Properties and Paradox in Graham Priest's *Towards Non-Being*

To appear in a book symposium in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research.*

Graham Priest's book is a treasure-trove, with many interesting things to discuss, but in these remarks, I want to address two main questions. The first concerns what properties and relations Priest's non-existent objects should have *simpliciter*. The second is the question of whether Priest's framework needs dialetheism - should the framework only be attractive to those who accept true contradictions? In these remarks I plan to grant, for the sake of discussion at least, that there are non-existent objects. I take it that the question of whether there really are things that don't exist is one that is to be settled once we see how well the rival theories do - and so developing a theory of non-existent objects seems to me an important preliminary to the judgement of whether there are, after all, such things.

What Properties Should Non-Existents Actually Have?

Priest's non-existent objects are introduced primarily to play the role of intentional objects. Non-existent objects are also very useful as possibilia. Non-existent objects are often specified by "characterisations", and for Meinong and many since, non-existent objects literally have the characteristics associated with them. The golden mountain is a mountain, Sherlock Holmes is a detective, and so on. Priest, on the other hand, says that the connection is that a non-existent object must only have its characterising features *in some world or other*, possible or impossible. This disposes of several of the traditional problems facing noneists. The existing golden mountain is characterised by "existing" as well as by "golden" and "mountain": it is just that it is an existing golden mountain in another world, not, presumably, our own. Logically impossible characterisations do characterise objects, albeit those that cannot exist (and so exist only at impossible worlds). The problem of relations is also largely dealt with - if Arthur is king of Britain, but Britain has no king, there seems to be a problem. But if Arthur is guaranteed to be king of Britain only in the worlds of the Arthur stories, the problem is solved.

Priest also tells us that non existent objects have some properties and relations in the actual world. The relation of "having at" holds between Bilbo, the property of Being A Hobbit, and some world w_A in the actual world. Identities also actually hold of non-existent objects here, so Bilbo=Bilbo in the actual world. And Bilbo stands in intentional relations - he stands in the relation of being talked about in my comments, for example.

Priest's remarks suggest that non-existent objects lack most familiar, non-intentional features in our world. On p 59-60 he tells us that "If a kicks b, or runs past b, then both a and b must exist" and that "if a fears b, or thinks of b, or worships b, then a must exist but b may or may not". We do not, however, get an argument for these claims. It is not obvious that they are true: after all, we might think that Merry kicks Pippin or Gabriel

worships Yahweh, even if we deny that those four exist. What would be wrong with a theory that said that, even though the Characterisation Principle does not require anything about how the golden mountain is in the actual world, even so, the Golden Mountain is in fact golden (though sadly non-existent)? Or even a theory that counsels agnosticism about whether there are literally golden non-existents?

Allowing non-existent objects to have a richer suite of properties and relations may help a noneist theory of abstract objects to be more palatable. According to Priest, abstract objects like numbers (and let me stick with the mathematical example) are objects that cannot possibly exist, but at the (impossible) worlds characterised by the appropriate mathematical theory, they have the properties and relations ascribed to them by the appropriate theory. Priest explicitly draws the analogy between numbers and objects in fiction:

> The properties of the natural numbers are determined by the characterization, say the Peano axioms. The properties of Holmes are determined, likewise, by characterization —what was written by Doyle (Priest p 147)

The suggestion seems to be that 2 is no more the successor of the successor of 0 than Holmes is a detective. In both cases, rather, it is that they have their characterising properties in the worlds of the corresponding theory (/fiction). Priest also seems to suggest (p 137, in his discussion of the number 3) that worlds where mathematical objects have their characteristics are worlds where they exist: and so given his unusual claim that numbers are necessarily non-existent, that would make it impossible for e.g. the number 3 to have the properties attributed to it by its characterisation.

