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Author(s): Graham Priest and Graham Priest

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Replies to Nolan and Kroon

GRAHAM PRIEST

University of Melbourne

The central issue of *Towards Non-Being* is intentionality; but its most contentious tool is a deployment of the notion of non-existent objects. It is this feature on which both Nolan and Kroon focus their criticisms.¹ Both have enough sympathy to avoid the incredulous stare, and marshal much more interesting objections. I thank them for the generous spirit in which they are made. Clearly, in the space available, I cannot comment on everything they say, so I will restrict myself to the main issues.

Nolan

Nolan observes, correctly, that I take non-existent objects to have very few properties at the actual world. They can have intentional properties, such as being thought of, and logical properties, like being identical to or different from something. Crucially, they cannot have any property that entails that they enter into causal relations; for this would entail that they exist. Things might be better, Nolan thinks, if I allowed them to have more. Specifically, according to me, things will not, in general, have the properties they are characterised as having at the actual world; one can be sure that they have them only at *some* world. At least as far as mathematical objects go, he suggests, it is more plausible to suppose that they have their characterising properties at the actual world. Let me make three comments about this.

First, in special cases, characterised objects do have their characterising properties at the actual world. Arithmetic is, in fact, such a case. In the language of arithmetic, all the atomic sentences are identities (things like $0' = 1$, where $'$ denotes the successor function). True identities are necessarily true.² Hence if there is a possible world where such

¹ G. Priest, *Towards Non-Being: the Logic and Metaphysics of Intentionality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). (Hereafter, TNB.) F. Kroon, 'Much Ado about Nothing: Priest and the Reinvention of Noneism', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, this issue. D. Nolan, 'Properties and Paradox in Graham Priest's *Towards Non-Being*', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, this issue. Page references are to their respective articles.

² TNB, p. 146, fn. 19. I take numerals to be rigid designators.

an identity is true, it is true at the actual world. Now, take a world that realises, say, the Peano postulates. There are possible such worlds; the characterisation imposes no contradictions or impossibilities on us.³ Since the identity is true at these worlds, it is true at the actual world. And so are all true statements of arithmetic, since the equations suffice to determine the truth values of all sentences.

Second point. Identity is a special case. Many mathematical theories require for their formulation predicates other than identity. Set theory is like this. Nolan says (p. 193):

Saying that there is such a thing as the unit set of the null set, but it does not have the null set as its member ... strikes me as one of the least initially plausible extant mathematical error theories.

A minor cavil: I do not say that *there is* such a thing as the unit set of the null set. That would be to attribute it existence.⁴ But I do take it to be true that *something* is the unit set of the null set, $\exists x x = \{\phi\}$; and I do not take it to be (actually) true that $\phi \in \{\phi\}$: this holds only in the worlds that realise, say, the axioms of *ZF*. Now, I do not, myself, find this view implausible in the way that Nolan does. However, as TNB (p. 154, fn. 29) points out, it is perfectly possible to take the actual world to be one of the worlds that realises these axioms. Since set membership between the objects of *ZF* is not existence-entailing, this is quite compatible with the general framework.

Third and finally, though, I am not inclined to go down this path. As far as I can see, nothing that we do with mathematics—even applying it (TNB, 7.8)—requires statements such as these to be true (at the actual world). And there certainly will be mathematical characterisations that cannot be so—for example (assuming the actual world to be consistent), those characterisations which characterise an object inconsistently.⁵ So uniformity speaks in favour of dispensing with this assumption.

³ Nolan attributes to me (p. 192) the view that mathematical objects can have their characterising properties only at worlds where they exist. If this were the case, these worlds would be impossible, since numbers necessarily do not exist. (They *cannot* enter into causal relations.) But this is not my view. Characterised objects do not have to exist to have their characterising properties (TNB, p. 95). (The impossible world referred to on p. 137 is the Platonist's world, where the objects do exist.)

⁴ Similarly, I do not say that 'there ... are things which don't exist' (p. 191). As far as I am concerned, that would be to say that there exist things which don't exist.

⁵ And if the claim of classical mathematics that some real-valued functions are discontinuous is true at the actual world, the claim of intuitionist mathematics that all real-valued functions are continuous cannot be.

Nolan's second point is that my version of noneism is committed to dialetheism. This, he thinks—probably correctly—will put people off. A few preliminary comments: there is no cause here for panic: the possibility that the actual world is inconsistent is built into the very semantics of TNB. I made use of this fact when dealing with a certain paradox of self-reference in chapter 8; but it did not seem to me that dialetheism was necessary otherwise: certainly, none of the standard concerns about non-existent objects seemed to require it. But Nolan's considerations are not of this kind. They are an intentional reworking of the Cantor/Russell paradox. It would be natural, therefore, to say about this paradox whatever one says about the other paradoxes of self-reference.

