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ARE THERE NONEXISTENT ENTITIES?

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Professor Butchvarov begins his book Being Qua Being[1] with a series of puzzles, the first of which he calls the apparent existence of nonexistent things. Since we think and speak about such nonexistent things as Santa Claus or an hallucinatory pink rat, it seems that there are things of which it is true to say that there are no such things. But this can't be right; at least, it certainly seems like a contradiction to say it. So, how shall we understand our reference, or apparent reference, to nonexistent things, so as to avoid this contradiction?

Butchvarov connects this problem intimately to another problem, which he calls the apparent distinctness of identicals. If the statement "Dr. Jeckel is Mr. Hyde" is to be understood as informative (a material identity statement), not just a way of saying that Dr. Jeckel is Dr. Jeckel (a formal identity statement), then it looks like there are two things about which it is true to say that there aren't two such things, but only one. How can such pairs of things exist? How can a material identity statement ever be true?

Butchvarov proposes a joint solution to these two problems (plus some others that I won't discuss), in terms of a very, very basic, "protometaphysical" distinction between objects and entities. This distinction is not intended as a partition of things in the world like the distinction between solids and liquids, but rather as a purely conceptual distinction, like Aristotle's distinction between matter and form. As with matter and form, it is the same ordinary things that appear both as objects and as entities, except that some objects are not also entities. Mere objecthood is enough for reference, or to be brought before the mind, but not enough to exist; it is entityhood that entails, or, rather, is existence. Butchvarov solves the initial nonexistence problem by saying that things like Santa Claus and the hallucinatory pink rat are objects, but they are not also entities. So we can think and talk about them, even though they don't exist. He solves the material identity problem simultaneously by saying that such pairs as Jeckel and Hyde are two objects but only one entity. Qua objects, there are two things that we think or speak about when we say that Jeckel is Hyde; qua entity there is only one.

So, how do we tell which objects are entities? What makes an object into an entity? According to Butchvarov, nothing else than its being identical with other objects. To say that Jeckel is Hyde is nothing more or less than to say that one thing exists that is both of them, one entity that is both objects. The concepts of existence and identity are thus, on Butchvarov's account, so close as to be almost the same thing.

This is a bold and powerful theory, which greatly impresses everyone who studies it with care, whether they ultimately agree with it or not. I am inclined to agree. But I believe that there is a grave problem with Butchvarov's elaboration of this basic theory, having to do with the status of certain types of nonexistent things, including fictional and mythological things. Butchvarov is aware of this problem and discusses it, though he does not take it as seriously as I would wish him to. In this paper I will describe the problem, criticize in detail Butchvarov's approach to solving it, and briefly lay out what I take to be the main alternative solution.

Here is the problem. We all know that Jeckel and Hyde are identical.[2] This means that they are not just two objects but also one entity, i. e. one existing thing. So, according to Butchvarov's theory Dr. Jeckel exists, since he is identical to somebody else, namely Mr. Hyde.

But Dr. Jeckel doesn't exist. He is not a real person. He is just a guy in a story. This is also true with Butchvarov's own first example of a nonexistent object, namely Santa Claus – for who is Santa Claus but Saint Nicholas, also identical to Father Christmas? These are plainly all the same person, even though that person doesn't exist. Similarly, Venus is identical to Aphrodite, just as much as the Morning Star is to the Evening Star. And one doesn't have to be a pagan to think so; I know perfectly well that Venus and Aphrodite are not real. Superman is Clark Kent; Batman is Bruce Wayne; James Bond is 007 - we can come up with as many such examples as we wish. So it looks like identity is not restricted to real things, but occurs all over the place, among real and unreal things alike. But this plain fact seems to wreck Butchvarov's whole explanation of existence in terms of identity, according to which a single true material identification is enough to make an object real. So, it looks like Butchvarov can solve the puzzle of the apparent existence of nonexistent things, only at the cost of creating a new puzzle regarding the apparent identity of nonexistent things.

Here is the problem in terms of three inconsistent statements:

(1) Any two identical objects are an entity.
(2) Some pairs of unreal objects are identical.
(3) All entities are real.

