

International Phenomenological Society

Review: Précis of Towards Non-Being

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Source: *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 76, No. 1 (Jan., 2008), pp. 185-190

Published by: [International Phenomenological Society](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40041159>

Accessed: 08-04-2015 01:34 UTC

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Précis of Towards Non-Being

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Intentionality has been a source of philosophical perplexity throughout the course of Western philosophy—Ancient, Medieval, and Modern. The puzzles and conundrums to which it gives rise, such as the Hooded Man paradox of Eubulides, are some of the oldest philosophy knows. *Towards Non-Being*¹ provides a semantics and metaphysics of intentional notions which addresses these.

The approach to intentionality which it provides has two central planks. The first in the deployment of a theory of worlds of various kinds—actual, possible, impossible. The second is the invocation of non-existent objects. In this way, it draws heavily on the bold work of the late Australasian philosopher, Richard Sylvan (*né* Routley), who rehabilitated the views of Meinong, in a form he called *noneism*: the only objects that exist, that have being in any sense whatever, are those out there in space and time; all other objects, of which there are many, simply do not exist.

The intentional notions with which the book deals are of two kinds: *intentional operators*, which take sentential or propositional complements, and *intentional predicates*, which take noun-phrases as complements. The first are deployed in the examples:

John Howard *thinks that* he is a great prime minister.
I *fear that* he is sorely mistaken.
Any right-minded person can only *believe that* he has done grave damage to Australian international interests.

The second are deployed in the examples:

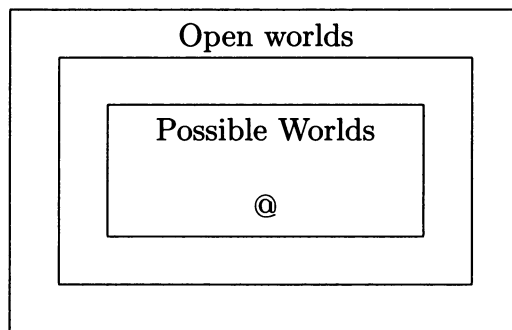
George Bush *worships* power.
But he *fears* Osama bin Laden.
Last night he *dreamt of* him.

¹ G. Priest, *Towards Non-Being: the Logic and Metaphysics of Intentionality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). Hereafter, TNB.

Intentional Operators

The semantics of intentional operators are specified in terms of worlds. Some of them are possible; the actual world, @, is one of these. The others are not. Impossible worlds are required since we can have intentional states directed towards impossibilities. For example, I can wish to square the circle, or dream that my father is my mother. Impossible worlds are worlds that realise the contents of such intentional states.

Intentional states are not always—in fact, not usually—closed under entailment. Thus, I can believe something without believing all of its logical consequences. An important characteristic of many of the impossible worlds is, therefore, that they are not closed under entailment. They are *open* worlds. The general structure of worlds may therefore be depicted as follows:²



I write $w \Vdash A$ to mean that A holds at world w .

The semantics for intentional operators are those that are standard in the world-semantics of epistemic and doxastic logic. For every intentional operator, Ψ , in the language, there is a corresponding binary accessibility relation, R_Ψ , between worlds. $wR_\Psi w'$ means something like: at w' , things are as they are Ψ d to be at w . So if Ψ is 'John fears that', $@R_\Psi w'$ iff w' realises all the things that John actually fears.³ This makes the following truth conditions natural: $w \Vdash \Psi A$ iff for all w' such that $wR_\Psi w'$, $w' \Vdash A$

Because of the open worlds, even if A entails B , one can have $w \Vdash \Psi A$ without $w \Vdash \Psi B$.

² TNB calls only the closed non-possible worlds 'impossible'. It might have been better, as I do here, to call all the non-possible worlds impossible, and to distinguish within these between the closed ones and the open ones.

³ In the cause of perspicuity, I simplify here—though not in TNB itself—incorporating the agent into the intentional operator.

Intentional Predicates

Every world comes with a domain of objects. In fact, we may take every world to have the same domain, D . At each world, an object may or may not exist. Thus, we may suppose that there is a monadic existence predicate, E , whose extension at world w is the things that exist at w . Quantifiers work in the standard way:

$\exists x A$ holds at w just if *something* in D satisfies A at w

$\forall x A$ holds at w just if *everything* in D satisfies A at w

$\forall x$ is the universal quantifier, to be read ‘every x is such that’; $\exists x$ is the particular quantifier, to be read ‘some x is such that’. It is not to be read as ‘there exists an x such that’, or even as ‘there is an x such that’. If one wants to say such things, one has to use the existence predicate explicitly, thus: $\exists x(Ex \wedge A)$. It is important to note that an object that does not exist at a world does not have some lesser grade of being there. If it does not exist (at a world) it simply *is not* (there). It is just non-existent, a non-being.

Given this set up, the semantics of intentional predicates are simple. Intentional predicates are the same as any other predicate. The extension of ‘sees’ (at a world) is just the set of pairs such that the first sees the second (there); the extension of ‘fears’ at a world is just the set of pairs such that the first fears the second (there). Thus, when John fears something, this is a relationship between John and the object of his fear. John has immediate phenomenological acquaintance with the object; but the object itself may or may not exist.

