

Ontological Pluralism about Non-Being

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Neither square circles nor manned lunar stations exist. But might they fail to exist in different ways? A common assumption is “no”: everything that fails to exist, fails to exist in exactly the same way. Non-being doesn’t have joints or structure, the thinking goes—it is just a vast, undifferentiated nothingness. Even proponents of *ontological pluralism*, the view that there are multiple ways of being, do not entertain the possibility of multiple ways of non-being.

This paper is dedicated to the latter idea. I argue that *ontological pluralism about non-being*, roughly, the view that there are multiple ways of non-being, is both more plausible and defensible than it first seems, and it has many useful applications across a wide variety of metaphysical and explanatory problems.¹

Here is the plan. In section 1, I lay out ontological pluralism about non-being in detail, drawing on principles of ontological pluralism about being. I address whether and how the two pluralisms interact: some pluralists about non-being are monists about being, and vice-versa. I discuss logical quantification strategies for pluralists about non-being. In Section 2, I examine precedent for pluralism about non-being in the history of philosophy. In section 3, I discuss several applications of pluralism about non-being. I suggest that the view has explanatory power across a variety of domains, and that the view can account for differences between nonexistent past and future times, between omissions and absences, and between different kinds of fictional objects.

1. Ontological Pluralism

Ontological pluralism, the view that there are multiple fundamental ways of being, has enjoyed a resurgence of popularity in recent years. According to the

¹ Ontological pluralism about non-being holds that there are fundamental differences in types of non-being, not just differences in the characteristics of nonexistents.

ontological pluralist, entities can exist differently than each other: a number, for example, exists in a different way than a chair. According to the ontological pluralist, there are several fundamental different ways, modes, or kinds of being: some things exist in different ways than other things. These types of being are fundamental and irreducible to each other. For some ontological pluralists, there is no univocal category, *being*, to which all things belong. Rather, there is being₁, being₂, etc.² For other ontological pluralists, there is a univocal category of being that is less fundamental than types of being. I will remain neutral on these different pluralist strands.

Ontological pluralism suggests a connection between something's existence and its essence: there is a relationship between what kind of being something has and the particular sort of thing that it is. A number can exist₁, for example, but cannot exist₂: a number can never be a chair, no matter how much it changes. Specifically, there is a relationship between a thing's *strict* essence—what it is to be that thing—and the kind of being that it has. If what it is to be a chair is to have four spatially extended legs and a seat, for example, then being a chair implies that the chair is a *concretum*. For the pluralist, questions about an entity's being and its essence overlap heavily.³

If there are multiple ways of being, then taking an exhaustive inventory of reality requires more than listing what there is. As Cameron (2018) puts it, ontological pluralism means that there is more structure in the world than we thought there was: an extra dimension of existential sorting for which we must account. Drawing on the Quinean connection between existence and existential quantification, contemporary friends of ontological pluralism like Turner (2010, forthcoming) and McDaniel (2009) take seriously the idea that any theory that accurately describes reality makes use of more than one singular first-order existential quantifier in order to represent this extra structure. For some pluralists, these multiple restricted quantifiers are more “natural” than the singular unrestricted existential quantifier—they describe reality in a more accurate and finer-grained way.

Suppose that a pluralist takes there to be a fundamental difference between

² Canonical forms of ontological pluralism take there to be two equally fundamental ways of being, but there might be more than two.

³ See McDaniel (2017, p. 277) for a historically-rooted discussion of the relationship essence and existence.

abstracta and *concreta*. When she says that there are numbers and there are chairs, she means that there are₁ numbers and there are₂ chairs. Both existential quantifiers, \exists_1 and \exists_2 , carve nature at the joints: the existential quantifiers \exists_1 and \exists_2 are more fundamental than \exists .⁴ If one is taking an inventory of everything that there is, the pluralist's "is" is ambiguous between \exists_1 and \exists_2 , and the items in being must be sorted into either category. The pluralist's inventory is finer-grained than the list that falls in the domain of the single first-order existential quantifier, since it includes everything that there either is₁ or is₂.