At least one of these statements has to be false. So, which one should we falsify, and why? Statement (1) is, of course, the very core of Butchvarov's account. It might turn out to be false, I suppose, but such a possibility is not interesting here. If we have any faith at all in Butchvarov's approach, then falsifying (2) and falsifying (3) are the only strategies to look at. And this is awkward, because both (2) and (3) seem superficially to be true. The strategy of denying (2) forces us somehow to explain the falsity a broad range of apparently true material identity statements. The strategy of denying (3) forces us into something like a many-worlds position, which might pose the risk of an embarrassing, Meinongian profusion of beings.

Butchvarov chooses the first of these strategies over the second, and I think that this is a mistake. He affirms (3), claiming that only real things can exist, and denies (2), claiming that only real things can figure in material identity. So, he must try to convince us that such apparently material identity statements as "Jeckel is Hyde" or "Aphrodite is Venus" are either false or meaningless, despite the fact that common speech and (I think) common sense would have us say that they are true. Butchvarov explains his reasoning on this point in Chapter 4, section VII of Being Qua Being. Here is what he says:

> [T]he proposition that whatever does not exist is not identifiable seems implausible. And it is not difficult to see the reason for this. In addition to saying, or imagining, or dreaming, or hallucinating, or thinking that a certain nonexistent object has some ordinary property or relation, we sometimes also say, or imagine, or dream, or hallucinate, or think that it is the same as some other nonexistent object…But while it is because of such undeniable facts that we may be sceptical regarding the account of existence as identifiability, they do not themselves constitute a reason for rejecting that account…[W]hat is at issue is precisely whether it could be true, whether the concept of identity can be coherently applied to such situations, not whether it is in fact applied to them. (pp. 112-113)

Butchvarov asks how one could tell whether or not such identity judgments are true, and responds:

> Nothing would count as a reason for an answer. Certainly no mere similarity…and what additional reason could there be?...[T]he concept of identity is not applicable to nonexistent things because there are no criteria for such an application, because there are no criteria of identity for nonexistent things. (p. 114)

Butchvarov claims that nonexistent things are not truly identifiable because they are not indefinitely identifiable:

> We recognize that nothing would count as returning to the thing again and again, singling it out from any point of view we desire; that it is false that there are circumstances in which we would encounter it again, or that we could track it through space and time and investigate it. And this is exactly what we mean by saying of such a thing that it is unreal, that it does not exist…We regard it as nonexistent precisely because there are severe restrictions on its identifiability, precisely because it is not indefinitely identifiable…[W]here there is no indefinite reidentifiability, there is no genuine identifiability either. (pp. 117-118)

Let me note in passing how question-begging some of this looks. The stuff about all points of view and tracking things through space and time seems to be building physical reality as we know it right into the concept of identity. Seemingly all of a sudden, protometaphysics, which is supposed to be the exploration of pure, basic concepts, has turned into plain metaphysics, the discussion of reality itself. Perhaps what Butchvarov is doing here is only giving an example of some ways in which an object could be indefinitely reidentified, not demanding in advance that all entities be reidentifiable in just these ways. In any case, a little further on he gives his definition in a more concise and abstract way:

> What is meant by the indefinite identifiability of an object? The answer is simple: there are…an indefinite number of objects such that the object is identical with each of them. (p. 119)

Thus the reappearance of an imaginary object only through memory is not enough to reidentify that object, according to Butchvarov, because there is no way of grasping the second appearance independently, as another object. If one is recalling through memory a thing singled out in only one way, then there is no possibility of surprise: one's identity judgment is not a genuine, material one (a = b), but only a formal one (a = a).

Butchvarov supports his arguments here with four running examples. Three of these are what we might call private objects – a dream-house in a woman's dreams, a girl in a teenager's passionate visualizations, and the famous hallucinatory pink rat. I don't want to talk about such private objects more than necessary here. There are perhaps indeed good reasons, parallel to Wittgenstein's argument against private languages, for finding identity judgments among such objects incoherent, on grounds of the impossibility of mistake.

I want to concentrate instead on the fourth type of example, namely characters in fiction (and I would add mythology and certain other categories), because these are public objects that

we all might know about and wonder about, and where there is, it seems to me, a lively possibility of our being proved wrong in our identity judgments – as we frequently are, for example, when reading a well-written mystery novel. But we do not have to be reading a story (or even to have read it) to be able to identify its objects falsely. I might say that I have always liked the way Huck Finn got all those other kids to paint the fence that he was supposed to paint. But then I discover, or remember, that the boy who did that was not Huck Finn; it was Tom Sawyer. The first identification I made, that Huck Finn was the boy who tricked the other children into painting a fence for him, turned out to be false. The second one, that it was Tom Sawyer who pulled off that trick, is plainly true. And there seems to be a clear enough criterion for distinguishing the false identification from the true one: just look in the book, or ask anyone who knows the story.

