Creating Non-Existents

April 7, 2015

Abstract

Towards Non-Being (Oxford University Press, 2005) gives a noneist account of the reference of words which do not refer to existent objects—in the context, in particular, of intentional states. The account is a realist one, in the sense that the domain of objects is the same at each world, and so does not depend on the behaviour of objects which exist there. In this paper, I discuss an anti-realist version of the theory. In particular, what non-existent objects are available at a world may be taken to supervene on the actions of the existent—and, particularly, sentient—beings at that world. An appropriate formal semantics is given; and its philosophical ramifications, for example, with respect to the naming of non-existent objects, are explored.

1 Noneism, Realism, and Anti-Realism

Some objects do not exist: purely fictional objects, like Holmes and Anna Karenina; objects of various intentional states, such as worshiping (God—any of the ones you don't believe in); failed objects of scientific postulation, such as the planet Vulcan. One may certainly contest the noneist claim, but I have defended it in *Towards Non-Being*,[1] and I shall assume it without further argument in what follows. The question I wish to address here is whether one should be a realist or an anti-realist about non-existent objects.

There is no *a priori* reason to suppose that all non-existent objects should have the same status. However, absent considerations to the contrary (of which I have none, at least at present), it is simpler to suppose that there is

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[1]Priest (2005); hereafter, TNB.

a uniform answer to the question. One may also, of course, ask the question of realism about existent objects. I shall assume a realist stance concerning these here. This is by no means mandatory; but it throws into relief the central question of this essay: the specific status of non-existent objects.

It is natural to hear the question of realism about non-existent objects, as one would normally hear questions of realism, as asking whether objects such as Holmes exist and have their properties (at various worlds), independently of the cognitive attitudes of any sentient beings. This is precisely not the way to hear it here: by definition, such objects do not exist at all. One can understand the question in the following way. Every world (and in particular, the actual world) has a domain of objects which provides the referents for names, and over which quantification takes place. One possibility is that the domain of a world is independent of the cognitive states of the sentient beings at that world. We may, then, take the domain to be world-invariant. This is a species of realism. On the other hand, one may suppose that the domain supervenes on the actions and properties of the sentient creatures at that world (or perhaps more generally, of all the objects that exist at the world: maybe computers can tell stories to each other), and so may change from world to world. This is a species of anti-realism.

2   Denotation and Creation

The realist approach to non-existent objects is adopted in TNB. There is a domain of objects, D, and this is the same at all worlds. Thus, the domain of objects at a world has nothing to do with the behaviour of the existent objects there.

The realist approach of TNB comes out most clearly when considering the naming of non-existent objects. When Doyle coined the name 'Holmes' he gave it to a non-existent object, picked out as an object which was a detective with acute powers of observation and inference, etc., in the worlds that realised the story Doyle wished to tell. The object was selected by an act of phenomenological pointing, familiar to anyone who imagines an object; and, realistically conceived, the object was available to be pointed at. But how does the pointing work? How does the act pick out one of the enormous number of non-existent objects? (In many worlds there are objects—different objects—which are detectives with acute powers of observation and inference, etc. How does the act pick out one of these?) The supposed incomprehen-

sibility of this has been one of the major objections raised to the account of TNB by commentators, such as Bob Hale.[2] I do not, myself, find a problem with a notion of mental pointing that can do this, any more than I find a problem with a notion of physical pointing that selects an object at random.[3] (Close your eyes and point to someone in a crowd.) But from an anti-realist perspective, things look quite different, and perhaps more palatable to Hale & Co.

From an antirealist perspective, the domain of objects at a world is not fixed once and for all, but depends on the actions of the objects that exist there. Thus, Sherlock Holmes would not have been in the domain of objects at the actual world had it not been for the story-telling activities of Doyle. How Sherlock Holmes got his name, according to this account, is quite different. Doyle created Holmes. He did not, of course, bring him into existence; Holmes does not exist. But it was in virtue of Doyle's story-telling activities that Holmes came to inhabit the domain of objects of the actual world. Doyle's cognitive activities resulted in the expansion of the domain of objects that were available for reference and quantification. Since Doyle's phenomenology did not select Holmes, but created him, the question of how the selection was possible does not arise.

Whether one is a realist or an anti-realist about non-existent objects also affects questions of their identity. Suppose that you and I, independently, tell stories about some non-existent character. Suppose that we both call her 'Ricki'. By happenstance, we say exactly the same about Ricki: the stories are identical. Are we talking about the same object? TNB, 4.4, gives perfectly determinate identity conditions for all objects, existent and non-existent: two objects are the same if they satisfy the same atomic predicates at each closed world. This, however, is not sufficient to settle the issue. We do not yet know whether the two Rickis satisfy this condition.[4]

If one is a realist, there is no general answer to the question of whether or not the two are the same. I selected an object to christen 'Ricki'; so did you. In both cases they are objects of which the story is true in certain worlds. We may have chosen the same object (and the same worlds), we may not; it

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[2]Hale (2007).