Identity

Special problems beset the notion of identity in intentional contexts. *Prima facie*, it would appear that Oedipus desired Jocasta, but did not desire his mother, even though Jocasta was his mother. This is not a tough problem, however. Oedipus *did* desire his mother. He just did not realise that Jocasta was his mother. Of course, he realised that Jocasta was Jocasta. Hence, the substitutivity of identicals, we may suppose, holds within intentional predicates; but it cannot hold within the scope of intentional operators (like ‘realise that’).

TNB handles this fact using techniques from so called “contingent identity” systems of modal logic. As a first cut, think of an object as having different parts at different worlds (in the way that an object may have different time-slices at different times). Since it is, *in stricto sensu*, the different parts that have the properties at different worlds,

we can no longer give the usual truth conditions for an atomic sentence, say Px :

$w \Vdash Pa$ iff $\delta(a)$ is in the extension of P at w

where $\delta(a)$ is the denotation of the term a . We have to give them instead as:

$w \Vdash Pa$ iff $|\delta(a)|_w$ is in the extension of P at w

where $|x|_w$ is the part of x at w . In particular, then, $a = b$ holds at w just if $|\delta(a)|_w$ and $|\delta(b)|_w$ are the same. It is now not difficult to see that Pb follows from $a = b$ and Pa . But even if $a = b$ is true, a and b may have different parts at different worlds, and so may have different properties at each. Hence, ΨPb does not follow from $a = b$ and ΨPa .

How are we to conceptualise these parts in the present context, though? TNB suggests that we think of them as identities. Thus, just as an object may have different sizes or colours at different worlds, it may also have different identities. In the actual world, the identities of Jocasta and Oedipus' mother were the same. But in the world that realised the way Oedipus took things to be, i.e., in the world of Oedipus' beliefs, they were different.

We may suppose that when identities do diverge in this way, it is because agents represent the objects question in different ways. One should expect them to diverge, therefore, only in those worlds that are essentially the realisations of intentional states, that is, the open worlds.

Characterisation

It is often suggested that non-existent objects are problematic, since they have no clear identity conditions. Such is not the case. If a is b , that is, $@ \Vdash a = b$, then for every atomic sentence, A , and every closed world, w :

$w \Vdash A(a)$ iff $w \Vdash A(b)$

We can take this condition as the *criterion* of identity. It is a version of the standard Leibniz identity conditions. Two objects are the same if they have the same properties at all (closed) worlds. The account, note, is quite general, and applies whether or not the objects in question exist at any particular world.

The criterion does raise the question of what properties non-existent objects have at various worlds, though. The simple answer is that, as for existent objects, that depends on the object in question. One can of course, say more. Some properties, such as being thought about, do not entail existence. Other properties, such as being kicked, do. We

might argue about which properties are existence-entailing, and which are not. But, by definition, an object cannot have existence-entailing properties at worlds where it does not exist.

Let A be any condition with one free variable, x . Perhaps it is what we say of some character in a story we tell. Maybe nothing exists which satisfies that condition. But a natural thought, once we are countenancing non-existent objects, is that *something* does: something is characterised by A . Suppose we write such a thing as ϵxA ('a thing satisfying A '). It follows that, for any A :

$$A(\epsilon xA)$$

This is called the *Characterisation Principle*. No one, however, can subscribe to it in full generality. Let B be an arbitrary sentence, and let A be $x = x \wedge B$. Then the Principle gives us that $\epsilon xA = \epsilon xA \wedge B$; B follows. Standardly, those who have supposed that some objects do not exist, starting with Meinong, have tried to restrict the Principle by allowing only certain A s. How to do this in a principled fashion has always been problematic.

TNB takes a different line here. $A(\epsilon xA)$ *always* holds. It may not hold at the actual world, however. Someone who talks or thinks about ϵxA will represent the object in question to themselves in certain ways. Thus, when Arthur Conan Doyle characterised someone (Holmes) as being a detective, having acute powers of observation and inference, living in Baker St., using cocaine, etc., he (partially) described the world in which Holmes lived: a sort of Victorian Britain. Holmes does not have the properties by which he is characterised at the actual world. He does, however, have them in those worlds that realise Doyle's descriptions. In general, we are not guaranteed $A(\epsilon xA)$ at the actual world, but we are guaranteed it at worlds that realise certain representations—which may be the actual world, but may not be. So we do not in general have $@ \Vdash A(\epsilon xA)$, but we always do have $@ \Vdash \Psi A(\epsilon xA)$, where Ψ is the appropriate intentional operator (such as 'In the Sherlock Holmes novels, Doyle described it to be the case that').

A Glimpse Beyond

Such are the basic ideas of TNB. They are developed further in many ways in the book. Modern noneist views are compared with the standard medieval views of intentionality. Quine's celebrated paper 'On What there Is' is analysed. The charge that noneism is just a disguised form of platonism is dismissed. The question of how one refers to non-existent objects is addressed. Fictional objects, mathematical objects, and even worlds themselves—other than the actual—are argued to be non-existent

objects. And a clash between noneism and a naive view about denotation is disarmed by deploying a theory of multiple-denotation. Those who want to know the details will just have to read the book!

The aims of the book are limited. It does not try to produce a definitive noneist account of intentionality: there are too many ways one might consider ringing the changes on the details, and many such changes may well improve the account. Nor does the book attempt to compare the theory offered with others in the area, and argue that it is preferable: that would have required a book several times the length. It simply attempts to put into play what seems to me to be a basically very simple and natural account of the nature of intentionality. It will allow people to think about a view that they may have never considered seriously before. Even though it does not exist.