Butchvarov seems to be aware that such public nonexistent objects are at least somewhat special, not quite like such private objects as hallucinatory pink rats or fantasized hot teenage babes. And he says a number of interesting things about them, which are not, I think, however, always consistent with each other, or with his general approach to handling identity and nonexistence.

First, he says:

> …[M]any of the common examples of nonexistent things ought to receive prior elucidation by other branches of philosophy if anything of protometaphysical significance is to rest on them. Fictional things are such examples. Unlike hallucination, dreaming, and imagination, fiction is a certain mode of discourse and thus cannot directly acquaint us with objects. Whether, and the extent to which, genuine reference to fictional things is made, the differences between the author's and the reader's reference, what I shall later describe as the analogical applications to fictional things of the concepts of existence and identity, are all issues specific to the philosophy of literature that require independent examination. (p. 89)

Here, Butchvarov appears to be minimizing the problem posed to his theory by fictitious objects, in two ways. The first is by making the astounding claim that such objects have to be successfully analyzed before they are allowed to serve as commonsense counterexamples to his theory, and analyzed not by metaphysicians, but only by a handful of specialists in the so-called philosophy of literature. This is like telling Aristotle not to talk about the forms of statues until somebody else comes up with a complete "philosophy of sculpture". The second way that Butchvarov seems to minimize his problem is by suggesting that fiction should be viewed as a "mode of discourse" sufficiently separate from ordinary discourse as to cast doubt on our ability even to refer to its objects. But this is a strikingly odd point to find in a work, one of the main assumptions of which is that we refer to nonexistent things like Santa Claus all the time. Why Santa Claus and not Sherlock Holmes?

Butchvarov returns at greater length to fictional objects in the section on identifiability that I quoted from above. Referring to his distinction between apparent and genuine identity statements, he says:

> This distinction is particularly obvious in its application to a work of <u>pure</u> fiction. The question whether the sentences a <u>novelist</u> writes are true does not even arise, has no application, literally has no sense, for we take for granted that these sentences are not

> used for the purpose of making statements. And while a reader can use such a sentence to make a statement, his use of it would be very different from the novelist's; perhaps it would best be understood as being, even though only implicitly, about what the novelist has written, about the novel. (p. 113)

Again, I am surprised by these remarks. In every other context, Butchvarov strives to convince us of exactly the opposite sort of point: that when we seem to be thinking about objects that don't exist, we are genuinely thinking about those objects and not some substitute (sense-data, properties, descriptions, or anything else) that does exist. His general view is that such substitutions are just tricks to dodge the obvious fact that we can think and talk about objects that do not exist. But again, if one can think and talk about Santa Claus or an imaginary rat, why can't one think and talk about Sherlock Holmes? Am I not doing so right now? Isn't this just as obvious?

Another surprise here is the claim that we take it for granted that fiction writers make no statements in their work. This is just false, not only with respect the large amount of ordinary reporting and description of real things that appears in novels, but even applied to the purely fictional parts of stories, to the extent that those two features can be separated. I myself would affirm that novelists do make statements, and I feel sure that most people would say that novels are full of statements. Admittedly, an author's relationship to the truth of what he says is an unusual one. Clearly some part or aspect of his work is stipulation, and perhaps that part or aspect should be viewed as analytic, hence, in a sense, perhaps, not fully meaningful. But I have read and heard any number of accounts by novelists of how they understand their job, and they speak pretty consistently in terms of creating an initial set of characters and situations, and then exploring this creation, discovering the strengths and weaknesses of their characters, trying to stick to the truth in what they write, and the like – even of finding out what happens in the end. They sound to me a lot like mathematicians or philosophers, who speak straightforwardly of exploring and discovering the consequences of their models and theories. But I am not saying that these novelists are right about the nature of their work (they are not, after all, philosophers of literature), only that the falsity of their account neither is nor should be taken for granted.