[3]See Priest (200+).

[4]If the telling of the stories is not independent, the matter may be different. If you hear me talking about Ricki, and then tell your own story about her, it is the same Ricki. You have picked up the reference of the name from me, as the causal theory of reference has it (TNB, 7.5).

just depends. Nor may we ever know. Similarly, if you and I point to people in different historical photographs (say 60 years apart), we may never know whether we have pointed to the same person. Of course, if we were to know everything about them, we would know whether they were the same person. But if we were to know everything about your Ricki and mine, we would also know whether they were the same person. In both cases, such knowledge may be denied to us. Such is realism.

The anti-realist situation is different. Ricki and her properties supervene on the activities of her creator. If the two creators are the same in the relevant ways, presumably in the stories they tell, the two Rickis cannot be different. Same stories, same Rickis. There is no more to Ricki's identity to be found out.

Note what supervenience does *not* mean. It does not mean that a non-existent object, characterised in a certain way, has only those properties it is explicitly characterised as having (or those that follow from these) at the worlds that realise that characterisation. Thus, if Ricki is characterised as being either left handed or right handed, then in any world that realises the characterisation, she will be either the one or the other. Supervenience means only that if you and I are the same in the relevant respects, so are our Rickis: any world in which the one is left handed, so is the other. As TNB, 6.4 explains, objects may have properties beyond those they are characterised as having (or that follow from these) in the worlds that realise the characterisation. The realist/anti-realist distinction does not affect this matter.

Before we turn to an appropriate semantics, a couple more observations. First, if one can create objects, then, presumably, one can create groups of objects. Thus, in writing *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare created not only Mark Anthony, but the howling crowd, C, which he addresses after Caesar's assassination. Did he create all the members of the crowd? Well crowds certainly have members; and in every world that realises Shakespeare's story C exists and has members. In different worlds, C may have different members, and the members of C must be things which exist at that world, and so members of the domain there. But it does not follow that Shakespeare created each one of them.[5] It is up to the director—so to speak—at each world, to decide who it is that goes into the crowd.

Secondly, it might well be thought that just as non-existent objects can

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[5]Though one might argue that he created those to which he gave speaking parts.

be created, so they can be destroyed, or at least lapse into oblivion. Let us suppose, for example, that a community has a belief about an object which does not exist, perhaps a god of some kind. Let us suppose also that gradually, over generations, the belief lapses, and all reference to the object is forgotten (no written records, no living memories, etc.). Then at least arguably, the community has lost the ability to refer to that object, and it is no longer in the domain of quantification.

3   Anti-Realist Semantics

What formal semantics goes with an anti-realist understanding of non-existent objects? An appropriate semantics can be obtained by modifying the semantics of TNB in such a way as to give a variable-domain semantics.

An interpretation is a structure $\langle W, @, D, \delta \rangle$. W is a set of worlds, or better, given that domains may now change over time, worlds at times; $@ \in W$ is the actual world (now). In the full story, W further subdivides into possible worlds and impossible worlds, closed and open; but the details are exactly the same as in TNB, ch. 1, and need not concern us here. D is a domain of objects, and for every $w \in W$, $D_w \subseteq D$ is the domain of world w.[6] For every constant, c, $\delta(c) \in W$; for every n-place predicate, P, and world, w, $\delta_w(P)$ is a pair, $\langle P_w^+, P_w^- \rangle$ such that $P_w^+, P_w^- \subseteq D_w^n$; for every intentional operator, Ψ, and for every $d \in D$, $\delta(\Psi)$ is a binary relation on worlds, $R_\Psi^d \subseteq W^2$, subject to the constraint that:

(*)   if $wR_\Psi^d w'$ then $D_{w'} \subseteq D_w$.

The condition says something like: if world w' realises an intentional state, Ψ, of agent d, in w, the only objects in the domain of w' are ones that are already in the domain of w. I will come back to the significance of this in a moment.

The truth and falsity conditions for the logical connectives and intentional operators are as in TNB. Thus, for example:

$w \Vdash^+ \neg A$ iff $w \Vdash^- A$

$w \Vdash^- \neg A$ iff $w \Vdash^+ A$

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[6]Since D is a set of objects, not a function, this notation is, strictly speaking, nonsense. To render it not so, take D_w to be $\delta(w)$.

$(w \Vdash^+ A$ says that A is true at w; $w \Vdash^- A$ says that A is false at w.)

