Noneism as Ontological Free Lunch?

A Case Study of Method in Metaphysics

Abstract. The paper discusses some methodological questions of metaphysics, taking the controversy around noneism as its point of departure. The first two paragraphs shortly outline the ontological conception of noneism and then set it apart from fictionalism. After underlining the use and importance that noneism could have, the main part of the paper engages the question whether noneism is comprehensible after all. The discussion of this topic raises some methodological questions for metaphysics in general.

Keywords: metaphysics, method in metaphysics, noneism, Meinong, Routley, Priest

§1 A short history and outline of noneism

The idea of noneism is taken from Alexius Meinong's *Gegenstandstheorie* (Meinong 1904), his theory of possible, impossible, existing and non-existing *objects*. "Object" in fact becomes a technical term with Meinong. Meinong considers the label "object" as carrying no ontological commitment.[1] In Meinong's ontology *all* objects *are* – in a sense of "are" to be explained. There 'are' also inconsistent and impossible objects. With inconsistent objects there seem to be inconsistencies, since the round square is round, and is square, thus round

[1] I use "metaphysics" and "ontology" synonymously in this paper. (Unfortunately "ontology" nowadays is widely used in artificial intelligence and cognitive science contexts in the sense of 'conceptual scheme', e.g. Nirenburg/Raskin 2004.)

and not-round. Meinong himself did not develop a logic to deal with inconsistent objects. He saw standard logic as fit for *existing* objects (these are the objects in space and time). Inconsistent objects are for him, because of their inconsistency, *impossible objects* (i.e. it is impossible that they exist, i.e. are somewhere in space and time). Meinong's *basic idea* is the rejection of any inherent connection between having properties (i.e. predication) and existence (i.e. "metaphysics", in Meinong's use of the term). Meinong's point of attack is the *Ontological Assumption* saying:

(OA) Predication implies existence.

and the *Referential Assumption* saying:

(RA) Every singular term refers to some kind of being.

Meinong's more fundamental idea – behind his attack on (OA) and (RA) – is the claim that objects are *beyond being*. That idea is supposedly hard to grasp. Meinong does *not* claim that there are realms of being *besides* being in space and time (i.e. existence). There are no domains of *possibilia* (possible objects). And there are no 'outer-domains' (like in some *Free Logics*) where even more strange objects like the round square reside. Meinong claims that objects *are* without *being*! The philosophical field that deals with objects in this generality is *Gegenstandstheorie [Object Theory]* (whereas *metaphysics* is concerned with existents only). The central idea put forth by Meinong, going back to his disciple Mally, can be summed up as the *Independence Thesis*:

(IT) Even nonexistent objects have properties and are constituted in some way.

Given (IT) one can truly say of the round square that it is round (as it is square) *without* committing oneself to its existence by this. Predication is independent of existence. Truth

does not require referential truth conditions in the ordinary sense.

Meinong's theory has often been ridiculed, from Bertrand Russell (1904) to Gilbert Ryle (1973), who famously claimed '*Gegenstandstheorie* itself is dead buried and not going to be resurrected' (1973, p.255). With the advance of free and many-valued (modal) logics systematic formalisations have been put forth to show its coherence (Jacquette 1996, Lambert 1983).

Richard Routley (1980) and recently Graham Priest (2005) have developed Meinong's ideas as ontological background theory for their dialetheism (their view that there are true contradictions). Routley invented the term 'noneism'. It is a name to an extended theory using Meinong's main claim. Noneism claims, for example, that mathematics does not deal with anything having being. So, for the noneist, there is no problem of *abstract entities*: Numbers etc. are objects and nothing beyond that. The same goes for sets and properties (if taken as *abstract* entities). Noneism is *the* alternative to Platonism, it claims. Noneism is, as well, for its proponents *the* alternative to modal realism (of the sort defended by Lewis 1986) as noneism allows for the same promiscuity of quantifying over any object (of thought) whatsoever.

The theory surrounding these theses Routley sums up in a couple of main postulates of noneism:

(P1) Everything is an object.

(P2) Many objects have no way of being.

(P3) Nonexistent objects have properties and are constituted in some way.

(P4) Existence is no characteristic property of an object.

(P5) Every object has an essence independent of its existence.

(P6) Every object has its characterising properties.

These postulates have some immediate consequences:

- by (P1) anything can be the *object* of a belief, desire, fear – any propositional attitude – whether the object is possible or impossible.
- by (P6), also called the *Characterisation Postulate*, the golden mountain is golden, and the round square is round and is square. The *Characterisation Postulate* is a further claim to the well defined *nature* of nonexistents.
- by (P4) versions of the ontological proof of God's existence should be blocked. As *existence* is no characteristic property all *existence entailing* properties (like *necessity*) cannot be characteristic, and thus are not allowed to use in characterisations.
- by (P3) and (P5) the round square and the triangular square are *different* impossible objects as they have a different set of properties each.
- by (P5) and the existence of *impossibilia* we can say:

  (1) There is something which necessarily does not exist.

  The quantifier "there is" having no existential impact here.

Not every sentence about a nonexistent object has a truth value, since nonexistents are in most cases only partially characterised. We do not know how many rolls Holmes ate during his observation of the Baskervilles. So a noneist logic may allow for truth value gaps. Priest, accordingly, claims noneism to be the proper theory for intentional and fictional objects (see §3).

