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Noneism—Neither Meinongianism nor Allism

Abstract

The subject of this paper is the relation between three views: noneism, Meinongianism, and allism. The first one has it that 'some objects do not exist,' the second that 'there are objects that do not exist,' and the last one that 'every object exists.' While noneism is commonly considered to be close to Meinongianism and very distant to allism, this arrangement has been lately questioned. Consequently, some claimed that the difference between noneism and allism is based merely on the choice of words. The aim of this paper is to argue that the disagreement between noneism and allism is substantial and not merely verbal, and its subject is the domain of objects.

Key words: Non-existent Objects, Ontology, Meta-Ontology, Existence, Alexius Meinong.

Noneism is a theory created by Richard Routley (1980; 1995), and developed by Graham Priest (2005; 2016). The main thesis of noneism is that (N): some objects do not exist. Advocates of noneism often refer to Alexius Meinong's Theory of Objects (or Meinongianism) as its ancestor and as an ally in the debate against the critique of the belief in non-existent objects. After all, Meinongianism has it that (M): there are objects that do not exist (Meinong 1904/1960; Parsons 1980).[1] Both Meinongianism and noneism—due to their commitment to a belief in non-existent objects—are often contrasted with allism, according to which (A): every object exists (Quine 1948; Lewis 1990; van Inwagen 1998).[2]

[1] It should be noted that the term 'Meinongianism' applies to many more theories, e.g. (Castañeda 1974; Rapaport 1978; Zalta 1983; Jacquette 1996; Paśniczek 1999; Berto 2013). As a matter of fact, noneism is often considered to be a kind of Meinongianism as well. For the purpose of this paper, however, I am going to restrict term 'Meinongianism' to views of Alexius Meinong and Terence Parsons. There are two reasons for this. The first one is that in the exposition of Meinongianism I merely intend to reveal those aspects of the Theory of Objects, which are relevant for the question of the relation between this theory, noneism, and allism. Secondly, I consider Parsons' version of Meinongianism to be the one that shares most assumptions of the original Meinong's view. (Contrary to some of the above-mentioned, which often share more with Ernest Mally's views (Mally 1912) than with the Meinong's theory (Jacquette 1989)) For these reasons, Parson's approach might be helpful in putting Meinong's Theory of Object in a contemporary debate over nonexistent objects, especially in the case of a paraphrase of Meinong's thesis into the formal language of quantifiers.

[2] While the term 'allism' was introduced as a label for a fictional theory, theses of this theory have their non-fictional advocates. For this reason, I will use this as a label for views shared by these advocates.

This intuitively plausible picture of the relation between the mentioned three views has been questioned lately. It is argued that the proper explication of (N) and (A) reveals that those theses are much closer to each other than it seems. Ultimately some claim that noneism is merely allism expressed in unusual terminology (Lewis 1990) and that the disagreement between noneism and allism is merely verbal (Woodward 2013) or that it is so at least up to some point (Schoonen and Berto 2018). The aim of this paper is to argue that while noneism provides a middle way between Meinongianism and allism, the alleged closeness of (N) and (A) does not hold, and that the debate between the two is substantial and not merely verbal. In order to do so, I will examine both the 'Meinongian' and the 'Quinean' aspects of noneism.

1. Noneism and Meinongianism

What makes noneism similar to Meinongianism is a belief in non-existent objects. This includes fictional, abstract, merely possible, and impossible objects. Additionally, Meinongianism has it that *some* abstract non-existent objects have a different kind of existence—subsistence.[3] In other words, when we assert in a common way of speaking 'there exists *a*,' we express one of two philosophical theses depending on whether *a* is concrete or abstract. Nowadays this view is often called 'ontological pluralism,' and it claims that 'there are different ways in which things exist' (McDaniel 2009: 291). In the case of the Theory of Objects, these ways are existence and subsistence.