But does Nolan's argument work? To see what is at issue here, it is best to focus on the formalisation given. (I modify his notation a little for the sake of uniformity.) He defines the set γ (G) as:

$$\{y : \exists \alpha C(y, \lambda x(xT\alpha)) \wedge \forall \beta(C(y, \lambda x(xT\beta)) \rightarrow y \notin \beta)\}$$

where $C(y,z)$ means: the object y is characterised by the property z . He then takes a (o) to be the object 'exactly characterized as thinking about γ ' (p. [195]), which therefore satisfies the two axioms:

1. $C(a, \lambda x(xT\gamma))$
2. $\forall \delta(C(a, \lambda x(xT\delta)) \rightarrow \delta = \gamma)$

The rest of the argument we need not take issue with.

Now, from an orthodox point of view, one might balk at the definition of γ . How big is it? Presumably its defining condition picks out lots of objects. There is an absolute infinity of worlds, and just as many where there is a thinker of the kind in question. γ does not, therefore, succeed in specifying a set. But for myself, I accept the generalised comprehension principle of set theory, so I accept the definition of γ as legitimate. In any case, I do not think that this is where the central point of interest in the argument arises.

As TNB, ch. 4, points out, there is a close conceptual connection between characterisation and descriptions. To say that an object is characterised by the condition $A(x)$ is just to say that it is an (or the; it does not make much difference for the present purposes) object satisfying $A(x)$. So, writing ε for the indefinite description operator (TNB, ch. 4), the natural way of understanding $C(y, \lambda x A(x))$ is as $y = \varepsilon x A(x)$. Axiom 1 is now unproblematic. It is simply $a = \varepsilon x x T \gamma$. We may just take ' a ' to be ' $\varepsilon x x T \gamma$ '. But 2 then becomes:

$$\forall \delta (\varepsilon x x T \delta = \varepsilon x x T \gamma \rightarrow \delta = \gamma)$$

Is this true? There is no reason to suppose so. (Indeed, it is not difficult to construct formal counter-models.) ‘ $\varepsilon x x T \gamma$ ’ picks out a thing thinking about γ —in this world if there is such a thing, or in some other if there isn’t. But there is no reason to suppose that it is not thinking about some other set, δ , as well—at the corresponding world. In which case it may be picked out by the description (characterisation) ‘ $\varepsilon x x T \delta$ ’, as well.⁶ If γ and δ have the appropriate kind of independence, the Principle of Freedom ensures that there are other worlds where the thinker of γ is not thinking of δ , but that is beside the point.⁷

It is, perhaps, easy to confuse the situation concerning characterisation that we have just been discussing with the following. Suppose we characterise an object, b , in the following way:

$$\varepsilon y (y T \gamma \wedge \forall \delta (y T \delta \rightarrow \delta = \gamma))$$

The Characterisation Principle then gives us that:

$$(*) \quad b T \gamma \wedge \forall \delta (b T \delta \rightarrow \delta = \gamma)$$

But there is no reason to believe that (*) is actually true—only that it is true at worlds of certain kinds which may well not be actual (and which will be inconsistent if some form of Nolan’s reasoning goes through there).

Kroon

Kroon’s major objection is in Section 3 of his article, and is also a complaint to the effect that it is much more plausible to suppose that characterised objects can have at least some of their characterising properties at the actual world, though he prefers to make the point with fictional objects rather than mathematical ones (p. 201):

⁶ Or strictly speaking (since ‘ δ ’ is a free variable), the description obtained by substituting an appropriate name for ‘ δ ’.

⁷ Nolan says (p. [194]), ‘Priest’s principle of freedom ensures that when the “constraints imposed by facts about objects that actually exist” are not relevant, characterisations that do not entail each other will pick out different objects...’ This is not true, as I have just observed. TNB, pp. 112-3, gives some more examples of this. P. 113 also uses the Principle of Freedom to argue that, in a certain situation, two distinct specifications of non-existent objects refer to distinct objects; but this argument depends on the context, and particularly the intentions of the speaker. The contextual dependence of the characterised object is a feature of TNB not shared by other accounts of non-existent objects, such as those of Parsons and Zalta, where the characterisation fixes the object in a context-independent fashion.

People admire Gandalf ... much as they might admire Bill Clinton. But note that they are clear why they admire Gandalf. They admire him because of things such as his uncompromising goodness. They do not admire him because he is fictionally *represented* as being of uncompromising goodness, and so where he has uncompromising goodness in some distant world in which he exists... Similarly, Homer worshipped Zeus because Zeus was a powerful god, eminently worthy of worship. Hence, fictional objects can have quite ordinary properties at this world.

As with mathematical objects, it is possible to accept that non-existent objects, characterised in certain ways, have various of their characterising properties at the actual world, provided that those properties are not existence-entailing. If one does so, one may need to revisit the question about what properties are existence-entailing. Does being good or being powerful entail existing? But I do not think it necessary to go down this route.

People admire Gandalf for the things he does—but these are the things he does in the worlds that realise the story that Tolkien told us.⁸ Of course, there are other worlds where Gandalf is not very admirable; where, for example, he sells out the Shire for a kilo of cocaine. It is for his acts in the Tolkien worlds, that we admire him. This has little to do with non-existence. I admire Nelson Mandela. I admire him for what he has done in this world. But there are other worlds where his actions are not admirable; where, for example, he unleashed a blood-bath on white South Africans after he and the ANC came to power. It is for what he did in this world that I admire him.

