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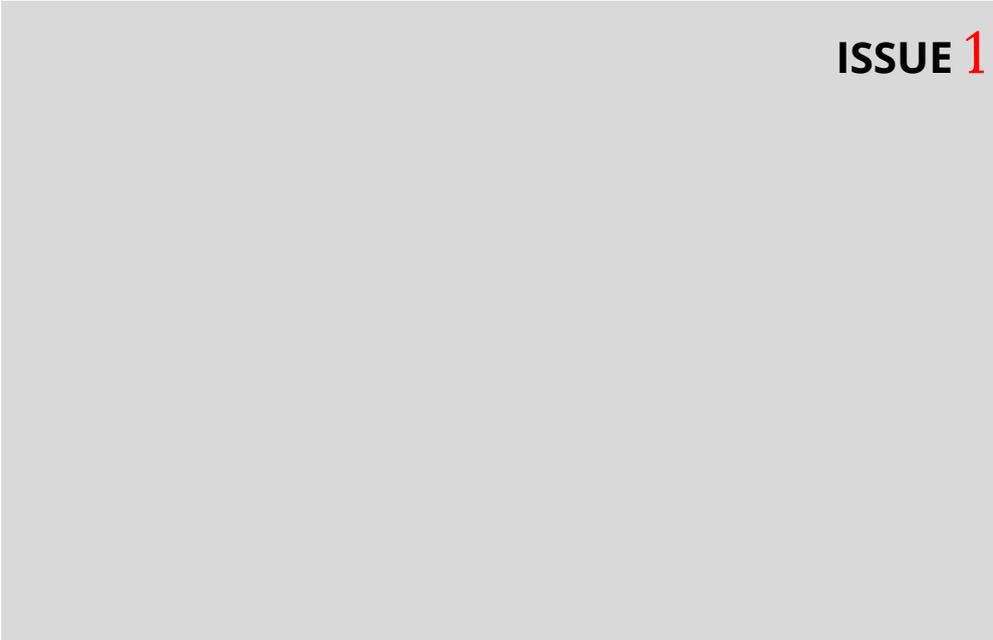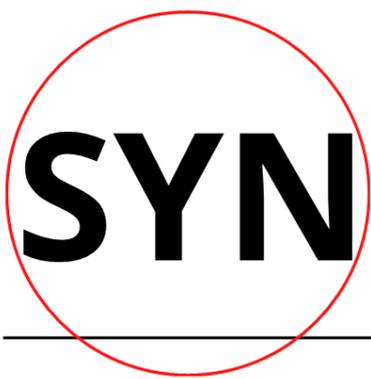
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Non-Existence:
Error and Fiction

List of contributions

Simone Nota

(Trinity College Dublin)

The Paradox of Falsehood and Non-Being:
Parmenides, Plato, Russell, and the *Tractatus**

Abstract: How can we think or say what is not? If we equate what-is-not with nothing, then a thought of nothing is no thought at all; if we don't, we are condemned to admit that what-is-not is, seemingly incurring in self-refutation. This paradox – the paradox of falsehood and non-being – has a long and venerable history, part of which I address here as the story of a double patricide: the one committed by Plato against Parmenides, and the one committed by the early Wittgenstein against Russell. I argue that these thinkers – in attempting to solve the problem posed by the thought of the non-existent – all appeal to a relational theory of intentionality, by which whenever we think, we are in a relation to something existing. However, this solution comes into two general variants. A radical one (Parmenides) by which we simply cannot think of the non-existent, and thereby falsehood is impossible; and a moderate one (Plato, Russell, early Wittgenstein), by which thought of the non-existent is to be analysed in terms of existing entities. The moderate variant is essentially aimed at making falsehood explicable, yet only Wittgenstein offers a workable account, as both Plato and Russell remain stuck in the "problem of participation".

Keywords: *Paradox*, *Falsehood*, *Non-Being*, *Russell*, *Wittgenstein*

> *"Thought must be something unique". When we say, and mean, that such-and-such is the case, we—and our meaning—do not stop anywhere short of the fact; but we mean: this—is—so. But this paradox (which has the form of a truism) can also be expressed in this way: Thought can be of what is not the case.* – L. Wittgenstein

Introduction

How can we think or say what is not? If we equate what-is-not with nothing, then a thought of nothing would seem to be no thought at all;[1] if we don't, we are condemned to admit that what-is-not is, seemingly incurring in self-refutation.[2] The story of this paradox – namely that of false thought or

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[1] See *Parmenides* 132b and *Theaetetus* 189a.

[2] See *Sophist* 239a and 241b.

thought of what is not – goes back to the very inception of Western metaphysics with Parmenides, and runs throughout the history of Western philosophy, reaching Wittgenstein (and beyond). In this paper, I shall address a significant part of it as the story of a double patricide: the one committed by Plato in his *Sophist* at the expense of «father Parmenides» and his strict vision of Being, and the one committed by the early Wittgenstein at the expense of Bertrand Russell – his philosophical mentor or father – and his multiple relation theory of judgement.

The paper is divided into four sections (one per author), yet its aim is to build a unifying narrative linking all four authors through a modal account of their notion of object(s) of thought, worked out in the framework of a relational theory of intentionality. According to a relational theory of intentionality, whenever we think we are in a relation to something existing. I will however distinguish two general variants of such a theory: a radical variant (Parmenides), by which we simply cannot think of the non-existent, and a moderate variant (Plato, Russell, early Wittgenstein), by which thought of the non-existent is to be analysed in terms of existing entities.

My discussion is as follows. In section one, I argue that Parmenides endorses (a view that I call) *hyper-necessitism*, by which *Being* is the one, necessary "object" of thought, and thereby falsehood – qua thought or expression of what-is-not – is impossible. In section two, I provide an interpretation of the core of Plato's *Sophist*, which silences Parmenidean worries by accounting in some detail for the possibility of thinking of what-is-not in terms of a web of necessary forms, especially the form *Other* or *Non-Being*. I offer a conjecture of my own on how the form *Other* blends with false discourse for Plato; but ultimately, (what I take to be) Plato's solution to the problem of falsehood leaves open the notorious "problem of participation". Section three is a presentation of the development of some of Russell's thoughts on truth and falsehood, from his "Parmenidean" 1903 stance, by which literally everything that is thinkable must be, to his multiple relation theory of judgement and its Platonic metaphysics of forms, which is meant to offer a more reasonable account of false thought or judgement by analysing the logical possibility of (the thought of) non-existing complexes in terms of actual entities. Finally, in the fourth section, I go through some of the young Wittgenstein's objections to Russell's multiple relation theo-

ry. I claim that Wittgenstein sees how, by endorsing a Platonic metaphysics of forms, Russell too remains stuck in the problem of participation; thus, Wittgenstein endorses an Aristotelian view instead, by which forms are immanent to "objects" (cf. Pears 1977: 187–8). Further, I argue that Wittgenstein's "objects" are logically necessary existents – logic being transcendental for him – *and* that the forms of "objects" are necessarily contained in thoughts and their expression in language, given a logico-transcendental isomorphism between thought, language, and the world. The conjunction of these two claims is arguably sufficient to provide a workable solution to the paradox of falsehood and non-being.

1. *Parmenides*

At the beginning of his poem *On Nature*,[3] after having led him «upon the far-fabled path of the divinity, which carries over all cities the knowing man» (fragment 1), the Daughters of the Sun guide Parmenides to the halls of Night, where the ethereal and towering gates of the paths of night and day stand. When the gates are finally opened, and indeed when Parmenides crosses their threshold on his chariot, we learn that a Goddess is waiting on the other side. The Goddess welcomes Parmenides, and, following a few introductory remarks, she begins her immortal revelation:

> Come now, I shall tell—and convey home the tale once you have heard—
> just which ways of inquiry alone are there for understanding:
> the one, that [it] is and that [it] is not not to be,
> is the path of conviction, for it attends upon true reality,
> but the other, that [it] is not and that [it] must not be,
> this, I tell you, is a path wholly without report:
> for neither could you apprehend what is not, for it is not to be accomplished,
> nor could you indicate it. (fr. 2)

The Goddess distinguishes two ways of inquiry for understanding: (1) *it is and it is not not to be*; (2) *it is not and it must not be*. Surprisingly, right after having introduced the second way, she restrains Parmenides from it. Indeed, later in the poem, she will go as far as saying that the second way is «no true

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[3] Quotes from the poem are, unless otherwise stated, from the translation contained in Palmer (2009).

way at all» (fr. 8; verses 17–18). Why, then, does she include it in the ways of inquiry that «alone are there for understanding»? The question is crucial—addressing it is necessary before one can proceed on the first way of inquiry, the path of conviction that attends upon true reality.

It might be thought that the second way of inquiry (*it is not and it must not be*) must initially be taken into account on logical grounds. After all, the Goddess herself will state that either «it is or it is not» (fr. 8; 16), and surely this peculiar formulation of the principle of the excluded middle deserves to be investigated.[4] The first difficulty here is to establish the subject hiding behind the Parmenidean "it".[5] Since the subject must be assumed to be the same in both "it is" and "it is not", let us briefly begin with the phrase "it is", in order to then turn to "it is not" and see what happens.

If Parmenides were to address us with the nude statement "it is", we would plausibly reply with a natural question: "What is there?"[6] What would Parmenides answer in turn? I am inclined to think, with Quine, that he would answer "Everything", exactly as everyone else (Quine 1948: 21). This way, "it is"

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[4] I say "peculiar", since Parmenides' formulation of the logical principle of the excluded middle also seems to exhibit an ontological aura. While this might sound queer or alien to many of us nowadays – used as we are to neat distinctions between logic and metaphysics – it probably did not sound thus in antiquity. For example, as argued by to the Polish logician Jan Łukasiewicz, Aristotle maintained that the logical principle of contradiction – $\neg(\alpha \wedge \neg\alpha)$ – and the logical principle of the excluded middle – $\alpha \vee \neg\alpha$ – are at the same time ontological (1971: 489; 1987: 69). Here, I want to suggest that a limit-version of the (onto)logical principle of the excluded middle – "[either] it is or it is not" – is at least *put to the test* for the first time by Parmenides.

[5] I talk here of the Parmenidean "it", notwithstanding in the Greek original the verb "is" is unaccompanied. That, in fact, is no reason to assume Parmenides' poem has no subject matter!

[6] It might be thought that a more natural question to ask is rather "What is it?". This question, however, is completely empty of content, if it asks for the essential nature of the "it" (that is said to be) in abstraction from what there is, and thereby in abstraction from the question: "What is there?". The question "What is it?" has the further drawback of creating the grammatical illusion that we are looking for a certain thing or substance, as is clear if we formulate the question thus: "What is this thing that is said to be?". At this stage, however, the assumption that we are looking for a thing is completely unwarranted, and rather reflects modern preoccupations, such as those of Descartes ("What am I?" — "A thing that thinks"). This is not to say that the question "What is it?" is illegitimate or sterile, but rather that our investigation should *start* elsewhere: not from reference to an alleged substance which possesses the alleged property of being, but rather, to use Oliva Blanchette's words, from what there is «in a comprehensive yet concrete sense» (1991: 273). This is what Parmenides sometimes calls τὸ ἐόν (ibid). In the continuation of this section, I simply employ, following Quine, the word "Everything". For the priority of the question "What is there?" over "What is it?" see also Varzi (2011).

would promptly translate into the more manageable "Everything is".[7] Crucially, if *Everything* is the subject behind the Parmenidean "it", then the principle by which "It is or it is not" will read: "either Everything is or Everything is not"—a statement which sounds very much like Parmenides' own at fr. 8, verse 11: «It must either be altogether or not at all».

But now let us try to entertain for a moment the thought that "Everything is not". Evidently, this thought cancels itself out, for if Everything is not, then not even the (pseudo) thought that "Everything is not" is. In fact, if Everything is not, we are left with *nothing*, so to speak. Small wonder that the second way of inquiry ultimately constitutes no true path of inquiry at all, since there would be literally nothing to be thought of as object of the inquiry, and, indeed, even the inquiry itself (which is to be conducted by means of thought or language) could not be in the first place.[8] It is perhaps through this chain of reasoning, or at any rate something quite like it, that Parmenides concludes that «not to be said and not to be thought is it that it is not» (fr. 8; 8–9), for trying to say or think of this results in self-refutation. If the second way of inquiry is called a way for understanding, then, it can only be because trying to embark on it will prompt the understanding that «a single tale of a way remains, that it is» (fr. 8; 1–2).

In effect, now that we have managed to establish that "Everything is not" represents no feasible way of inquiry, and since for Parmenides *tertium non datur*, there remains only one alternative, namely the natural one that faced with the question "What is there?", answers "Everything (is)". However, and again as noted by Quine, this answer is so general that there could still be much room

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[7] Francesco Berto aptly calls the thesis that "Everything exists" the Parmenidean Thesis (2013: 4). However, Berto also suggests that attributing this thesis to the *historical* Parmenides may be misleading, since for the historical Parmenides, Berto claims, «almost nothing exists!» (2013: 3; see also 2010: 5) This claim is motivated thus by Berto: «[the historical] Parmenides relegates the multiplicity of objects of our ordinary experience – houses, mountains, people – to the realm of the fallacious δόξα, the deceptive appearance» (ibid.). Contrary to Berto's view, I shall however argue below that, while the apparent "multiplicity of objects of our ordinary experience" is indeed deceptive for Parmenides, that which appears *is* nonetheless *something* (and surely not nothing). If so, "appearances" could be ultimately accounted for in terms of *Being*. In this way, the thesis that "Everything exists" (or "Everything is", given that Parmenides was surely oblivious to alleged distinctions between existence and being) may be attributed to the historical Parmenides, and not just to a fictitious Parmenides, as Berto does.

[8] Or for that matter the enquirer.

for disagreement, for example on what the term "Everything" should encompass, and how.

Let us then turn our attention to the domain of the things that are for Parmenides (for now, it will be convenient to speak in the plural). First of all, what is the minimal requirement to *be* something? Parmenides' answer to this question, it seems to me, is contained in his notorious fragment 3:

> because the same thing is there for thinking and for being.[9]

Famously, or perhaps infamously, there are many possible ways to translate fragment 3. Many will translate along the lines of "for the same thing can be thought and can exist"[10]; this translation, however, seems to suggest that something might *fail* to exist for Parmenides.[11] Other translators, instead, prefer something more obscure, along the lines of "thinking and being are one and the same thing"[12]; this translation, however, would problematically make Parmenides into an absolute idealist *ante litteram*.[13] Perhaps the simplest way out of this conundrum is to interpret the fragment as telling us that everything that can be thought of *is*, and thus as individuating in *thinkability* the minimal criterion for being. In this interpretation, thinking and being are one and the same not literally (so that all being would be reducible to thought), but rather since they share the same space: *all that is thinkable is*. If this is really Parmenides' stance in fragment 3, as major interpreters believe,[14] what then could be the rationale behind it? Why should everything that is thinkable *be*?

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[9] τὸ γὰρ αὐτὸ νοεῖν ἐστίν τε καὶ εἶναι. Translation by Gallop (1984: 57). On this score, Williams (2006: 18).

[10] This is Tarán's translation. On this score, also Diels-Kranz. Cf. Gallop (1984: 56-57).

[11] I argue against this view in some detail below.

[12] On this score, Vlastos, and many others following him. Cf. Gallop (1984: 56-57).

[13] This is in fact how Hegel understands Parmenides (1995: 253). Conversely, in the analytic tradition, Bernard Williams (2006: 5), and following his lead Myles Burnyeat (1982: 4), have denied that idealism was present in Ancient Philosophy. This goes to show that making Parmenides into an absolute idealist *ante litteram* is at least controversial. For a critique of idealist readings of fragment 3, see also Palmer (2009: 120-121).

[14] For example, Owen (1966: 95).