Introducing the mentioned distinction requires one to explain what the difference is between these two types of (broadly understood) existence. The first one applies only to concrete, spatiotemporal objects. For the Theory of Objects, however, this does not mean that every concrete object exists. On the contrary, many of them are non-existent. Meinong's examples of concrete objects of which it is true to say that they exist, suggests that by these he

[3] Terence Parsons restricted his analysis to merely concrete objects. Thus he did not consider the notion of subsistence. He did not, however, criticize this notion either (Parsons 1980: 10).

meant objects that are actually spatiotemporal (Findlay 1963: 13). Hence, while both Hoover Dam and Trump Dam have the property of being spatiotemporal, only the first one is *actually* spatiotemporal, which makes it an existent dam. The second is a merely possible, and (as such) a non-existent, object.

Abstract objects are necessarily non-spatiotemporal, hence none of them exist in the way in which Hoover Dam does. It seems, however, that the domain of abstract objects contains a variety of items that require distinguishing between those that do not exist in *any* sense and those that do exist in some sense, i.e., abstract *a*s such that (loosely speaking) 'there exists *a*' is true. Given that popular examples of abstract objects are mathematical and social objects, consider the following pairs:

(a1) a prime number greater than 5; (a2) the largest natural number,

(b1) Fermat's Last Theorem; (b2) a counterexample for Fermat's Last Theorem,

(c1) Oxford University; (c2) Hundred Acre Wood University.

While all of the above are abstract, there is an important ontological difference between them. The difference allows for truly saying that there exists a prime number greater than 5, Fermat's Last Theorem, and Oxford University, while it is false to say the same about the largest natural number, a counterexample for Fermat's Last Theorem, and Hundred Acre Wood University. The difference is not that a prime number greater than 5 is actually spatiotemporal while the largest natural number is not. Both of them are abstract, hence none of them is spatiotemporal. Meinong claimed that the difference is grounded in the fact that the previous subsists while the latter does not.

In virtue of the above, Meinongianism holds that some objects exist (Hoover Dam), some subsist (a prime number greater than 5), and some neither exist nor subsist (Trump Dam, the largest natural number). Consequently, the universe of objects is divided into four groups:

(I) Concrete existent objects (e.g., Hoover Dam, Barack Obama, the Eiffel

Tower);

(II) Concrete non-existent objects (e.g., Trump Dam, Sherlock Holmes, Pegasus);

(III) Abstract subsistent objects (e.g., the right-angled triangle, Pythagoras' theorem, Oxford University);

(IV) Abstract non-subsistent objects (e.g., a round triangle, Trump's theorem, Hundred Acre Wood University).

Contrary to Meinongianism, noneism (or the theory of items) explicitly rejects ontological pluralism:

> There is, on the theory of items, only one way of being, that is existence in the space-time world; there are no alternative ways of being, or of existence, such as subsistence may be taken to be. (Routley 1980: 851)

> The admission of non-existent objects is meinongianism, or, as I shall call it—as explained in the preface to the book, and following Routley/Sylvan—noneism. And let me stress, as he did, that non-existent objects do not have some inferior mode of being, such as 'subsistence'. They have no mode of being whatever. They do not exist in any sense of that word (in the world in question, of course—they may, or may not, exist in others; they may even not exist in any world). (Priest 2005: 14)

Consequently, while the domains of Meinongianism and noneism are alike, the latter divides the universe of objects into three groups. The first group includes objects that are actually spatiotemporal (Routley 1980: 710) (or in other words, object of actual causal relations (Priest 2005: 135-137)). The second includes objects that are spatiotemporal, though not in the actual

world (e.g., Trump Dam, Sherlock Holmes), and the third group contains abstract objects (e.g., a prime number greater than 5). Hence, the first difference between Meinongianism and noneism is that the former one is committed to ontological pluralism, while the latter rejects it.