This invites the question of why it is different worlds in the two cases. The question is misleading. Admiration, and similar evaluative mental states, such as pitying and detesting, are all relative to a set of circumstances.⁹ So we admire Mandela *for what he is/does at this world*; we may not admire him for what he is/does at another. Similarly, we admire Gandalf *for what he is/does at the Tolkien world*; we may not admire him for what he is/does at another. When the qualification is

⁸ Which is not to say that Gandalf is admirable because he is represented in a certain way. We admire things because of what they are/do, not because of what they are represented as being/doing. Kroon's characterisation of me as a 'representational noneist' (p. [202]) is not apt.

⁹ Note that this is not true of all intentional states. If you dream of someone, this is not relative to a set of circumstances in the same way. (Of course, if you dream of someone, you dream of them *in* a certain set of circumstances; but equally, if you kick someone, you kick them in a certain set of circumstances too.)

dropped, it is because it is the actual circumstances that are salient in the Mandela case, and the Tolkien circumstances that are salient in the Gandalf case.

Neither does this have anything much to do with worlds. Suppose that Herman lives a thoroughly degenerate life for his first 30 years, lying, stealing, and cheating. He then sees the error of his ways, and spends the next 30 years dedicated to selflessly relieving the suffering of others. We admire Herman for what he is/does in his second 30 years; we do not admire him for what he is/does in the first. (In each case the admiration or lack of it is now. The time-change is relevant only to the character/behaviour.) We might say that we admire the Herman of the first half of his life; we do not admire the Herman of the second half—provided that this is not taken to imply that these are literally distinct people. In the same way we may say that we admire the Mandela of the actual world, but not the fictional world, and the Gandalf of the fictional world but not the actual world—it being understood that there are not literally two Mandelas or Gandalfs.¹⁰

Kroon bolsters these considerations with what he calls the *intrinsic nature problem* (p. [203]).¹¹ We seem to ‘know virtually none of the positive properties of non-existent objects’. Indeed we do not: in the sense that Kroon intends it, they do not have any. All such properties are naturally taken as existence-entailing—even, let us agree, the property of being a ‘he’. (We can, of course, refer to Gandalf as a ‘he’, just as we can refer to a ship as ‘she’.) Kroon avers (p. [203]) that it is hard to see how an object that has no existence-entailing properties at one world can have existence-entailing properties at another. I fail to see the problem here. We have no difficulty in seeing how an object can have existence-entailing properties at one time, but not at another—after they are dead. The perception of the problem would seem to be generated by Kroon thinking of non-existent objects as abstract objects, platonistically construed. But they are not like such objects at all: they are non-existent and may well be concrete (since this is defined in terms of a counter-factual).

Kroon articulates a final worry in Section 4 of his article. He notes that we may define a predicate of being, ‘*x* is something’ in terms of

¹⁰ Note that Kroon’s Zeus example is rather different. There is no reason to believe that Zeus is a powerful God. He does not exist. Of course, the Greeks believed that he was a powerful God, but they would have ceased to worship him had they come to believe that he does not exist. We admire Gandalf despite the fact that we know that he does not exist.

¹¹ Kroon does not explain what he means by an intrinsic property. As far as I can see, an intrinsic property is just a property at this world, or maybe some special kind thereof.

the unloaded quantifier thus: $\exists yy = x$. We may take this predicate to attribute a form of being, and so formulate a view even more radical than mine, to the effect that some things don't exist in any sense, not even in this one. E.g.:

A Some things, including Gandalf and the golden mountain, don't exist in any sense whatever; in reality, they are *nothing*.

The apparent inconsistency in **A** is just as good/bad as the inconsistency that appears to be involved in my example:

B I thought of something I would like to give you as a Christmas present, but I couldn't get it because it doesn't exist.

'The challenge, in all these cases, is to find a sense in which the sentence in question might coherently count as true despite its apparent inconsistency' (p. [206]).

Now, I deny that quantification over something requires it to have *any* form of being. One can quantify over things that do not exist in any sense, and which are not, therefore, part of one's ontology. (Ontology = what has being.) **A** is, therefore, a sentence with which I agree. But if being nothing (i.e., not being something) is cashed out as Kroon suggests, the core part of **A** becomes: $\exists x - \exists yy = x$, i.e.:

C $\exists x \forall yy \neq x$

Assuming the law of identity ($\forall xx = x$) to be a logical truth, this will indeed be a logical falsehood.

The situation is not the same as with example **B**, however. **B** does not look inconsistent—unless one is already in the grip of the (false) view that to quantify over something is *ipso facto* to take it to exist. By contrast, to say that something is not self-identical does look like a logical falsehood. The challenge, if there is one, is not at all the same in the two cases. **C** is the logical falsehood it appears to be. **B** is quite consistent, and could even be true.

Much of Kroon's article hints at a different way of elaborating talk of fictional objects and the things we say about them. I certainly do not deny the interest of the approach in question, but a comparison of his approach and mine is clearly a matter of much more substance than can be attempted here.