

# NONEXISTENT OBJECTS

3<sup>rd</sup> & 4<sup>th</sup> of June 2022



*Graham Priest: Medieval Non-Existence*

All the great medieval logicians believed that some objects do not exist. Some of them also accepted that some of these were impossible objects. In this talk we will look at their grounds, and possible contemporary replies to them.

*Alberto Voltolini: The Strange Case of Dr. Moloch and Mr. Snazzo  
(or the Parmenides' Riddle Once Again)*

It is possible to endorse a syncretistic stance as regards the Parmenidean riddle of non-existence. Items that fail to exist in a first-order and non-universal sense of «existence», hence that are not captured by a restricted application of that predicate, can be admitted in the overall ontological domain of beings, let me call them *loyal non-existent items*. Non-items that fail to exist in a first-order yet universal sense of «existence», hence that are not captured by an unrestricted application of that predicate, can be utterly ruled out of that domain (properly speaking, with respect to them utterly empty genuine singular terms are the only things that there are). This stance seems to be corroborated by some empirical evidence.

*Jonathan Mai: Choices in the Semantics of Intentional Identity*

Intentional identity sentences are conjunctions of attitude reports where the attitude predicate of the first report embeds an indefinite that serves as the syntactic antecedent of anaphoric pronouns occurring in later reports. The prime example of an intentional identity sentence is

- (1) Hob believes that a witch blighted Bob's mare, and Nob believes she killed Cob's sow.

The challenge that an intentional identity sentences like (1) poses for any semantics of anaphoric pronouns is to give a compositional semantics for its non-specific reading. According to this reading Hob and Nob have beliefs about one and the same witch; but that same reading has it that (1) does not imply the existence of a specific witch that is responsible for the beliefs of Hob and Nob. Neo-Meinongians like Graham Priest have tried to capture this reading by analyzing (1) in such a way that the indefinite takes wide scope over the attitude predicates and quantifies over non-existent objects. This analysis is expressed by the following formula from first-order epistemic logic

(1')  $\exists x(B_n(Wx \wedge Mx) \wedge B_nKx)$

under a constant domain semantics, where quantifiers are allowed to range over objects that lie outside the extension of an existence predicate.

However, this analysis faces the problem that intentional identity sentences are in general not symmetric: There are scenarios where (2) is true, while (3) is false.

(2) Hob thinks a witch has blighted Bob's mare, and Nob believes she killed Cob's sow.

(3) Nob thinks a witch has killed Cob's sow, and Hob believes she blighted Bob's mare.

If quantification over non-existent objects is unrestricted, Priest's analysis wrongly predicts that (2) and (3) are truth-conditionally equivalent.

To rescue a neo-Meinongian analysis of (1), I propose a non-standard semantics for first-order epistemic logic based on choice functions. The idea is to augment standard varying domain models with mappings that send every individual from the model domain to sets of choice functions on the set of world domains. I call every such function a 'representation function' for the individual in question. The intuition is that an individual comes with various ways of representing it in every world. But in every evaluation context a unique representation function is singled out as the salient one. Consequently, satisfaction of formulas is relativized not only to worlds and assignments but also to salience functions that map the set of choice functions for an individual to one of its members.

The choice function semantics yields an analysis of (1) as (1'). The asymmetry between (2) and (3) can be explained by assuming that salience functions are subject to restrictions arising from the intentions and interests of speaker and hearer of an evaluation context. The default restriction in contexts, where (2) is true and (3) is false only admits those representation functions as the potentially salient ones that correspond to the description 'the one who has blighted Bob's mare'. Since (2), but not (3), introduces the object of discourse via conditions that imply the conditions associated with the description, we can explain why (2) is true and (3) is false in the context.

### *Dolf Rami: Quantification and Nonexistent Objects*

In this paper, I focus in more detail on the semantics and the epistemic status of different formulations of the core thesis of all those views that assume nonexistent objects. Firstly, I discuss the deflationary analysis of "Some objects do not exist" given by Sainsbury and Hofweber. I will show how these views can be formulated in a formally rigorous way that avoids an ambiguity thesis with respect to quantifier expressions. After that, I show why this account and all related accounts can only provide ad hoc and non-compositional truth-conditions for the instances of some apparently true substitutionally interpreted quantifications. A semantics that makes use of nonexistent objects has clear advantages in this respect. In the next section, I argue that we should not treat "Some objects do not exist" or any equivalent formulation of this claim as an intuitive datum for the assumption of nonexistent objects. There are many other more specific generalizations that seem to imply this

claim that seem to have other more far-reaching implications and a better intuitive status. However, an even better strategy is to show that a semantics that assumes non-existent objects can provide the best compositional and not ad hoc semantics of the mentioned more specific generalizations. In the last section, I review different observations with respect to a formulation of the main thesis by means of "There is" and related observations concerning such sentences by Parsons, Sainsbury, Zalta and Priest. I show in how far, I think, they are incorrect or mistaken. On this basis, I will sketch a new analysis of "There is"-sentences.

#### *Friederike Moltmann: Existence and Validity*

The distinction between existent and nonexistence objects is generally applied to objects of (objectual) mental attitudes such as imagination and thought, which then may have or fail to have mind-independent existence. In contrast to that, there is a distinctive way of being that applies only to certain mind-dependent 'abstract artifacts', such as laws, claims, and offers, namely validity. A law, claim, or offer owes its existence to an act - of declaring or passing, of claiming, or of offering - and it may endure beyond that act. But even though there is a sense in which such an entity may be 'around' for some time, its continued existence in a stricter sense amounts to its validity. I will discuss the different sources of validity as a mode of being.

#### *Niall Connolly: The Structure of Nonexistence*

This talk explores the prospects for a structuralist treatment of nonexistent intentional objects. First I will show how structuralism accommodates some of the best insights on nonexistence and the ontology of fiction. Structuralism comes in different forms each of which accommodates an influential line of thought about nonexistent intentional objects. There are two main obstacles for a structuralist treatment to overcome. One is considerations in favour of attributing intrinsic natures to nonexistent intentional objects. These include considerations invoked by Meinongians and those invoked by non-Meinongian accounts. The second obstacle is considerations surrounding the identity and identification of non-existent intentional objects. I will show that both obstacles can be overcome.

#### *Maria Reicher-Marek: In Defense of "Serious Actualism"*

In Francesco Berto's words, the term "Serious Actualism" is used for the position "that any object must exist in every circumstance in which it has any property – the thesis that predication, or the having of properties as such, entails existence." ("Modal Meinongianism and Fiction: The Best of Three Worlds", *Philosophical Studies* 152, 2011, 324f.) Berto agrees with Nathan Salmon that Serious Actualism is "a confused and misguided prejudice" (Salmon, "Nonexistence", *Noûs* 32, 1998, 290). The aim of my talk is to defend the doctrine of Serious Actualism against this verdict.

*Nathan Salmon: Fictitious existence versus Nonexistence*

A correct observation to the effect that  $a$  does not exist, where the ' $a$ ' is a singular term, could be true on any of a variety of grounds. Typically, a true, singular negative existential is true on the unproblematic ground that the subject term ' $a$ ' designates something that does not presently exist. More interesting philosophically is a singular, negative existential statement in which the subject term ' $a$ ' designates nothing at all. Both of these contrast sharply with a singular, negative existential in which the subject term is a name from fiction. I argue that such singular, negative existential statements are false. My account of fictional characters is significantly different from Kripke's.