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Modal Meinongianism Doesn't Exist

ABSTRACT

Meinongianism takes non-existent objects to actually possess the qualities they are characterised as possessing. But many of these qualities are *existence entailing*. Priest and Berto's modal Meinongianism tries to circumvent this problem by taking Pegasus to possess the property of being winged in some nonactual world. I argue that modal Meinongianism's individuation criterion for fictional and imaginary entities doesn't allow us to rule out that Emma Woodhouse and Batman are identical. I further argue that depending on the status of the 'other worlds' it posits, modal Meinongianism either trivialises Meinongianism's 'characterisation principle' or replaces it with something no less objectionable. Priest and Berto's view, I conclude, if it is tenable, is not a form of Meinongianism; but arguably it is something better: a structuralist account of non-existent objects.

Keywords: Modal Meinongianism; Non-existence; Individuation; Impossible Worlds

1. Meinongianism and modal Meinongianism

One way of explaining thought and talk about, so to speak, Emma Woodhouse and Batman involves positing 'exotic' (Sainsbury 2010, 300) items to serve as the referents of names like 'Batman' and the intentional objects of Batman thoughts. This allows for simple, 'relational' (Crane 2013, 9) accounts of reference and intentionality: theoretical simplicity is paid for by some ontological extravagance.

Those who posit exotica bear the burden of explaining their nature. One type of

explanation is the Meinongian explanation. Meinongianism as I am defining it endorses the Nonexistence Principle (NP)

NP There are intentional objects that don't exist.

But NP on its own does not equal Meinongianism. I take the Characterisation Principle (CP) - or something like it - to also be a necessary part of any view that can properly be called 'Meinongian.'¹

CP Non-existent intentional objects have the qualities they are characterised as having.

The problem is that many of the qualities that Batman is characterised as possessing (e.g. *being massive*) are *existence entailing*. Graham Priest and Francesco Berto's modal Meinongianism (Priest 2016, Berto 2008, 2011, Berto & Priest 2014) is allegedly a version of Meinongianism that gets around this problem.² As many of the qualities attributed to fictional and imaginary entities are existence entailing, they can't *actually* possess these properties. But that doesn't preclude their possessing the qualities *in other worlds*. Modal Meinongianism replaces CP with MCP

MCP Non-existent intentional objects have the qualities they are characterised as having in some world/worlds.

¹ As Priest notes 'CP in its pristine form' (Priest 2016, 83) is not endorsed by any Meinongian including Meinong. If the qualities that non-existent intentional objects can be characterised as having include *existence, being such that 2+2=5* and so on, then CP is untenable. 'The standard response, from Meinong onwards, has been to accept it only if the properties deployed in the CP are of a certain kind: assumptible, characterizing, nuclear, the names vary....' (Ibid.)

² The name 'modal Meinongianism' was coined by Berto (2008). Priest originally called his view 'noneism'.

According to Priest fictional and imaginary entities must ‘in some sense’ (Priest 2016, 83) have the qualities they are characterised as having, because otherwise ‘we wouldn’t know what we were talking about when we talk about them’ (Ibid.) I take this to mean that *something like* CP is needed to allow for the *individuation* of fictional entities.

But I will argue that MCP - modal Meinongianism’s replacement for CP – fails to supply a criterion of individuation that allows us to rule out that Batman and Emma are identical. I will also argue that either MCP is at least as objectionable as CP, or it follows trivially from NP. Replacing CP with MCP, I will conclude from this, improves on naive Meinongianism only if it involves abandoning what is distinctively *Meinongian* about Meinongian theories of fictional and imaginary entities. What Priest and Berto are proposing, if it is defensible, is not a version of Meinongianism at all. ‘Modal Meinongianism’, I will conclude, fails to accurately describe any theory.

Priest and Berto’s view, if defensible, is not Meinongian. However that in itself is not a reason for rejecting it. It doesn’t allow us to distinguish Batman from Emma: is that a reason for rejecting it? In the final section of this paper I will explain how Priest and Berto’s view can be understood as a *structuralist* account of fictional and imaginary entities, and how if it is understood this way, the indiscernibility of Batman and Emma can be considered a feature, not a bug.