$w \Vdash^+ a\Psi A$ iff for all w' such that $wR_\Psi^{\delta(a)}w'$, $w' \Vdash^+ A$

$w \Vdash^- a\Psi A$ iff for some w' such that $wR_\Psi^{\delta(a)}w'$, $w' \Vdash^- A$

For quantifiers, we assume that the language is augmented by a set of constants $\{k_d : d \in D\}$, such that $\delta(k_d) = d$.[7] $A_x(c)$ is A with all free occurrences of x replaced by c. Then:

$w \Vdash^+ \forall x A$ iff for all $d \in D_w$, $w \Vdash^+ A_x(k_d)$

$w \Vdash^- \forall x A$ iff for some $d \in D_w$, $w \Vdash^- A_x(k_d)$

$w \Vdash^+ \exists x A$ iff for some $d \in D_w$, $w \Vdash^+ A_x(k_d)$

$w \Vdash^- \exists x A$ iff for all $d \in D_w$, $w \Vdash^- A_x(k_d)$

For atomic sentences, $Pc_1...c_n$:

$w \Vdash^+ Pc_1...c_n$ iff $\langle \delta(c_1), ..., \delta(c_n) \rangle \in P_w^+$

$w \Vdash^- Pc_1...c_n$ iff $\langle \delta(c_1), ..., \delta(c_n) \rangle \in P_w^-$

The existence predicate, E, note, is treated in exactly the same way as every other predicate. Thus, $E_w^+, E_w^- \subseteq D_w$. (So we need not have $E_w^+ = D_w$; not everything in the domain of a world may exist there.)

Validity is defined in terms of truth preservation at @ in all interpretations.

4   Comments on the Semantics

Let me make some comments on the semantics. Note, for a start, that if c does not denote an object in D_w, any atomic sentence involving it (even one that says that it exists) is neither true nor false there. (So, unlike TNB, there will be truth value gaps even at possible worlds.) Another strategy that has some plausibility is to take such a sentence simply to be false. This involves changing the falsity conditions for atomic sentences to:

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[7]In TNB I treated quantifiers differently, defining satisfaction. The present method is equivalent and simpler.

$w \Vdash^- Pc_1...c_n$ iff $\langle \delta(c_1), ..., \delta(c_n) \rangle \in P_w^-$ or $\delta(c_1) \notin D_w$, or ..., or $\delta(c_n) \notin D_w$

However, had Doyle never created Holmes, 'Holmes is a detective' would appear to express no proposition at all, true or false. The truth conditions given therefore seem more appropriate.[8]

Predicates expressing intentional states, such as 'admires', are treated as in TNB. Their semantics are the same as those of any other predicate, and they are existence-entailing in their first place (TNB, 3.3). Thus, if P is an intentional relation, we have:

If $\langle d_1, d_2 \rangle \in P_w^+$ then $d_1 \in E_w^+$

But not $d_2 \in E_w^+$. A sentence such as 'Doyle admired Holmes' can be true at a world, even though Holmes does not exist there. Had Holmes not been created at a world, though, this sentence, like all atomic sentences containing his name, would be neither true nor false.

Turning to intentional operators, consider an example such as:

(†) Priest believes Holmes to be a detective.

This, presumably, cannot be true or false unless Holmes is available to be thought about. If Holmes is not in the domain of w, but $wR_\Psi^d w'$ and Holmes is in the domain of w', then (†) could be true or false at w. This is exactly what the condition (*) rules out.

If the language contains identity, the semantics have to be modified as in TNB, ch. 2. Specifically, a new component, Q, of identities (avatars) is added to interpretations, and the members of D are taken to be functions from worlds to Q. Extensions and anti-extensions of predicates are world-indexed subsets of the appropriate n-tuples of Q. If $d \in D$, we will write $d(w)$ as $|d|_w$. The truth/falsity conditions for atomic sentences are then:

$w \Vdash^+ Pc_1...c_n$ iff for all $1 \le i \le n$, $\delta(c_i) \in D_w$, and $\langle |\delta(c_1)|_w, ..., |\delta(c_n)|_w \rangle \in P_w^+$

$w \Vdash^- Pc_1...c_n$ iff for all $1 \le i \le n$, $\delta(c_i) \in D_w$, and $\langle |\delta(c_1)|_w, ..., |\delta(c_n)|_w \rangle \in P_w^-$

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[8]Note that on either strategy statements of the form $a = a$ may not be true. This provides an alternative solution to the problem of TNB, chapter 8. See 8.4.

where, for all w, $=^+_w= \{\langle q, q \rangle : q \in Q\}$.