The answer lies in the notion of object of thought,[15] and indeed in a dilemma that seems to affect it. Every act of thought must have an object: on this proposition, most would immediately agree. Now, for any such act, there seem to be two possibilities: either its object is, or it is not. Intuitively, we want to maintain that some objects of thought are not, such as Pegasus (the winged horse of the Greek myth) or a flying man. Yet if they are not in any sense at all – if they do not have being, and if they are not analysable or reducible in terms of being(s) – then how could we think of them? Should we say we think of nothing at all? This seems impossible. Should we say that there are objects that are not, and that we think of those? This seems contradictory. We are thereby stuck in what, partly following Tim Crane (2013), we might call *the problem of non-existence*—one at the very core of the paradox of false thought (as should be clear from our introduction).

One type of solution to this problem is to appeal to a relational theory of intentionality, by which whenever we think, we ultimately think of – or are related in thought to – something that is or exists.[16] I distinguish between two general variants of this solution, namely a radical and a moderate variant. Either literally everything that is thinkable *is*, and thereby we absolutely cannot think of what-is-not (radical variant); or else we can think of what-is-not, if only in a watered-down or relative sense, by which (thought of) what-is-not must be *analysable or reducible in terms of what there is* (moderate variant). This consideration is fundamental for our purposes, as I have begun to argue that Parmenides endorses the more radical claim, whereas I shall argue that Plato, Russell, and the early Wittgenstein endorse the moderate one. Throughout the paper we will thereby be concerned with this type of solution to the problem of non-existence, in its two different variants. For now, let us return to Parmenides alone, by asking the next natural question: What can we think of (or can count as an object of thought)?

Everything, Parmenides would say, if our discussion above is not mistaken. But what does the word "Everything" stand for? Nowadays, some people

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[15] The notion of "object of thought" is inherently ambiguous (and that may well be what gives rise to the paradox of falsehood in the first place). I will, however, exploit this ambiguity for now, and only disambiguate the notion in § 3 below, as it is very likely that the (or at any rate, most of the) Greeks were not explicitly aware of the ambiguity itself.

[16] For the notion of relational theory of intentionality, see e.g. Caston (1998: 253) and Benoist (2007).

in philosophy would answer in turn: "primarily states of affairs or facts", i.e. combinations of objects.[17] Parmenides, however, could not avail himself of Wittgenstein's categorial distinction between facts and objects. For a Greek, the world was the totality of things (i.e. every-thing), not of facts (cf. Mourelatos 1969: 742). On the other hand, this should not mean that the Greeks had no states of affairs or facts to think of in their ontology, such as a lunar eclipse. Rather, they believed the moon's being eclipsed – which *we* call a state of affairs – to be an object (of thought) in quite the same sense in which Socrates is.[18] This much was maintained by Montgomery Furth (1968), who meticulously argued that the Greeks had a *fused notion of being*, one – that is – equally accounting for both the ideas of predication (being *thus–and–so*) and existence (being *simpliciter*).[19]

Once it is provisionally accepted that for Parmenides both objects proper and states of affairs would equally count as thinkable objects – and thereby as objects that *are* – we should turn to the *modality* of being of these objects, in order to delve deeper into the metaphysical core of the poem. That is, we know now that thinkable objects are according to Parmenides; but we do not know yet in which way they are or exist (whether necessarily, contingently, merely possibly, or some mix of these). Or do we?

The solution to this riddle was already contained in the Goddess' revelation, where we read that «it is and it is not not to be», i.e. that *it must be*. In the analytic tradition, it is a merit of John Palmer to have stressed that the modal clause of this verse cannot – as is often done – be ignored or downplayed, and thus that the verse itself specifies a mode of being, namely *necessary being* (Palmer 2009: 97-99). It does thereby follow, according to our interpretation so far, that for Parmenides "Everything necessarily is".[20] Surprisingly, however, Palmer himself does not reach this conclusion, rather arguing that Parmenides

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[17] See for example Armstrong (1993).

[18] Cf. Kahn (2007: 45)

[19] A partial anticipation of Furth's view is to be found in Kahn (1966).

[20] Notice that the modality of necessity is here attached to Everything ("Everything necessarily is"), and not to the proposition that *Everything is* (as in "necessarily Everything is"). In other words, I take Parmenides to be concerned with *de re* necessity (necessity pertaining to things), and not with *de dicto* necessity (necessity pertaining to linguistic statements). That is because most ancient philosophers, such as Aristotle, were arguably concerned with *de re* necessity; cf. Grayling (2014: 54-55). Indeed, as far as I know, the distinction between *de re* and *de dicto* necessity was not explicitly thematized until the Middle Ages (though Aristotle himself might have had a hunch about it).

also endorsed the modality of *contingent being*, so that *not* Everything necessarily is (or is a necessary being), but rather something exists in this mode and something else does not (2009: 106-118).

Palmer's alternative conclusion is reached, to be sure, through the consideration of the text, which seems to account for contingent being(s) as well. In effect, in fragment 6, the Goddess seems to introduce a *third way* of inquiry, namely that of mortals, who believe in ever-changing *appearances* by «suppos[ing] that it is and is not the same and not the same», i.e. that it is and it is not (what it is). If, however, one takes seriously Parmenides' principle of the excluded middle – "it is *or* it is not" – then surely "it is *and* it is not (what it is)" results in a contradiction,[21] and indeed Parmenides himself informs us that «the path of all of these [mortals] turns back on itself» (fr. 6; 9).

This last expression will become clearer once we consider the following. Parmenides is adamant that «*nothing else* [is] except What is» and that «it is *all* replete with What Is» (fr. 8; 36–7 and 24; my emphasis). Thus, if we are not to conclude that the totality of being is contingent ("Everything is contingently"), a conclusion that Parmenides would have found repugnant – and that clearly contradicts his injunction that *it must be* – then the allegedly contingent appearances in which mortals believe are ultimately to be upgraded to necessary being (if they are not to be downgraded to nothing at all). After all, the Goddess appears to tell Parmenides this much, right after having mentioned the untrustworthy opinions of the mortals for the first time: «Still, you shall learn these things too, namely how the things-that-seem *had to* have genuine existence, being indeed the whole of things».[22]

It is therefore the case that for Parmenides "Everything *necessarily* is". Something in the spirit of this Parmenidean idea has been recently advanced by Timothy Williamson, in his *Modal Logic as Metaphysics*. There, Williamson defends *necessitism*, which he presents as the thesis that «it is necessary what there is», or equivalently that «necessarily everything is necessarily something» (2013: 2).[23] However, being possible for him to avail of the Wittgensteinian dis-

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[21] Cf. Furth (1968: 120).

[22] Owen's translation (1966: 88; my emphasis).

[23] Notice that Williamson immediately clarifies that the necessity at stake in necessitism is not attached to «what can or cannot be known or thought or said of what there is»; rather, it is *meta-*

tinction between states of affairs or facts (*how* things stand) and objects (*what there is*), Williamson could also preserve the intuition that «things could have been otherwise» (2013: 1). For example, a necessitist could suppose that although the things there are are necessarily, their actual combinations in states of affairs are contingent. (As we shall see, this will be the key to Wittgenstein's insightful solution to the paradox of falsehood and non-being).

We should keep in mind, however, that Parmenides could avail himself of no such conceptual machinery. For him, a state of affairs was yet another object (of thought), in the exact same sense in which Socrates or a chair are. Therefore, if for Parmenides "Everything necessarily is", *Everything*, quite literally, is *necessarily*. Literally *nothing* is contingent. We might call this view *hyper-necessitism*, and assert with some plausibility that it is a view that almost no one in his or her right mind would maintain.[24] Ultimately, in this view, all things collapse into one eternal, changeless and monolithic mass, held together tight by *necessity* (see fr. 8; esp. 30-31).[25] The distinctions between beings (whether of place, of time, of colour, etc.) reveal themselves to be illusory, as all things indistinctly and necessarily *are*. In fact, it is not even possible for anything to be F *and* not-G: «for this may never be made manageable, that things that are not are» (fr. 7; 1). Plurality melts thus into Oneness. Whenever we think of something – say, a chair or a lunar eclipse – our ultimate object of thought is none other than the one undifferentiated and necessary *being*, the only true *form* that is right to name (see fr. 8; 53–4).

And here is the most startling consequence of all: in this view falsehood is impossible. We perpetually inhabit the all-pervading dimension of necessary reality or truth (*alētheia*), with no possibility of ever escaping it.[26] Whatever we

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physical necessity (2013: 3). Put otherwise, just like Parmenides, Williamson is not concerned with *de dicto* necessity, but rather with *de re* necessity. For the distinction between *de dicto* and *de re* necessity, see note 20 above.

[24] To my knowledge, the only hyper-necessitist after Parmenides was Emanuele Severino, who defended the view with remarkable coherence (see his 1964). Of him, it was perhaps true what Plato says in the *Phaedrus* (at the beginning of the discourse on the fourth kind of madness): «He stands outside human concerns and draws close to the divine; ordinary people think he is disturbed and rebuke him for this, unaware that he is possessed by god» (*Phaedrus*, 249d).

[25] Cf. Aristotle's *Metaphysics* N 2 (1089a).

[26] Consider in this light Parmenides' otherwise obscure fragment 4: «And it is all one to me / Where I am to begin; for I shall return there again».

think, if we are to think at all, we must think of something that is necessarily – that cannot but *be*. Whatever we say, if we are not to produce mere babbling, we must say it of something that is necessarily – that cannot but *be*. Yet, intuitively we think or say a falsehood whenever we think or say, of something that is, that it is not, or else of something that is not, that it is.[27] Both these options are prohibited by Parmenides.

2. *Plato*

Towards the end of the last section, I have ventured to assert that virtually nobody in his or her right mind would commit to the Parmenidean view that literally Everything is necessarily (hyper-necessitism). This, however, should not be taken to mean that Parmenides' view is inconsistent or illogical. As it happens, there is a sense in which quite the opposite is true. Out of a few basic logical principles, such as the principle of the excluded middle and the principle of sufficient reason,[28] Parmenides generates a powerful a priori argument in support of his metaphysical thesis. This is remarkable in itself, whether or not we think the argument succeeds in establishing its conclusion. Indeed, we should not be surprised that a philosopher like Plato had a tremendous respect for Parmenides,[29] since Parmenides' poem is the first true piece of metaphysical reasoning (if by "metaphysics" we mean an a priori investigation into the essential nature of reality according to rules).

It is all the more significant, then, that Plato sets for himself the task of revealing that and how Parmenides' view is untenable. Crucially, he will refute Parmenides' view not on theoretical charges, or at any rate not merely on these, but rather on *pragmatic* ones. Committing to Parmenides' teachings would in fact result either in a mindless silence, or else in useless repetitions. In a mindless silence, if we take thought and language to be activities; they would in fact act upon their object, thereby changing it – an impossible consequence if the

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[27] This is the traditional conception of falsehood, to be found in Plato's *Sophist* (e.g. 241a), and famously in Aristotle's *Metaphysics* Γ (1011b25), as part of his conception of truth.

[28] As noted by Bernard Williams (2006: 18), Parmenides makes an elegant use of the principle of sufficient reason in order to prove the eternal nature of Being: for «what necessity would force it, sooner or later, to come to be, if it started from nothing?» (fr. 8; 9-10; William's translation).

[29] See *Theaetetus* 183e.

totality of being is changeless (S*ophist*, 248 d-e). Even if we do not concede this argument,[30] the alternative result would hardly be more compelling from a pragmatic standpoint: we would be condemned to think and speak of one and the same truth again and again, i.e. *it is and it must be*, without the possibility of ever uttering falsehoods. Though not being logically impossible, Parmenides' view seriously threatens the pragmatic requirements of meaningful discourse. Thus, as noted by Luca Castagnoli, «it is the extreme undesirability of the non-philosophical (and indeed non-human) life to which [this view] would lead if coherently followed that requires every effort to fight [it]» (2010: 224).

The upshot of all this is that, if the possibility of falsehood is to be vindicated, the letter of Parmenides' teachings must be abandoned. That, however, does not mean that their spirit should be abandoned too. The various Forms that Plato famously envisioned, although not reducible to Parmenides' one true form (*Being*), are in fact best characterized as being*s* of a Parmenidean type,[31] i.e. beings that retain the fundamental characters of Parmenides' Being, only in the plural: they are necessary and changeless theoretical entities,[32] known by reasoning rather than sense-perception, and thereby contrasted with perceptible appearances. The contrast between a plurality of theoretical entities and a plurality of perceptible appearances proves however extremely problematic for Plato, as it opens a stark *dualism* between a formal order of reality and a material one, and the problem of the relationship between the two, known as *the problem of participation*.[33]

It is no doubt fitting that in the dialogue *Parmenides*, when the young Socrates presents this rather canonical version of Plato's theory of forms, Parmenides himself objects with a battery of logical arguments against it (including the famous third man argument). Yet it is a true stroke of genius, once consid-

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[30] For one, Hegel would not concede it, as the argument takes for granted that cognition is akin to an instrument that modifies the object to which is applied. See Hegel (1977: Intro, §§ 73–4).

[31] Cf. Kahn (2007: 36–7) and Harte (2008: 192).

[32] Harte (2008: 193) rightly writes that «Forms are theoretical entities in the sense that they do some theoretical work». Example of such theoretical work will soon be given below.

[33] Cf. Allen (1960: 161). Notice that the "problem of participation" was not a problem for Parmenides, for whom even appearances were to be reduced, so to speak, to the one necessary Being. No dualisms needed.

ered the similarities mentioned above, that Plato's Parmenides should continue his *logos* thus:

> "Yet on the other hand, Socrates", said Parmenides, "if someone, having an eye on all the difficulties we have just brought up and others of the same sort, won't allow that there are forms for things and won't mark off a form for each one, he won't have anywhere to turn his thought, since he doesn't allow that for each thing there is a character that is always the same. In this way he will destroy the power of dialectic entirely. But I think you are only too well aware of that". "What you say is true", Socrates said. "What then will you do about philosophy?" (*Parmenides*, 135b-c)

Here Parmenides, right after having presented some devastating objections to the canonical theory of forms, stands nonetheless as the ultimate defender of forms. Without forms and their definition – he claims – our thoughts would be objectless, presumably since no features common to things qua things (say, *Being* and *Oneness*) could be then singled out (and, at that point, what would our thought be a thought *of*?). In that way – Parmenides continues – the ability for meaningful discourse would be entirely destroyed, and with it philosophy itself (presumably, qua advanced modality of meaningful discourse).[34] Thus, with a truly surprising twist, Plato's Parmenides is willing to go beyond his own doctrine by accepting a plurality of forms, if that means protecting the possibility of meaningful discourse and of philosophy at large.

Protecting meaningful discourse is however impossible if one does not allow for falsehood. Indeed, that was the reason why the Parmenidean letter had to be abandoned in the first place. But surely the same goes for philosophy as well. For how is one to protect philosophy, as an enquiry aiming at the truth,[35] if not by allowing the possibility to spot falsehoods and those who utter falsehoods? And with this remark, we finally come to Plato's *Sophist*.

In this dialogue, Theaetetus and a Stranger coming from Elea (Parmenides' *polis*) embark on a hunt for the sophist, or better for the right definition of the sophist. The sophist is a craftsman of falsehoods, yet one that is not easily characterizable as such, as he himself *denies* the possibility of falsehood, in doing so appealing to the letter of Parmenides' teachings. Thinking or saying a false-

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[34] Cf. Politis (2021: 182-3).

[35] At least for the Greeks.

hood – the sophist would say – should mean thinking or saying something that is not; but surely something that is not, as Parmenides saw, is nothing at all, and thus one cannot think or say a falsehood in the first place.[36]

Clearly, if this argument is to be stopped, the uncompromising Parmenidean equation of What-is-Not with Nothing must be challenged. This is exactly what happens at the turning point of the *Sophist* (241d), when the Eleatic Stranger prays Theaetetus

> S: Not to think that I'm turning into some kind of patricide. T: What do you mean? S: In order to defend ourselves [from the sophist] we're going to have to subject father Parmenides' saying to further examination, and insist by brute force both that *that which is not* somehow is, and then again that *that which is* somehow is not.