The pluralist about being is motivated by a desire to account for multiple ranges of existents that exhibit very different features from each other. A pluralist might believe that numbers exist differently than chairs, that God exists differently than humans, or that *abstracta* exist differently than *concreta*, to name a few examples. McDaniel (2017) and Spencer (2012) point to three overlapping main categories of argument for ontological pluralism: theological, phenomenological, and ontological. Theological motivations for pluralism involve the ability to explain God's different mode of existence from other non-God things. God is so different from other things, the thinking goes, that she must exist differently than everything else. The phenomenological strategy uses the apparent experiential differences between, for example, perceiving a number and perceiving a chair as evidence of multiple ways of being. *Abstracta* and *concreta* are given so differently in experience that different sorts of being are the best explanation. The ontological strategy proceeds from the idea that different sorts of entities behave differently, and ontological pluralism is the best explanation for these fundamental differences.

Now consider that there are many sorts of nonexistents: omissions, holes, shadows, possibilia, impossibilia, and fictions, to name a few examples. Plausibly, there are some differences within and between these sorts of nonexistents. The pluralist about non-being shares some basic motivations with the pluralist about being: she can best explain ontological, phenomenological, and theological phenomena by positing multiple forms of non-being. The ontologically-motivated pluralist might take the difference

⁴ There is some debate about whether the pluralist should recognize a generic quantifier that ranges over all of being, with more fundamental restrictions, or simply deny that there is a generic quantifier. I do not take a stand on this issue here, but see Rettler (forthcoming) for an interesting take. See Simmons (forthcoming) for a detailed look at whether the pluralist can accept a generic notion of being.

between impossible and possible nonexistent objects, or the difference between nonexistent past and future times, to be best modeled by a joint in non-being. Another pluralist might seek to explain phenomenological differences between thoughts about non-existent numbers versus thoughts about nonexistent people. And pluralism about non-being opens up a heretofore underexplored option in theological space: a theist can believe that God doesn't always exist, but can plausibly come into being and go out of being. It would be natural for her to hold that God's non-being is different than run-of-the-mill non-being had by mere objects and persons: it's a special, divine sort of non-being. (In Section 2 below, I discuss some historical precedent for this view.)

With these motivations in hand, we are in a position to investigate non-being. Call *ontological pluralism about non-being* the view that there are several fundamental different ways, modes, or kinds of non-being. Non-being has structure beyond the list of what does not exist: things that fail to exist, fail to exist differently than each other. If one is a certain kind of pluralist about non-being for *concreta* and *abstracta*, for example, nonexistent chairs and numbers do not share a univocal property of non-being. If we wish to speak of both, we must say that the chair has non-being₁, and the number has non-being₂. Non-being is not a univocal property: speaking of something's non-being is ambiguous between non-being₁ and non-being₂.

The pluralist about non-being might or might not embrace the same attitude towards being: she can believe in ways of non-being and being, or just one or the other.⁵ Call a *bilateral pluralist* one who believes in multiple ways of being and non-being, and a *unilateral pluralist* one who believes in just one or the other. Such a unilateral pluralist could hold, for example, that a square circle and a nonexistent chair have different ways of non-being, but that all existents exist the same way. The bilateral pluralist need not believe that the joints in non-being mirror those in being: she might accept differences in nonexistence between impossible and possible objects, but differences in existence between *abstracta* and *concreta*.⁶ Call bilateral pluralists who believe in different joints in being and non-being *asymmetric pluralists*, and those who believe in equivalent joints

⁵ Plausibly, the Stoics had this view. See Caston (1999) for a subtle interpretation of the Stoics on non-being and nonexistence.

⁶ Both symmetric and asymmetric pluralists may be what Caplan (2011) calls superpluralists, roughly, those who believe in different ways of being an ontological pluralist.

in being and non-being *symmetric* pluralists.