However, this noneist treatment of mathematics has some serious costs. Saying that there is such a thing as 13, but that there are no primes between 10 and 20 (and indeed no primes at all), or that 8 is not in fact the sum of 5 and 3, strikes me as one of the least initially plausible extant mathematical error theories. It seems more appealing to say that, while no numbers (or sets, or functions, etc.) *exist*, nevertheless a range of them do in fact possess at the actual world the features they are characterised as having. 8 really is the cube of 2, for example. Of course, other objects such as the object characterised as "is the square of 2 and identical to 8" will have to lack their characteristic features at this world.

This alternative noneist approach to mathematics resembles Platonism more closely than Priest's view. Since there really is a privileged set of mathematical objects that match their characterisations in this world, the usual issues of which ones these are, and how we know, may again raise their heads. So it would be less of a shortcut through the philosophy of mathematics. Giving some non-existent objects the privilege of *actually* having the properties specified in their characterisations, while others neither exist nor are actually as they are characterised might open the door to a halfway house with shades of Meinong's "subsistent" - though now with the subsistent as a privileged class of objects that lack being rather than an under-privileged class of objects with being. So

perhaps this is not the way noneists like Priest would like to go.[1] But I offer it as a noneist alternative with some appeal.

Noneism and Contradiction

As well as being a noneist, Priest is famously a *dialetheist,* a believer in true contradictions. Richard Routley, another important noneist and an obvious inspiration to Priest in this book, was as well. One of the things I want to explore is whether one can hold something like Priest's noneist theory without commitment to any true contradictions. I think being a consistent noneist of Priest's stripe is harder than it appears. While this is not by itself necessarily a refutation of Priest-style noneism (and it would be hopeless as an *ad hominem*), it might show that Priest's particular way of developing the project will be of limited appeal to others.

Priest himself explicitly employs true contradictions in one aspect of his account: the resolution of the paradox of denotation in Chapter 7. I want to leave that to one side, though: while difficult, the paradox of denotation has consistent treatments, and what to say about it seems more of a piece with what one says about self-referential paradoxes in general than about noneism in particular.

The sorts of inconsistency I am more interested in come from the quite strong principles about what objects there are. Some of these issues are not specific to noneism, of course: those who believe in *existing* possibilia and impossibilia, abstract or not, will have similar challenges. Priest endorses a general *Characterization Principle*: "Let *A*(x) be *any* condition; this characterises an object c_A. And $A(c_A)$ is true—maybe not at this world, but at other worlds." (Priest p 84). Priest also maintains a *Principle of Freedom:*

> [G]iven a characterized object, for any property that is not determined, there will be closed worlds, realizing the representation in question, in which the object has the property and ones in which it does not, subject only to constraints imposed by facts about objects that actually exist. (p 89)

"Determined" properties are those that logically follow from the ones in the characterisation, and "facts about objects that actually exist" make a difference primarily when the actual world is one of the worlds that has an object that is as the associated characterisation specifies.

Priest's principle of freedom ensures that when the "constraints imposed by facts about objects that actually exist" are not relevant, characterisations that do not entail each other will pick out different objects, given that objects that differ from each other in how they are in *some* world are *actually* distinct. Finally, Priest seems to be "abundant" with respect to properties - as far as I can tell, "properties" are as generous as "conditions" or open sentences.

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[1] Of course some non-existent objects may well possess their characterising features even on Priest's view: the object characterised by "is non-existent and self identical" for example.

This is enough machinery to give us paradox worries. Consider, for example, conditions constructed by reference to groups of objects. An example of a sort of condition like this is "The person thinking of exactly $a_1, a_2, a_3, \ldots$". It seems that there will be as many such conditions as there are groups of objects. And once we consider conditions of this form not satisfied by any actual people—most of such conditions, of course, since there is at most a low infinity of actual people—each condition of this form will be associated with a distinct non-existent object. After all, if the two conditions list different objects, it seems there will be some world where someone thinks of the objects in one condition but not also *exactly* those in the other.