The following discussion will be concerned only with noneism (i.e. with a theory subscribing

to (P1) - (P6) *in some form*) and Meinong's thesis of non-being ('Außersein').[2]

§2 Noneism and fictionalism

Prima facie noneism seems a close cousin of metaphysical fictionalism, if not a brand of it. Fictionalism and noneism both maintain – in contrast to instrumentalism, which sees the ontological posits of a theory referring to unobservables *merely* as part of a calculating device for predictions – that the ontological claims made by a theory should be taken as *genuine*, capable of being true or false. Interpreted thus the fictionalist, however, takes these

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[2] Thus even if there are major problems for noneism that need not tell against Dale Jacquette's or Terence Parson's theories of non-existents, which they claim go back to Meinong. The same applies to work done in the vicinity of *Gegenstandstheorie* (e.g. the papers in Haller 1995). In my eyes though, Routley is right in seeing his version of noneism as a proper articulation of Meinong's main theses. Even if that is not so (i.e. if Meinong is misrepresented by the noneist), the challenge posed by noneism is worth considering in its own right. The reference to Meinong then has only a motivating function. Further on, Priest introduces his noneism in reference to Routley, but tries to improve on Routley's theory (especially on the way to render (P6) less problematic). If a characterisation always holds and characterising an object obeys no restrictions besides excluding existence entailing predicates, (P4), one can introduce for any statement α a characterisation: $x = x \wedge \alpha$. If object *b* is characterised by *that*, we have: b = b. Thus with the reflexivity of identity, $(\forall x)(x=x)$, any statement can be derived. Triviality ensues. Priest therefore weakens (P6) to the assumption that there is *some possible world* at which the properties apply to the characterised object. And one possible world is the trivial world, where everything is true. In line with (P4) the use of "□" in characterisations has to be restricted as "$x = x \wedge \Box\alpha$" in combination with S5 modal axioms would also trivialize each world! Whether Priest's version improves or waters down Routley's theory will not be discussed in much detail either. Some differences will be commented upon, cf. §5. In any case Priest subscribes to (P1) - (P5) in the presented form, which are central with respect to existence/non-existence claims. He adds his version of (P6). Routley himself later (1995) considered 'items' to be completely free with respect to having all their characteristic features in their 'region' only, so that one may later look how to integrate these regions or make them overlap.

ontological claims as being *false*. Mathematics, for example, is strictly speaking false for the (mathematical) fictionalist, since there are no numbers, but mathematics claims to talk about them. In a similar way modal theories or ethics may lack their supposed subject matter. Despite of this the fictionalist recommends *accepting* these theories, since the aim of theories of this type, dealing with the problematic subject areas, is not providing a true description of how things are in reality, but rather to produce theories with other virtues (like predictive success or the ability to systematize our observations). According to the fictionalist, one may thus not *believe* a theory, since strictly and non-strictly speaking it is false (i.e. not just as a matter of being an idealisation or approximation), but one may nevertheless *accept* it. Fictionalist accounts of this type have gained support and found wider application (cf. Kalderon 2005). Noneism, despite sharing the fictionalists rejection of realism in, say, mathematics and modal ontology and sharing the fictionalist's attitude of taking the ontological claims 'at face value', is almost the opposite of fictionalism: Noneism takes the claims of the respective theories as dealing *about entities*, although, of course, these entities are taken as being non-existent. Correspondingly some of the theories in questions are *simply true* (i.e. true in the same sense observational statements are taken as true by both instrumentalists or fictionalists) if the facts claimed to obtain by these theories are facts about/concerning the respective non-existent entities. Although noneism – *inter alia* – is a theory *of* fiction and fictional entities, the entities it deals with are not taken *as* fiction. Count Dracula is a non-existent fictional object, the number 4 is a non-existent non-fictional object. For the noneist the number 4 is not more fictional than you and me, it just does not exist (i.e. is not in space and time). Routley is very outspoken about this:

> Mathematics is objective; for pure mathematics is concerned with the properties and

> relations of objects, objects which, though they do not exist, are objective, are in no way mind-dependent … (Routley 1980, p.794)

Fiction presents stories. Fiction is presented in form of mind-dependent human representations. The fictionalist considers the story *as told* as essential in his assessment of an acceptable theory. Not so the noneist: In as much as the mathematical objects are not mind-dependent, mathematics does *not* reduce to story telling and even 'any constructive aspect vanishes' (Routley 1980, p.916).[3]

Further on, noneism, does not contain the problematic distinction between believing and accepting a theory, constitutive for a fictionalist account of supporting a mathematical or modal theory.

§3 What might noneism be good for?

Noneism is advertised as solving a couple of central ontological problems or even dissolving some old ontological conundrums. Routley rest his case for noneism on its fecundity to treat a plethora of philosophical problems in a unified systematic fashion.

One major use could be dissolving the problem of abstract entities by recasting them as perfectly harmless. Many statements considered problematic by philosophers (e.g. not only

[3] Things are more difficult with Priest's version of noneism, as he takes some mathematical statements (e.g. numerical identities) as simply true and others (e.g. set membership assertion) as *not* actually true, but true only in those possible worlds where the objects concerned exist (in the ordinary sense of "exist" it seems), although he also allows for these statements being simply true, as they (say again set membership assertions) are not existence entailing. This fits to postulates (P1) – (P5). In any case, he takes 'it to be true that *something* is the unit set of the null set' (2008, p.209), so committing himself to the non-existent objects (taken as existentially noncommittal 'somethings'); but see §5.

those dealing with abstract objects, but those of indirect discourse, those of fiction and those of false theories) are – even if false in some cases – perfectly in order as they are. The talk about the objects they purport to talk about. If entities like numbers or sets have no existence at all, it does not matter that they are set apart as entities of a special kind (say the subject matter of mathematics).