The second difference is grounded in the question of the relation between 'being' and 'existence.' As mentioned, Meinong's thesis is often expressed in the form of (M): there *are* objects that do not *exist* (Parsons 1980: 6-7). This requires drawing a distinction between objects that are and those that exist. The distinction is typically understood as one according to which what is usually considered to be subject to the *existential* quantifier (∃) becomes ontologically neutral, a particular quantifier that expresses the being of an object, and which ranges over *every* object in the domain. Existence, in this framework, is expressed by the predicate of existence, $E!$. Hence the thesis (M) is expressed as $\exists x{\sim}E!\,x$. Without this (or a similar) distinction, 'to be' and 'to exist' become synonyms and the Meinongian claim may be easily reduced to inconsistency of the form 'there exist objects that do not exist' or (as Meinong originally formulated it, for '[t]hose who like paradoxical modes of expression') 'there are objects of which it is true that there are no such objects' (Meinong 1904/1960: 83).

Contrary to the above, noneism holds that 'to exist and to be are exactly the same thing. Holmes does not exist; Holmes is not. There exists/is nothing that is Sherlock Holmes' (Priest 2005: 108). Since the thesis of noneism—on pain of falling into contradiction—cannot be expressed as (M), the 'Meinongian' aspect of noneism is expressed without assuming the aforementioned distinction, as (N): some objects do not exist. 'Some' in this case is understood as a neutral (unloaded) quantifier (⊖) that ranges over every object. Just as in the case of Meinongianism, existence (and in this case also being) is expressed as a predicate of existence $E!$. Consequently, thesis (N) is expressed as $\ominus x{\sim}E!\,x$ (Routley 1980: 174-180; Priest 2005: 13-14). The relation between an ordinary allist's existential quantifier and those of Meinongians' and noneists' is such that what an allist would express as $\exists xFx$ ('there is/exists an x such that

x is F'), a Meinongian would express as $\exists x(E!\, x\&Fx)$ ('there is an x such that x exists and x is F'), and a noneist as $\Im x(E!\, x\&Fx)$ ('some x exists and is F').

This shows that the philosophical tension between noneism and Meinongianism might be to some extent neutralized on the formal level. Since both views introduce ontologically neutral, particular quantifiers, the difference between them is merely in the reading of this quantifier. Assuming that the reason for which Meinongians refer to the distinction between 'existing' and 'being' is to be able to quantify over non-existent objects; 'being' can be understood as an abbreviation for 'being an object.' It is safe to assume that if this is possible given this identification of 'being' and 'existence,' thesis (M) could be easily reduced to (N).[4] For the exposition of the argument, however, I will assume that one of the differences between Meinongianism and noneism is the question of whether 'being' is synonymous with 'existence.'

The above shows that the relation between Meinongianism and noneism can be expressed by acceptances or denial of the following theses:

(1) Not every object does exist.

(2) Some objects subsist.

(3) Being is not the same as existence.

(4) Being is the same as existence.

(5) No object subsists.

[4] This has been indirectly expressed by Terence Parsons, who, considering the relation between formal and informal expressions of existence, claimed that:

> we sometimes use 'there are' to mean 'there exists'; when this is done, the symbolization discussed does not beg the question in any overt sense. But we also use 'there are' in a broader sense, a sense roughly equivalent to that of the word 'some', or 'at least one', and this usage cannot be appropriately symbolized in the same way as 'there exists.' (Parsons 1980: 6)

While both Meinongianism and noneism are committed to thesis (1), they disagree when it comes to theses (2-5). Meinongianism accepts (2-3) and rejects (4-5). Noneism accepts (4-5) and rejects (2-3).

2. Noneism and Allism

Features that differ Meinongianism and noneism are also features that move the latter towards what David Lewis called allism, the main thesis of which is that (A): every object exists. Allism has its roots in Willard van Orman Quine's view on existence (Quine 1948), which—as interpreted by Peter van Inwagen—is based on five theses of which two are highly important for the subject of this paper. These are 'being is the same as existence' and 'being is univocal' (van Inwagen 1998). The first one is the same as the aforementioned (4), and the second is the opposite of ontological pluralism.