The pluralist about non-being stipulates that there is a sort of structure in non-being. Though different kinds of pluralists might stipulate different kinds of structure, a common view of structure is a “pegboard” model, thus described by Turner:

“Ontological structure is the sort of structure we could adequately represent with a pegboard and rubber bands. The pegs represent things, and the rubber bands represent ways these things are and are interrelated.” (2011, p. 2)

The non-being pluralist accepts a “multiple pegboards” picture, according to which there are two different kinds of propertied and related items in non-being. As there can be relations across kinds of being (I, a *concretum*, can think of a number, an *abstractum*), there can be relations across kinds of non-being (I am such that I do not eat square circles).

Just as the ontologist of being has principles for discerning how many things exist, so too the ontologist of non-being can ask how many things don’t exist. The latter takes the task of creating an ontological inventory one step further: she asks how many entities fail to exist in more specific ways. The pluralist about non-being is as much an ontologist as that of being, since she seeks a sorted inventory of everything that fails to exist.

Believing in ways of being transforms questions about existence into questions about multiple forms of existence. McDaniel (2013), for example, suggests that ontological pluralism splits the question of why there is something rather than nothing into multiple questions:

“If there are modes of being, that is, different ways to be, then either in addition to or instead of the question “why is there something, rather than nothing?”, we should pursue, for each mode of being, the question of why there is, in that way, something rather than nothing.” (2013, p. 277)

Similarly, the friend of ways of non-being splits the something-rather-than-nothing

question into multiple finer-grained questions. The unilateral pluralist turns that question into: “why is there something rather than nothing₁ or nothing₂?” The bilateral pluralist would ask: “why is there₁ something₁ or there₂ something₂ rather than nothing₁ or nothing₂?”

Denying that something exists is different than conveying that it has a specific sort of non-being. The former involves straightforward negative existential quantification, whereas the latter requires stipulation of an entity that has a specific kind of non-being. Supposing I am a unilateral pluralist about non-being, when I say “There is no Tyrannosaurus Rex with pink feathers in South Bend, Indiana”, I do not necessarily mean that there is a Tyrannosaurus Rex with pink feathers that has non-being₁. Rather, I intend to convey that there just isn’t anything that corresponds to that description. Note the difference between this sort of statement and one that is intended to convey that a nonexistent object is in some sense “out there” in liminal reality, as in “There is a Greek god of war.”

This juncture is where one might turn to existential quantification in order to sort things out. One option follows Parsons (1980), Jacquette (1996), Zalta (1988), and Priest (2005) in positing different notations for “there is” (\exists) and “there exists” ($E!$). Depending on one’s system, one can either have a special quantifier, or an existence predicate for only things that exist. Here I focus on the predicate strategy. On this scheme, the logical form for “There is an x such that x doesn’t exist” is $\exists x(px \ \& \ \neg E!x)$. “There is a square circle but it doesn’t exist”, for example, becomes $\exists x(scx \ \& \ \neg E!x)$. Now, one might be tempted to hold that the logical form for a unilateral non-being pluralist’s claim is $\exists x(px \ \& \ \neg E!_1x)$, or “There is an x such that x doesn’t exist₁”. The specific claim about the square circle becomes $\exists x(scx \ \& \ \neg E!_1x)$, or “There is a square circle that doesn’t exist₁”. The problem with this logical form is that it is better interpreted as a claim made by a pluralist about being rather than a pluralist about non-being: it denies a particular positive way of being to the square circle, but does not postulate a specific way of non-being.

With a bit of tweaking, however, the dual notation strategy can be easily adopted by the friend of non-being. As above, let \exists denote ontologically neutral “there is” and $E!$ denote ontologically committed “there exists”. Subscripts denote ways of being. Distinguish between two claims that a pluralist about non-being may wish to make: (i)

there are no square circles, and (ii) square circles have non-being₁. The former denies that there is anything in being or non-being meeting the description “square circle”; the latter accords a spot in non-being₁ to a square circle. The first claim can be represented with

$$\neg\exists x(scx)$$

to be interpreted as “There are no square circles.” The second, substantive claim about non-being can be represented with

$$(\exists_1x)(scx \ \& \ \neg E!x)$$

or “There is₁ a square circle, and anything that exists is not it.” (A more perspicuous, less introduction-to-logic-y translation is “There is₁ a square circle, and it does not exist.”)