Another use concerns the problem of 'intentional inexistence'. Objects of thoughts (another supposed category *sui generis*) may be taken at face value as objects of thoughts, but there are no existence claims then following from this assumption.

Noneism goes beyond a *dual aspect theory* of meaning (that separates sense/meaning from reference), since it sees in such dual aspect theories only a version of (RA) in that these theories take (as in Frege) the sense sometimes as the referent of an expression. Any kind of shifting (like in Frege) *or* using intensions in intensional contexts (like in Carnap) is said to be less adequate to our understanding of intensional contexts than a *straightforward* noneism such that

(2) Peter believes Holmes to live in Bakerstreet.

expresses a relation between Peter and (the object) Holmes. All objects can be *quantified*; there will be different kind of quantifiers though – some with existential impact, others not. As mentioned above, by (P1) anything can be the object of a propositional attitude – whether the object is possible or impossible. The attitude is directed to the object *itself*, not to its representation or to the sense of the object's name. And given that we have quantifiers at our disposal that carry no ontological commitment we can freely *quantify into* intensional contexts:

(3) Peter thinks of the round square.

(4) (∃x)(Peter thinks of x)

goes through. Noneism may thus claim to solve various problems about *de re* modalities.[4] As a theory of intentional objects noneism may have its merits, but other theories may well do the same work or achieve almost what noneism, according to Priest, does. The main argument for noneism as a theory of intentional objects (that in any context we need an 'item' to be talked about) is not convincing. Given a dual aspect theory of meaning (i.e. a distinction between reference vs. meaning in the narrow sense) some talk may have no referent, but still has *meaning*. Referentially it is about nothing, but we can rephrase the *content* of such talk. Reporting this content does not presuppose an 'item' that these sentences are 'about'.

In *Free Logic* we are free to use any singular term we like. It just may turn out that it does not refer.[5] This accounts for the free use of names and descriptions in ordinary discourse. We do

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[4] Priest sees noneism also as the solution to the problem of substitution in intentional contexts (2005, p.63). Note, however, that the notorious failure of substitutivity in intentional contexts still obtains in noneism once non-existents have *different modes of presentation* : If (i) is true we still need not have that (ii) is true if (3) is true, given Peter's ignorance:

(i) The round square is Meinong's famous example for an impossible object.

(ii) Peter thinks of Meinong's famous example for an impossible object.

[5] Note that principles around (P3) like the following (cf. Routley 1980, p.14)

(P3') *Sentences* about singular objects have meaning independent of the existence or the possibility of these objects.

(P3") Many *sentences* about nonexistents have a truth value.

not need the – further – assumption that everytime we use an expression that might refer to an object there 'is' some object, although it might be non-existent and completely without being. Even allowing *possibilia* (or *ersatzist possibilia*) that *subsist* without having physical existence may do a better job in a *Free Logic* framework than inventing *non-being*. The proper work to be done by noneism may be elsewhere.

A major concern of some of its main proponents (like Routley and Priest) are ontological questions which turn up once one has committed oneself to a paraconsistent logic and to the endorsement of inconsistent theories like *naive set theory* (i.e. a set theory with the unrestricted *Comprehension Axiom*) or *naive semantics* (i.e. working with a language containing its own truth predicate and comprehensive means of self-reference). Both Routley and Priest support *dialetheism* (the view that there are true contradictions).[6] Especially naive set theory raises the topic of an *inconsistent ontology*. Some of the sets in naive set theory (for example the *Russell set*) are inconsistent objects: The Russell set is a member of itself and a member of its complement (or even is at the same time a member and not a member of itself). Given the dialetheist's program of true contradictions and a even *mildly* realistic theory of truth (containing in some – maybe even restricted – fashion the idea of correspondence), a true contradiction is *supposedly* made true by either an inconsistent fact, taking facts – at least

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are true in many *Free Logics* as well, cf. (Lambert 1991). The distinguished nature of noneism is due to postulates (P1), (P2), (P5) and (P6).

[6] Which will be not questioned here, for the sake of the argument, and because I agree: There are true contradictions. Of course, dialetheism is at least as controversial too many as noneism or any other version of Meinongianism. The two debates should be kept apart, though. One may endorse noneism (say for a theory of intentionality) without endorsing dialetheism. One may endorse dialetheism (say to have naive semantics) – as I do – without endorsing noneism – which I do not.

for the moment – to be truthmakers of statements, or by inconsistent objects. Like true contradictions they are, then, just *there*.

The challenge may not be that great for naive semantics given some *mildly* anti-realistic theory of truth, containing in some – maybe even restricted – fashion the idea that truth depends on justification, and observing that the inconsistent *objects* in that area are *sentences* only. The problem of inconsistent objects is much harder with respect to ordinary objects. If properties are structures of objects, and this means in the last analysis structures of distribution of matter and energy, then an inconsistent objects cannot exist, it seems, since either at some location there is matter or not. The real problem in case of the provable antinomies of naive set theory are *objects* like the Russell set or the least inconsistent number. A set, even for the mentioned mild versions of realism, either is a member of another set or it is not, otherwise the including set could not be well-defined. As any type of realist – even if you do not adhere to naive realism or extreme versions of metaphysical realism – you adhere to some principle that there correspond structured entities (facts or objects with properties) to true statements. The entities are – at least as much as our linguistic resources to describe them are partly sufficient – as the true statements say they are. This means that a truth like

(5) $F(a) \wedge \neg F(a)$

means, at first sight, that the object *a* has property *F* and does not have property *F*.