In any case, while Butchvarov makes it quite clear that while he wants to restrict the true application of the concept of identity to real things, not fictitious ones, he realizes that this does not mirror ordinary discourse in the main. This fact requires an explanation, which he gives as follows.

> But why do we nevertheless employ the concept of identity in fiction and in our dreams, imaginings, and hallucinations? The reason, I suggest, is that in many cases a nonexistent thing is singled out not in isolation but rather as a part of what may be called a nonexistent world…We reflect this fact by applying the concepts that are essential to our regarding something as a world, and, of course, the concepts of identity and existence are the fundamental such concepts. (p. 117)

If Butchvarov means what he is saying here, then it seems that he has swerved abruptly from the first strategy for dealing with the apparent identity of nonexistents into the second strategy. He seems to be allowing suddenly that fictional objects really are sometimes identical to one another, so that they are entities after all – but elsewhere, in other worlds than the real one. Such things do exist, then, even though they are not real.

But Butchvarov pulls back somewhat, if not exactly to his prior view, as he goes on:

> But their [i. e. the concepts of identity and existence] application to nonexistent things is at best analogical, just as its subject matter is only analogous to a world. We do want to distinguish between what is included in such a "world" and what is not. For example, we want to distinguish between Hamlet's mother and Hamlet's wife. To mark this distinction we speak of the former's "fictional existence," thus showing our clear awareness that the concept of existence can be employed only analogically regarding fiction. We should also speak of fictional identity, to mark that with respect to fiction the word "identity" is also used only analogically. (p. 117)

Butchvarov says here that we use the term "fictional existence", and that this clearly supports his analysis. But "fictional existence" is a phrase that is not at all common, and far from clear; still less so would be a phrase like "fictional identity". It seems that Butchvarov is saying here that, taken literally, our ordinary identifications of fictional things are all false, but taken analogically they can be read as true. But if these statements are <u>intended</u> analogically in the first place, wouldn't that make them just-plain true? At this point, it becomes unclear what Butchvarov's actual view of everyday material identity statements involving fictional things is. If there is a single concept of identity, and a single use or sense of the word "identity", then, according to Butchvarov, the statements in question are false. This is what he says most of the time. But if there are actually two uses or senses of the word "identity", one for real and one for unreal things, then the statements in question are presumably true. This is what Butchvarov seems to be saying now. And this is tantamount to saying that there are really two different concepts of identity at work, one "genuine" and tightly constrained, the other less respectable but more wide-ranging.

Let me give three quick arguments against any such two-uses or two-concepts account of the apparent material identity of nonexistents. For simplicity, I'll put them in terms of separate concepts, rather than senses or uses, but it makes no difference. Here they are.

<u>The undetermined cases argument.</u>

If there is a difference between the real concept of identity and its analogues for non-existent things, then surely one ought to be able to tell which concept is employed in a particular statement that one makes. But this cannot be done for a whole class of ordinary statements that appear to be material identity statements, namely those about objects whose existence is in doubt or in dispute. For example, I know that Abraham is Abram in the Bible, although I don't have any idea whether any of the Hebrew patriarchs prior to, say, Moses ever really lived. I know that Allah is God (or use Jehovah, if you disagree about Allah), but I do not know whether God exists. There are probably some other agnostics in this room, maybe some theists, too, and certainly some atheists. But we all would agree, I think, that Allah (or Jehovah) is the same thing as God, whether this thing exists or not. Can we agree if we are using different concepts of identity, one for those who think that they are talking about real things, and one for those who don't? And which of the two concepts is the agnostic using? Shall we say that this depends on whether it turns out that God exists or not? But that would make the very meaning of a proposition depend on whether it is true or false. This is impossible.

The cross-worlds identity argument.

There is a character in Tolstoy's novel War and Peace named Napoleon. There is (or was) also someone in the real world named Napoleon. This is no coincidence, because they are the same person. Tolstoy's novel would make no sense if it were not partly about the real Napoleon, even though it has him saying and doing minor things that the real Napoleon did not say or do. This appearance of a real man in a novel is no big surprise, as long as we think of identity as a single, univocal concept. But if we say that genuine identity can only happen in the real world, and that fiction employs a mere simulacrum of identity, how on Earth (or anywhere else) can a fictional character and a real man be the same, or even be said to be the same? Shall we say that the concept of identity is genuine on one side of the equation, (Tolstoy's) Napoleon is (the real) Napoleon, and fake on the other?