If this is right, there will be at least as many objects as there are groups of objects (since the actual exceptions mentioned in the above argument are few enough that a map can be constructed handling them as special cases). And this gives us Cantorian paradox. Consider the objects characterised to be thinking about groups of objects, and now consider the group G of such characterised thinkers who are not characterised as thinking about a group of objects that contain themselves. Consider the thinker characterised as thinking about exactly the Gs. Does she meet the conditions required to have that characterisation? Yes, since that's the characterisation. So she is among the objects she exactly thinks about in the worlds characterised by her characterisation. So it is not the case that she is one of the "such characterised thinkers who are not characterised as thinking about a group of objects that contain themselves". So she is not a G, so she does not have the postulated characterisation. Contradiction.[2]

Apparent reference to "groups" of non-existent objects can be dropped: the above proof can be easily rewritten with second order logic or plural quantification (replace "group of objects" with "some things" and "the group G" with "the Gs"). I suspect avoiding the paradox by staying rigidly first-order will not be an option Priest will find tempting.

Priest's response to the above paradox is likely to be straightforwardly dialetheist. One of the actual objects both does, and does not, have a certain characterisation. I have no criticism to make of that here. However, can a Priest-style noneism retain its attractive features if we develop a consistent response to this sort of paradox? That is less clear to me.

It seems to me we have three options if we allow the logical machinery needed to construct the Cantorian paradox above, and we want to retain consistency about the actual world. The first is to modify the Characterization Principle. If some characterisations are not associated with objects that satisfy those characterisations at some world, then we can deny the general characterisation-object link needed to get the paradox going. This would be a worry. The salient advantage of Priest's principle over other characterisation principles offered by noneists such as Routley is that Priest does not need to make ad hoc looking restrictions on what conditions "characterise" - he does not need to argue that conditions like "existence" or "lives in London" or "if self-identical then 2+2=5" are "non-nuclear". Introducing restrictions to characterisation,

[2] This argument is a cousin of "Kaplan's Paradox", see Kaplan 199n

particularly to block paradox, looks like wading back into the swamp of distinguishing conditions that characterise from those that do not in order to keep the theory intact.

The second obvious option is to limit the *Principle of Freedom*. If apparently distinct conditions can be associated with the same object, then the paradox also dissipates. Dropping the principle of freedom, though, looks unappealing too. It is this principle that guarantees that most objects that are differently characterised are in fact distinct: it is this sort of principle that ensures the possible fat man in the doorway and the possible bald man are distinct (in many contexts), that there is no risk that Sherlock Holmes will turn out to be Bilbo Baggins, and so on. Of course, restricted principles of almost-freedom can do a lot of the same work, but we would compromise the appeal of a simple, powerful principle like the unrestricted version.

A final option is to be far more restrictive about what conditions there are. I was being very generous with conditions in the above argument - there were many more conditions than have in fact been written down, or ever will be. Perhaps Priest could deny this. If we restrict what conditions there are to those that have been explicitly formulated, there will not be enough to generate the paradox, presumably. This option differs from restricting the *Characterization Postulate*, since we can still allow that there is an object for every characterisation, as the Postulate says: there are just relatively few characterisations.

This third option fits with the letter of Priest's view, so far as I can see, but goes against the spirit. Such a restricted noneism does not look very appealing - we *want* objects that could have been postulated by false physical theories that were never formulated, that would populate the stories never told, and so on. Furthermore, for Priest the worlds themselves are non-existent objects. If we were only guaranteed the non-actual worlds that are in fact characterised, we will not be guaranteed nearly the range that we need to represent what is possible (let alone what is impossible.) In saying what conditions, or quasi-conditions, are relevant to the Characterization Postulate, it seems in the spirit of the view to say that they are not just the actual conditions specified, but any that could be, and maybe some that could not be. A restriction that rules out some of the supposed "conditions" in the above argument can block the paradox. But perhaps at the cost of hobbling the view in a way that it should not be.

Priest's theory is simple and powerful, and does not have the ad hoc restrictions that bedevil some other approaches. Whether a consistent version of Priest-style noneism can retain these advantages remains to be seen.

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