Isn't that too much to bear, even for a dialetheist?

On second sight, paraconsistent semantics works with the idea of an extension of "F( )" and an anti-extension of "F( )", the extension being the set of entities fulfilling the criteria of *F*-ness, and thus being *F*; and the anti-extension being the set of entities fulfilling criteria of not being *F*, thus being *not-F*. For an anti-realist this may solve the problem of inconsistent

objects, since being an inconsistent objects means nothing more for an anti-realist than that the objects fulfils inconsistent criteria. There is no claim on the anti-realist's side that there corresponds something to this in reality. The anti-realist can even explain how this may happen in case of ordinary objects: If predicates are employed by more or the less vague criteria or family resemblances to some prototype it may happen that one route of resemblance leads from the prototype of *F* to *a*, and another route leads *via* some intermediaries from *a* to a prototype of *non-F*. One may then argue that we have to be able to model theories that depict – at least implicitly – the world as containing inconsistent objects without ourselves to be committed to this picture. We need the formal tools of paraconsistent logics for this, but these tools themselves have no negative ontological impact. That is just like we need a logic to draw inferences in works of fiction (or about art) where some works are essentially inconsistent with respect to some object (e.g., some stories about time travelling or drawings by M. C. Escher).

A realist cannot take this easy way out. For (most) realists properties are *structures* of objects – or parts or tropes or ... – and either you have them or not. In case of *sentences* – i.e. for a dialetheist's view on naive semantics – the way out may be that a sentence is really an object that can have inconsistent properties without us having ontological scruples: A sentence being a dialetheia means that it and its negation are provable. These are clear cut properties. They do not stand in each others way like *being completely red* and *being completely green* would for an ordinary object. The content of the semantic antinomies, once again, concerns facts *about language*. Given our mild form of realism that incorporates some idea that truth is also – besides aiming at correspondence – tied to justification we can accept inconsistent objects here, since this 'merely' points to the inconsistent nature of our linguistic access to reality. That is a deep philosophical point – as dialetheism is – but it locates the inconsistent objects

somewhere in the objects having the job of mediating between our mind and the rest of reality, these objects often being constituted by linguistic conventions.

For sets this is no option. This is where noneism comes in: Sets are objects, there are sets with contradictory properties, but all this, according to the noneist, does not go against our initial realistic intuitions, since sets are not existing entities. Some forms of realism about sets have to be given up on this move, of course (namely those which claim that sets 'are' just in the same way chairs 'are'). Still the noneist may endorse a version of realism that agrees with ordinary (truthmaker) realism on physical objects, and claims for all non-existent objects that true sentences about them correspond to states of affairs containing these non-existent objects and their (non-existent) properties. If truthmaking is *not* understood as a causal relation, a noneist may even consider such states of affairs as truthmakers of the corresponding sentences, adding that these states of affairs themselves are, of course, non-existing objects. Once the major stumbling block of inconsistent ontology is removed from inconsistent set theory and inconsistent mathematics their case against standard set theories and mathematics is strengthened. Their virtues (like allowing for a strong finitistic arithmetic, cf. van Bendegem 1993, 1999) then may put the standard theories on defence. The viability of noneism, therefore, has wider repercussions than one may have expected.

§4 Discussion

Can we really understand noneism? The short reply that in reading a book on it, writing a paper on it and having a discussion we obviously understand the position we are attacking is too simple. Obviously one can retell what some authors have published under the heading "noneism". In a sense of "understand" we understand the strangest stories that lack

coherence, at least up to a point. Around that elusive 'point' of not coming to terms with a story or theory we are at a loss what somebody is writing or talking about. We are at a loss – we may conjecture – because what we are told goes massively either against our standards of coherence or against our understanding of involved core concepts. This conjecture is still quite vague. And, further on, we cannot appeal here to strict standards of consistency against Meinong or the dialetheists without begging too many questions. The difficulties with noneism, however, go beyond difficulties one may have with accepting contradictions. At least that is what I will try to argue, as I am otherwise ready to subscribe to large parts of dialetheism.

Metaphysics in analytic philosophy traditionally (starting with Frege) could be seen as deriving from semantics or an account of the truth of statements/propositions. Frege assumes concepts as entities in their own right and with their peculiar feature of being 'ungesättigt' (having a gap to be filled by some argument), because he needs this ontological assumption in his account of assertions/statements and their cohesiveness. With the increasing interest in ontological questions in their own right metaphysics nowadays if often seen as independent from semantics, not to speak of epistemology. Metaphysics in this newer tradition advances as *axiomatic ontology*. "Axiomatic" is meant in theories of this type in a sense close to the sense of laying down axioms in logic or mathematics. Axioms may be useful (say in applying mathematics in science), but foremost are stipulations concerning either the concepts or the entities contained in them. As Carnap saw 'no morals' in logic, so that according to his *principle of tolerance* every system had a right to be developed, so the axiomatic ontologist may see no morals in ontology so that there are no restrictions on ontological postulates. In the light of this approach one might consider noneism as just another axiomatically founded ontology. The postulates (P1) – (P6) just being its introduction.

Carnap may well have been wrong about conventionalism in logic, at least in the sense that human reasoners follow one specific logic (or a narrow range of logics) and in that the human language faculty may contain one specific logic (or a narrow range of logics). In a similar way stories and accounts about the possible furniture of the universe may be interesting in their own right, but given even a mild realism, there cannot be just any entity proposed by some story or ontological account. And given, further on, some mild evolutionary account of our cognitive faculties our human conceptual system cannot be neutral with respect to ontological theories.