The conjoined cases argument.

I like to use Adolf Hitler as an example of a real thing. It turns out that Butchvarov also uses Adolph Hitler as an example of a real thing. So the object in my "real" example is materially the same as the object in his "real" example, namely Hitler. So the statement

My real object is the same as Butchvarov's real object

is true. Both are Hitler. I like to use Santa Claus as an example of an unreal thing. It turns out that Butchvarov does likewise, so the object in my "unreal" example is the same as the object in his "unreal" example, namely Santa Claus. So the statement

My unreal object is the same as Butchvarov's unreal object

is also true, since both are Santa Claus. Now, are we to say that these uses of the word "same" as between the two pairs of examples are different in meaning? That we are using different concepts of identity, one genuine and one just analogical, in these two closely matching, ordinary statements? If so, then how about this statement:

My two objects are the same as Butchvarov's two objects.

This is obviously a true statement, since we really do use the same objects as examples, so it must at least make sense – but which of the two concepts of identity does it employ, the genuine one or the analogical one? On Butchvarov's account, neither is possible.

I think that these examples make it pretty clear that the idea of different senses or uses or concepts of identity for real and unreal things cannot work to account for the apparent material identity of many pairs of unreal objects. The fundamental reason for this is, I think, that many such pairs of objects really are identical, just as common speech and common sense would have it.

Let me now turn more directly to Butchvarov's claim that all entities are real ones. Throughout his discussion of unreal things, Butchvarov seems to assume that common sense counts "exists" and "is real" as synonymous. Here is another little argument, to show that they are not synonymous.

The three beauties argument.

Consider the following pairs of true statements.

(a) Michelle Pfeiffer is real.
Michelle Pfeiffer exists.

(b) Aphrodite is not real.
Aphrodite does not exist.

So far so good. In both cases, existence and reality seem not only coextensive, but entirely the same in meaning. But now look at this one:

(c) Cleopatra is real.
Cleopatra…exists? (We say that she used to exist, but she doesn't any more.)

We all agree that Cleopatra is a real person, but if existence and reality are one thing, why do we not say simply that Cleopatra exists? Philosophers may want to enforce the synonymy here, by insisting that "existed" and "exists" are effectively equivalent, but this directly contradicts the commonsense statement that Cleopatra exists no longer, which entails she does not exist right now. But she is real regardless; we do not say that she was real. So there is clearly some kind of a semantic difference here, one that is made rather mysterious by our hesitation in deciding what to say about such things as Cleopatra. The fact is that we don't like addressing simple questions of existence with respect to real things of the past. If a child asks us, does Cleopatra exist?, we cannot say simply yes or no without misleading him, but have to say two things instead: that she existed in the past, and that she does not exist in the present. Why? What is going on here?

The examples used in the four arguments above all belong to common sense, but they are indigestible on Butchvarov's account of unreal things in terms of analogical identity and the synonymy of existence and reality. This forces us to consider seriously the alternative, "many worlds" strategy for solving the puzzle of the apparent material identity of nonexistent – it is better to say unreal – things. According to that strategy, we would affirm the genuine material identity of some pairs of unreal things, allow that this makes such objects into entities, and accept the consequence that there are entities, things that exist, that are not real. This means that existence and reality are not after all the same thing, at least at the basic level of analysis that Butchvarov calls protometaphysics. If this second approach is right, then we would be right to speak of entities in many different worlds. And I don't even see how this is unintuitive, or hard for common sense to swallow. I am pretty sure, in fact, that we already think and talk this way a lot of the time with little trouble, as when saying that somebody like Sherlock Holmes exists not in reality, but only in a myth or story. We do occasionally get messed up in conversation, and we have to stop and make it clear whether we are talking about real life or not, as in the following example:

A: Do you think that Hamlet's father's ghost exists?
B: No. Ghosts don't exist at all.

A: I wasn't asking whether it exists for real. I only meant, does it exist in the play, or is Hamlet just imagining it?

So, as philosophers looking for a broad, consistent, and explanatory theory, we will have to be a bit more careful and explicit than we are in ordinary discourse.