Since noneism—contrary to Meinongianism—is committed to these, Lewis suggested that thesis (N), along with the assumption that 'to exist/to be' means 'to be actually spatiotemporal,' provides justification for the transition of (N) into (N*)—'some objects are not actually spatiotemporal,' where 'some' is considered to be the standard, ontologically loaded quantifier. By virtue of this, the noneist's ontological universe could be characterized as one that contains both actually spatiotemporal objects and those that are either abstract or non-actually spatiotemporal. All of them, however, exist. This—Lewis claimed—allows surmising

> that the distinction Routley has in mind is genuine, and what is more that we accept it no less than he does. It is just that he calls it the distinction between what 'exists' and what does not, whereas we call it the distinction between present, actual, particular spatiotemporal things and all the rest […] This hypothesis is altogether too irenic. Or rather, it is one-sidedly irenic: it squares Routley's position on loaded and neutral

> quantification with orthodoxy, but at the cost of making nonsense of Routley's evident conviction that his position is deeply opposed to orthodoxy. (Lewis 1990: 30)[5]

In virtue of the analogy, the question of the relation between noneism and allism has been raised. Consequently, some claimed that noneism is nothing more than allism in disguise, and since noneism requires an unusual framework that includes non-existent objects, one should lean towards allism (Lewis 1990). Others claimed that the debate between allism and noneism is merely verbal (Woodward 2013) or at least that part of it is (Schoonen and Berto 2018). After all, both sides are equally committed to merely possible and fictional objects. While in terms of noneism none of them exist, allists consider them to be existent and either abstract (Plantinga 1974; van Inwagen 1977) or unactualized spatiotemporal entities (Lewis 1978; 1986).

The above is based on the assumption that there is a proper translation between allists' and noneists' quantifiers. For the sake of argument, I will assume that there actually is one and that according to it noneists' 'is an object' is translated into allists' 'exists' and noneists' 'exists' is translated into allists' 'is an actual concrete' (Woodward 2013).[6] This—Richard Woodward claims—allows believing that the disagreement between noneism and allism is merely verbal.

The debate between two theories T_1 and T_2 is merely verbal when:

> for every sentence which T_1 says is true, there is a corresponding sentence which T_2 says is true. To be clear: the translation function only matches truths to truths and falsehoods to falsehoods, and it does so in a systematic and compositional manner. (Woodward 2013: 190)

As an example, let's consider two 'theories,' T_B and T_{UM}. The first has it that the domain of men divides into bachelors and non-bachelors. T_{UM} also distinguishes only two types of men. These however are not bachelors and non-bachelors, but unmarried and married men. If there

5 'Orthodoxy' in this case stands for thesis (A).
6 For more on a translation between noneism and allism, see (Priest 2016: 198-206).

is a translation function that for every true sentence of T_B of the form '*a* is a bachelor' delivers a true sentence of T_{UM} '*a* is an unmarried man,' then the question of whether *a* is a bachelor or unmarried man is merely verbal, and the disagreement between T_B and T_{UM} reduces to a choice of terminology.

3. (N) vs. (N*)

Let us assume that a similar function holds between sentences of noneism and allism, i.e., every sentence of the first can be translated into a sentence of the latter without a change in the truth-value of the sentence. Consequently, what differentiates them is merely a choice of terms. Where allists draw a distinction between the actually spatiotemporal and everything else, noneists see a distinction between existing and non-existing objects. What is crucial for the success of such a translation is the agreement on what the domain of objects contains:

> In particular, *any* object that the noneist embraces is a denizen of the allist's ontology. (Woodward 2013: 183)[7]

In other words, while noneists and allists may seem disagreeing on how to divide the domain of objects, they do agree on what belongs to this domain. Importantly, the assumption of the sameness of noneists' and allists' domain is crucial for those who consider the debate between these positions to be merely verbal. After all, if there were some discrepancies between the domains of T_1 and T_2, there would be no guarantee that for every sentence that T_1 says is true, there is a corresponding sentence that T_2 says is true. For example, if T_B has it that '*a* is a bachelor' and there were no object *a* within the domain of T_{UM}, it would not be the case that according to T_{UM} '*a* is an unmarried man' is true. The extension of 'unmarried man' would not include *a*, because there would be no *a* in the first place. The success of translating between T_1

[7] See also (Schoonen and Berto 2018: 3747).

and T_2 relies on the condition that their domains are the same. Thus, if there is no genuine disagreement between noneism and allism, this is – among others – because both sides agree on the domain of objects.