The final aim of this sort of enquiry is therefore to leave aside the intractable notion of an absolute Non-Being, rather focusing on a *relative* notion of Non-Being, by which *what is not* somehow is, and correspondingly *what is* somehow is not. If this can be done coherently, then the possibility of falsehood can be coherently defended.

It would be impossible here to present all the nuanced steps of Plato's argument. The essential point, however, is that we must allow other fundamental forms beyond that of *Being*, and that not only each of these forms must have an essential nature of its own, but also that they must necessarily «weave together with», or «partake in», some others.[37] For example, these further forms must partake in the form *Being*, for otherwise they would not be at all. Among them, Plato lists the form *Other*, which by its very nature is *other-than-the-form-Being* (255c-d).[38] Yet being essentially *other-than-the-form-Being* ultimately means being (the form of) *non-Being*, and thus Plato finds in the form

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[36] According to Palmer (1999: 141), collapsing the distinction between what-is-not and what-is-not-at-all (i.e. nothing) is the *characteristic move* of the sophist, one that reveals an evident Parmenideanism, or at any rate a certain interpretation of Parmenides.

[37] Plato metaphorically describes the relationship between forms as a "weave" or "blend" (*symploké*), as "participation" (*metaschesis*, *methexis*), and as "communion" (*koinōnia*). Still, the nature of this relation is not itself straightforward. I shall leave this question open here.

[38] At *Sophist* 255c-d we read that *Being* and the *Other* must be «completely distinct», for the *Other* can only be such relatively to something other than itself, whereas *Being* can – and must – be also by itself.

Other the relative notion of non-Being he was looking for. Indeed, on the one hand the form *Other* or *non-Being* is (by partaking in *Being*), but on the other hand it is not (by its very nature) the form *Being*. Furthermore, although by partaking in *Being* all beings are, by partaking in the *Other* there will be a relative sense in which each being is not the form *Being* (256d-e), or any of the other beings that partake in it.[39] In other words, thanks to the form *Other*, there is a sense by which it is possible that something is other than, or different from, What Is by its very nature (namely, *Being*), and indeed different from all the other things that are by partaking in What Is. The Parmenidean injunction is thus violated.

It goes without saying that this is Plato's key to address the paradox of falsehood. Thinking or saying a falsehood, in effect, is thinking or saying something other than, or different from, what as a matter of fact is—something which however must possess a being of some kind for Plato. As Theaetetus says early on in the dialogue: «that [the things] that are not are in a way, [this] has to be, if anyone is ever going to be even a little bit wrong» (240e). We should not therefore be surprised when the Eleatic Stranger later asserts that «the weaving together of Forms is what makes speech possible for us» (259e). In fact, the Form *Other* or *non-Being*, which *is* by weaving together with *Being*, must be found in (meaningful) false discourse and thought, for

> if it doesn't blend with them then everything has to be true. But if it does then there will be false belief and false speech, since falsity in thinking and speaking amount to believing and saying those [things] that are not. (260c)

Unluckily, Plato is not crystal clear as to how this blending of thought and speech with *non-Being* – which is to make falsehood possible – is to take place. He does provide, however, two notorious examples, out of which we can advance a reasonable conjecture.

The two examples come in the form of two elementary sentences, namely "Theaetetus sits" and "Theaetetus flies", of which the first is true while the second is false (263a-b). The sentences are analysed by means of a distinc-

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[39] Thus, for example, the Eleatic Stranger can say: «each [form] is different from the others, not because of its own nature but because of sharing in the type of the *Other*» (255e). Plausibly, anything whatsoever (including sensible particulars) is different from other things for the same reason.

tion between name and verb. The name is said to refer to a certain object, namely Theaetetus. The two verbs ("sits" and "flies") are said to indicate actions that are allegedly performed by this object—that allegedly *hold of it*. Nowadays, we would likely call these *properties*.[40] In the second example, however, the property indicated by the verb "flying" does not *really* hold of the Theaetetus. Indeed, the state of affairs by which Theaetetus flies does not actually exist. How, then, can we meaningfully think or express it for Plato?

Here's my conjecture. Theaetetus and the property or form *Flying*, taken individually, do exist.[41] If we are to judge that "Theaetetus is flying", then we must not only be related to Theaetetus and *Flying* individually, but we must also combine them in judgement (cf. 262e)—we must succeed, that is, in saying that Flying *is* with respect to Theaetetus,[42] or equivalently that the state of affairs by which Theaetetus is flying *is*.[43] However, if we are to succeed in doing this, then we must also be related to the form of *Being*, which should already pertain not only to Theaetetus and *Flying* taken individually, but also to the combination of Theaetetus and *Flying* (Theaetetus-instantiating-*Flying*). Indeed, to anticipate what I will say about Russell below, for a realist like Plato no amount of thinking or judging could bring together Theaetetus and *Flying* if it were not already possible for them to be combined *in reality* in some way. (In judging that "Theaetetus is flying" we do not magically bring a possibility into being).

Now, the trouble is that, since the property or form *Flying* is different from those that actually hold of Theaetetus, such as *Sitting*, the combination of Theaetetus and *Flying* does not *actually* exist.[44] If so, *Being* cannot directly per-

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[40] While a *token-action* (such as this man's sitting) is hardly characterizable as a property, a *type-action* (say, sitting in general) may be characterized as a property or kind/form; cf. Crivelli (2012: 224, 238). In the following, I assume that verbs like "sitting" and "flying" refer to properties (or kinds/forms).

[41] Arguably, this is the main consequence of Plato's analysis of speech, by which a name and a verb *refer* to different elements. See Denyer (1991), Chapter 9 (esp. § 'The Distinction as Semantics').

[42] Cf. Crivelli (2012: 249), who argues that «the central claim of Plato's definition of sentence is that a speech act performed by uttering a [elementary] sentence is directed to two things, one of which (the action signified by the verb) is said about the other (the object signified by the name)».

[43] Recall, the Greeks had a fused notion of being (at least according to Kahn and Furth).

[44] This might also be expressed by saying that flying is a form – both in an ordinary and a technical sense – of non-sitting, *and* that the latter is different from what is with respect to Theaetetus. Notice that Plato allows for negative forms in the *Sophist*, and further claims that they essentially constitute the form *Other* or *non-Being* (257c – 258c).

tain to it. And yet exactly because it is different from, or other than, the obtaining one, the combination of Theaetetus and *Flying* must partake of the *Other* or *non-Being*. Furthermore, since the *Other* partakes in *Being* in turn, it will result that, through the mediation of the form *Other*, a kind of "indirect" being must pertain to the combination above, which is none other than the state of affairs by which Theaetetus is flying. In other words, this state of affairs *is*, although its (modality of) being consists in being *different* from the states of affairs that are in an immediate or actual sense—in being, that is, merely possible. Thereby, we can meaningfully and falsely think or express it through the judgement "Theaetetus flies".[45]

If I am right, in his attempt to coherently accommodate falsehood and trap the sophist, Plato commits to a moderate-variant relational solution to the problem of non-existence, by which we must analyse (the thought of) the non-existent in terms of what there is. In this view, the false thought or speech that "Theaetetus flies" would be mainly accountable in terms of a web of existing Forms to which we are related, including *Flying*, *Being*, and *Other* or *non-Being*. However, here is the problem. Clearly, Theaetetus as well (qua sensible particular) must be related to this web of Forms, if the proposition is to be both meaningful and false. But how is he, if he belongs to a completely different order of reality from the formal one? As we have seen, this issue – the problem of participation – was already raised in the form of devastating objections by Parmenides, in the dialogue that bears his name. In the *Sophist* it is raised once again (248a-b), but then put aside, as if Plato was concerned more with what Kahn called a transcendental logic of Forms (2007: 49), rather than with the actual metaphysical plausibility of the doctrine of participation. If by a Platonic transcendental logic of Forms, however, we mean the study of those necessary logical relationships among mind-independent heavenly Forms that make possible

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[45] I realize that the opposition immediate vs. indirect – and thereby the opposition between actual states of affairs, that have being in an immediate sense, and possible states of affairs, that have being only in an indirect sense – might sound imprecise to the reader. Here, however, words fail me, and I can find no better way of expressing (what I take to be) Plato's solution, if not through this "pictorial language". The state of affairs by which Theaetetus flies has an "indirect" being, in that its participation in *Being* requires a detour: it must be mediated by the form *Other* or *Non-Being*.

thought and discourse (*both true and false*), then the problem of participation will still loom large. And it is doubtful whether Plato ever solved it.[46]

3. *Russell*

One rather striking feature of philosophical problems, that perhaps they share with historical contingencies, seems to be their periodicity. To paraphrase Vico's famous take on History, we might talk of philosophical «corsi and ricorsi» (i.e. occurrences and recurrences), since the very same problems return, in slightly different forms, in very different times. Among the advocates of such a cyclical view of philosophy there might well be Bertrand Russell. Indeed, this statement would seem to be confirmed by Russell's treatment of Parmenides in his *History of Western Philosophy*. As he writes:

> The essence of [Parmenides'] argument is: When you think, you think *of* something; when you use a name, it must be the name *of* something. [...] Whatever can be thought or spoken of must exist [...]. (HWP: 68)

As we have seen in the first section, the idea that every thought must be the thought of something that is (or exists) was plausibly part of Parmenides' real stance. Most importantly, however, this is an idea that Russell himself entertained at one definite stage of his philosophical development. In his 1903 *Principles of Mathematics*, Russell writes in fact:

> Being is that which belongs to every conceivable term, to every possible object of thought—in short to everything that can possibly occur in a proposition, *true or false* [...] Numbers, the Homeric gods, relations, chimeras and four-dimensional spaces all have being, for if they were not entities of a kind, we could make no

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[46] I should further stress here that "the problem of participation", which I have generally characterized as the problem of the relation between a material (spatiotemporal) order of reality and a formal (non-spatiotemporal) one, is a problem for Plato's theory of judgement in general, and *consequently* for his theory of *false* judgement. In effect, if we are to take the *Sophist* seriously, for a typical Platonic judgement to be possible, *whether true or false*, at least two conditions must be met: (*i*) we (human beings in space and time) need to be in a relation not only with objects in space and time, but also with mind-independent eternal forms; (*ii*) we need to be able to express by means of our judgements *that* some object in space and time (particular) falls under a mind-independent eternal form (universal). Both these conditions pose the "problem of participation", to which, I have suggested, Plato had no satisfying final answer. But if so, Plato had no satisfying final answer to the problem of falsehood either (as I have also suggested above).

propositions about them. Thus being is a general attribute of everything, and to mention everything is to show that it is. (PoM, § 427; my emphasis)[47]

Clearly, at this stage of his career Russell wants to endorse a radical-variant relational solution to the problem of non-existence, which was already endorsed by Parmenides, and by which literally everything that is thinkable *is*. There is, however, also an important difference that separates Parmenides from the 1903 Russell. Following his own theoretical assumptions to their extreme logical conclusion, Parmenides seems to leave no space for falsehood at all. Russell, on the other hand, insists in the passage above on the importance of accounting for both true and false propositions. But how can one account for falsehood, if the objects mentioned (or seemingly mentioned) in true and false propositions alike must exist?

Already in his 1905 'On Denoting', Russell implicitly acknowledges this problem, by abandoning the Parmenidean claim that to mention everything is to show that it is, in favour of the analysis of «the logical status of denoting phrases that denote nothing» (OD: 490), such as "The present King of France". The idea is that, if one were to say "The present King of France is bald", the *absence* of an object which is the present King of France will make the sentence false (ibid.). However, in this way the problem is merely postponed. In effect, the present King of France might not exist, and yet it seems that when we judge that he is bald, we must surely be judging *something* as opposed to nothing at all. Or so one wants intuitively to maintain. It is no surprise, then, that Russell's view of propositions at this stage was such that propositions are *real* (mind-independent) entities, to which we are in relation whenever we think or judge something.[48] In other words, a proposition is the real object of any thought or judgement whatsoever, whether it be true or false (cf. NT1905: 492, 494). Yet once again, if this is so, how can one account for false judgements in the first place?

The problem starts to become clearer through the investigation of what Russell meant by "proposition" and "judgement". According to Russell, a proposition is a real and fact-like complex entity, composed out of simpler real entities

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[47] Compare also PoM, § 47.

[48] I here equate thought and judgement, as opposed to e.g. perception. Russell himself makes the distinction between thought and perception in OD (479), and between judgement and perception in NT1906 (47).

(terms or *constituents*), such as particulars and universals. For example, the proposition *Theaetetus flies* will have as its constituents *not* the words "Theaetetus" and "flies", but rather Theaetetus himself (considered as sensible particular) and the universal *Flying* (see PoM, § 51). One would expect that, when I judge that *Theaetetus flies*, I am simply in a relation with Theaetetus and *Flying*, qua constituents of the proposition. And yet, as Peter Hylton has shown, at the beginning of the 20th century the complex nature of a proposition could not play a decisive role in Russell's account of judgement. This was for ideological reasons: given his revolt against idealism, and thereby against the synthesizing powers of the (Kantian kind of) mind, Russell had no way of accounting for the way in which constituents come together to form a proposition (Hylton 2005: 16-17). As a result, over the first years of the century, Russell simply «treats judgment [...] as a relation between a person and a proposition» (ibid.), the latter being considered as a single object (NT1910: 174). This is Russell's so-called Dual Relation Theory of Judgement.

Now, Russell's dual relation theory has a host of problems, first among which is its ambiguity with respect to three analytically distinguishable (though deeply interrelated) senses of the phrase "object of thought": (1) what we think *about* (intentional object); (2) what we are related to in thought (*relatum*); (3) what we think, judge or assert (proposition).[49] To be fair, Russell *nearly* came to a satisfying distinction between (1) and (2) already at this stage, arguing that the notion of 'about' is different from that of 'constituent' (OMD: 328). Thus, my judgement that *Theaetetus flies* is about Theaetetus, and not about *Flying*, which

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[49] The distinction between objects of thought as (1) what we think about and as (3) what we think (namely propositions) has been popularised by Prior (1971). While popular, the distinction should not however be taken as absolute: one might maintain that we may think *about propositions*, as we are doing, perhaps, through this article; cf. Crane (2001: 337). Only, as rightly noted by David Bell (1987: 38), it better not be that we *always* think about propositions or thoughts. «Clearly, not all thinking can be reflexive» (ibid.). While not equally popular, the distinction between objects of thought as (1) what we think about and as (2) *relata* of thought could turn out to be equally important. If I want an inexpensive burgundy, it is at least a defensible relational view that one of the *relata* of my thought, beyond burgundy, is the property 'being inexpensive'. However, the object my desire is *about* is surely not a property: I want *a burgundy* (of a certain kind, etc.), not a property (this example is taken from Crane (2013: 12) and suitably modified for my purposes here). In my view, the distinction between (1) and (2) is especially important for Russellian accounts of false judgement, since a Russellian could coherently maintain that, in judging falsely that *the present King of France is bald*, I must be related to the property 'being King of France', without thereby maintaining that my judgement is *about* that property. Indeed, properties cannot have or lack hair!

latter is still however a constituent of the proposition (as is Theaetetus). Since, however, for Russell at this stage, whenever I judge I am in a relation with a proposition treated as a single object, then the fact that, in judging or asserting a proposition, I must be related to the constituents of the proposition—in our example, the fact that I must be related to Theaetetus and *Flying* in judging that *Theaetetus flies*—becomes hardly distinguishable from the fact that I entertain or judge the proposition itself. Put otherwise, Russell does not demarcate sharply between (2) and (3). This may be the source of a pernicious confusion, as Russell ended up believing that, in judging or asserting propositions, we "assert" complex and real objects of thought, namely the propositions themselves. But if, in asserting a proposition, we "assert a complex object", and this complex object is treated as a single real thing, then we must "assert" the component parts of that complex object too.[50] In which case, in judging or asserting that *Mont Blanc is 4000 meters high*, I would be asserting Mont Blanc itself![51]

But by far the greatest problem of Russell's dual relation theory of judgement is that it makes falsehood both incredible and inexplicable. Incredible, for if a false judgement is a relation between a person and a real proposition, then there must exist somewhere (perhaps in a Platonic heaven) propositions which may be described as objective falsehoods—objective non-facts, such as the non-fact that Theaetetus flies. Inexplicable, for if true judgements as well must be relations between a person and a real proposition, then one cannot make sense of the difference between a true judgement and a false one, and thereby he is condemned to admit that truth and falsehood are ultimate qualities belonging

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[50] Compare Russell's letter to Frege, in which, in reply to Frege's belief that «Mont Blanc with its snowfields is not itself a component part of the thought that Mont Blanc is more than 4000 metres high» (1980: 163), Russel wrote: «I believe that in spite of all its snowfields, Mont Blanc is itself a component part of what is actually asserted in the sentence [*Satz*] 'Mont Blanc is more than 4000 metres high'. We do not assert the thought [*Gedanke*], for this is a private psychological matter: we assert the object of thought, and this is, to my mind, a certain complex (an objective proposition, one might say) in which Mont Blanc is itself a component part. If we do not admit this, then we get the conclusion that we know nothing at all about Mont Blanc [itself]» (Frege 1980: 169; translation slightly emended). For a discussion of this letter, see also Glock (2013: 246-7).