The debate over noneism might thus be put: Does our conceptual system allow for noneism? Or: Does our concept of object allow for the noneist's talk of being beyond being?

David Lewis (1990) complained against Routley's use of two ways of quantifying, one time with existential impact, one time without. The mere occurrence of two types of quantifiers may not be the core of the problem. Non-committal quantifiers have become a common tool in modal and *Free Logics*, usually in combination with an existence predicate. The concern behind Lewis remark on the quantifiers points, however, in the right direction: If "there are" is not committal in *any* sense (i.e. not even to *possibilia*, as *it is committal* in many *Free Logics*), what does it mean after all? We (i.e. we who are not noneists, yet) run against a way of talking defying our understanding. Our first problem is not that we do not agree with the noneist, but that we simply do not understand what to disagree about.

The distinction between existents and *possibilia* is a clear one in modal semantics. Noneism claims even less being than possible being, but still uses the forms of "to be". What an object *beyond all being* is supposed to *be*, is beyond us non-noneists, and our human concept of object, one may suppose. Ryle challenged Meinongianism of abusing the expression "object":

> …the important sounding word ‘object’ never did have any other positive function than to be a synonym for ‘subject-matter’ or ‘remark-topic’ (1973, p.257).

That thoughts have representational content no one will deny, that thoughts have ‘objects’ beyond those representations is a far more substantial thesis and no obvious consequence of the observation on representational content. For noneism, however, everything depends on Holmes not just being a file of propositions attached to the expression “Holmes”, but being a unified something (an ‘item’). Noneism seems to trade on the almost imperceptible shift from ‘content of a thought’ (easily identified by citing the representation employed) to ‘object’ (as something *beyond* its representation). As Priest stresses: ‘[A] noneist accepts objects of thought as genuine, not just as linguistic simulacra’ (2005, p.42).

The noneist’s “there are” posits a “there” which we cannot locate and are not allowed to locate on pains of importing being into the theory. And “cannot locate” means here not just without location in space and time, but without being placed in any ‘realm’ like Frege’s or Popper’s ‘third world’ of thoughts or abstract entities. Chisholm (1973) once appropriately called the noneist’s objects ‘homeless’ as they neither are in the concrete realm (the universe) nor beneath the Platonic forms. The noneist’s “there” is equivocal when applied to ordinary objects, which are existing some*where*, and non existing objects.

The *Independence Thesis* itself seems, at least in the noneist’s reading, quite questionable. *Being-Round* in case of the non-being round square cannot be the same manner of *being-Round* like in the case of a penny coin. *Being-Golden* in case of the non-being golden mountain cannot be the same manner of *being-Golden* (i.e. having some physical structure) like in the case of the gold bar. All general terms seem to become ambiguous here!

One may represent states of affairs involving existing and non-existing objects, and properties in the same format, say:

(6) <The golden mountain, Golden, 1>

(7) <Peter's gold bar, Golden, 1>

This, however, is only a formalisation at the level of an ontological theory. What we also need is an account what having a property comes down to. In case of physical objects we have such accounts (like trope theories or property realism). These theories cannot apply to non-existing objects. How, then, are they *to have* their properties?

Again, describing an non-existent object as having some property does neither explain how it has that property, nor does it explain how this succeeds in the object 'being there'. Usually speaking about something does not make it the case. Does this distinction have any application in case of non-existent objects? Even describing a non-existent object other than it was introduced in its characterization need not be a matter of falsity, since non-existent objects may be inconsistent. Even defining a non-existing object as "consistent" leaves it difficult to distinguish false claims about an object from changing the subject or extending the objects definition/characterization.

A theory that comes to terms with this problem is Edward Zalta's theory of 'encoding' (Zalta 1988, 1996, 1997). Zalta's *Logic of Encoding* ("LoC" for short) is an axiomatized ontology of abstract entities based on *Second Order Modal Logic*. It deals with several philosophical topics (like intentional contexts), but we look here just at its sub-theory of inconsistent objects and its way of interpreting/using Meinong's ideas. The central idea of LoC is the distinction between *exemplification* and *encoding* [following Meinong's pupil Ernst Mally]. Exemplification is that way of ordinary predication in which a red pen is said to exemplify the property *BeingRed*. Encoding in distinction to this is the way *abstract* entities are determined. An abstract entity is the specific abstract entity it is *by encoding* some specific

properties. The crucial point is that an abstract entity need not *exemplify* the properties it encodes.

Example: The golden mountain encodes the properties of *BeingGolden* and *BeingMountain* (these encoding facts make up this specific abstract entity), but it need not exemplify these properties! An abstract entity has no more need to exemplify the properties it encodes, as a representation of a lake needs to be wet.

The LoC framework thus denies the *Independence Thesis* (which now would cross illicitly from encoding to exemplification anyway). Several kinds of abstract entities exist according to LoC. These abstract entities play all the roles *items* play in *noneism.* To have enough abstract entities around a principle of comprehension claiming that there is an encoding abstract entity to any property is postulated. To avoid paradoxes encoding is generally restricted to first order properties with a finite number of defined exceptions.

For Meinongianism this means:

- there are abstract objects which encode contradictory properties
- since these objects need not exemplify the properties they encode there are *no* true contradictions because of these objects
- the underlying logic, thus, can be (extended) standard logic.