Here is one way to understand the latter claim. Assuming that there is an ontologically neutral sense in which the square circle is “out there”, that leaves two options with respect to heavy-duty ontological commitment to the square circle: either the square circle has non-being, or it has existence. A square circle can’t have existence. But it can have non-being. By utilizing both the neutral quantifier and the committed existence predicate, the friend of non-being can hold that square circles have a specific kind of non-being without having existence. What is distinctive for the pluralist is that the subscripted notation, “ \exists_1x ”, specifies a particular mode of non-being—a way of being “out there”—for the square circle. “ $\neg E!x$ ” denies the existence of the square circle.

Another option for representing assertions of pluralistic non-being is to imbue logical negations themselves with ontological import. Let \neg_1 mean “there is not₁” and \neg_2 mean “there is not₂.” For the pluralist about non-being, $\neg_1\exists$ and $\neg_2\exists$ carve non-being closer to the joints than $\neg\exists$. Note that these notations are different than $\neg\exists_1$ and $\neg\exists_2$: the former represent ways of non-being, whereas the latter represent negations of ways of being. Suppose that a pluralist believes in a fundamental difference between possible and impossible nonexistents. If she wants to hold that a square circle has non-being₁, she would represent such a claim as $\neg_1\exists x(scx)$, or “There is not₁ a square circle.” This claim is substantively different than “The square circle doesn’t exist₁”, which only denies a

certain form of positive being. The notation with the restricted logical negation explicitly reserves a spot for the chair in the inventory of non-being₁. The friend of this strategy incurs a few extra explanatory burdens: she must explain what subscripted negation is. She must also reckon with the meaning of the subscripted negation in contexts with less ontological importance. For example, she should explain what it means to be not₁ hungry or not₂ red. Nonetheless, it is an option worth exploring.

Now, a natural objection to ontological pluralism about non-being is that it overly reifies non-existence. The thought is that being has a kind of *oomph* that distinguishes it from non-being. The pretheoretic concept of non-being is that it is a hazy, unstructured nothingness-- it does not include natural joints and structure. While being enjoys rich structure and complexity, non-being is just a label under which nonexistent things fall. Being is ontologically thick, the thinking goes, while non-being is thin and formless.

A closely related objection holds that pluralism about non-being reifies specific nonexistents. Consider the atheist who says: "Look. When I say that God does not exist, I mean that she *really does not exist*. I do not mean that there is an omniscient, all-powerful being sitting around in non-being, with all of the details, properties, and contours of an existent, but inhering in a different ontological category. I mean that there isn't *anything* like that, in any sense." If the things that have non-being have substance, the worry goes, they become very being-like. We should be able to deny that things exist full stop.

The pluralist has several lines of response to these lines of thinking. In reply to the objector who worries about reifying nonexistents with too much specificity, she can hold that not every description corresponds to an item in non-being. Consider the description "being such that one is a golden dragon if each member of the Beatles wears a red hat on a Tuesday". Even if nothing of that description exists, one need not accept that this description correspond exactly to an item in non-being: plentitudinous descriptions do not necessarily equate to plentitudinous items in non-being.

Accepting reified nonexistents can also be theoretically useful. Suppose that a theist and an atheist disagree on the existence of God on Cartesian grounds. The theist thinks that God must exist because existence is more perfect than nonexistence. The atheist thinks that God doesn't exist because nonexistence isn't necessarily better than existence. Here, the atheist would be well-served by a reified nonexistent, God, about

whose nature she can argue. Utilizing straightforward negative existential quantification is less useful than granting God a kind of non-being, but arguing about her nature.

