

# Lost in Translation: a Reply to Woodward

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## 1. The Story So Far

In *Towards Non-Being*<sup>1</sup> I defended an account of intentionality based on noneism: the view that some things do not exist. In 7.9 thereof, I considered an objection to noneism based on a mooted Quinean interpretation of its language. According to this, the noneist quantifier  $\exists$  ('some') is interpreted as an existentially loaded quantifier ('there exists an object such that'). The noneist's existence predicate,  $E$ , is interpreted as 'is concrete' (so the noneist's loaded quantifier  $\exists x(Ex \wedge \dots)$  is read as 'there exists a concrete object such that ...'). According to this translation schema, when the noneist says that some object does not exist, what they really mean is that the object exists but is not a concrete object. The noneist's non-existent objects, are just, then, existent abstract objects.

A major part of the reply was that the interpretation does not work, since it gets the alethic status of central noneist claims wrong. Thus, the noneist:

1N Routley existed, but might not have existed.

becomes:

1Q Routley was a concrete object, but might not have been a concrete object.

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<sup>1</sup> Priest (2005).

For the noneist, the first is true. Given a standard platonist view, according to which abstract objects are necessarily abstract, and concrete objects necessarily concrete, the second is false. In no possible world is Routley a set or a number.

In his (2006), Bob Hale suggested that we understand ‘is concrete’, instead, simply as ‘is in space-time’. In a world where Routley was never born, he still existed: he was just not space and time there. With this understanding,  $1Q$  is true.

In Priest (2011), 2.6, I argued that this translation manual still breaks down in counterfactual situations. Thus, the noneist:

$2N$  If 3 were existent, it would be in space-time.

becomes the Quinean:

$2Q$  If 3 were concrete it would be in space-time.

$2Q$  is true; indeed, trivially so. For the noneist,  $2N$  is certainly not trivially true. Indeed, arguably, it is just false. In a world similar to ours, but as Plato takes it to be, 3 is existent but still not in space and time.

In the same paper (3.4), I also replied to an objection plausibly attributed to David Lewis, as pressed on me by Richard Woodward. According to this, notwithstanding any of the above,  $\mathfrak{S}$  must be read as ‘there exists’ for methodological reasons to do with mutual intelligibility. Since the noneist quantifies over all manner of entities, it follows that they have an unduly extravagant ontology. The reply was to the effect that methodology does not require this. Indeed methodological considerations actually turn the argument on its head. There are important things that cannot be said on the Quinean picture. Methodology rules against expressive impoverishment.

In ‘Towards Being’<sup>2</sup> Woodward revisits these issues. He argues (i) that there is another Quinean translation of the language of noneism that does fit the bill; and (ii) this shows that noneists and those who take quantifiers to be existentially loaded are ‘talking past each other’ (p. 2).

*Now read on...*

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<sup>2</sup> Woodward (2012, pp. 183–193).

## 2. Actuality to the Rescue

Woodward's new translation reads the noneist's  $\mathcal{E}$  as 'exists', as before; but it reads the existence predicate,  $E$ , as 'is an actual concrete object'.<sup>3</sup>  $1Q$  then becomes:

$1'Q$  Routley is an actual concrete object, but might not have been an actual concrete object.

Assuming Hale's gloss on 'concrete',  $1'Q$ , like  $1Q$ , is true from a Quinean perspective. So the first counter-example pair fails to establish its point. However, the new translation does not help with the second pair at all.  $2Q$  becomes:

$2'Q$  If 3 were an actual concrete object, it would be in space-time.

For the Quinean,  $2'Q$  is just as trivially true as  $2Q$  (to be concrete *just* is to be in space-time); but as we have seen, for a noneist,  $2N$  is not.

Here is an even more straightforward counter-example. Consider:

$3N$  If what mathematical Platonists say is true, mathematical objects exist.

$3Q$  If what mathematical Platonists say is true, mathematical objects are actual and concrete.

$3N$  is true for a noneist (and a Quinean);<sup>4</sup>  $3Q$  is false for a Quinean (and a noneist).

Another pertinent point. The phrase 'is an actual concrete object' is, of course, part of the noneist's vocabulary, just as much as the Quinean's. How should this be translated into the Quinese? The only plausible interpretation would seem to be 'is an actual concrete object'. The

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<sup>3</sup> It is not entirely clear how to handle the locution 'is actual' from Woodward's perspective. He says (p. 188) ' $o$  is actual at world  $w$  iff  $o$  exists at world  $w$ '. But what exists at world  $w$ ? If the things that exist at world  $w$  are just the things that exist, period, then to say that  $o$  is actual is vacuous; saying 'and is actual' adds nothing to 'is concrete'. If, on the other hand, the extension of 'is actual' varies from world to world, then for any world,  $w$ , there may be things that exist, *simpliciter*, that do not exist at  $w$ . Choose  $w$  to be the actual world,  $@$ . Then there may be things that exist that do not exist at  $@$ . But, presumably, truth at  $@$  coincides with truth *simpliciter*. (Aren't we in  $@$ ?) Then there may be things that exist that do not exist.

<sup>4</sup>  $3N$  should not be confused with the conditional 'If mathematical objects exist, mathematical objects exist', which translates into 'If mathematical objects are actual and concrete, mathematical objects are actual and concrete', both of which are analytically true.

noneist and the Quinean do not, after all, appear (or need) to disagree about this. But now consider the Quinean sentence:

4*Q* If 3 were an actual concrete object, it would be an actual concrete object.

This is analytic. But there are four noneist sentences that translate into it:

4*Ni* If 3 were an actual concrete object, it would be an actual concrete object.

4*Nii* If 3 were an existent object, it would be an existent object.