One may assess the *Logic of Encoding* on several accounts. Whether it is the *best* theory to deal with intensionality (its main concern) cannot be made out here, since this required extensive comparisons with rival approaches. In any case it is an *alternative* to noneism. Whether one should accept an ontology of abstract entities is another difficult question raising problems both in epistemology and ontology. Given, however, that one allows for abstract entities one has the option to introduce a relation like *encoding*. And this may very well be a better way to make sense of Meinongianism than *noneism.* We have to come to terms with

criteria of comparing ontological approaches: Noneism is more ontologically economical than the *Logic of Encoding*, since abstract entities do not exist in noneism; the *Logic of Encoding* on the other hand provides a theory of property possession that accounts both for the similarities and differences between objects in space and non-spatial objects. Both theories supposedly face criticism for failing to account for the epistemological access problem for their respective special entity types.

§5 Methodological lessons

The difficulties with noneism one may have – or must have, in my eyes – may point to some more general methodological lessons in metaphysics. Something seems to go wrong here with axiomatic ontology. From the point of view of the Fregian tradition, which put semantics before metaphysics, axiomatic ontology has gone too far. Notwithstanding its limits or shortcomings the linguistic or conceptual turn of (analytic) philosophy is still endorsed by a proponent of this tradition.

Postulating relations works in science in as much as the postulates are borne out by the thus established (scientific, experimental) practice and theoretical framework. Definitions are not refuted by evidence, but some definitions turn out to be useless or to be incoherent with other parts of a theory. As has been noted often: Conventions (alone) do not deliver truth(s). Thus *saying*

(8) '[V]ery many objects do not exist in any way at all' (Routley/Routley 1973, p.227).

makes no more truth – or maybe sense – than saying

(9) The Arch-Supervisors co-inhabit collectively the hidden dimensions of Gaia.

Noneists can hardly claim their descriptions and postulates to be acceptable to their audience by being evident. This applies as well to Routley's distinction between *reference* (the supposedly bad idea behind most of today's philosophy of language) and *aboutness* (the supposedly benign and non-committal relation between names and non-existents, *inter alia*). Instead of the *Referential Assumption* (RA) Routley endorses something like an *Aboutness Assumption*:

(AA) Every singular term is about some kind of being.

On first sight (i.e. before becoming a noneist) this is a distinction without a difference. Especially if one holds that reference – as shown by definite descriptions – does *not* require a causal connection, there is nothing that sets *aboutness* apart from reference.

To defend noneism it is not enough to stress that we understand talk about fictional objects and thus talk about non-existents.[7] This understanding only counts for noneism if noneism was the only or best account of fictional objects, which, of course, is contested. We understand what it means to tell a story. We may conceive of such a fiction even in terms of images what the world had to be like if the fiction was true. We employ our imagination thus when reading a book, others do that when producing a (fantasy) movie. No one, however, can imagine the Russell set or the round square in that way. And in any case, in all these form of

[7] Both Frederick Kroon (2008) and Daniel Noolan (2008) in their criticism of Priest are not clear on this point. Kroon bases his criticism on a problem with the properties of the fictional character Gandalf, and sees this as 'an example of our apparent ability to talk about what does not exist' (p.199). Noolan says, 'Non-existents are also very useful as possibilia' (p. 191), which for the noneist they are – often enough – not: They have not possible being, but no being at all. Meinong and Routley are perfectly clear on that. Priest employs possible (and impossible) worlds in his version of noneism, which complicates matters a lot, and which invites understanding non-existents as *possibilia*, as they exist in some 'possible world'. On the other hand he is outspoken against a *possibilia* account

understanding or conceiving some fiction (mental or linguistic) *representations* are entertained and employed. Let us call an account of fiction and intentional inexistence along these lines a "representationalist theory of fiction" ("RTF" for short). As noneism is not fictionalism noneism should demand far more: there 'are' non-existent objects *not* imaginable or representable by us.[8]

Should we accept theoretical moves of the kind involved in noneism?

To decide between ontological proposals we need criteria to judge their respective merits. These criteria may take up the tenet for which the respective ontology was developed. Alex Oliver (1996, pp.2-13), discussing the metaphysics of properties, proposes to look at an ontology's achievement in conceptual analysis, in as much as ontologies are introduced to account for the function and content of expressions. To understand what a name is one introduces referents, for example. Following such an analytic procedure (types of) entities are introduced which, according to the analysis, account for our use of language. And no other entities are to be introduced, as ontologies have to be economical.

With respect to ontological economy one may distinguish between *ideological economy* and *ontological economy proper*. Ontological economy proper concerns the number of introduced types of entities. Ideological economy concerns the number of undefined basic concepts of a theory. The less undefined concepts a theory has, the more concepts have to be defined, the more inferential links will be present in the conceptual system of the theory, which therefore shows a higher degree of systematicity (cf. Goodman 1943, 1949, 1972, pp.275-355).

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of non-existents, for example: 'I deny that quantification over something requires it to have *any* form of being' (2008, p.214, Priest's emphasis; similar: Priest 2005, p.14).

[8] Meinong himself is too much an idealist to endorse such view. He considers any object to be a possible object of thought (see below). This idealistic attitude may have brought his noneism too close to representalist accounts to see its anti-fictionalist core.

Now, we can increase the ontological economy proper of a theory if we introduce undefined operators and relations instead of basic types of entities (say, if we do not define "necessary" and so forsake the introduction of possible worlds). And *vice versa*: We can define former undefined concepts by introducing new types of entities to occur in their definitions. This is even true of methodological concepts (say, if we substitute "being a relation" by ordered pairs or tuples). How can we decide then the degree of simplicity of an ontology?