2. Historical Precedent for Pluralism about Non-Being

The pluralist follows Meinong (1904) in accepting the idea that things can have a kind of being without having existence. Meinong famously distinguishes between objects that *exist* (you, your iPhone, the Eiffel Tower), things that *subsist* (the number twelve, the proposition that snow is white), and impossible things that neither exist nor subsist (a round square, the proof that $2+2 = 5$).⁷ Pluralism about non-being captures some of the spirit of Meinongianism insofar as some nonexistent things have what others take to be the hallmarks of being: properties, relations, and classification under distinct ontological categories. Subsistence is an ontologically rich form of non-being rather than a hazy nothingness without structure.

There are many available Meinongian positions in logical space available to the pluralist about non-being. One option is to hew very closely to the letter of Meinong's theory, while another option is to abandon the letter and remain close to the spirit. Consider the unilateral pluralist who believes in one way of being, but two ways of non-being: one for impossible things and one for merely nonexistent things. This sort of pluralist shares a tripartite ontology of being and non-being with Meinong, as the major ontological joints fall in very similar, and possibly identical, places. Other pluralists might embrace the spirit of Meinongianism but fall farther from the original view. For example, some pluralists about non-being might take the division in nonexistent things to lie between, e.g., God and non-God things rather than possible and impossible things. The symmetric pluralist postulates joints in being in addition to those in non-being. How many joints there are, and where they fall, determine whether a pluralist is Meinongian or merely neo-Meinongian. Either way, accepting the substantivity of non-being has a strong whiff of Meinongianism.

In addition to Meinong's friendliness to substantive non-being, there is scattered

⁷ Here I follow Reicher (2019) in taking this to be a plausible interpretation of Meinong, though Meinong interpretation is a controversial matter.

historical precedent for accepting different ways of non-being. Here I will discuss a few instances, though I expect that there are more if one searches for them.

Following Moran and Guiu (2019), I interpret John Scotus Eriugena as positing five modes of being and correlative modes of non-being. There are things accessible to senses (and things that are not), orders of created natures (and their differences), actual things (and potential non-things), things perceived by the intellect alone (and those that are not), and those infused with divine grace (and those that are not.) The joints in non-being mirror those in being. Arguably, Eriugena also makes use of a distinctive form of non-being to make sense of God's self-creation. He holds that God is beyond being and non-being, but gradually self-creates from "divine darkness" into light. Such "divine darkness" is a special kind of non-being from which being stems, and is different than ordinary nonexistence.⁸

Simone Weil (1947, p. xxi) makes similar use of a special form of non-being to make sense of an "absent god". According to Weil, God "withdrew" from full existence in order to make room for the universe. Persons, too, are created from the space which God has deserted: a distinct form of non-being from whence being arises.

Theological motivations were not the only underpinnings of historical pluralism about non-being. The Stoics believed in multiple fundamental types of incorporeal entities: time, place, void, and expressibles. Following Long and Sedley (1987), I take the fundamental unit of Stoic ontology to be the "something", or the thing that exists. A common reading of the Stoics is that what it is to be something—that is, what it is to exist—is to be an object of thought and discourse. But certain objects like centaurs, while being proper objects of thought and discourse, do not exist. The Stoics thus posit a liminal sort of existence, subsistence, that characterizes nonexistent objects. According to this view, there are "somethings" that do not exist. Caston (1999) suggests that this reading creates a contradiction: there are things that do not count as things. He argues for an interpretation of Stoic ontology that avoids this contradiction, according to which each universal is a "something", but is not necessarily real. Essentially, there are nonexistent "somethings" that are different than other nonexistents. Apart from particular interpretive matters, it is clear that the Stoics were friendly to different ways of thinking about non-

⁸ Bosley and Tweedale (2006, p. 573) also support this reading.

being.

