

**Existence, Non-Existence, Fiction and the Imagination
(PHIL 5180, PHIL 7180)**

Tung Chun-I Visiting Professor (CUHK), Spring 2021

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Class schedule:

February 19, 2:30-5:15pm

February 26, 2:30-5:15pm

March 5, 2:30-5:15pm

March 12, 2:30-5:15pm

Course Description:

There are many things: Classrooms, bosons, neurons, numbers, justice, time etc. At the same time, there also seem to be things whose existence can be disputed: values, colors, consciousness, God(s) and so forth. But what exactly are we asserting or denying when we ascribe existence or non-existence to some class of entities? What is it for them to exist or not to exist respectively? Specifically, how is it possible to refer to fictional and imaginary objects (such as literary characters and systematically distorted sensory presentations of ordinary objects of perception, not to mention hallucinated objects) without thereby overturning their alleged ontic status as non-existent? Ever since the founding gesture of philosophy, the concept of being has been threatened by a paradox, most prominently articulated in the Eleatics. The paradox culminates in the conclusion that it is impossible for anything not to be/not to exist in virtue of the fact that any assertion of its non-existence entails its existence qua target of an intentional state directed at the entity or kind of entity charged with non-existence.

In this course, we will look at various formulations of the paradox in order to become acquainted with contemporary strategies of solving or re-solving it by way of ontological theory-construction designed to make sense of assertions both of existence and non-existence alike. In this context, we will discuss the ontology of fictional and imaginary objects, because they can easily be used as litmus tests for the various ontological frameworks on offer in contemporary philosophy with a focus on so-called New Realism.

Required Reading

1. Markus Gabriel, *Fields of Sense. A New Realist Ontology*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2015, chapters 2, 3, 6, 7, 13.
2. Gottlob Frege, "Dialogue with Pünjer on Existence," in: *Posthumous Writings*, edited by Hans Hermes, Friedrich Kambartel, Friedrich Kaulbach, translated by Peter Long and Roger White, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1979, pp. 53–67.
3. Friedrich W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, edited and translated by Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006, pp. 1-77.

4. Alexius Meinong, "The Theory of Objects", in: *Realism and the Background of Phenomenology*, edited by Roderick M. Chisholm, Glencoe.: Free Press 1960.
5. Graham Priest, *Towards Non-Being: The Logic and Metaphysics of Intentionality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007.
6. Plato, "Sophist", in: *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper, translated by Nicholas P. White, Indianapolis: Hackett 1997, 216-268d.
7. Markus Gabriel, "Gadamer and New Realism", in: *The Gadamerian Mind*, edited by Theodore George and Gert-Jan van der Heiden, London: Routledge, forthcoming.
8. Keith Frankish, *Illusionism: As a Theory of Consciousness*. Exeter: Imprint Academic 2017.
9. Gabriel, "The Ontology of the Work of Art and the Universality of Hermeneutics Reconsidered", in: Ted George and Gert-Jan van der Heiden (eds.): *The Gadamerian Mind*. New York/London: Routledge (forthcoming).

Additional Readings

10. Markus Gabriel, "Is there such a Thing as Everything", in: *Everything and Nothing*, co-authored with Graham Priest, Cambridge (forthcoming).
11. Markus Gabriel, *Fiktionen*, Berlin: Suhrkamp 2020.
12. Amie L. Thomasson, *Ontology Made Easy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2014.
13. Irad Kimhi, *Being and Thinking*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press 2018.
14. Stuart Brock and Anthony Everett (eds.), *Fictional Objects*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2015.

First Meeting (February 19): Existence

Readings:

1. Markus Gabriel, *Fields of Sense. A New Realist Ontology*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2015, chapters 2-3.
2. Gottlob Frege, "Dialogue with Pünjer on Existence," in: *Posthumous Writings*, edited by Hans Hermes, Friedrich Kambartel, Friedrich Kaulbach, translated by Peter Long and Roger White, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1979, pp. 53–67.
3. Friedrich W. J. Schelling, *Philosophical Investigations into the Essence of Human Freedom*, edited and translated by Jeff Love and Johannes Schmidt, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006, pp. 1-77.

We will first discuss the issue of whether existence is a first-level predicate/property (a 'real predicate') by looking at the motivations for thinking of it as a second-level predicate/a property of properties. In particular, our first meeting will focus on the specific weaknesses of the major proposals for thinking that existence is not an ordinary property had by existing objects which are

interlinked with the project of avoiding certain paradoxes or undesirably strong results in ontology (such as the ontological proof of the existence of a singular, all-encompassing divine being). In order to tackle those thorny issues, we will also introduce some influential historical lines of thought, with a focus on Schelling's ontology in his so-called *Freedom Essay*.

Second Meeting (February 26): Non-Existence

Readings:

1. Alexius Meinong, "The Theory of Objects", in: *Realism and the Background of Phenomenology*, edited by Roderick M. Chisholm, Glencoe.: Free Press 1960.
2. Graham Priest, *Towards Non-Being: The Logic and Metaphysics of Intentionality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007.
3. Plato, "Sophist", in: *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper, translated by Nicholas P. White, Indianapolis: Hackett 1997, 216-268d.
4. Markus Gabriel, *Fields of Sense. A New Realist Ontology*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2015, chapters 6-7.

The second meeting will be dedicated to the paradox of non-being or non-existence, according to which we cannot successfully judge of any given entity that it does not exist. In this context, we will read selected passages from Meinong's classical treatise on the *Theory of Objects* and the most sophisticated form of contemporary Neo-Meinongianism represented by Graham Priest.

Third Meeting (March 5)

Readings:

1. Gabriel, "The Ontology of the Work of Art and the Universality of Hermeneutics Reconsidered"
2. Markus Gabriel, "Gadamer and New Realism", in: *The Gadamerian Mind*, edited by Theodore George and Gert-Jan van der Heiden, London: Routledge, forthcoming.
3. Graham Priest, *Towards Non-Being: The Logic and Metaphysics of Intentionality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007.

In the third meeting, I will introduce the basic idea of a hermeneutical realism about fictional objects, according to which fictional objects exist in their own fields of sense whose existence depends on acts of interpretation. The essential interpretation-dependence of fictional objects does not undermine their existence and can actually be modelled in realist terms. However, any such account is again threatened by novel versions of the paradox of non-being, which we will try to dissolve.

Fourth Meeting (March 13)

Readings:

1. Keith Frankish, *Illusionism: As a Theory of Consciousness*. Exeter: Imprint Academic 2017.
2. Markus Gabriel, *Fields of Sense. A New Realist Ontology*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2015, chapter 13.

The goal of the last meeting of the course is to discuss imaginary objects that figure as constituents of conscious perceptual experience. The idea is to understand the existence of illusions without thereby thinking of consciousness itself as a form of illusion. Thus, the recently much-discussed theory of illusionism according to which consciousness itself is somehow illusory collapses in the face of its underlying, incoherent fictionalist account of conscious mental life. The details of this failure shed a light on the existence of perceptual modes of presentation which do not obscure our access to objective reality, but belong to it. At the same time, their existence is relational and potentially distorting, which justifies the assumption that there is a relevant sense in which illusions are constitutive and ineliminable in the realm of our being conscious.