> One constraint is the provision of fruitful conceptual analyses of concepts we employ in our ordinary thought and discourse. ... Here, as in all philosophical inquiry, we must adopt the method of reflective equilibrium, balancing the demands of theory against the preservation of commonsensical beliefs. .. [O]ne cannot hope to defend a metaphysical theory by constructing knock-down arguments against each of its competitors. There are numerous ways to trade off ideological and ontological economy and to balance these theoretical benefits against the preservation of common-sense belief. One can only hope to draw up a cost and benefit score sheet, it being a very real possibility that there will be ties for first place. (Oliver 1996, pp.4-5)

Systematicity (and thus a higher degree of ideological simplicity) yields more explanatory power, since less fundamental principles (those containing the undefined basic concepts) have to be used. Conceptual analysis provides a decrease in the number of undefined concepts.[9]

[9] One need not subscribe to a highly controversial theory of concept definitions to have some form of conceptual analysis. The argument presupposes only that some form of conceptual analysis is possible (cf. Jackson 1998), where conceptual analysis is even viable in theories which deny that there are enough definitions providing an analysis into necessary and sufficient features, as long as we allow for any inferential links (cf. Bremer 2008). One may even speak of 'analysis' *simpliciter* as one stresses that this analysis yields substantial insights, often denied to 'mere' linguistic or conceptual analysis (cf. Williamson 2007).

We explain a fact by conceptual analysis by being explicit about the concepts which are used to describe the fact (cf. Oliver 1996, p.6). So a high number of definitional links increases explanatory power. Therefore, one usually may prefer higher ideological economy over higher ontological economy proper, as regularly theories are chosen for their explanatory power (cf. Thagard 1978, 2000). Thus one will accept those (types of) entities which are introduced in building up the framework of such a theory.

These considerations lead to one criterion of a successful ontological theory:

(O1) *Legitimation by Conceptual Analysis*

Exactly those (types of) entities are to be assumed, which have to be introduced by the best conceptual analysis of the target domain of concepts.

As Routley stresses the systematicity of noneism, this seems to be good news for non-existents. (O1) has to be supplemented, however, by a second criterion:

(O2) *Epistemological Constraint*

An ontology which introduces (types of) entities has to contain a theory how we know of these entities.

This constraint will not be endorsed by someone following a 'pure' axiomatic approach to ontology. Giving up (O2) on the other hand means giving up the approach to ontology which ties it to *our* conceptual system and *our* use of language (as any theory of these will have to contain a theory of how we refer or 'hook up to' entities of some kind). Not subjecting a conceptual analysis to the epistemological constraint seems to miss that the target of analysis are *our* concepts and linguistic abilities. Any analysis of our concepts should contain a part explaining how we can *use* these concepts or manifest our knowledge of their proper employment. Even if one does *not* follow the strict agenda of Michael Dummett (1991) and

his adherents any theory of our concepts should contain a part explaining our use of these concepts in our engagement with reality and other speakers. If our possessing some concept is reduced to some type of entity (as outlined above) then a comprehensive theory of our concept possession should contain how we can stand into contact with entities of this type. David Lewis' modal realism for all its ideological economy, relying just on classes and *all* individuals (everywhere), is mostly rejected by its blatant failure to give a convincing answer to (O2), as Lewis postulates the absence of *any* access connection between us and (other) possible worlds (denying both spatial and causal access).

Let us consider noneism in face of these conditions.

(ad 1)

Meinong (cf. 1904, §§2-3) argues in favour of noneism by pointing to (i) thoughts always having 'objects' as content, (ii) the countability even of things we know not to exist, and (iii) negative existence statements. (iii) has been dealt with by Russell's or similar theories of descriptions and elimination of non-referring terms in favour of variables and predicates. (ii) ultimately reduces to (i) as the counting concerns objects of thought. So Meinong's main argument claims that the intentional structure of thoughts (and indirectly sentences) has to be accounted for by positing objects of thoughts, *every* thought dealing with its objects. Meinong thus shares with the so-called 'semantic tradition' (cf. Coffa 1991) the thesis that thoughts have *objective contents*, which can be shared. But whereas the semantic tradition sees these contents as sentences or their meanings (i.e. as representations or abstract objects) Meinong uses a generic concept of 'object' and binds it to the *Independence Thesis*. Even if the positing of objects of thoughts was required by a conceptual analysis, say of propositional attitudes, the further step is an addition [see §4 above].

There are other theories of intentionality and intentional objects besides noneism. Making a *de re/de dicto* distinction or employing a *Free Logic* accounts for the failure of quantifying into intensional contexts and related phenomena. Representational theories, which take propositional attitudes either as relation to representation of the *language of thought* or representation of a public language, provide a model of the attitudes without too much ontological commitment. The goal of ontological scarcity or simplicity – if that is a goal to adhere too – thus does not favour noneism over these theories, at least not to a degree which makes dealing with its extravagancies worth while. The crucial – and in my eyes not met – challenge to noneism demands arguments from the noneist which show that in the critical cases of non-existents "thinking of *a* as *F*" is *not* reducible to "having a representation: F(a)" (or a representation belonging into an equivalence class of translations or synonyms of: F(a)).[10]

(ad 2)

Noneism engenders epistemological problems both in accounting for reference or the substitute for reference, and for the truth of non-existential committal theories: Are there non-existent truthmakers for facts about non-existents? Frege and other Platonists speak of a relation of *grasping* a thought. Relating to pre-existing thoughts or other abstract objects by such a faculty of grasping is one of the major and controversial topics in the philosophy of mathematics. In this case, however, the problem is simpler than the related problem for