I am hoping that a few simple statements might suffice here, in advance of a more worked-out theory. First, allow me to use the technical term "domain" rather than the misleading "world", to denote some sets of entities (this fits the Quinean conception of existence merely as the value of a variable, i. e. as relative to a domain in formal logic). Like distinguishing objects from entities, or matter from form, distinguishing among domains is a merely conceptual, protometaphysical device, not a partition of the real world.

Here is a little three-point theory of domains.

(1) Objects and entities appear within domains.
- (a) The set of all genuine objects of thought and discourse is the unrestricted domain. Objects as such are understood as members of the unrestricted domain.
- (b) Each "world" of discourse, including fiction, mythology, a particular story or myth, etc., as well as the real world, is a restricted domain.
- (c) For two objects to be identical is for them to be an entity in some restricted domain. Thus existence is relative to a domain, but identity is not.
- (d) Any two objects could conceivably be identified, so it is possible for domains to overlap, i.e. for the same object to exist in more than one domain.
- (e) One domain can also wholly contain another, as the real domain contains the present real domain.

(2) Common usage of the word "exist" and its cognates should be understood as follows.
- (a) These words are sometimes used with reference to particular restricted domains, and sometimes not.
- (b) We switch from one domain to another implicitly, unconsciously, and seamlessly in conversation; but sometimes we get confused, and then a domain must be specified explicitly.
- (c) The default usage of "exist" is with reference to the real domain, and particular reference to the real domain of the present. Thus, if someone says that an object exists, he is ordinarily understood as saying that the object is an entity in the present real domain.
- (d) If we wish to say that an object is an entity in the real domain but not the present real domain, we avoid simple existence statements and employ the past tense, along with phrases like "not anymore", in order to prevent confusion as between these two most commonly referenced, overlapping domains.

(3) The question, "are there nonexistent entities?" can be answered as follows.
- (a) No, there are no entities that are not entities, and no real things that are not real.
- (b) Yes, there are stable, identifiable objects that exist in one domain but not another. In particular, there are things that exist in unreal domains but not in the real one.

(c) An undue multiplication of beings is avoided, because entities in domains other than the real one do not really exist, i.e. exist within the real domain.
(d) The sentence "some things exist that are not real" can be uttered meaningfully only in unrestricted discussions like the present one, i.e. discussions that reference the unrestricted domain.
(e) In restricted discussions, including most of common discourse referencing the real domain, the same sentence is self-contradictory, since "existence" ranges in default discussions only over real things.

Now let us review all of our examples in light of this theory. Jeckel and Hyde are two objects in the unrestricted domain, and one entity in the domain defined by Stevenson's story, Dr. Jeckel and Mr. Hyde, and also in the larger domain of fictional people. Venus and Aphrodite are one entity in the domain of Greco-Roman mythology. Santa Claus and Father Christmas are one entity in the domain of Western folklore. Superman and Clark Kent are one entity in the domains defined by lots of comic books, TV shows, and movies, and in the more general domain of American lowbrow culture. Abram is identical to Abraham, and exists in the Old Testament, but we are not sure whether he also exists (in common English: existed) in the real world of the past. God is the same being as Allah (or Jehovah) in comparative theology, whether he exists in the real world or not. Napoleon is a single entity in at least two overlapping domains, the real world of the past and the world defined by War and Peace. Michelle Pfeiffer exists in the real, present world (in common English: she exists) and is therefore a real thing. Cleopatra exists in the real world of the past – and is also therefore real – but not in the real world of the present (in common English: she used to exist, but no longer does).

It seems to me that the theory of domains gives an account, or points the way to an account, of all the commonsense examples that I have discussed, while providing a plausible explanation of its own one seemingly awkward consequence, that it violates the near-synonymy of "exists" and "is real" in ordinary conversation. And it does all this within the fundamental Butchvarovian framework of objects and entities, while preserving as univocal the concepts of existence and identity. In a way, what I have said is more Butchvarovian, I think, more in keeping with the logic of objects and entities, than much of what he says himself with respect to unreal public things. It is also a virtue of this alternative approach, I think, that it keeps clear the distinction between protometaphysics and regular metaphysics, where the former concerns the concept of existence itself – being qua being – while the latter is concerned primarily with understanding what is real.

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[1] Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1979.
[2] The same man, at least, if not the same person in Locke's terminology.