Gx)$, sometimes shortened to (the $x$: Fx)Gx or (ιx: Fx)Gx.

Now suppose G is existence. Then existence comes in twice: as a predicate and a quantifier. Is it ambiguous? No. (1) becomes redundant and should be dropped.

You can assert that "the so-and-so exists", meaning that there is just one [thing] that has those properties, but when you get hold of a [thing] that has them, you cannot say of this [thing] that it exists, because that is nonsense: it is not false, but it has no meaning at all. So the individuals that there are in the world do not exist, or rather it is nonsense to say that they exist and nonsense to say that they do not exist.

But then what about “Homer really existed”? “Homer” must be a disguised definite description: the author of the Iliad, etc. existed, that is, the Iliad had a unique author. Why Russell finds this natural; if “Homer” were a genuine name, the very meaningfulness of Homer-statements would hinge on the empirical question whether Homer existed. Priority of meaning! This leads Russell to his Principle of Acquaintance: we don’t understand a proposition unless all its constituents are things we’re acquainted with. We’re acquainted only with universals, ourselves, and sense-data, we it’s a pretty radical view.

Two points that will come up again. (i) Russell is wrong about “Homer” meaning the so-and-so; names aren’t descriptive. (ii) Logical evidence that existence is *first*-order.