2. The Characterisation Principle

Meinongians endorse CP – or something like it – as true. But why? Appeals to the ‘intuitive truth’ of claims like ‘Miss Jean Brodie is a fascist’ confuse fidelity to the story with truth (cf.

Sainsbury 2010b, 26-31). Obviously non-existent intentional objects are commonly alluded to as 'horses', 'gods' and so on; but a pedant would insist that the 'gods' worshipped by the Romans, for instance, were *false gods* (and if no being possesses divine powers then there are no true gods).

Linsky and Zalta take another tack. They ask us to consider an example like 'the ghost in John's nightmare last night' (Linsky & Zalta 1991, 442). 'In some important sense, this dream object 'is' a ghost, otherwise why fear it?' (Ibid.) they ask. The question 'why fear it?' can be interpreted as asking why John *does* fear the dreamt-of object. It can also be interpreted as asking why John *should* fear the dreamt-of object. But John shouldn't fear the dreamt-of object: it isn't real. Why *does* John fear the dreamt-of object then?

John fears the dreamt-of object because his dream *represents* it as a ghost (and he isn't aware that he is not veridically perceiving). Imagine a second case: John mistakes Sally (approaching through the mist, dressed in white) for a ghost. Why does John fear Sally? Because he represents Sally as a ghost (and he isn't aware that he is not veridically perceiving). John's fear of the dreamt-of object can be explained in the same way: in both cases the object of his fear is represented as a ghost. Unless we implausibly deny that the object of John's fear in the second case is Sally, we must allow that intentional states can *misrepresent* their objects. But if intentional states can misrepresent their objects, there is no reason to suppose the accuracy of John's representation of the dreamt-of object.

Linsky & Zalta have not given us a good reason for endorsing CP. Here is another bad reason. It might be felt that Meinongian theories that take non-existent objects of thought to really have the qualities they are imagined as having can offer a neat explanation of how we succeed in thinking about and referring to these items: I can think about a fictional entity and refer to that entity because I entertain a descriptive content that uniquely specifies that entity. This neat explanation however, if it is any good, obviates the need to posit non-

existent objects of thought in the first place. If there is a set of descriptive contents each of which is associated only with thoughts that are 'about Pegasus' and if there is a set of descriptive contents each of which is associated only with acts of reference that we would want to count as acts of reference to Pegasus, then do we need Pegasus? We can hold that for a thought to be 'about Pegasus' is for it to involve a member of the set of Pegasus-contents posited by this explanation, and for an act of reference to be an act of reference 'to Pegasus' is for it to involve a member of the set of Pegasus-contents posited by this explanation.

The reason Priest gives – quoted above – for endorsing CP is related to yet another bad reason. To explain both these reasons - Priest's reason and the bad reason it's related to - I need to say something about the notions of 'individuation criterion' and 'criterion of identity'. These terms are used in more than one way. E.J. Lowe distinguishes an epistemological notion of individuation as 'a cognitive achievement, consisting of the *singling out of an object in thought*' (Lowe 2007, 521) from a 'metaphysical sense' (ibid) of 'individuation' as 'a certain kind of metaphysical determination relation between entities' (ibid.) Lowe makes further distinctions....

A metaphysical principle of individuation tells us what determines the identity of an object, in the sense that it tells us what determines which object it is. A criterion of identity, by contrast, tells us what determines whether an object belonging to a given ontological category is or is not identical with another such object. In the latter case, we are concerned with identity conceived as a relation, whereas in the former case we are concerned with 'identity' in the sense of individual essence (to use a traditional term). (Lowe 2007, 522)

If every object has an essence that is determined, in the metaphysical sense, by *other* items, or if for any given objects, whether or not the objects are identical to each

other (whether they are many or one) is determined, in the metaphysical sense, by *other* items, then this would be a reason for attributing properties to non-existent objects (to play the determining role) and thus for endorsing something like CP.