[51] Notice that this is a confusion not only of (2) and (3), but also of (1) and (3), since, assuming a relational theory of judgement, Mont Blanc is not only an object to which I should be related in judging that *Mont Blanc is 4000 meters high*, but it also happens to be that which I think *about* in judging this.

to the object of judgement (proposition), indeed qualities for which we can give no account at all (cf. NT1906: 48).

Retrospectively, Russell understood that the dual relation view of judgement is untenable exactly for these reasons, which are masterly laid down in the revised version of his 1906 essay 'On the Nature of Truth', appeared in 1910. "Untenable", however, should not mean "illogical". In the revised version of his essay, Russell is in fact adamant: the fact that the dual relation view compels us to admit objective falsehoods (mind-independent false propositions) in our ontology does not make that very view logically impossible (NT1910: 176). Rather, the dual relation view should be opposed since it is not theoretically virtuous, and indeed since it runs against our feeling for reality,[52] upon which so much of our daily lives is based. Once again, alongside theoretical reasons, we have a theory that should be refuted also on pragmatic grounds.

If the dual-relation view of judgement is untenable, and if one does not want to commit to the paradoxical view that false judgements have no object whatsoever, then how can she account for falsehood? Russell's answer to this question is pretty much straightforward: «We must therefore abandon the view that judgements consist in a relation to a single object» (NT1910: 177), and embrace the view that whenever we judge, either truly or falsely, we must be in a relation with a multiplicity of items, namely those items that Russell had called the *constituents* of the proposition. This is the essence of Russell's so-called Multiple Relation Theory of Judgement.

The move from the dual relation view of judgement to the multiple relation one is perhaps best described as the last step in Russell's departure from a radical-variant relational solution to the problem of non-existence, in the direction of a full endorsement of a moderate one (the first step being the rejection of his 1903 stance, by which any grammatically correct subject pointed to the being of a corresponding real object). Indeed, this move prompted the abandonment of Russell's earlier exotic metaphysics of propositions (propositions now being described as the *unreal* meanings expressed by judgements[53]), in favour of

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[52] «[W]e *feel* that there could be no falsehood if there were no minds to make mistakes» (NT1910: 176; my emphasis).
[53] ToK: 108-9.

a *metaphysics of facts*[54] (facts being what Russell had previously called true propositions[55]).

Russell's first formulation of his new theory of judgement clearly lets us see the transition from claims about the being of true and false propositions, to the analysis in terms of the beings which *can* make up facts in the world, such as particulars and universals:

> When we judge [truly] that Charles I died on the scaffold, we have before us, not one object, but several objects, namely, Charles I and dying and the scaffold. Similarly, when we judge [falsely] that Charles I died in his bed, we have before us the objects Charles I, dying, and his bed. These objects are not fictions: they are just as good as the objects of the true judgment. (NT1910: 177)

It is plausible to interpret Russell as saying the following: Charles I, dying, and his bed are objects in the world that might have been combined in such a way as to produce the fact that Charles I died in his bed. That this combination did not actually exist or obtain (indeed, Charles I died on the scaffold) does not mean that we cannot represent "it"[56] through the false judgement "Charles I died in his bed". It will be sufficient to have before our minds the aforementioned objects, so that we can combine them in a mental act of judgement.

Roughly speaking, Russell calls this being presented with – or being directly *related* to – objects "acquaintance" (KAKD: 108), and thus he endorses the general principle that in order to entertain or understand a thought/proposition, a thinking subject must be acquainted with the objects named in the

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[54] Cf. Ricketts (2002: 232).

[55] NT1906: 48.

[56] One must here suppress the illusion that behind the "it" there *must* be a logically possible state of affairs (i.e. that Charles I died in his bed), which is shy of existence, but which nonetheless has some kind of being. While Russell talks of logically possible complexes, he is also clear that «the notion of what is 'logically possible' is not an ultimate one, and must be reduced to something that is *actual*» (ToK: 111). As I interpret Russell, this means that non-existing complexes (e.g. that Charles I died in his bed) are ultimately to be reduced to existing entities. What this "reduction" amounts to Russell does not say. It is plausible – as conjectured by Sanford Shieh (2019: 394) – that Russell would have analysed *possibilia* as logical constructions. That said, it does not follow that for Russell we are automatically authorized to infer that there are *no* such logically possible states of affairs (here the parallel is with objective falsehoods, which, as we have seen, Russell did not rule out as logically impossible). Rather, I take it that Russell's point would be that there are no advantages in countenancing them in our ontology (insofar as they can be reduced to actual entities), but only disadvantages (such as the accumulation metaphysical lumber). This is essentially connected with Russell's employment of Ockham's razor, on which see Levine (2018).

judgement expressing the thought/proposition (cf. Levine 2013: 179-180). Importantly, Russell's new view also brings back a synthesizing (Kantian) element that was earlier avoided for ideological reasons: it is in fact the mind that, in an act of judgement, knits together in a unitary judgemental complex the objects with which it is acquainted at a given moment (PoP: 73-4; see also NT1910: 178). A judgement will then be true if there is a corresponding unitary complex in reality (fact), independently of the judgement itself; false, if there is no such unitary complex in reality (PoP: 74). For example, "Charles I died on the scaffold" is true since Charles I indeed died on the scaffold; "Charles I died in his bed" is false because of the lack of the corresponding fact.

Soon enough, however, Russell realized that this view needed refinement in order to satisfyingly account for falsehood (without slipping into idealism). Given that Theaetetus does not fly, and since for a realist like Russell no amount of thinking and synthesizing could unite Theaetetus and *Flying* in reality, then to unite these elements in judgement we must at least know *how* they are supposed to be combined[57]—how they would have to be combined in reality if the proposition "Theaetetus is flying" were true. This problem – that José Zalabardo dubbed the *mode-of-combination problem*[58] – was addressed by Russell through the introduction of further objects of acquaintance *beyond* constituents such as particulars and universals—objects of a «logical acquaintance» or experience, that are required to understand any empirical proposition whatsoever, and that Russell called *forms*. (I stress the word "beyond" here, since a form cannot be a further propositional constituent. For if it were, *how* would this constituent be linked to the others? Another form would be needed, for which however the same problem would arise, and so on *ad infinitum*.[59])

We can describe forms, Russell believed, as the result of the outmost generalization of empirical propositions (ToK: 97-98). For example, the outmost generalization of "Theaetetus is flying" yields "x is α", namely the form of all subject-predicate complexes. The outmost generalization of "Plato loves Parmenides" will instead yield "x ε y", i.e. the form of all binary complexes (cf. ToK: 98). Yet forms are not only logical fictions or abstractions: they are *something*, if it is

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[57] ToK: 116.

[58] Zalabardo (2015: 27).

[59] See ToK: 98.

true that we are acquainted with them.[60] If we ask "What are forms, then?", Russell's clearest answer is that they are facts of a peculiar kind: *logical facts*, or else absolutely general facts (ToK: 5 and 129). Indeed, according to Russell, we should call a form «the fact that there are entities that make up complexes having the form in question» (ToK: 114).[61] This way, the subject-predicate form is none other than the logical fact «something has some predicate» (ibid.); the binary-complex form is none other than the logical fact «something has some relation to something [else]» (ibid.). These logical facts, Russell believes, we know as self-evident truths about the world (cf. ToK: 132).

At this point, we are ready to turn to Wittgenstein.

4. *Wittgenstein*

In 1981, Bernard Williams suggested that «Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, a metaphysical work comparable in both boldness and abstractness to Parmenides' [poem], takes its start from a question which implies the converse of Parmenides' principle: 'How can we say what is not?'» (2006: 19). For her part, Elizabeth Anscombe – after having substantiated Williams' words, and intentionally echoing those of Alfred Whitehead on Plato – concluded that there is a narrow sense in which «philosophy is footnotes on Parmenides» (1981: xi). If this is so, surely Russell had many footnotes to add to our philosophical narrative. Not by chance, "How can we say what is not?" is a question that Wittgenstein directly inherits from Russell's theories of judgement, especially the multiple relation theory presented in the 1913 manuscript *Theory of Knowledge* (namely, the one involving forms). Famously, however, Wittgenstein harshly criticized Russell's multiple relation theory, committing our second philosophical patricide.

Unluckily, the nature and target of Wittgenstein's objections to Russell's (1913) multiple relation theory is itself much disputed. Indeed, there is a copious literature on them. While it would take another essay to discuss even a fraction of it in some depth here, I should at least remark what follows. *Roughly speaking*, interpreters tend to divide into two main camps: those who believe that Witt-

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[60] «Whatever we are acquainted with must be something» (PoP: 69).

[61] As Russell immediately recognizes, «this sounds circular» (ToK: 114). However, he also adds that «what is intended is not circular» (ibid.). I leave it to the reader to assess Russell's claim.

genstein's objections were mainly targeted at Russell's theory of types; and those who believe that Wittgenstein's objections were mainly targeted at Russell's account of the unity of a judgement/proposition,[62] which is cashed out in terms of *his* (Russell's) forms.[63]

Now, I am inclined to side with the second camp, since it is arguable that the problem of the unity of the proposition—or: of the form(s) of the proposition[64]—is far more central in Wittgenstein's early philosophy than any criticism of Russell's theory of types.[65] Besides, in being concerned with the unity of the proposition, and thereby with forms, Russell was exactly concerned with the issue of the possibility of falsehood, which, as rightly noted by Williams and Anscombe, is definitive of Wittgenstein's early philosophy. In what follows, I will thus discuss some of Wittgenstein's objections to Russellian forms, and their relevance with respect to the paradox of falsehood. I will however do this by way of an unconventional route,[66] arguing that Russell had based the possibility of entertaining a judgement/proposition onto *contingent* facts. And this was completely inacceptable to Wittgenstein, for whom logic was rigorously *a priori*.

To see this, we need to take a brief step back. As we have seen in the last section, according to Russell a judgement or proposition – whether true or false – had to be synthesized by the mind in accordance to a certain *form* or mode of combination, such as the subject-predicate form or the relational form. Forms were objects of a "logical acquaintance", though not propositional constituents, characterized by Russell as logical (general) facts, such as the fact that some-

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[62] Representatives of the first "camp" are for example Somerville (1980) and Griffin (e.g. 1985/6), whereas representatives of the second one are for example Hanks (2007) and Zalabardo (2013 and 2018). However, keep in mind that talk of "camps" in this context is just meant as a rough approximation. In fact, as noted by Michael Beaney (2009: 458), there might be disputes within each "camp", and there might be authors that do not readily fall into one "camp" or the other.

[63] See Zalabardo (2018).

[64] I cannot resist a cursory reference to Kant, who had called the forms of judgements "functions of unity" in his first *Critique* (A69/B94). For some parallelisms between Kant and the early Wittgenstein, see below.

[65] For a brilliant account of the centrality of the problem of the unity of judgement in Wittgenstein (and Kant, and Frege) see Bell (1979), Introduction and Ch. 4, §§ 7-8. Significantly, Bell also argues that the problem of the unity of judgement makes it first appearance in Plato's *Sophist* (1979: 8).

[66] That is also because the relationship between Wittgenstein's interests in the unity of the proposition, Russellian forms, and falsehood, has already been recognized and discussed in the literature on Wittgenstein's objections to Russell's multiple relation theory; see e.g. Zalabardo (2013). Here, I wish to discuss it under a different light.

thing has some relation to something else. Russell considered the existence of such logical facts as a self-evident truth, and maintained that, in order to produce or understand any empirical judgement at all, we must be acquainted with them. Now, Wittgenstein's first attack is exactly directed at Russell's notion of self-evidence here. As he writes in his wartime *Notebooks*:

> Does the subject-predicate form exist? Does the relational form exist? Do any of the forms exist at all that Russell and I were always thinking about? (Russell would say: "Yes! That's self-evident." *Well!*). (NB, 3.9.14)

> If the existence of the subject-predicate *sentence* does not show everything needful, then it could surely only be shewn by the existence of some particular fact of that form. And acquaintance with such a fact cannot be essential for logic. (NB, 4.9.14)

Wittgenstein came to see that a Russellian form – that Russell himself conceived of as a general fact necessary to understand propositions – always presupposes the existence of a particular fact of that form. Thus, Russell's relational form, namely 'something has some relation to something else' presupposes that, well, something (say, *a*) does have a relation to something else (say, *b*). Yet this is clearly contingent, as we might imagine for theoretical purposes a world in which there obtains only one fact, and that the fact in question contains only one particular, instead of two (say, there obtains only *Fa*, as opposed to *aRb*). Indeed, how many objects are actually combined in which and how many facts would seem to be a matter of empirical investigation. And why should this matter to logic? Surely logic – which among other things deals with the *possibility* of our entertaining and understanding propositions – cannot be based on experience, Wittgenstein will write in his *Tractatus* echoing Kant. Least of all, a Russellian logical experience concerning something being the case:

> The "experience" that we need in order to understand logic is not that something or other is the state of things, but that something is: that, however, is not an experience.
> Logic is prior to every experience—that something is so.
> It is prior to the question "How?", not prior to the question "What?". (T, 5.552)

How the world is – how many objects are actually combined in which and how many facts – is for Wittgenstein completely contingent, a matter of experience.[67] *That* the world is – that there are objects that can and do combine into facts – this is not contingent, but rather known a priori.[68] For otherwise there would be nothing at all, not even logic (cf. WWK: 77). But now *what* are "objects" for Wittgenstein? And what is their role with respect to the paradox of falsehood and non-being?

Let us proceed with order. Following his critiques to Russell, Wittgenstein had a problem, the formulation of which is important for our purposes:

> This is the difficulty: How can there be such a thing as the form [of the proposition] p if there is no situation of this form? And in that case, what does this form really consist in? (NB, 29.10.14)

The difficulty is one we have already presented: Wittgenstein wanted a proposition to have sense independently of there being facts possessing the same form of the proposition, for otherwise logic would be contingent. In other words, Wittgenstein thought, a proposition must have logical form – it must be possible for it to make sense – independently of *how* things stand in the world. In effect, if I utter the proposition "my lamp is on the table", it seems that it possesses a sense irrespective of whether my lamp is actually on the table, or for that of whether *a* is on *b*. That is: the proposition can be understood, and indeed represents a situation «as it were, off its own bat» (NB, 5.11.14). The question then becomes: How is this possible? How can a proposition have logical form independently of how things stand in the world? And «what does this form really consist in?»