[10] Priest (2005, pp.58-59) criticises representational accounts of propositional attitudes, without putting weight on these reflections. His main criticisms concern the problem of *quantifying in* and the problem of introducing an equivalence relation on representations without invoking the objects they are *about*. The first may be answered by some *Free Logic* account (with *possibila*, say), the other by some form of inferential role equivalence between representations.

noneism. The Platonist has/postulates a 'realm' (a Fregean 'Drittes Reich') which is targeted by the grasping. Non-existent entities are not anywhere. Their being 'entertained' thus – if not just reducible to the representation of sentences – is far more elusive than Fregean grasping. Meinong himself (cf. 1904, pp.10-12) speaks of 'grasping' a 'pre-given' ('vorgegeben') object, then rejects talking of 'quasi-existence' and settles to the thesis that the contrast between being and non-being arises only with (complete) states of affairs, not single objects, which are, therefore beyond being. This, however, threatens to reduce objects to thoughts about objects in assumptions (presumably sentence like representations); and Meinong's states of affairs ('Objektive') are (sometimes) said to be non-existent themselves (cf. 1904, p.6)! The non-existence of states of affairs is also very explicit in Routley and Priest. So with respect to grasping a non-existent nothing is gained here. Meinong ultimately declares that *every* object could be known, and everything that *could* (!) be known has 'givenness' ('Gegebenheit', p.20). 'Given where by whom or what?', one inclines to ask. Later Meinong (1921, p.20) stresses that grasping is something 'ultimate, indefinable' ('ein Letztes, Undefinierbares'). The faculty of grasping an non-existent object, so, is a theoretical postulate in Meinong's theory.

Priest also at one point (2005, p.142) posits a faculty of 'pure intention', which is able to bring us into contact with any object whatsoever. He provides no account how this faculty works in detail. Further on, he claims *phenomenological evidence* for acts of object access:

> [W]hen one fears something, one has a direct phenomenological experience of a relation to the object of the fear. And the phenomenology is quite independent of whether or not the object *actually* exists. (Priest 2005, pp.57-58)

As often with phenomenological evidence claims this one seems open to disagreement: Does

one not rather experience *the content* of one's fear, whether or not it is (semantically) linked to an object or not? What would it be like to experience an object *simpliciter*, in any case? A representational theory seems closer to the phenomenology [cf. (ad 1) above].

Priest ultimately tries to soften the access problem by moving his version of noneism closer to fictionalism and RTF:

> The properties of Sherlock Holmes may be just as a *priori* as those of 0. In both cases, we characterise an object purely by fiat. We know a *priori* that the object so characterised has those properties (at certain worlds), and this is so whether the characterisation is provided by what is told in Doyle's novels or by the Peano axioms. (Priest 2003, p.9; cf. 2005, pp.145-48)

In fact, somewhat against the spirit of Routley and what we have seen in §2, Priest's noneism is more a fictionalism than noneism. Priest – like the fictionalist [cf. §2] – regards fiction as false. Priest also regards it as *possibly true* (i.e. true in the worlds of fiction). If α is any claim about the non-existence entailing properties of a mathematical entity, the noneist should claim α to be *simply true*, whether the mathematical entities are existent or not (as they are not, of course, for the noneist). Priest has to say that α is true at the worlds in which the entities exist, i.e. has to take α as *possibly true*. At the actual world it is true: $\Diamond\alpha$. Mathematical statements become intensional. Priest so endorses a revisionist theory not only of mathematical ontology, but of mathematical truth as well. If that saves noneism then it does so only at the price of moving towards fictionalism and trading in the problems of fictionalism. As Priest uses the strategy of entities at some world not just for mathematics his theory – despite (Priest 2008, p.214; 2005, pp.14, 42) – looks rather like a theory of *possibilia* in a paraconsistently

extended *Free Logic* than like Routley's or Meinong's theory of non-existent items.[11]

Noneism is incompatible, further on, with any form of semantic externalism, as externalism typically invokes some causal mechanisms of hooking up concepts and lexical items to properties in the world. Noneism's attack on the *Referential Assumption* has to apply to properties and 'content' as well. As many epistemologists and semanticists support at least some version of externalism noneism calls for a far and wide revision of these fields as well, respectively is put into doubt by the success of externalist accounts.

There may be more conditions one may like to lay down for ontological theories. The two conditions considered here clearly speak against noneism. That is no wonder – the noneist might reply – as they link ontology either to language *via* (conceptual) analysis or – even worse for some metaphysicians – to epistemology. On the one hand this reply is well taken if we are to allow for an axiomatic ontology as an independent way to do ontology. On the other hand the burden of outlining other conditions for understandable and acceptable ontological theories lays on the axiomatic ontologists. The noneists, so far, have not only not delivered

[11] There are a few additional problems with circularity for Priest's account, it seems. Firstly, possible worlds are considered to be non-existents as well. So what can it mean that *all* non-existents exist at some world? Priest's version of *Characterisation* has worlds 'realize' other non-existents and their properties. As worlds are taken as non-existents, *where* do *they* get realized? Or can they realize without being realized themselves? Worlds seem to exist at themselves. Secondly, discussing the question how non-existent mathematical objects can be used to describe reality (the actual world) Priest claims that the physical quantities and the mathematical quantities 'have the same structure' (2003, p.12; cf. 2005, p.150-51). But a structure is a paradigm case of something abstract, thus non-existent for Priest. A regress seems to ensue.

such conditions. Appealing to the shared virtue of ontological simplicity does not outweigh the utter incomprehensibility of some of the noneists theses/descriptions concerning ‘objects’. Noneism as the extreme end of a spectrum might show that axiomatic ontology has gone too far.

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