Lowe himself does not insist that the identity of every object is determined by *other* items: he allows that an object can determine its own identity (Lowe 2007, 522-523). Indeed, the suggestion that for any given objects, whether or not the objects are identical to each other (whether they are many or one) is determined by *properties*, amounts to the very controversial principle of the identity of indiscernibles. This controversial principle is not a good reason for endorsing another controversial principle: CP.

But the reason given by Priest I take to be a separate reason, a reason that invokes the *epistemic* notion of individuation. Priest says non-existents must possess the qualities they are characterised as possessing in some sense, otherwise 'we wouldn't know what we were talking about when we talk about them'. What does it mean to say that I 'know what I'm talking about' when I talk about Pegasus? These words could be understood to mean that I know what *type* of thing I am talking about. But Priest can't intend them in this sense as he denies Pegasus actually is the type of thing we imagine Pegasus to be. Pegasus is not actually a horse. Pegasus is *imagined as a horse*; but Vladimir Putin can be imagined as a horse without this requiring he be a horse in some sense.

I thus take Priest to mean something else. I take him to mean that if non-existents didn't possess the qualities they are characterised as possessing 'in some sense' - that is if *something like CP* wasn't true - then I would have no way of knowing, when I am thinking about Pegasus, that I am not actually thinking about Rocinante or Batman or

Emma. I would fail to grasp any criterion that would enable me to rule out that Emma and Batman are one and the same. If I do indeed know that Emma is not identical to Batman, then if Priest is right about this something like CP must be true.

3. A case of Identity

If I do indeed know, when I'm thinking about Emma, that I'm not thinking about Batman, then I grasp a criterion of identity for Emma, in the minimal sense of a principle that specifies a condition that something meets if and only if it is identical to Emma; and I know that Batman doesn't meet this condition.

If I know that Emma possesses properties like *being female*, and nothing that isn't identical to Emma possesses these properties, and I know that Batman doesn't possess these properties, then I know that Batman and Emma are not identical. CP thus allows for a criterion of identity, a grasp of which allows me to know, when I'm thinking about Emma, that I'm not thinking about Batman: the criterion of identity in question being *for all x, x = Emma only if x is human, x is female, x is English...*

But modal Meinongianism can't appeal to this criterion of identity, as modal Meinongianism denies that non-existent objects possess any existence-entailing properties. Priest rightly maintains that...

As a non-existent, Holmes cannot literally have features that entail existence, like living in a real street, having tea with Gladstone, or being a detective. If something is a detective and lives in a London street, then, it is natural to think, it is a human being, a physical object, a spatiotemporal occupier, and endowed with causal properties. One might ask where the person is, or why, as a detective, they cannot help the metropolitan police to solve crimes. Answer: things lacking real existence are not anywhere and cannot have such existence-entailing properties. (Priest 2016, 222)

In order to distinguish Emma and Batman, modal Meinongians can't look to the properties they grant are actually possessed by these non-existent individuals.³ And so, invoking MCP, they look to the properties that, according to this principle, Emma and Batman possess in other worlds. The following, then, is Priest's suggested criterion of identity....

MMCI Fictional entities A and B are identical iff they have the same (atomic) properties in the same 'closed'⁴ worlds (see Priest 2016, 88-89).

I am going to argue that a grasp of this criterion does not enable me to rule out that Emma and Batman are two rather than one, at least if certain assumptions – *that modal Meinongians are required to make* - hold. The first of these assumptions that modal Meinongians are required to make is a restriction on property possession in other worlds: if when one *actually* thinks about A one thereby thinks about B, then A and B have the same properties at the same (closed) worlds (Ibid.) Think of Clark Kent and Superman. Priest doesn't want his criterion of identity to deliver the result that Clark Kent isn't Superman. In the actual world a Superman-thought is a Clark Kent-thought. The restriction on property possession thus decrees that in any world in which Clark wins the Pulitzer Prize, so does Superman.