The solution to these problems exactly lies in Wittgenstein's notion of "object". Russell had argued for a Platonic theory of forms, since forms (*modes of combination*) were real objects of acquaintance for him, but they were not possible constituents of facts (such as particulars), nor were they made out of or integrated into constituents; thereby, Russellian forms had to exist in some platonic heaven, ready to be "logically experienced" (whatever that may mean).

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[67] This means that for Wittgenstein there is no such thing as Kripke's (1980) "necessary a posteriori".

[68] For the view that Wittgenstein's "objects" are known a priori, see Levine (2013: 192).

This, however, had brought Russell straight back to the problem of participation. For how could he justify the connection between forms and the spatiotemporal world, without simply assuming it to be self-evident? As argued by David Pears, Wittgenstein was well aware of the problem, and opted for an Aristotelian solution instead: incorporating forms into his "objects", qua their *possibilities of combination* with each other in states of affairs (Pears 1977: 187-8). «A state of affairs», Wittgenstein writes in fact, «is a combination of objects» or things (T, 2.01), and «it is essential to things that they should be possible constituents of states of affairs» (T, 2.011). More precisely, every object has its own combinatorial possibilities – spatial, temporal, chromatic[69] – in states of affairs written into itself, as its essential features (T, 2.012 and 2.0123). *What* objects are, however, Wittgenstein does not specifically say, rather relegating the question of the *What* to the horizon of the mystical or ineffable (see T, 3.221 and 6.522).

One might maintain that Wittgenstein is simply elusive here. This might be true. However, I also think there is a sense in which "What is a Wittgensteinian object?" is the wrong question to start with. True, at a certain stage, Wittgenstein supposed that particulars as well as universals count as objects (NB, 16.6.1915). Yet by the time of the *Tractatus* objects are *not* self-standing entities like Russellian particulars and universals[70]: they are rather incomplete or unsaturated—essentially in need of each other.[71] For this reason, if one wants to get a sense of Tractarian objects, and of the role they play in solving such problems as the one of falsehood, she should focus first on their combinatorial potentials, i.e. forms. Or rather she should consider objects under a formal respect (as opposed to a material one), as bearers of combinatorial *possibilities* (independently of the combinations/configurations of objects that happen then to

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[69] See T, 2.0251.

[70] Russell explicitly writes that particulars are self-standing (PLA: 525). While he does not say so explicitly for universals – possibly since acquaintance with at least some universals is parasitic upon acquaintance with particulars – he does say that particulars are not components of universals, and that the particular/universal distinction is exhaustive, i.e. that which is not a particular is a universal (KAKD: 112). From this, we can more or less safely assume that Russellian universals are self-standing entities as well.

[71] Famously, Frege entertained a similar thought before Wittgenstein, only *not* with respect to objects, which like Russell he thought are self-standing, but rather to concepts; see Frege (1971: 34, fn. 13).

materially obtain in reality).[72] We might call objects, qua bearers of combinatorial possibilities, *formal objects*. After all, Wittgenstein himself talks of the «shifting use of the world "object"» (T, 4.123), and he is adamant that objects constitute the unalterable *form* of every thinkable or logically possible world, including the actual one (T, 2.022–3).

This last consideration is especially important for us. Famously, Wittgenstein also expresses it thus:

> Objects are what is unalterable and subsistent; their configuration is what is changing and unstable. (T, 2.0271)

The idea is this: what can change from world to world are not objects or their possible combinations in states of affairs, but rather their *actual* configurations in states of affairs (which are contingent). Indeed, for Wittgenstein, the formal objects there are in the actual world are quite the same formal objects there are in every thinkable or possible world. Brian Skyrms calls this a fixed-domain account of possible worlds, meaning that objects are necessary existents. (1981: 199 and 201). Williamson would call this a form of necessitism. However, the necessity by which formal objects exist unalterably in every possible world is not metaphysical. In fact, Wittgenstein clearly stresses that «[t]he only necessity that exists is *logical* necessity» (T, 6.37). And since, as he writes, «Logic is transcendental» (T, 6.13), we are hereby dealing with a transcendental necessity—the kind of necessity, that is, that pertains to a priori conditions of the possibility of representation of the world. Only qua necessary conditions of the possibility of representation, then, objects should be able to account for the possibility of thinking or saying what is not.[73]

It would be impossible to fully present here Wittgenstein's account of logico-linguistic representation, by which thoughts and propositions work as *pictures* of reality. Luckily for us, given our purposes, it will be sufficient to state the problem Wittgenstein wishes to address, and the main insight behind its so-

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[72] Cf. T, 2.0231.

[73] The view that Wittgenstein's objects are "transcendental" has been advanced, among others, by Stenius (1960: 223), Hintikka (1984: 453) and Borutti (2010: 132). Possibly, Frank Ramsey was the first to hold it, since he believed that, according to Wittgenstein, the Subject must be acquainted with objects in a "transcendental sense" (1991: 146).

lution. The problem, it seems to me, goes as follows. It is a given that we represent the world, and thereby that «we think about things – but how do these things enter into our thoughts?» (BB: 38). Wittgenstein's strategy to solve this problem was both clever and elegant. He saw that in order to represent reality it is by no means necessary for objects to be materially contained into thoughts or propositions as their constituents, as Russell had once supposed. Rather, thought, language and reality had just to share the logical *form* of objects, or if you prefer *formal objects*.

This logical isomorphism between representation and reality is characterized by Wittgenstein in many ways, for example as a harmony between thought, language and reality, or indeed as a formal mirroring.[74] I believe the most interesting characterization, however, is exactly framed in terms of *containment*. Indeed, according to Wittgenstein «objects contain the possibility of all situations» under the guise of their forms (T, 2.014), and these very forms must be found into every legitimate thought or proposition, for «a thought contains the possibility of the situation of which it is the thought» (T, 3.02). The last remark, of course, will also apply to thoughts or propositions picturing situations that do not actually exist. That is why Wittgenstein can *retrospectively* write in his *Blue Book*:

> Supposing we asked: "how can one imagine what does not exist?". The answer seems to be "if we do, we imagine non-existent [i.e. merely possible] combinations of existing elements". (BB: 54)[75]

Here, Wittgenstein is indicating that, at the time of the *Tractatus*, he believed that if we are to represent what is not, it is necessary that there be objects («existing elements»), whose forms pervade all thinkable worlds (cf. T, 2.022-23). In effect, Wittgenstein retrospectively suggests, it is these objects that can be *imagined* or *pictured* as combined in ways that do not actually exist («non-existent combinations»). But if we can indeed picture such non-existing combinations of objects, then not only we must be *related* to the existing objects which

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[74] Cf. T, 4.121, as well as the retrospective PG § 95 and §112-3, and PI § 429.

[75] By the time of the *Blue Book*, Wittgenstein had long rejected the Tractarian solution to which he refers back in this passage (that is why I have stressed the word "retrospectively"). This, however, need not concern us here.

contain the possibilities of non-existent combinations (as well as of existing combinations), but our language must itself already *contain* these combinatorial possibilities. For only if language always already contained the forms of existing objects—in virtue of a *projective thought-relation* which correlates *a priori* linguistic signs to such objects[76]—it would be guaranteed that our propositions could act as *projections* or pictures of possible situations (see T, 3.11), including situations which do not exist. Thus, for example, the propositional sign "a b" could *represent* the possible situation by which object *a* is to the left of object *b*, even if there is no such existing situation in reality, because name "a" is related to object *a*, name "b" is related to object *b*, and name "a" can – and does – stand to the left of name "b" (cf. T, 4.0311).

It is therefore the fusion of a logico-transcendental necessitism with a logico-transcendental isomorphism between thought, language, and reality, that constitutes the early Wittgenstein's moderate-variant relational solution to the problem of non-existence, and thereby to the paradox of falsehood and non-being.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper I have discussed the problem of false thought or judgement – the paradox of falsehood and non-being – in the philosophies of Parmenides, Plato, Russell and the early Wittgenstein. I have construed a unifying narrative that brings together these four authors, insofar as, in addressing the paradox, they all appeal to a relational theory of intentionality. However, I have also distinguished between two general variants of this theory: a radical variant (Parmenides), and a moderate variant (Plato, Russell, early Wittgenstein). In agreement with Plato – and in a Russellian tone – I have argued that, while perhaps not logically impossible, Parmenides' radical-variant account is pragmatically untenable. However, I have then argued in a Wittgensteinian tone – and somewhat inspired by Plato's Parmenides – that both Plato and Russell's moderate-variant accounts of false judgement are untenable too—though this time because of the metaphysical problem that goes under the name of "problem of

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[76] T, 2.151ff and T, 3.11-3.

participation". In the last section, I have then presented some insights behind Wittgenstein's early account of judgement, arguing that his own moderate-variant account overcomes this *impasse* by means of a curious mixture of Aristotelianism (forms are immanent to objects) and Kantianism (objects are necessary conditions of the possibility of representation of the world, the forms of which language contains). In this way, I believe to have shown that the early Wittgenstein's account, while surely not exempt from difficulties, constitutes at least a viable relational solution to the paradox of falsehood and non-being.

I should however remind the reader that, at the beginning of the paper, I have remarked that the narrative above is one among many possible ones with respect to the paradox of falsehood and non-being, further stressing in § 1 that our four thinkers offer *one* type of solution (though coming in different variants) to the problem at the heart of the paradox, namely the problem of non-existence. Thus, I make no claim to completeness in the present work. In effect, a relational theory of intentionality is far from being the only possible way to go if one wants to address the paradox of falsehood and non-being. For one, the later Wittgenstein will abandon his commitment to (transcendentally) necessary objects, and his (Russell-inspired) view of truth and falsehood as agreement and disagreement between a proposition and a state of affairs, in favour of the view that it is the linguistic agreement or disagreement *among human beings* to establish the truth or falsehood of propositions. And this, Wittgenstein will write, is an «agreement in forms of life» (PI, § 241).

Perhaps even more importantly, there is a different tradition in Western thought – another narrative strand if you will – addressing the problem of non-existence through a *non*-relational theory of intentionality. In this theory, there is no need for the ultimate object(s) of thought to be existing entities (though some objects of thought will be correctly characterized as existing). Arguably, this theory of intentionality goes back *at least* to Kant,[77] according to whom the ultimate intentional object of all conscious representation is «the transcendental object = x», which is not an object in the real sense (Kant 2005: 245), but rather «a mere thought entity» (A565-6/B593-4), an ideal of reason, which we use as

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[77] But it may stretch as far back as Aristotle. See Caston (1998: 261-6), who explicitly argues that Aristotle rejected a relational account of intentionality, by means of his theory of *phantasmata*.

pure correlate for our representations (see A250). Strong echoes of this theory are to be found in Husserl,[78]and indeed in Crane.[79]

That said, I rest content to have explored one narrative strand alone within the confines of this paper, and to have mentioned (or even just hinted at[80]) other ones, with the aim of exploring those, and their connection with the relational strand discussed here, in further work.[81]

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[78] Cf. Husserl (1931: § 131). On the ideality of the object in Husserl, see Luft (2007: 381).

[79] Crane (2013). Cf. Jocelyn Benoist's review of Crane's book (2016: 7-8)

[80] I have cursorily appealed, in text and in footnote, to the views of authors such as Aristotle and Hegel, whose philosophies bear on the problem of falsehood. However, I have avoided to discuss them in any real depth, since that would have meant enlarging the paper to an almost unmanageable extent, and indeed since the already complex subject matter of the paper would have become much harder to survey with clarity. I rely here on the patience of the reader, who hopefully will understand that, given these circumstances, it could have been counterproductive to discuss at some length further authors and their views.

[81] I am grateful to Jim Levine, Andrea Sereni, Bruno Cortesi, Vasilis Politis, the audience of a work in progress seminar at the Trinity Plato Centre (Trinity College Dublin), as well as to two anonymous referees, for their instructive comments on previous drafts of this essay.

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List of abbreviations

Parmenides

Fr.   'On Nature', in Palmer, J. (ed.), *Parmenides & Presocratic Philosophy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009.

Plato

(All dialogues below have been quoted from *Plato: Complete Works*, edited by Cooper, J. M., Indianapolis/Cambridge, Hackett Publishing Company, 1997.)

Parmenides; *Phaedrus*; *Sophist*; *Theaetetus.*

Russell

HWP   *History of Western Philosophy*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1948.

NT1905   'The Nature of Truth', in *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*. IV. London, George Allen & Unwin, 1994.

NT1906   'On the Nature of Truth', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 7, 1906, 28-49.

NT1910   'On the Nature of Truth and Falsehood', in *Philosophical Essays*, New York, Longmans, Green&Co., 1910.

KAKD   'Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 11, 1910 – 1911, 108-128.

OD   'On Denoting', *Mind*, 14, 56, 1905, 479-493.

OMD   'On Meaning and Denotation', in *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*. IV. London, George Allen & Unwin, 1994.

PLA   'The Philosophy of Logical Atomism', *The Monist*, 28, 4, 1918, 495-527.

PoM   *Principles of Mathematics*, New York, W. W. Norton & Company, 1996.

PoP   *The Problems of Philosophy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998.

ToK   *Theory of Knowledge*, London, Allen & Unwin, 1984.

Wittgenstein

BB   *The Blue and the Brown Books*, New York, Harper Collins, 1965.

NB   *Notebooks 1914–1916*, New York, Harper & Row, 1961.

PG   *Philosophical Grammar*, edited by Rhees, R., translation by Kenny, A., Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1974.

PI   *Philosophical Investigations*, English translation by Anscombe, G. E. M., Oxford, Basil Blackwell.

T   *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, translation by Pears, D. F. & McGuinness, B. F., London, Routledge, 1974.

WWK   *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*, edited by McGuinness, B., Oxford, Basil Blackwell,1979.

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Lorenzo Giovannetti

(Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen)

Before Any Possible Error: A Platonic Argument in Realism

Abstract: Metaphysical Realism is commonly understood as the view that reality is independent of what one thinks or believes about it. To better understand the notion of independence deployed by metaphysical realists, I consider two very influential critiques from Putnam and Dummett. Thereafter, I show that Plato's view on reality and the mind does not share the assumptions that are considered to be unacceptable by Putnam and Dummett. Thus, I go on to analyse a passage from the *Cratylus* that clearly shows (i) that Plato puts forward a view that we would uncontroversially consider as realist; and (ii) that in this view, the concept of error plays a pivotal role. Finally, I provide the outline of an alternative view on metaphysical realism, inspired by Plato's line of thought, in terms of reality enjoying a priority over representation/belief.

Keywords: *Error, Realism, Plato, Natural Kinds*

1. Introduction: Metaphysical Realism

Metaphysical realism is a polysemic notion that lends itself to a variety of philosophical debates. It can be related to particular sets of objects. For instance, one can be a realist about numbers, classes, first-person conscious experience, and so on. This means that the realist believes that the words "number" and "class", for example, refer to existing entities. By contrast, the antirealist claims that what we say when we refer to these entities can be fully accounted for without being committed to their existence.[1] The traditionally most famous representative of this position is nominalism with regard to universals or properties, namely the view that only particular objects exist and that speaking of their properties does not require us to include a genuinely existing entity for each of their features we talk about. Commonly, existence is joined with mind-independence by the realist. For instance, one is a realist about numbers,

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[1] Cf. Dummett (1978: 358-61), who maintains that antirealism of this sort can best be understood semantically. In other words, statements regarding the class of entities whose existence is disputed are true in virtue of the truth of statements regarding a more fundamental class of entities that the former entities should be reduced to.

if one thinks that numbers exist independently of whether any cognitive subject knows about, thinks of and speaks of them.