Sartre (1969) affirms the reality of nothingness (“le néant”), and distinguishes between at least two sorts of non-beings. There is a concrete kind of nothingness as represented by an absence—for example, a friend failing to show up for a meal—and a more abstract kind of nothingness exemplified by square circles. Absences are brought about by human consciousness insofar as they are products of expectations. Sartre’s view draws on his admiration of Heidegger’s work on nothingness, in which he infamously claimed “The nothing itself nothings.” Nozick took up the task of ontologically interpreting Heidegger’s claim:

“Imagine this force as a vacuum force, sucking things into nonexistence or keeping them there. If this force acts upon itself, it sucks nothingness into nothingness, producing something or, perhaps, everything, every possibility. If we introduced the verb “to nothing” to denote what this nothingness force does to things as it makes or keeps them nonexistent, then (we would say) the nothingness nothings itself.” (1981, p. 123)

While Nozick’s approach doesn’t stipulate pluralism about non-being or push us towards such a view, such a conception of non-being takes it seriously as having distinctive behavior. Viewing non-being as a kind of force or actor is a foundation for the idea that different nonexistents behave differently.⁹

3. What Ontological Pluralism about Non-Being Can Do

Ontological pluralism about non-being can be applied to a number of issues in metaphysics. There are a few points to which I will attend before enumerating them. First, one might wish to deploy degrees of non-being rather than ways of non-being for some of these issues. Here I do not focus on this view, but it is worth mentioning the possibility. Second, it should be obvious that one would not want to hold all of these pluralisms about non-being at once; this discussion is simply intended to be a case study

⁹ See Skow (2010) for an analysis of Nozick’s claim informed by contemporary physics.

of various applications. Finally, the list is not exhaustive: there are likely many more applications of ways of non-being than I discuss in this section.

a. Presentist Ontological Pluralism about Non-Present Events and Objects

Presentists about time believe that only the present events and objects exist. They are to be contrasted with *eternalists*, who believe that all events and objects exist, and *growing block* theorists, who hold that past and present events and objects exist. For growing block theorists, existence distinguishes future events from past and present ones. For both presentists and eternalists, there are no ontological differences between past and future events: they don't exist for presentists, and they do exist for eternalists.

One explanatory burden for ontologies of time is to account for the apparent differences between the past and the future. For example, the past seems fixed and unchangeable in a way that the future is not. Humans often prefer pain to be in their past and pleasure to be in their future. And the direction of causation seems to run from the past to the future.

Presentists have a unique explanatory possibility, however. The presentist can accept a certain kind of pluralism about non-being, according to which the past and the future are fundamentally different kinds of non-being. Presentist pluralism about non-present times challenges the dominant assumption in the presentist literature that the two kinds of unreality are the same kind.¹⁰ Past and future events have different kinds of non-being, and they do not share a univocal property of non-being. Consider a past and future event: your birth and your lunch one month from now. The pluralist presentist can hold that the birth has past nonexistence and the lunch has future nonexistence. The present moment is the ontological cleavage between the two fundamental ways of non-being.¹¹ Events do not fail to exist *simpliciter*; they fail to exist in more specific ways.

Different ways of non-being can help explain phenomenological differences between experiences of the past and the future: we remember one, but not the other. The past and the future differ in the way they are given to us in experience. The view also

¹⁰ Prior (1972, p. 245) hints at this view, presumably unintentionally, in writing that “The present simply is the real considered in relation to two particular species of unreality, namely the past and the future.”

¹¹ McDaniel (2017, pp. 81-86) proposes that pluralism be applied to ontological differences between the past and the present.

supports ontological differences past and future-- for example, the fixity of the past and the openness of the future.¹²

According to some essentialist interpretations of ontological pluralism, something that has one kind of being can never have the other kind of being. To use an earlier example, a chair can never be a number. The presentist friend of pluralism should deny the equivalent view about non-being, since moments that have one kind of non-being will eventually have the other kind of non-being: future moments will become past moments.

b. Omissions versus Absences

Intuitively, there are differences between *omissions*, roughly, events that are close to occurring but do not occur, and *absences*, roughly, things that are not close to occurring and do not occur. I caused my plant's death by omitting to water it; I very well could have watered it. I also did not go shopping with Abraham Lincoln last night, leaving me to wonder whether he would have liked the shoes that I eventually picked out. But I could not have gone shopping with Abraham Lincoln: such an event was not even close to occurring. A puzzle for causation theorists is how to distinguish between omissions and absences: both do not exist, but one seems intuitively different from the other. Omissions cause things to happen; mere absences do not, or at least do not exert the same kind of causal power.

