On interpreting away the non-existent objects

Long Abstract

A recurring problem for ontological debates in general and for disagreements around non-existent objects in particular is that one side of the argument finds the position of the opponent unintelligible. A Meinongian who admits "there are objects that do not exist" should demarcate semantically "to be" and "to exist" in order to avoid logical contradiction. Nevertheless, philosophers like Quine, David Lewis or Peter van Inwagen do not distinguish semantically "to be" and "to exist" and therefore Meinongian's position poses an intelligibility problem for them.

To overcome this problem, David Lewis, in [Lewis, 1990], proposes a solution in "Noneism or Allism" that consists of proposing an interpretation for the conceptual scheme of noneists who accept there are objects that do not exist. The interpretation here is nothing but a translation scheme, or a set of semantic rules mapping terms from the conceptual scheme of noneists to the conceptual scheme of David Lewis. Noneists' neutral quantifier is translated to the existentially loaded quantifier of David Lewis. In that sense, the Noneism becomes intelligible with the price of non-existent objects now being part of the domain of entities. The noneist philosopher is for David Lewis an allist in disguise. In Lewis's theory, when a noneist says an object does not exist, he is probably saying that it is not concrete. Noneists' existentially loaded quantifier is his concrete predicate. When saying "there are objects that do not exist", the noneist philosopher is simply saying "there are objects that are not concrete".

In this paper, we attempt to address this interpretative approach to disputes around non-existent objects. First of all, for David Lewis, ontological disputes around non-existent objects are conducted withing the conceptual scheme of one side, which is in this case David Lewis's side. In that regard, these disputes are understood not as part of the ordinary language but as a part of another technical language. Much discussions occurred over the necessity of a technical language for ontological disputes. Sider in [Sider, 2009] argues for a technical language, *Ontologese* within which ontological disputes are conducted. Another example is Peter van Inwagen that introduces *Tarskian* as the technical language [Van Inwagen, 2014]. I argue that David Lewis's interpretative attempt presupposes his own ontological theory as the technical language for conducting ontological disputes. The crucial point is the centrality of quantifier expressions in the technical language. It is shown that David Lewis's framework shares with *Ontologese* that quantifier expressions have metaphysically fundamental meaning.

The technical language contains an interpretation scheme for translating opposing

positions. Two conceptual schemes, seemingly opposing and probably mutually un-intelligible, might be indeed concordant or at least mutually intelligible under proper interpretation. Their dispute might be merely verbal, possible to be interpreted away. Ruling out an apparent disagreement or unintelligibility depends on finding proper interpretative scheme. The interpretative scheme in this way follows norms prescribed by Davidson and more recently Eli Hirsch [Hirsch, 2005]. It is charitable. It is truth preserving translation scheme from a conceptual scheme to another. Despite its appeal, the main problem is to decide whether the translation scheme is conclusive, whether it is truth preserving or not.

This problem was raised already by Graham Priest regarding Lewis's interpretation. Graham Priest noted the inadequacy of Lewis's translation scheme using a modal argument [Priest, 2005]. Concrete objects of Lewis are necessarily concrete but existent objects of Priest are not necessarily existent and therefore Lewis's translation is not truth preserving when it comes to certain modal statements. This inadequacy led to series of works on this issue particularly by Priest himself and Richard Woodward, with Woodward proposing an interpretation of noneists' "to exist" as "concrete and actual" with an indexical account of actuality[Woodward, 2013]. It remains an issue to decide whether this new interpretation is conclusive after all. An adequate interpretation should avoid ad hoc modification of the translation scheme only to circumvent a raised objection. I argue that the interpretation should consider systematically the truth value of all propositions in the target conceptual scheme including modal propositions and specifically other ontological commitments of the target theory. The truth ascription procedure is required to be known, i.e., how it is decided that some propositions are true and some not. The interpretation scheme should translate propositions of first scheme recursively to the second one. It will be argued that both parties of non-existent debates fall short of this requirement.

Finally I argue that there is a problem with finding a criteria for adequacy of a translation scheme. When Priest observes that concrete objects of Lewis are necessarily so, this only implies that they do not agree about the modal status of concrete objects. It cannot be decided then whether this divergence is an artifact of the translation scheme or arises from an original disagreement over modal status of concrete objects. It will be discussed that although in some cases, a decision can be made whether a translation is needed or not, this is not the case for the debate on non-existents.

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