It is precisely the junction of existence and mind-independence that can be generalised so as to provide a general account of metaphysical realism.[2] In quite intuitive terms, it could be phrased as follows:

> The simplest way to put the idea that lies behind our concern with knowledge is that the world around us that we claim to know about exists and is the way it is quite independently of its being known or believed by us to be that way. It is an objective world. [...] In many cases what we believe or think we know about the world does not require anyone's knowing or believing anything in order for it to be true. (Stroud 1984: 77)

A general definition of realism can be found in the SEP:

> a, b, and c and so on exist, and the fact that they exist and have properties such as F-ness, G-ness, and H-ness is [...] independent of anyone's beliefs, linguistic practices, conceptual schemes, and so on[3]

The notion of independence can be pushed further so that it constitutes the background assumption that makes any theory whatsoever intelligible. This is, roughly put, Searle's position: «*Realism is the view that there is a way that things are that is logically independent of all human representations. Realism does not say how things are but only that there is a way that they are*» (Searle 1997: 20, emphasis in original).

As often happens in philosophy, the best way to understand and assess a theory is by considering its rival views. In this paper I will consider the most influential critiques put forward by analytic philosophers, namely Michael Dummett and Hilary Putnam. Of course, the complexity and the variety of their views cannot be surveyed here. However, they very generally characterise metaphysical realism as is represented by the definition above. This characterisation is then considered unacceptable by them for different reasons, which prompts them to offer alternative views. My objective in this paper is to show that Plato does not subscribe to the characterisation of realism targeted by Dummett and

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[2] Cf. Devitt (1996: 13-25).

[3] https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/realism/#ViewOppoIndeDimeISemaReal

Putnam, without endorsing any form of conceptual relativism or antirealism. This should be taken to mean that one can find a more essential conception of realism that can only appear by comparing modern criticism and ancient conceptions. In this way it is possible to delineate, as it were, a Platonic core of metaphysical realism that remains unaffected by the two aforementioned challenges.

Challenge to mind-independence. This is formulated by Putnam. He critiques the view that reality is independent of the mind, which ultimately amounts to saying that reality is a totality of objects and properties that are only waiting for some cognitive subject to label them.[4] The basic argument is that if one is to pick only one correspondence between words and mind-independent things, one should also have referential access to mind-independent things.[5] In other words, metaphysical realism is the view that every truth is independent of what humans do or can do, that any meaningful statement is determinately true or false and that there is only one correct description of the world.[6] Denying this view does not mean denying that there are objectively true or false propositions. Putnam's point is that there could not be true and false propositions before applying a specific language, conceptual scheme or, more generally, way of speaking. There is no brute fact before a subject applies a conceptual scheme, i.e. she uses the terms of a given language according to certain rules.[7]

Putnam's ingenious arguments are very complex. However, what should be focused on here is that metaphysical realism is considered to be untenable insofar as it claims that reality is a totality of given objects that are only waiting to be discovered and to instruct the speakers about which words to use and how to use them. The problematic aspect of this conception of metaphysical realism is that one can never escape one's own thought and language so as to grasp the way reality is supposed to inform the speaker about what words she should use independently of the language she is employing at that moment. The inner tension within metaphysical realism thus conceived is that reality dictates essential

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[4] Putnam (1992: 27); Putnam (1994a: 449).

[5] Putnam (1981: 73).

[6] Putnam (1991: 107). See also Putnam (1992: 30-1).

[7] Putnam (1991: 114-5). See also Putnam (1994b: 295-314).

facts to the mind and at the same time what accounts for this is that reality is absolutely mind-independent. Putnam's worry is ultimately that he cannot see how an absolutely independent reality can determine the terms of the language that we use to speak of it because any matter of existence and truth only makes sense within that language. According to this challenge, what is real needs to be somehow related to some mental activity. Consequently, this challenge makes explicit, by criticising it, what notion of mind-independence is at stake when we talk about metaphysical realism. As I will show in the next section, Putnam's opposition between metaphysical realism qua "totality of objects" view and mind-relatedness[8] does not hold in the case of Plato. According to Plato, reality consists of a totality of objectively existing entities, but at the same time these entities are naturally related to the mind.

Challenge to recognition-transcendence. This challenge is formulated by Dummett. He claims that realism is the view that all meaningful contingent statements are true or false regardless of any cognitive subject being able to recognise whether they are true or false. This is usually expressed through the opposition between recognition-transcendence and recognition-immanence. Dummett's line of thought is particularly difficult and relies on a variety of arguments. I will focus here on the general outcome of his view.[9] According to Dummett the fundamental aspect of metaphysical realism is that what is real is independent of our knowledge of it, which translates into reality making each statement true or false independently of whether we know it or are able to discover it, i.e. bivalence. Dummett thinks metaphysical realism is mistaken because it inconsistently relies on a truth-conditional theory of meaning while maintaining that propositional truth-values are recognition-transcendent. In a nutshell, this theory is that the meaning of a sentence coincides with knowing under what conditions that statement would be true. Dummett view is that such truth-conditions can only make sense if a cognitive subject is actually able to rationally assert whether they obtain or not. By contrast, if there is no evidence for thinking that a given statement is true or false, then that statement lacks a truth-

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[8] I choose this term in accordance with Putnam's own regret in speaking of "dependence", cf. Putnam (1994a: 448 n. 8).

[9] See Dummett (1978: 358-74) and Dummett (1996: 230-76).

value. This view deserves the name of antirealism because if a statement lacks a truth-value, this ultimately comes down to reality itself being indeterminate. This also implies that if evidence changes, reality itself changes: what is real is essentially related to the epistemic means of a given subject at a given time.

This challenge reveals much about the nature of metaphysical realism because it essentially recognises its being independent of knowledge. Knowledge here is thought of in terms of recognition of a truth value, i.e. one's actual capacity to recognise whether something is the case. As I will show in the next section, this opposition between a robust notion of realism and its possibly being related to our knowledge of reality does not hold in Plato's view.

2. Does Plato's *realism expose itself to the two challenges?*

In this section I will briefly show that Plato's view meets the two challenges presented above without abdicating to some sort of realism. Due to space limitations, I cannot explain on what historical grounds he can do it, and I will only focus on the theoretical outcome. However, it should always be kept in mind that the comparison I am proposing between modern analytic philosophers and Plato is fertile because they *move from very different philosophical assumptions*. It should also be noted that I say that Plato *meets* the challenges, in other words he maintains a sort of realism that does not present the two aspects criticised by Putnam and Dummett. This by no means suggest that Plato strictly speaking provides *counter-arguments* to their critiques as if he were embedded in the current debate.

Furthermore, Plato's two philosophical tenets, which I am about to introduce and that here are meant to meet the two challenges of the previous section, are well known in the literature. This means, among other things, that the debate around them is enormous. However, discussing them in detail is beyond the scope of this paper, and therefore I will only make explicit the interpretation I am embracing.

2.1. *The kinship between mind and being*

One crucial tenet of Plato's theory of mind is that minds are naturally related to the object of knowledge. As is well known, and as I will discuss in the next subsection, the object of knowledge is being, i.e. forms or ideas. Thus, Plato's view seems to be that being a cognitive subject means, among other things, being naturally related to a fundamental class of entities, which in turn constitutes the object of knowledge. It is not possible here to discuss what knowledge is for Plato. However, on a quite general level, one is allowed to say that for Plato knowledge is a cognitive capacity through which one is able to grasp or understand and possibly describe a certain portion of reality with absolute certainty, which means that what one knows is so stable that it will not be subject to further correction.[10]

Consider the following passage from the *Phaedo*:

> But when the soul investigates by itself [*scil.* without bodily sense-organs] it passes into the realm of what is pure, ever existing (ἀεὶ ὂν), immortal and unchanging, and being akin to this (ὡς συγγενὴς οὖσα), it always stays with it whenever it is by itself and can do so; it ceases to stray and remains in the same state as it is in touch with things of the same kind (τοιούτων ἐφαπτομένη), and its experience then is what is called wisdom (φρόνησις)? 79d1-5 (transl. G. M. A. Grube)

This text epitomises what could be called the doctrine of *syngeneia*, i.e. the kinship, between the soul or mind and what is real.[11] To put it roughly, Plato's view is this. There are two sorts of items, namely becoming things and truly existing forms. The former can be perceived by means of the bodily senses, the latter can be grasped by thought. What is relevant here is that the mind, namely that by which thought and linguistically informed enquiry are carried out, is considered to be of the same nature as the objects one can know. Part of Plato's

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[10] Cf. for instance *Resp.* 477e.

[11] This is not its only appearance in the corpus, cf. *Resp.* 490 a-b; 518b-c; 611e. An essential analysis of the doctrine of *syngeneia* is found in Aronadio (2002: 221-44). This argument is also known under the name of the Affinity Argument. It has been discussed with regard to whether Plato entertains a representationalist view of knowledge, cf. Gerson (2003: 79-88) and Butler (2006). I will not engage in the discussion of what concept of knowledge Plato has in mind, I only take into account Plato's view that sees the soul's kinship with the forms as a condition to get in contact with them, as is recognised also by Gerson (2003: 81).

argument here is to show that the soul is immortal and to say that the soul is of the same kind as the eternal objects of its activity goes in this direction.[12] However, this is not what I am interested in here. The text seems to suggest a different point as well. We are told (i) that the soul or mind is able to grasp items that are always-existing and unchanging and (ii) that this can happen *because* the mind and these beings are akin.

The junction of (i) and (ii) is theoretically remarkable and may sound odd to the metaphysical realist described above. Given the features of the objects in question, i.e. changelessness, purity, eternity, one is clearly faced with items that are at the farthest end of what, in some sense, depends on the conceptual schemes of a community of speakers at a given time. On the other hand, the relation between the mind and these objects is accounted for by a primitive feature of mind itself, namely its being naturally able to grasp them. This natural capacity is phrased in terms of reality and the mind being "of the same kind". The term *syngenes*, outside the philosophical jargon, mainly means that two or more people are relatives, belong to the same family and thus, in a sense, belong to each other. So the point is not just the assumption that the mind can know an independent world. Any realist who is not a sceptic would accept this. The next step is that the mind can know what is real *because* they are of the same kind, i.e. they are naturally *related*.[13] Accordingly, the philosophical outcome of the *syngeneia* is that being and mind are naturally fit for each other (when the mind is not distracted by irrationality, which mainly means bodily sensations and appetites). However, this implies that what is real is somehow related to the mind. This aspect of Plato's thought seems to join a series of features usually associated with the absolute objectivity and independence of reality belonging to metaphysical realism with an essential aspect of mind-relatedness. However weird this might sound, the doctrine of *syngeneia* seems to meet the challenge to mind-independence, while remaining within a strongly realist conception.

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12 On which cf. Apolloni (1996).
13 Curiously enough, in English the term "relative" means both "related" and "family member" just as the term *syngenes* is being used by Plato.

2.2. Onto-epistemic correlation

Plato's conception of what is real is connected to the cognitive ability of human mind in one further respect. In this subsection, I will very briefly introduce one of the most debated texts in the Platonic corpus, namely *Resp.* 476e-480a. I will not try to give my own specific interpretation, nor will I present its many steps. I wish only to focus on one single theoretical outcome that is immediately relevant to the present discourse. Roughly put, Plato's line of thought seems to be the following. Different sorts of objects admit of different sorts of cognition. Knowledge in its strict sense, i.e. a mental capacity that requires the exercise of thought and that is unerring, is directed at what fully is (forms). Belief in its strict sense, i.e. a mental capacity that is between knowledge and ignorance and whose results are not unerring, is directed at what at the same time is and is not.[14] It is not easy to understand what Plato means by "being" and "not-being" in this context. There are two points that are relevant for us here:

- Different cognitive activities are directed at different sorts of items;
- The fundamental trait by which to distinguish different sorts of items is the way they can be cognised.

One more fact seems to emerge from Plato's account:

- The epistemic features of the mental capacity are determined by the ontological features of the cognised object. For instance, knowledge is unerring *because* its object (i) reveals itself in an undeceiving manner and (ii) is unchanging. Accordingly, a mental grasp and proper descriptions of such an object are unerring and indefeasible.

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[14] This is commonly regarded as the traditional reading. Some classical proponents of this reading are Cross & Woozley (1964: 134-195) and Vlastos (1973). More recent versions are Fronterotta (2001: 62-79), White (2006), and Moss (2021). A fierce adversary of the traditional reading is Fine (1981; 1990). However, Fine's view cannot withstand criticism, cf. Gonzalez (1996), Gerson (2003) and Fronterotta (2007). The main problem of the traditional reading is that it seems to exclude that one can have knowledge of particulars and opinion of forms, given that this would relate sorts of cognition with the "wrong" sorts of objects. A very well-argued defense of the traditional reading is Schwab (2016). The most recent attempt to solve the issue is to be found in Smith (2019), who claims that the capacities or powers of the soul/mind and the mental acts produced by those powers should be kept distinct.

What is immediately relevant for my argument is the continuity between forms of cognitions and items in the world. To begin with, Plato seems to be claiming that fundamental ontological distinctions essentially appear at the level of cognition: sensible particulars both are and are not and therefore give rise to beliefs, whereas forms completely are and therefore give rise to knowledge. Moreover, knowledge is (i) related to being and more importantly (ii) it is knowledge *because* it is knowledge *of being*.

The problem antirealism such as Dummett's has with metaphysical realism is that the latter ascribes truth-values to even in principle unverifiable statements. This constitutes a problem because it defies the cognitive means one employs in order to ascertain the truth of those statements. This is in turn problematic because the meaning of the statements is thought of as knowing under what conditions these statements are true. In Plato's line of thought in the *Republic*, there is no mention of a sophisticated theory of meaning. However, one point stands out. That which completely is, to use Plato's phrasing, which, ontologically speaking, corresponds to what the modern metaphysical realist would consider as knowledge- and recognition-transcendent, is in fact presented as (a) what knowledge is meant to grasp, (b) what can best be understood as the proper object of knowledge and (c) what, thanks to its features,[15] determines the nature of knowledge. As a consequence, Plato's view meets the challenge posed by Dummett's antirealism: it somehow assumes a realist stance insofar as Plato never says that reality is mind-dependent, but, at the same time, it seems not to be committed to any form of recognition-transcendence (which in this context should not be taken strictly as is formulated by truth-conditional semantics, but rather as the fact that reality is such as to possibly reside outside one's capacity to know it). On the contrary, the mark of reality is precisely its being that which can be known. Of course, Plato is well aware that one could never attain truth about the objects of possible knowledge, but this happens on account of a deficient nature and/or education.

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[15] Keeping with the example given above: knowledge is unerring because its object is undeceiving and unchanging; it must be said that only the second is a non-epistemic feature of the object in question. However, this should not worry us: that being is presented as something intrinsically clear to the mind only reinforces the point I want to make.

Interestingly, an appealing aspect of antirealism is that it bridges the gap between the subject's cognitive capacities and what there is to know since the latter is directly derived from the former.[16] However, although Plato's view does not insert any such gap between reality and the mind, at the same time it does not embrace any sort of antirealism.[17] In this sense, Plato meets the challenge of antirealism.

As just shown, Plato's realism does not fall prey to the two main challenges posed against metaphysical realism discussed in this paper. This does not mean that Plato actually refutes the main point of both critiques of metaphysical realism from the point of view of their authors. On the contrary, Plato conceives of reality as being related to both mind and knowledge. At the same time, he does this within a strongly realist view. I will now turn to an argument from the *Cratylus*, which helps disclose an essential aspect of Plato's realism and where the notion of error plays a pivotal role.