It might be initially tempting to distinguish between absences and omissions on the basis of their possibility: absences are not causally efficacious because they are impossible events, but omissions are causally efficacious because they are possible. It is impossible to go shopping with Abraham Lincoln, after all, while it is possible to set an alarm clock.

But drawing the line between omissions and absences on the basis of possibility is wrong, for several reasons. First, some omissions are impossible. Suppose that the assistant professor fails to prove that $2+2=5$, and is thus denied tenure. In Bernstein (2016), I argue for the position that such omissions are causally efficacious. Suppose that one accepts a simple counterfactual account of causation, according to which c is a cause

¹² In this vein, Cameron (2011), a rare contemporary friend of pluralism about non-being, argues that the view can help reconcile presentism with truthmaker theory.

of e if e would not have occurred had c not occurred. Then many omissive causal statements come out as true, including ones involving impossible omissions. The counterpossible “If she hadn’t failed to prove that $2+2=5$, she would have been awarded tenure” is true and non-vacuous. Such causal counterpossibles also furnish correct predictions and explanations. In some contexts, impossible events are closer to actuality than possible ones.

Another reason not to draw the absence/ omission distinction in terms of possibility is that many absences are intuitively possible, but causally inefficacious. There is no actual-size replica of the city of Paris in the empty fields between Indianapolis and Chicago, but such a thing is possible. It’s not even close to occurring: it’s simply not there. Without a particular causal or predictive context, this absence doesn’t cause anything to happen, even though it is possible. Impossibility and possibility do not correctly carve the absence/ omission distinction.

The ontological pluralist about non-being has a ready solution, however: she can hold that absences and omissions have different ways of non-being. Here’s how it would work. In the case of my failing to water the plant, there are at least two non-beings: the omission of my watering the plant, and the absence of my watering the plant. Supposing that absences have non-being₁ and omissions have non-being₂, they are fundamentally ontologically distinctive. One virtue of this view is that one need not identify a particular non-event as an absence *or* an omission, since both non-beings correspond to a particular non-event. There is an absence with non-being₁ of the plant-watering, and an omission with non-being₂ of the plant-watering. One is non-causal and the other is causal. Context makes one or the other salient.

A virtue of the view is that it helps with the *problem of profligate omissions*. The problem is as follows. Suppose that one accepts a simple counterfactual account of causation, according to which c is a cause of e if e would not have occurred had c not occurred. And suppose that one accepts that omissions can be causes. Then, for any particular omission that is a cause, there will also be countless other counterfactual dependence-generating non-occurrences. For example, the counterfactual “Had I not failed to water the plant, the plant would not have died” is intuitively true, but so is “Had Barack Obama not failed to water the plant, the plant would not have died.” Many more

non-occurrences count as causes than are intuitively so.

The pluralist about non-being, however, has a ready explanation for this problem. She can hold that there are a select few omissions, non-beings with causal efficacy, which have one way of non-being. And she can hold that there are profligate absences, non-beings without causal efficacy, which have another way of non-being. This pluralist accepts a plentitude of non-beings that are absences, but only a select few non-beings that are omissions. That way, the pluralist can account for the countless non-occurrences that are happening at any given time without ascribing them all causal efficacy.

For the proponent of this solution, multiple relevant distinctions will be hyperintensional. There is a *hyperintensional* distinction when two necessarily extensionally equivalent expressions are not intersubstitutable *salva veritate*—that is, when changing out the positions of necessary equivalents changes the truth value of a sentence. Some impossible omissive statements are hyperintensional: every world at which the circle fails to be a square is also a world in which two plus three fails to equal six. But these are different omissions. Omissions and absences might also be hyperintensional: every world where the mathematician couldn't have proved that $2+2=5$ is also a world where she failed to prove that $2+2=5$. But, intuitively, the absence is different than the omission. Pluralism about non-being does justice to these differences between negative entities relevant to causation and causal explanation.

c. The Ontology of Fictions

Another area where positing ways of non-being is useful is in accounting for the ontology of fictional objects. Fictional objects are those objects posited by works of fiction, like Captain Yossarian in Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*, the nameless narrator in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, and Issa Dee in HBO's *Insecure*. On the one hand, such objects do not intuitively exist in the "full" sense that you and I exist—we cannot physically interact with them, change them, or bump into them in the supermarket. On the other hand, fictional objects seem to exist in some other, more robust sense than fully nonexistent objects.