Priest applies his criterion of identity to Pegasus and Sherlock Holmes (Priest 2016, 89). If we know that there are closed worlds in which Holmes is a detective and Pegasus

³ What about properties that aren't existence entailing? These presumably include relational properties like *appears in a fiction authored by George Eliot, is represented as a horse*. These are the sorts of properties non-Meinongian realists about fictional entities ('external realists' in Stacie Friend's (2007) terminology) use to individuate fictional entities.

⁴ Closed under entailment. Priest's semantics also posits 'open worlds' in which anything goes. There is an open world in which George Orwell is not Eric Blair.

isn't, then the criterion of identity allows us to conclude that Holmes and Pegasus are two and not one. But do we know that there are closed worlds in which Holmes is a detective and Pegasus isn't? According to the restriction on property possession, Holmes has a quality in some world that Pegasus lacks in that world, only if it is not the case in the actual world that a Holmes-thought is a Pegasus-thought.

But how can we know that a Holmes-thought isn't actually a Pegasus thought? To know this, we would have to know that Pegasus wasn't *inadvertently re-baptised* as 'Holmes', in the way Hesperus was inadvertently re-baptised as 'Phosphorous' (assuming it happened that way around). But can we know this? Not if the second assumption that modal Meinongians need to make holds.

This second assumption concerns the baptism of fictional objects. How was Holmes baptised? Priest denies, as he must, that Holmes was baptised by description. Holmes doesn't *actually* have distinguishing qualities that would permit a description to single him (or rather it) out. According to Priest Holmes was baptised via an 'act of pure intention' (Priest 2016, 142), a 'mental act of pointing' (*ibid.*) to an object of thought. But baptism by act of pure intention doesn't preclude inadvertent re-baptism. If Holmes was baptised in the way Priest assumes he was baptised then there is nothing to rule out that when Conan Doyle baptised Holmes he was inadvertently re-baptising Pegasus, and thus when we think of Holmes we are in fact thinking of Pegasus.

I am assuming that there is not some important difference between mental pointing and the physical version: some feature of mental pointing - lacking from physical pointing - that precludes the possibility of inadvertent rebaptism. But I don't think this assumption is unwarranted. What feature of mental pointing could pull off this trick? If an act of mental pointing has a *content* that uniquely specifies the object being pointed to

then this would preclude inadvertent rebaptism; but of course, if the baptism of the object proceeds via such an act with such a content, then the object has been baptised by *description*, not by an act of pure intention. I would make the further point that even if mental pointing, unlike the physical variety, could magically preclude inadvertent rebaptism without availing of anything like description, then the alleged need for a criterion of identity for fictional objects would disappear. We wouldn't need something like CP in order to know what we're talking about when we talk about Holmes or Pegasus. We could trust in the magic of pure intentionality.

Modal Meinongianism, I conclude, fails to supply a criterion of identity that allows us to rule that Holmes and Pegasus, or Batman and Emma, are two rather than one.⁵

4. Other worlds

According to modal Meinongianism fictional entities actually lack existence entailing qualities, but they have the qualities they are characterised as having in other possible and (in many cases) impossible worlds.

What we make of this proposal depends on what we make of these other worlds. What are they? We must be careful to distinguish the 'worlds' of Priest's 'worlds semantics' - which are mathematical items - from what they represent. The success of worlds semantics in modelling intentional states does not depend on there being real items *like the actual world* corresponding to the 'worlds' of the mathematical model (see Priest 2016, 138). 'Ersatz worlds' would suffice.

According to Berto...

⁵ Priest acknowledges (Priest 2016, 270) that in some cases there is no way by his criterion of identity to determine whether fictional entities A and B are two or one; though he doesn't recognise that the case of Holmes and Pegasus, or the case of Batman and Anna Karenina may be such a case. Priest in this chapter suggests (without endorsing) an 'anti-realist' version of his view.