3. The core of Plato's realism

As is well known, in the *Cratylus* two views regarding the correctness of names and naming are contrasted, which are traditionally labelled conventionalism and naturalism and are maintained by Hermogenes and Cratylus, respectively. In associating conventionalism – the view according to which names are given purely by a conventional stipulation that is reversible at will – with Protagoras' view,[18] Plato is exploiting the present context to reject relativism or subjectivism about reality. I will focus specifically on this only apparently collateral question. Protagoras view is presented in this context as follows: «that man is the measure of all things, and that things are to me as they appear to me, and

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[16] This is diagnosed in different terms by Searle (1997: 29).

[17] This holds in the case of what Plato considers to be fully real, i.e. forms. When it comes to sensible particulars being caused by forms, the matter is much more difficult. Cf. Davidson (1997: 109) who, *en passant*, recognises the strict relation between forms and knowledge in Plato and suggests an antirealist reading of material items in Plato.

[18] As Sedley (2003: 54-5) points out, Conventionalism does not imply Relativism. However, rejecting Relativism entails that things and actions have their own stable nature, including naming (which will prove against Conventionalism). In any case, my concern in this paper is the metaphysical framework that Plato introduces as an alternative to Protagoras' view.

are to you as they appear to you». I will not discuss the vexed question of what Protagoras' doctrine means or whether Plato's Protagoras is the historical Protagoras. My point is that Plato's realism can be broached by considering the strict denial of the view that how things are is determined by one's belief about them.

> Then it is clear that things have some fixed being or essence of their own (δῆλον δὴ ὅτι αὐτὰ αὑτῶν οὐσίαν ἔχοντά τινα βέβαιόν ἐστι τὰ πράγματα). They are not in relation to us and are not made to fluctuate by how they appear to us (τῷ ἡμετέρῳ φαντάσματι). They are by themselves (καθ᾽ αὑτὰ), in relation to their own being or essence, which is theirs by nature (πέφυκεν). (*Crat.* 386d9-e4, transl. C. D. C. Reeve)

Plato's point is that things possess some sort of fixed being. Something is stable or fixed, *bebaios*,[19] if it is not in relation to us, i.e. the cognitive subject who mentally represents the world and entertains beliefs. "To be in relation to" should be taken to mean something like "being determined by". Thus, Plato is claiming here that whatever constitutes the being of things must be fixed, which is the same as saying that it is not determined by how it appears to a given subject at a given moment. Interestingly, the appearance to a subject is phrased in terms of movement: if what people think about something is what constitutes the being of that something, and what people think changes, then the being of that something changes.

However, given that the being of things is not determined by how they appear to a given person, it is thought of as remaining fixed while representations and beliefs change. This last remark is crucial to my argument, as will appear in what follows: the mark of what is real is depicted as what remains stable as representations/beliefs change. Moreover, this stability is presented in terms of self-determination and autonomy. If the being of things is to remain stable, things must have a being of their own and be determined by themselves (whatever it means). What I am interested in here is that one is faced with one of the first instances of the principle that reality must be in some relevant way independent of the mind. However, not to fall into ambiguous formulations, I will call

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[19] Cf. also *Crat.* 386a4 on which Aronadio (2008: XXXIV). Cf. also Ademollo (2011: 87), who reads "stability" to be a metaphor for "subject-independent, objective".

this the priority of reality with respect to the mind (PR). This because reality can be prior to the mind, for a sense of "prior" which is still to be defined, even though reality and mind are essentially akin.

However, how should one interpret PR? The basic idea is that reality remains stable as our *phantasmata* change. Also, in the last line there is a reference to nature, which is specifically employed to designate the fact that things have being of their own. The word in question is *pephyken*. [20] It is the perfect form of the verb *phyo*. Most notably, among the many differences entertained by the ancient Greek language and modern European languages is the fact that ancient Greek prioritises the grammatical aspect. The aspect is a grammatical category expressing how an action or an event, denoted by a verb, extends over time: «aspects are different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation» (Comrie 1976: 3). The perfect form of the verb is the kind of temporal constituency in which the action is already completed but whose effect still has an influence on the present situation. The common meaning of *pephykenai* in the LSJ is "*to be formed* or *disposed by nature*", but it is also employed impersonally to mean "*it happens naturally*" or "*as is natural*". My view is that this particular form of the verb is used by Plato to express what is at stake in the quotation above, namely that what is real is thought of as something naturally determined in advance with respect to minds having a representation of them. Thus, this notion of natural determination or disposition is a first way to express in what sense reality is prior to the mind.

Going back to the *Cratylus*, Socrates draws a further inference: for anything that has its own being naturally determined, then any action dealing with it, has in turn its own nature.[21] Let us consider one more passage:

> So an action's performance accords with the action's own nature, and not with what we believe (οὐ κατὰ τὴν ἡμετέραν δόξαν). Suppose, for example, that we undertake to cut something. If we make the cut in whatever way we choose (ἡμεῖς βουλώμεθα) and with whatever tool we choose, we will not succeed in cutting.

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[20] As far as I know, the subject has been given little relevance in the literature except for Aronadio (2002: 141-49), and a hint in Ademollo (2011: 99, n. 10), where the author compares the value of "ἐπεφύκει" to "a sort of timeless present" and Frede (2012: 376, n. 18); the subject has also been treated tangentially in the first part of Calvert (1970: 26-34) and Heitsch (1985: 44-62); for a brilliant comparison with Aristotle cf. Isnardi Parente (1966: 118-121).

[21] Sedley (2002: 57); Goldschmidt (1982: 55-6).

> But if in each case we choose to cut in accord with the nature (κατὰ τὴν φύσιν) of cutting and being cut and with the natural tool for cutting, we'll succeed and cut correctly. If we try to cut contrary to nature, however, we'll be in error and accomplish nothing. (*Crat.* 387a1-8)

The association of representation with belief I made is now textually expressed, as shown by the occurrence of the term *doxa*. The initial contrast of nature with representation/belief is now developed with regard to actions, including a further specification: if one is to perform some action, what needs to be done in order to perform that action is not up to that person. In other words, the stability of being emerges when one is to interact with it and not as something in principle unattainable, as recognition-transcendence would have it, for example. For now, my objective is starting to highlight that for Plato PR is something that is defined in relation to mental and practical activities. The crucial fact of this second excerpt is the reference to errors. This is the crucial point in Plato's critique of Protagoras. The reference to Protagoras is also what allows one to see that PR holds in the case of beliefs and not just for practical and technical know-how. The idea that a mistake emerges when one cuts or burns "contrary to nature" makes Plato's point immediately recognisable, as the result is unsatisfying. But it is not meant to restrict to such cases what Plato is saying about the stability of being. For Plato's own objective in criticising Protagoras' view is to show that according to Protagoras, errors are not allowed for and as a consequence there is no difference between wise and mean individuals, which Plato finds unacceptable. What is relevant here is that Plato's realism of fixed being is essentially related to the notion of error. One can get or make things wrong only insofar as what things are is not determined by what one believes or makes. To confront this view, Plato expresses PR in terms of natural predisposition.

As I am about to show, Plato's concept of PR may be properly understood through the concept of error. This may sound paradoxical in that the very concept of error implies that the person who, for instance, entertains a mistaken belief should not be aware of it. However, the point I want to make is that PR, as is suggested by the dense though brief text from the *Cratylus*, stands out when rectifying a mistaken belief. When Plato speaks of the fact that our representations or beliefs change when the reality they are about remains fixed is best un-

derstood as the fundamental realist view that, if things at some point turn out to be different, one's previous beliefs were wrong instead of claiming that things have really changed. Before discussing this, I must say a few words on Plato's peculiar way to frame this point. Through the concept of natural predisposition, Plato seems to suggest that reality is determined, as it were, in advance of beliefs and representations. What is philosophically remarkable in this is that this "coming before" of the fixed being of things should not be intended chronologically. This, I think, is the philosophical import of the term *pephykenai*. The fundamental idea behind the perfect form of the verb is that what is real is, as it were, fully determined by what it by itself is before one interacts doxastically or technically with it. Precisely on this account the being of things can be said to be stable and by no means determined in relation to our (changing) representations.

4. *The Platonic core of realism*

Now, Plato's argument as is very briefly presented in this paper would deserve a much more detailed treatment. This because the concept of natural predisposition is strictly related to Plato's metaphysics of forms. Exploring this aspect would clearly be beyond the scope of this paper. What I want to investigate now is whether there is room for a fundamental concept of realism directly inspired by Plato's argument in the *Cratylus*. This concept of realism on the basis of PR would frame mind-independence in a new way, given that in Plato's view the mind has a kinship with being and being is essentially related to knowledge. My attempt to capture this basic realist intuition is the following principle, immediately deriving from PR, which could be labelled the Priority of Reality Assumption (PRA):

> PRA: If one entertains a belief or a representation about how things are/stand, and later she finds out that she was mistaken and that they actually stand in some other way, the basic realist intuition consists in the fact that the second way things stand has always been truly the case, even if she did not believe so, and that therefore reality has not changed.

In other words, being does not change because one changes her mind about it. If one considers statements about numbers, laws of nature, or in general abstract entities, one sees that the described reality does not change when she sees that her theory or description is wrong. This is particularly clear on account of the fact that such abstract entities are commonly regarded as admitting of no change. However, PRA also holds in the case of descriptions of facts or states of affairs that occur in time, i.e. are possibly changing. For, if one believes something about concrete particulars, keeping to a general realist conception of the world, things do not change because her belief about them changes. For instance, if I see a person approaching and I think he is Theodorus, and then I find out that he is Theaetetus, PRA is meant to explain why Theodorus has not *actually* turned into someone else.

PRA specifies what I think Plato is aiming at when he says that the *ousia* of things is not drawn up and down by our *phantasma* or *doxa* of it. This because being or reality is by itself and is *already* complete by nature. This last, apparently mysterious, point means only that the object of cognition does not require that one represents it in order for it to be. This, however, does not commit Plato to either of the following:

-   Mind-independence in Putnam's sense because there is no mention of referential access to things independently of the mind, but only that the being of things is not determined by one believing it to be thus and so;
-   Recognition-transcendence in Dummett's sense because it is precisely in recognising that what one believes to be the case (or has been done in a technical endeavour) is wrong that what is really the case can emerge.

The overall philosophical significance of this is that there is a sense of "realism" that remains untouched by Putnam's and Dummett's criticism, whose core is to be found in Plato. One more relevant aspect is that PRA could also shed light on the difference between Putnam's internal realism and Dummett's antirealism. Putnam seems to be clearly committed to PRA:

> To reject the idea that there is a coherent 'external' perspective, a theory which is simply true 'in itself, apart from all possible observers, is not to identify truth with

> rational acceptability. Truth cannot simply be rational acceptability for one funda-
> mental reason; truth is supposed to be a property of a statement that cannot be
> lost, whereas justification can be lost. The statement 'The earth is flat' was, very
> likely, rationally acceptable 3,000 years ago; but it is not rationally acceptable to-
> day. Yet it would be wrong to say that 'the earth is flat' was true 3,000 years ago;
> for that would mean that the earth has changed its shape. (Putnam 1981: 55)

I am not going to comment on the topic of rational acceptability versus truth, nor will I elaborate upon the even more complex question of why Plato speaks of being while Putnam speaks of truth. I only wish to point out that in this quotation Putnam, at least at this stage of his critique to metaphysical realism, clearly embraces PRA. Those who believed that the earth is flat, when it appeared for whatever reason that the earth is not flat, must be considered to have been wrong all along. The other way would be to say that they were right both now and then and that *consequently* reality has changed. It must be said that Putnam would not subscribe to PRA in some cases, namely where it comes to the change in truth-values determined by adopting a different conceptual scheme. In fact, he wants to make precisely this point when he resorts to conceptual schemes: there is no fact of the matter as to how to use words because reality does not come up ready to be labelled by our language. The above quotation is a clear instance of PRA. In other words, Putnam's view retains a realistic core, represented by PRA, which is consistent with Putnam's own phrasing his view as "internal realism".

By contrast, Dummett's antirealism ultimately rejects PRA. This is clear from his antirealism about the past. The details of the theory are particularly complex, but the basic idea is this. Reality being determinate, i.e. reality being able to provide statements with truth-values, comes from the subject relying on evidence at the present time. Thus, for instance, we now have evidence for *s*, where *s* is a statement about the past; accordingly, *s* now has a truth value. Let us assume that the following day evidence for *s* is destroyed. This entails in Dummett's account that what happens the day after actually determines the state of affairs in the past *s* is about. This counts also with respect to the future. If I now have evidence for *s*, this seems to imply that tomorrow *s* will still be true because it is true now, which in the antirealist assumption means that the nature of the evidence I have now suggests that I will have it tomorrow as well. However, when tomorrow arrives, what I thought yesterday my evidence was going

to be and the evidence I have at the moment may well be different. In other words, I might lose my evidence overnight and reality might become indeterminate on account of my new epistemic means.

The intricacies of this view must be left aside here, but I think the sketch I proposed is very useful to highlight a basic contrast between PRA and Dummett's antirealism. Dummett ascribes to the present the crucial role when it comes to ascertaining what is real and what remains indeterminate. PRA instead thinks of reality as determinate and essentially related to the past: what turns out to be true needs to have been true all along. However, the notion of past at stake here is rather peculiar insofar as it should not be conceived as a chronological past. A chronological conception of the past would entail an objective conception of change, as the examples of mistaking Theaetetus or earth changing its shape make clear:

- Chronological past: x is F at t and is G at t_1; x has really changed from being F to being G and, consequently, there was a time at which x *was* really F.

When it comes to rectifying beliefs as described by PRA, matters are quite different:

- Timeless past: x appears to be F at t and turns out to be G at t_1; x has not really changed from being F to being G because x *has been G* all along,

This concept of timeless past requires another concept of change, which could be labelled "epistemic change". The change from what is believed in the first belief to what is believed in the second belief is not an objective or real event.[22] Rather, one is faced with a mind-dependent shift from one belief or re-

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[22] This type of change bears some resemblance to the Irwin (1977) concept of aspect-change (x is big in comparison with y, and big in comparison with z) when contrasted with self-change (x is hot at t1 and becomes non-hot at t2 by becoming colder). Self-change implies the comparison of a particular with itself and its conditions at different times thereby giving the idea of an objective becoming from a state F at t1 to a state non-F at t2 (in this respect it is connected with chronological past). The notion of change at stake here is similar to aspect-change insofar as it is no objective becoming such as a change of state, and yet it retains some essential reference to time, which resembles self-

presentation to another. In this respect, PRA entails that *x* was already *G* when it appeared to be *F* regardless of any cognitive subject being aware of it. At the same time, this independence of what the subject believes only appears *within* the process of recognition of one's errors. If the chronological past characterises processes of change, the timeless past applies to the relation between the mind and the world. The oxymoronic phrase "timeless past" is meant to convey the idea that, for any representation or belief, reality was already there, *before* the formation of belief, but this "before" has not actually taken place in time. On these grounds, I speak of a *priority* of reality over minds. According to Plato, such a priority takes the form of a stability of what is real: when a cognitive subject rectifies her belief, reality has not changed. With PRA one sees that there is room for metaphysical realism in terms of the priority of reality over minds along with the notion of timeless past. The Platonic inspiration of PRA is particularly interesting because, as we have seen, Plato's view is not committed to mind-independence and recognition-transcendence, which have been thought of as consubstantial with metaphysical realism, and yet the priority of reality over mind remains.

To conclude, I wish to consider whether Plato would embrace PRA as we could interpret it today. I think that the very concept of *pephykenai* is somehow related to PRA. The idea that what is real is already perfected, as it were, before being grasped, represented or described by minds is, I think, the best way to understand what Plato is trying to express with his notion of being naturally predisposed. To remain with the *Cratylus*, what is "already there" when one deals with shuttles is their nature, in Plato's own phrasing, what the shuttle itself is. The same happens with names, as Plato speaks of what the name itself is. At the same time, I submit, Plato would relate the ontological before of this timeless past to very special items whose existence is extra-temporal, i.e. forms, on account of his overall metaphysical view, which cannot be expanded upon here. The intuitive side of it would be that eternal beings such as forms, if sought after from within time, will be grasped as something that is already fully determined and changeless.