Ways of non-being can account for this difference: the pluralist about non-being can hold that fictional objects have one kind of non-being and other nonexistent objects

have another kind of non-being. This fundamental ontological distinction respects the intuitive difference between fictional objects and simply nonexistent objects, while doing justice to the idea that they don't exist the way that you and I exist.

Another place that pluralism about non-being can be of use is in distinguishing between impossible and possible fictions. Impossible fictions are fictions that describe impossible entities or scenarios. Such scenarios are particularly common in fiction involving time travel. Pluralism accounts for such differences by positing different kinds of non-being for impossible and possible fictional entities: impossible mathematical entities, like the proof of the inconsistency of mathematics in Ted Chiang's "Division by Zero", have different non-being than Yossarian.

Pluralism can also be of service in accounting for *nested* fictions, or fictional entities within fictional entities. The HBO television show *Insecure* features several secondary shows-within-the-show. "Due North" is a show-within-the-show set in the pre-Civil War South with its own actors and well-developed fictional narrative. The third season of *Insecure* includes "Kev'yn", a comedy series-within-the-show. And the fourth season features "Looking for LaToya", a fictional true crime show-within-the-show. In each case, the nested show is a distinct fictional entity from *Insecure*, with its own plot and characters. The characters in *Insecure* think about and discuss each nested show, but like us, they do not physically interact with fictions.

One reason it is important to distinguish between nested and primary fictions is that we want a way of justifying statements of the form "According to the fiction, ____." Truth-according-to-a-fiction is often seen as different than truth *simpliciter*: it is true according to the fiction that Sherlock Holmes smokes a pipe, but false that Sherlock Holmes smokes a literal pipe. Determining truth-according-to-a-fiction is a fairly easy task in cases in which the claim in question is explicitly stated in the fiction. For example, Issa Dee, the protagonist of *Insecure*, lives in Inglewood, so "According to the fiction, Issa Dee lives in Inglewood" is true because it is explicitly displayed in the fiction. But in cases of nested fictions, it is not necessarily the case that something true according to the primary fiction is true according to the secondary fiction, and vice versa. In *Kev'yn*, for example, Kev'yn and Yolonda stage a protest. It is true according to *Kev'yn* that they stage a protest, but it is not necessarily true according to *Insecure*. Similarly, it is not

necessarily true according to *Kev'yn* that Issa Dee lives in Inglewood.

Pluralism about non-being can account for nested fictions by positing distinct kinds of non-being for “primary” fictional entities, like those in *Insecure*, and “secondary” nested fictional entities, like those in *Kev'yn*. The characters and entities in *Insecure* have one sort of non-being, and the characters in each nested fiction have another. This way, truths-according-to-*Insecure* and truths-according-to-*Kev'yn* are grounded in different kinds of nonexistence. “Kev'yn and Yolonda staged a protest” is true according to *Kev'yn*, and “Issa Dee lives in Inglewood” is true according to *Insecure*. The difference in truth conditions is grounded in an ontological joint in non-being.

4. Conclusion

The preceding discussion has suggested that *ontological pluralism about non-being*, the view that there are multiple ways, kinds, or modes of non-being, is worthy of serious philosophical consideration. The view has not enjoyed the same attention as pluralism about being, but it is a natural complement to it. The view also has promising explanatory power for a range of theological, metaphysical, and phenomenological *explananda*, and deserves extensive further investigation. One need not think that non-being is, well, *nothing*: it might have explanatory and metaphysical structure unto itself.¹³

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