...if one embraces a broadly ersatzist metaphysical interpretation of impossible worlds (as states of affairs or sets of propositions or sentences which are not maximal and/or consistent at times), then they should turn out to work more like stories than like Lewisian concrete mereological sums of individuals with respect to how “at world w” works. So there are impossible ersatz worlds which represent that Watson both limps and does not limp, or according to which Watson both limps and does not limp, etc. (Berto 2008, 216)

Are modal Meinongianism’s other worlds ersatz worlds, or are they items of the same sort as the actual world? Or are they something else? Priest neither commits to an ersatzist nor a realist account of other worlds. His silence about the nature of worlds can be understood not as indifference between rival accounts of the nature of worlds but as an endorsement of a minimalist account of worlds as *sui generis* entities.

I will argue that modal Meinongianism faces a dilemma. Either the world at which Dr Watson has a limp and also doesn’t have a limp *inherits* the problems of Dr Watson or it doesn’t. An ersatz world which merely represents that Dr Watson has a limp and also doesn’t have a limp doesn’t inherit the problems of Dr Watson. It is no more problematic than a story according to which Dr Watson both limps and doesn’t limp. On the other hand, a (putative) concrete mereological sum of individuals that contains a doctor that both has a limp and doesn’t have a limp inherits the problems of said doctor. If Watson - as an impossible object - doesn’t exist, but also possesses existence entailing qualities and so does exist, the same must be true of a concrete mereological sum containing *such an individual*. If Watson can’t exist, but does exist, then such a world containing such an individual also can’t exist, but does exist. If modal Meinongianism’s other worlds inherit the problems of their occupants then modal Meinongianism is not an improvement on naive Meinongianism. CP allows for non-existent objects with existence entailing

properties. But if modal Meinongianism's worlds inherit the problems of their occupants then MCP also allows for non-existent objects (the worlds at which Dr Watson and his ilk have the problematic qualities they are characterised as having) with existence entailing qualities. Modal Meinongians might as well just be naive Meinongians.

That is one horn of the dilemma. Now, what if Modal Meinongianism's other worlds don't inherit the problems of their inhabitants? If this is the case, I contend, modal Meinongianism trivialises its version of CP and thus lets go of what would qualify it as Meinongian. This is most evident in relation to the view Berto proposes of other worlds as 'like stories' that merely represent Watson as having a limp and not having a limp. MCP on this understanding of other worlds amounts to the trivial (for anyone who endorses NP) principle that fictional entities are represented as having the qualities they are represented as having. But CP is not a trivial (for anyone who endorses NP) principle. MCP was pitched as a replacement for CP that lacks CP's absurd consequences, while preserving the distinctively Meinongian character of a theory of fictional and imaginary objects. But if modal Meinongianism's other worlds merely *represent* non-existent objects as possessing the properties they are characterised as having it is nothing of the sort.

The ersatzist view of other worlds as representations trivialises MCP. But the same goes for other views of other worlds which deny that worlds inherit the problems of their inhabitants. Everyone who endorses NP agrees that Watson is represented and imagined as having certain qualities. Any distinctively Meinongian explanation of this fact posits an individual that *has those qualities*. It either posits such an individual as a part of the actual world, or it posits a non-actual world that stands in a relationship (such as the whole-part relationship) to *such an individual*, and thus inherits the problems of the

individual. Berto's modal Meinongianism with ersatz worlds is clearly not a Meinongian explanation. Priest's modal Meinongianism with sui generis worlds either is or it isn't. If it is, then it is as objectionable as naive Meinongianism. If it isn't, then it too is not Meinongian.

5. So what?

I have argued that what Priest and Berto are proposing, if it is defensible, is not a version of Meinongianism. There is no defensible view, I conclude, that merits the name 'modal Meinongianism'. If 'modal Meinongianism' is interpreted as a definite description then it doesn't refer to any cogent theory. That is what my title is intended to impart (compare 'compassionate conservatism doesn't exist').

Priest and Berto's account, if defensible, is not Meinongian. The claims the account makes about other worlds should be taken as articulating facts about *representations* of fictional individuals (e.g. that Holmes is represented as a detective) that are endorsed by everyone who endorses NP.