This alleged agreement on what belongs to the domain of objects is, however, doubtful. This is partly grounded in the noneist's rejection of ontological pluralism, which makes *every* abstract object fall into the single category of those that do not exist in any sense of the word. The neutral quantifier, however, quantifies these. Consequently, according to noneism

(a_N) 'Something is the largest natural number'

(b_N) 'Something is a prime number greater than 5'

(c_N) 'Something is a counterexample for Fermat's Last Theorem'

are true. The noneist's universe contains non-existent (abstract) objects such as the largest natural number, a prime number greater than 5, and a counterexample for Fermat's Last Theorem. By translation between noneism and allism, allists should consider

(a_A) 'There exists the largest natural number'

(b_A) 'There exists a prime number greater than 5'

(c_A) 'There exists a counterexample for Fermat's Last Theorem'

to be true as well. This puts allists in a problematic situation, because while (b_A) is true, both (a_A) and (c_A) are false. After all, none of the existing spatiotemporal or abstract objects is the largest natural number or a counterexample for Fermat's Last Theorem. Likewise in the case of impossible objects such as a round square or an object that is not an object (Priest 2016: 245). While they belong to the noneist's domain of objects, they do not belong to the allist's domain. None of them exists—neither as a merely possible concrete nor as an abstract object. Hence, there is no one-to-one correlation between their domains of objects. This result in discrepancies of truth-values of sentences such as 'some cupolas at Berkeley College are both round and square,' 'one of Sylvan's boxes simultaneously did and did not contain an object.' Both are true

in the face of noneism and neither is true in the face of allism, regardless of whether the quantifiers 'some' and 'one of' are restricted to the actual world, or are unrestricted and quantify also over merely possible objects. Hence, either the suggested translation between (N) and (N*) is implausible or allism is committed to the existence of impossible objects. The first consequence undermines the assumed closeness between allism and noneism, while the second transforms allism into a significantly more contentious position than its proponents would prefer it to be.

This shows that the disagreement between these views is not merely verbal, but substantial. Its subject is *not* the question of how the domain of objects should be divided considering the metaphysical nature of its elements, i.e., whether it divides along the distinctions existent/non-existent and actually concrete/non-actually concrete or abstract. The subject of the debate is rather the question of what belongs to this domain in the first place, i.e., what is an object (Sendłak 2022). In this regard, the noneist establishes their domain of objects based on the principle of characterization, which posits that every description corresponds to an object that satisfies that description (Priest 2005: 59-60). In contrast, allists hold a more restrained perspective, asserting that to be an object is to exist, and defining the latter as being identical to something (van Inwagen 2008: 49). The only agreement in this respect is that both noneism's and allism's sides have it that *everything* is an object. This, however—as Quine shows—is not the end the debate, but merely the beginning of it. While round squares, married bachelors and even something that is not an object finds a room in noneist universe, none of these examples align with the allist's understanding of an object.[8]

[8] The inclusion of non-identical objects is grounded in the unrestricted principle of characterization (Priest 2016; Sylvan 1995). Although the acceptance of this principle sparks controversies (Kroon 2012), it is not my intention to delve into this topic here.

Allists' criticism of noneism aimed to demonstrate that, due to the translation between these positions and the assumingly less controversial claims of allism, there are compelling reasons to lean towards the orthodox approach to the question of being. The belief in the debate between noneism and allism being merely verbal assumes a one-to-one correlation between the truth-values of sentences expressed in both frameworks. However, as I have argued, such correlation requires a similar alignment between the domains of objects posited by both sides. Since this correlation is lacking, the debate between noneism and allism is not merely verbal; rather, its subject pertains to the question of what belongs to the domain of objects.

Moreover, even if an agreement were reached regarding the domain, and the suggested translation worked effectively, it would rather support the noneist's position. After all, it is one thing to consider a round square as an object (albeit non-existent), and quite another to claim that it exists like any other object.

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