If the language contains an (indefinite) description operator, ε, its semantics are handled as in TNB, ch. 4, with a minor modification. The semantics are augmented with a choice function, φ, on (non-empty) subsets of D. (In TNB, this is indexed by matrices, but again I ignore this complication here.) We now have:

1. If every name in A denotes something in $D_@$:

   $\delta(\varepsilon x A) = \varphi\{d \in D_@ : @ \Vdash^+ A_x(k_d)\}$, if this set is non-empty

   $\delta(\varepsilon x A) = \varphi(D_@)$, otherwise[9]

2. If a name in A does not denote something in $D_@$ then $\delta(\varepsilon x A) = \varphi(D - D_@)$.

The meaning of clause 2 is as follows. If Doyle had never created Holmes, so that the denotation of 'Holmes' is not in $D_@$, then 'a friend of Holmes' would have the same status as 'Holmes'.[10]

5 Further Reflections

Now that we have the semantics, a few further philosophical reflections are in order.

1. First, the semantics allow us to formulate a precise version of the supervenience of the non-existent on the existent. Given an interpretation, say that two worlds, w_1 and w_2, are *identical with respect to a set of objects*, X, if the extensions, anti-extensions, and accessibility relations at the two worlds are the same with respect to all members of X. Supervenience can now be formulated as follows. (Recall that E is the existence predicate.)

   - If $E^+_{w_1} = E^+_{w_2} = X$, and w_1 and w_2 are identical with respect to X, then $D_{w_1} = D_{w_2} = Y$, and w_1 and w_2 are identical with respect to Y.

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[9]And as in TNB, 4.5, we assume that if $d = \varphi(D_@)$, things are arranged in such a way that, for the appropriate Φ, and agent, a, $@ \Vdash^+ a\Phi A_x(k_d)$.

[10]If we do not treat descriptions as rigid designators, then their denotations are world-indexed. Thus, we write $\delta_w(\varepsilon x A)$, and their denotations are obtained by the same conditions, changing @ to w.

2. Next, what consequences does this account have for the worlds themselves? That depends. If we take worlds to be existent objects of some kind, then none whatsoever. However, TNB, 7.3, argues that worlds other than the actual are non-existent objects. Hence, if we assume an anti-realist approach to non-existent objects, we must apply it to these also.[11] What worlds occur in the domain of quantification of a world itself supervenes on the activities of the cognitive agents at that world. (Clearly, worlds can be in the domain of quantification of a world: we quantify over them in the actual world.) In particular, the worlds in $D_@$ supervene on the activities of those who theorise about them—us.

3. Finally, two possible objections. It might be suggested that the semantics still has a residual realism. The domain D comprises a bunch of objects; some of these may not exist (anywhere) and there is no reason to suppose that they are mind-dependent in any sense. To avoid this, one may take D to be $D_@$ (in which case, there are no truth value gaps at @). Again, the semantics is our construction, and the objects in D, if they do not exist, are objects we have created. That is:

    All non-existent objects are created by existent ones.

   What of the status of this claim? Arguably, is it a necessary truth, and so true in all possible worlds. It does not follow, however, that in every world each non-existent object has been created by some object that exists at that world. (One can characterise an object as non-existent but non-created.) What follows is that worlds where this is not the case are impossible worlds.

4. Finally, Doyle created Holmes; in virtue of that, we can now refer to him. Before Doyle created Holmes, one might think, it was true to say that he would create Holmes. But this is not true if Holmes was not then available to be the subject of a proposition. One way to accommodate the thought it to take it that the domain of quantification supervenes on the objects that exist, have existed, and will exist (that exist in a timeless sense). In this case, Holmes may be available for

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[11]In the same chapter it is also argued that abstract objects, and in particular mathematical objects, are non-existent objects. If this is so, then the debate about realism and anti-realism (constructivism) in the philosophy of mathematics is a special case of the debate about the nature of non-existent objects.

reference and quantification before Doyle. This strikes me as awkward, though. It would follow that whether or not something expresses a proposition would depend on future events of which we have no knowledge. Our grasp of whether or not something was meaningful would evaporate. I think it better just to agree that before Doyle, we could not refer to Holmes, and so say (truly) that Doyle will write about him. On the normal semantics for tense logics, it follows that even after Holmes was invented, we cannot say (truly) that it was the case that Doyle would write about Holmes. Whether the truth of this claim can be accommodated in a non-standard tense-logic is a matter for further investigation.

6   Conclusion

Let me bring this brief essay to a conclusion. I am still presently inclined to a realist persuasion about non-existent objects. But we now see, at least in outline, what an anti-realist account is like. Others, if sympathetic to non-existent objects, may prefer it. I'm sure that there are other important things to be said by way of comparing the two accounts. But at least the possibility of choice is now opened.[12]

References

[1] Hale, B. (2007), 'Into the Abyss: a Critical Study *Towards Non-Being*', *Philosophia Mathematica* 15, 94-110.

[2] Priest, G. (2005), *Towards Non-Being*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[3] Priest, G. (200+), 'Against Against Non-Being', to appear.