Interpreted as a non-Meinongian theory, Priest and Berto's account *is* defensible, I maintain. In this final section I want to defend it by clarifying it, and thus making clear what its defenders need to say and what they *don't need to say*. In section 3 I argued that the theory fails to supply a criterion of identity that allows the non-question begging individuation of fictional entities. That the theory fails to supply a criterion of identity that allows us to distinguish Batman from Emma would be a problem if the expectation that a theory of fictional entities *should* supply such a criterion is legitimate. Those who have done most to articulate the account seem to believe that this expectation *is* legitimate: we 'know what we're talking about' when we talk about Pegasus, and our theory needs to

explain this. But it doesn't. These people have, rightly, denied CP; but they seem to want to replace it with something that serves the same function. But they shouldn't.

The best defence of the account that is mislabelled as 'modal Meinongianism' denies the need to supply non-question begging identity criteria. Look at what this account says Emma actually is. If existence entailing properties encompass all non-relational 'qualitative' properties, then Emma is a *bare particular*. As noted above those who posit exotica like Batman and Emma to explain thought and talk 'about fictional entities' adhere to *relational* accounts of reference and intentionality. Relations, it might be assumed, require relata to obtain. For Meinongians the relata of an intentional relation are a subject and an intentional object, the latter envisaged as another entity with intrinsic features and individuable by those features.

On Priest and Berto's account (or an account very like theirs) intentional objects are merely the focal points of intentional relations. Emma occupies a place in a relational structure: Emma is the focus of Emma-thoughts as it were.⁶ And Emma is *nothing more than this*. Emma-thoughts can be further characterised by their intentional content, which worlds semantics does a good job of modelling. But Emma and Batman and Pegasus and Pig Bodine and Miss Jean Brodie are *fungible*.

What is in the offing is a sort of *structuralist* account of fictional and imaginary entities. 'Structuralism' is a slippery term (see Greaves 2011) but I will use it to refer to positions that hold that the phenomenon they aim to capture can be fully captured by describing its structure, and this does not require saying anything about the intrinsic nature of the focal points of the relations that constitute that structure. These are (on some versions) or might as well be (on others) *bare particulars* (see Sider 2006, 393-

⁶ Note that structuralism as I define it is a distinct position to Tim Crane's (2013) account. Although Crane is prepared to quantify over fictional individuals he crucially denies that non-existent objects stand in 'real relations'.

394). If Priest and Berto's account is understood as a structuralist treatment of fictional and imaginary entities then the lack of identity criteria is a feature, not a bug.

Given what Priest and Berto's account says fictional characters are - fungible bare particulars - this is what it should say about how we individuate them: we can't. Can it get away with saying this? Or is it obvious that we *do in fact know* that Batman is not Emma, and so we must have some way of knowing this?

What we know, I suggest, is that the development of a certain representation as of a masked vigilante was not influenced by a certain representation as of a clever but naïve English gentlewoman (I assume we know this); and that the 'official' games of make-believe we play when we engage with the Batman comics and movies do not mandate - indeed they proscribe - making believe that the individual called 'Batman' and also 'Bruce Wayne' has yet another alias: 'Emma Woodhouse'.

The structuralist account does not preclude our knowing all this. It does not deny that the claim 'Batman is not Emma' insofar as this claim is a way of articulating all this, is appropriate. Within the discourse of literary criticism it is correct to affirm 'Batman is not Emma'. This discourse is playful even when it is serious: claims about representations and influences are couched as claims about masked vigilantes and English aristocrats.⁷ That the claim 'Batman is not Emma' - considered *strictly and literally* - is unknowable for reasons that would only interest metaphysicians, doesn't impugn its legitimacy in its native discourse.

There is no problem here for structuralism, which turns out to be a very defensible position. Which is more than can be said for the view - Meinongianism - that it has been misidentified as.

⁷ A lot of what Walton (1990) says to this effect is obviously right.

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