4*Niii* If 3 were an actual concrete object, it would be an existent object.

4*Niv* If 3 were an existent object, it would be an actual concrete object.

From a noneist perspective, the first two are analytic; the third is true, but not analytic, depending, as it does, on a certain understanding of existence; and the fourth is false, as was 2*N*.

Again, alethic status is not preserved. Even worse, as the four sentences show, this translation collapses important conceptual distinctions which need to be made. Indeed, how could it be otherwise? If one has only one piece of apparatus ( $\mathfrak{S}$ ) to do two distinct jobs (express quantification and express existence), then important conceptual distinctions are going to be collapsed. Even for Quine. When he claims that what exists is that over which one can quantify, he is not trying to express the simple analytic claim that that over which one can quantify is that over which one can quantify. What he *means* is what the noneist would express by  $\exists xEx$ . But Quine has no official way of saying this. Such is essentially just the methodological point I made in reply to the Lewisian objection.

### 3. Meaning and Mud

Woodward's second objection takes off from the first. It assumes, *unlike* the Lewisian argument I mentioned, that the translation manual is such as to preserve alethic status. In such a case, it is claimed, there is no real difference of opinion between the two inter-translatable parties.

A number of things are pertinent here. First, the argument depends on the claim that the translation in question has the appropriate property. As we have seen, it does not. Indeed, the mere fact that the translation

manual changes non-analytic truths into analytic truths is enough to show that the Quinean and the noneist do *not* mean the same thing, as Woodward claims. The objection, then, collapses here. But there is more to be said. Let us grant for the sake of argument that the translation manual lives up to its billing.

Second point: the availability of the translation does not have the claimed consequences. Let us suppose that I believe that Nicaragua is a country in Central America, that Spanish is spoken there, and (correctly) that its capital is Managua. You believe that Honduras is a country in Central America, that Spanish is spoken there, and (incorrectly) that its capital is Managua. Neither of us has any other beliefs about Central American countries, and in all other respects our beliefs are identical. The translation from my vocabulary to yours which maps 'Nicaragua' to 'Honduras', and otherwise leaves everything unchanged, preserves things held to be true, in both directions. Must it then be the case that 'Nicaragua' in my mouth means the same as 'Honduras' in yours? Clearly not. Meaning is not determined simply by things held true. It is a public phenomenon; and the words I use may be used with the same meanings by others. One is not, in general, at liberty simply to translate mistakes of belief away. Thus, to bring this observation to bear on the matter at hand, suppose that Joan, an erstwhile Christian, becomes an atheist. She avers 'God does not exist'. Her fellow churchgoers apply the Woodward translation. "Well, she just means that God is not an actual concrete object. But we agree with that!" say they, in a relieved tone of voice. "No sensible person ever believed that God was a concrete object." For obvious reasons, Joan is not impressed.

Third, and finally, on the basis of the fact that there is, supposedly, no really difference between the two parties, Woodward castigates the noneist (pp. 191–192):

No-one seriously thinks that this relabelling exercise has changed anything: all we've done is rewritten the theory in a different way. But the rewritten noneist theory just *is* allism [the view that everything over which the noneist quantifies exists] and our new quantifiers are defined in exactly the same way as Quine's! It now seems like we should start to feel a bit guilty about some of the mud we threw at the orthodoxy. When Quine told us that to be is to be the value of a variable, we should have said: "indeed, we just wouldn't have put it that way".

But since the supposed translation is symmetric, the point would seem to cut just as much against one who takes it that quantifiers must be existentially loaded.<sup>5</sup> Bearing in mind that most of the philosophical

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<sup>5</sup> As observed in *Towards Non-Being*, 7.9.

mud which was thrown in the 20th century was thrown *at* Meinong, it might appear that it is the Quineans who should start to feel a bit guilty about some of this. (“When he told us that only some objects have being, we should have just said: ‘indeed, we just wouldn’t have put it that way.’”)

Indeed, Woodward does not seem to have taken his own point to heart. He, like Hale and Lewis, speaks from the position of Quinean orthodoxy. All italics mine: ‘[Lewis] suggests that *we Quineans* should be a little more charitable to the noneist.’ (p. 184); ‘But since *we members of the Quinean establishment* admit only one form of quantification...’ (p. 185); ‘the implication being that *our orthodox quantifiers* do not match up to Priest’s neutral quantifiers...’ (p. 185). If he were right, his “orthodoxy”<sup>6</sup> about quantifiers would be undercut just as much a noneism.

#### 4. In Sum

I conclude that Woodward’s translation-based critique on noneism is no more successful than previous ones of the same kind.<sup>7</sup>

#### References

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- Lewis, D. (1990), ‘Noneism or Allism’, *Mind* 99, 23–31; reprinted as ch. 8 of Lewis’ *Papers in Metaphysics and Epistemology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, .
- Priest, G. (2005), *Towards Non-Being: the Logic and Metaphysics of Intentionality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- (2008), ‘The Closing of the Mind: How the Particular Quantifier Became Existentially Loaded Behind our Backs’, *Review of Symbolic Logic* 1: 42–55.
- (2011), ‘Against Against Non-Being’, *Review of Symbolic Logic* 4: 237–53.
- Woodward, R. (2012), ‘Towards Being’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 86: 183–93.

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<sup>6</sup> It is worth emphasizing that, historically speaking, Quinean orthodoxy is something of an historical aberration. See Priest (2008). Indeed, it is not clear to me how orthodox this bit of Quineanism is amongst even contemporary philosophers—as opposed to North American analytic philosophers. That is an empirical question, and it would be good to know the answer to it.

<sup>7</sup> Many thanks go to Richard Woodward for generous comments on an earlier draft of this reply, which helped to improve it.