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change. This reference to time, however, is to be related to the believer entertaining two different beliefs at two different times.

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Osman Gazi Birgül

(Orta Doğu Teknik Üniversitesi)

Non-Existence: On the Representability of Nothings

Abstract: The paper discusses the representability of two nothing types from their linguistic and epistemological aspects. It consists of two parts. The first part discusses the representable type of nothing, i.e., *nihil privativum repraesentabile* (abbreviated as NP) and distinguishes its used and mentioned versions. The distinction makes the real nothing cases discernible from the nothing as a general term. Two cases of NP are analyzed. The first one covers Kant's explanations about the identification of absence in experience and the fabrication of non-existent entities such as fictions, dreams, and hallucinations. The second example analyzes a case from Spinoza, where the truth value of existential statements is evaluated, specifically when they appeal to the notions of absence, presence, existence, and non-existence. The second part discusses the irrepresentable type of nothing, i.e., *nihil negativum irrepraesentabile* (abbreviated as NN). Applying the mention and use distinction to NN, the possibility of representing the logically impossible nothings is discussed. There are two cases examined. The first one is Frege's definitions of zero and it is argued that Frege confuses the irrepresentable and representable types of nothing. The second case is Russell's paradox where the Russellian solution is compared with Kant's treatment of NN. The further implications of the analysis of NN are discussed in the context of the truth value gluts, gaps and the truth values of the paradoxical statements. The paper concludes that only the representable nothings are logically possible formal concepts.

Keywords: *Nihil privativum*, *Nihil negativum*, *nothing*, *representability*, *fiction*, *error*

Introduction

There is a myriad of epistemological accounts proposing an answer to how the representation of the existing objects is possible. The fertility in epistemological explanations can be observed in doppelgänger linguistic versions where the main concern is the relation between objects and linguistic terms. Nonetheless, in the case of non-existence, the philosophical investigations have never been as fertile. Arguably, this results from the common wisdom that there is simply nothing to be explained. Contrary to the common wisdom, in what fol-

lows the problem of representability is discussed within the context of two nothing types.[1]

The first part discusses the representability of a type of nothing that Kant coins *nihil privativum repraesentabile*. It is argued that formality[2] is a mode of existence[3] of the thought entities that are conceptually representable. Compared to formality, materiality is the mode of existence that pertains to the entities existing physically. In the context of formality and materiality, the first part focuses on the conditions that allow the conceptual representation of the formal concepts or terms that refer to the materially non-existent entities. There is a linguistic difference between the used and mentioned versions of *nihil privativum*. While the used versions are singular terms designating the absence or non-existence of the particular objects, the mentioned version acts as a general term. Distinguishing these two senses of *nihil privativum*, the first part presents two forms of representing non-existence or absence. Accordingly, the first form regards how we identify the absence of an entity in experience; and the second form concerns the fictitious entities that have no materiality.

In the first part, the focus is not only on the features of fictitious terms and entities but also on how they are fabricated. The first set of examples for *nihil privativum* includes Kant's treatment of made-up terms, fictions, dreams and hallucinations. Although all the *nihil privativum* cases belong to the same class, their fabrication process plays a key role in distinguishing them further

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[1] Despite that I focus on two specific types of nothing within the context of the following debate, the Kantian table of nothing covers four types, namely, (1) *ens rationis*, (2) *nihil privativum*, (3) *ens imaginarium*, and finally (4) *nihil negativum* (see A292/B348-9). Kant gives *noumena* as the example of *ens rationis* (see A290/B347), which can be interpreted as that the role of *ens rationis* is drawing the limits of knowledge. And for *ens imaginarium*, Kant gives the example of the forms space and time (see A291/B347), i.e., the role of *ens imaginarium* seems to be making the unity of experience possible. Unlike these two types, *nihil privativum* and *nihil negativum* are concerned in what follows. As it will get clearer in due course, *nihil privativum* is about the borders of phenomenal reality and *nihil negativum* is about the limits of possible logical thinking. As the paper discusses the possibility of representing absence within the phenomenal borders and representing what is logically impossible, it neglects (1) and (3).

[2] Elsewhere and in a set-theoretical context, I discuss formality and the case of Frege's definiton of zero below. See Birgül (2021).

[3] I beg the pardon of the readers due to the existentialist connotations of the phrase *mode of existence*. The phrase points out the difference between the concrete and abstract objects. However, the term *abstract* can get quite complicated when one considers Plato's ontological framework. Thus, as it will get clearer below, the difference between different modes of existence is simply the difference between the ontological realms or classification of thought entities and material objects.

into sub-types of *nihil privativum*. The second case is from Spinoza's *Ethics* where Spinoza discusses the non-existence of Peter. Spinoza's case clarifies the distinctions between the four terms *absence*, *presence*, *existence*, and *non-existence*. This case provides a ground to discuss the possibility of using these four terms together and attributing them to the same object. As the logical aspect of the second case, the truth values of the statements that combine any two of the four terms are considered.

The second part concerns the irrepresentable type of nothing that Kant coins *nihil negativum irrepraesentabile*. This part begins with an analysis of why *nihil negativum* cases are irrepresentable. It is argued that this is because they do not satisfy one of the necessary conditions of formal existence, namely the logical possibility. The significance of logical possibility is elaborated in a comparison of logical and real oppositions. Like *nihil privativum* cases, the fabrication of the *nihil negativum* cases is crucial, yet from a different aspect. In what follows it is argued that any fabrication of a *nihil negativum* case violates the principle of contradiction. Thus, the principle itself serves as a criterion of classifying the particular nothing-cases under the concepts of *nihil privativum* or *nihil negativum*, and it can be adopted as a tool to detect and avoid the self-contradictory reasoning. It is claimed that the mention and use distinction is applicable to *nihil negativum*. Despite its violation of the principle of contradiction, the distinction makes the representation of the mentioned version of *nihil negativum* as a *nihil privativum* case.

As in the first part, there are two cases analyzed in the context of *nihil negativum*. The first case is Frege's definition of zero, where there is a problem of mistreating non-existence of an extension as if it is an empty extension. The second problem discussed through Frege's case is the confusion of an irrepresentable type of nothing with a representable one. As the second case of *nihil negativum*, Russell's paradox is examined. Accordingly, instead of banning self-reference to avoid the self-referential paradoxes, the denial of the paradoxical concept is endorsed in the light of the analysis of *nihil privativum*. Like the implications of *nihil privativum* in logic, *nihil negativum* has its own implications in the field. Comparing the truth-value gluts and gaps in the context of *nihil negativum*, it is argued that the paradoxical statements take a gap as their truth value.

1. *The Fiction Case:* Nihil Privativum Repraesentabile

In terms of the possibility of conceptual representation, NN and the concept of NP are distinguished by formality. Only the conceptually representable thought entities exist formally. In that regard, unlike NN, the concept of NP is a representable object of thought that exists formally. To specify further, let me begin with Kant's terminology of nothings in the context of formality and materiality:

> A nothing is a merely formal concept, to the extent that the lack of everything material in intuition is found with it. It is thus only a nothing in the material sense <*nihilum in sensu materiali*>, but by all means a something in the formal sense <*in sensu formali*>, ... From this it follows that all concepts belong here for which all empirical intuition is lacking (LM, 29: 962).[4]

The passage indicates two critical points. The first one is that the designatum of the term *nothing* is characterized as non-existent or absent in its material sense. In other words, nothing does not exist. On the other hand, as a term, nothing is classified under the class something in its formal sense, i.e., nothing exists. Notice that both nothings are NP in different senses, i.e., in the material and formal senses. The distinction between these two senses of NP is a distinction between what is essentially linguistic-conceptual and what is essentially metaphysical. Kant warns against confusing these two by distinguishing them: «The mistake is that <*nihil*> is meant one time as negation, another time as a concept» (LM, 29: 815-6). As he contends that «negation is nothing» (A291/B347), the distinction makes it clear that NP is nothing in its material sense, and as an object of thought, it is something in its formal sense.

As is known, when a term is used it refers to the object in question, and when it is mentioned, it refers to a term. Consider the following example: '*Aris-*

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[4] The *Critique of Pure Reason* is quoted according to the German paginations that appear in the first and second editions. Although Kant's other works are quoted by volume and the page number of the *Akademie-Ausgabe*, when available, the Cambridge translations are used (sometimes with minor modifications). The abbreviation key for the titles of the translations is as follows: AHE = *Anthropology, History and Education*, LL = *Lectures on Logic*, LM = *Lectures on Metaphysics*, NF = *Notes and Fragments*, TP = *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755-1770*.

totle' *is the name of Aristotle*. Without the quotation marks, the term *Aristotle* is used and it designates the great philosopher. When the term is within quote marks, i.e., '*Aristotle*', the term is mentioned and this time it designates not an object but another term: the name of the philosopher. Following the example, let me use NP without quotation marks when it is used and with the marks when it is mentioned. Following the example, it can be formulated that NP, or nothing does not exist in its material sense. Nonetheless, when it is mentioned, 'NP' is the formal concept of nothing, and it exists as a representable object of thought. For Kant, 'NP' is about the negative concepts where there is a lack: «the privative nothing <*nihil privativum*>, which means lack, e.g., light is something *positive*, darkness is something *negative*» (LM, 28: 792). Representability of such negative concepts is possible because despite that the object is not present or existing anymore, the thought of that object «does not contradict the possibility of its mere representation» (LM, 29: 961). Due to this possibility, the first point of the passage can be recapitulated by a reformulation of the famous Parmenidean *dictum*: *Being is, non-being is not*; and the concept of non-being is.

The second indication of the passage regards a further point about 'NP'. Kant defines *nihil privativum* as the «empty data for concepts» (A292/B349), not as empty *datum*. 'NP' is not a concept of some particular empty datum or a particular case of nothing. Instead, it is the concept of nothing in general, or simply it is a general term. The evidence is in the last line of the passage where Kant treats 'NP' as a general term and classifies all the singular terms that refer to some materially non-existent or absent object as 'NP' cases. From this, it can be inferred that we can conceptualize the absence of a particular object X as 'NP$_x$'. Unlike the particular instances of non-existence or absence, 'NP' exhausts all cases where there is a term designating no object of intuition.[5]

After introducing NP and 'NP', let me discuss the Kantian and Spinozist cases. In both cases one can observe that 'NP' is exemplified in two main forms. In the first form, 'NP' is exemplified by any term for an absent object that was

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[5] It might be confusing to construe '*nihil privativum*' as the general term that exhausts all the cases where there are terms with no designatum on the one hand, and as the concept of an empty object on the other. The distinction is between the general and singular usages, i.e., when used in its general sense, '*nihil privativum*' acts as a predicate nominative that classifies the examples as terms with no designatum, e.g., *Pegasus* is a case of '*nihil privativum*'. In its singular usage, '*nihil privativum*' is the concept of an empty object, and *nihil privativum* is the empty object of a concept.

real and present in advance. And in the second form 'NP' is exemplified by made up terms designating no object of intuition. Regarding the first one, Kant contends that «If light were not given to the senses, then one would not be able to represent darkness» (A292/B349). Notice that an object is given first, and as a result of a real opposition, it becomes absent later. When there is a real opposition, «one thing cancels that which is posited by the other; but the consequence is something (*cogitabile*)» (TP, 2: 171). If the real opposition were accompanied by logical opposition, we would not be able to represent the absence of any object. According to Kant's example, «The motive force of a body in one direction and an equal tendency of the same body in the opposite direction do not contradict each other» (TP, 2: 171). For him, the «consequence of such an opposition is rest, which is something (*rapraesentabile*)» (TP, 2: 171). Unlike the first form of 'NP', in the second form the object in question is impossible in reality. This sort of impossibility simply means that these objects cannot be «met with in nature *quoad objectum*» (LM, 29: 961). Kant gives the example of fairy tales, «where there is no possible object corresponds» (LM, 29: 761). That is, when one hears such terms as *the frog prince*, or *the gingerbread man*, it is possible to represent them as imaginary beings because the real impossibility of objects does not bound the limits of representation. Like the fairy tale characters, the made-up terms exemplify the same form of 'NP'. An example of this is the *aether* in physics «that has no reality *intuitu objecti*, but which can be thought without contradiction. ... [It] contains nothing contradictory in thinking it, but it has no existence» (LM, 29: 961).

It is important to consider how one makes up fictions. Unlike the cases of *nihil negativum*, fictions and other similar cases such as hallucinations and dreams are not errors. It is the faculty of imagination where the fictitious entities originate. In fabricating fictitious entities, the function of imagination is reproductive. In other words, it is «a faculty of the derivative presentation of the object (*exhibitio derivativa*), which brings back to the mind an empirical intuition that it had previously» (AHE, 7: 161). This simply means that one cannot imagine a fictitious entity based on some data that has not been given by experience.[6]

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[6] Kant's examples emphasize that not only the objects themselves must be given to imagination by experience but also the objects synthesized by the combination of the previously given ones: «To one who has never seen *red* among the seven colors, we can never make this sensation compre-

Kant clearly states that «the sensations produced by the five senses in their synthesis cannot be made by means of the power of imagination, but must be drawn originally from the faculty of sense» (AHE, 7: 168). To fabricate fictitious entities, imagination acts on two principles: *separation* and *combination*. Kant maintains that by separation,

> I negate something from my concept. ... Through separation only fabricated concepts arise ... A *fictio separando facta* involves a removal of what otherwise is usually combined with a concept. We fabricate much *separando* [;] all novels arise by means of this kind of fiction (LL, 24:262).

As an example, one may imagine a man, a coyote, and then separate or remove their torsos in imagination. This step is separation. Unless one desires to imagine headless or bodiless fictitious entities, the combination should be taken as the second step. According to Kant, by combination, «we fabricate something when we put much together that in experience is never connected. In this way, as already indicated above, novels arise» (LL, 24: 262). Following the same example, one gets the image of *Anubis* when the head of the coyote is combined with a human torso.[7]

Dreams and hallucinations are fabricated by the same principles of separation and combination. On dreams and the origins of their images, Kant writes that «without an outer sense, whose representations we merely repeat and combine in a different way... we would not be able to have any dreams at all» (NF, 18: 310). In dreams one can separate and combine almost any object of intuition including places and different temporal segments into fictitious entities and episodes. Yet, the difference between the fabricated fictitious entities and dreams is that while the former is fabricated consciously, in dreams the entities

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hensible ... Yellow and blue mixed together give green; but the power of imagination would not produce the slightest idea of this color, unless it had *seen* them mixed together» (AHE, 7: 168).

[7] Notice that separation and combination are carried out voluntarily and consciously. This is the main feature of fictions compared to dreams and hallucinations and it can be found in many modern texts. E.g., Spinoza holds that «A Fictitious Being excludes clear and distinct perception, because a man merely according to his fancy–and not unknowingly, as in the case of the false, but knowingly and wittingly– joins together what he wants to join and separates what he wants to separate» (2002b: 178).

are fabricated involuntarily[8]: «An involuntary play of one's images in *sleep* (a state of health) is called *dreaming*» (AHE, 7: 167). Like dreams, hallucinations are involuntary fabrications of fictitious entities, yet with a crucial difference: while asleep, people may occasionally take dreams as if they are real, but the *vice versa* does not happen at least to the people with no mental illnesses. According to Kant, hallucinating is a mental illness where there is a tendency «to accept the play of ideas of inner sense as experiential cognition, although it is only fiction... and accordingly to trick oneself with the intuitions thus formed (dreaming when awake)» (AHE, 7: 161). Hence, one takes the fabricated fictions as if real and this happens while the person is awake. This is not an illness where the faculty of imagination malfunctions but where one loses the track of the difference between the inner and outer senses.

Despite that there is a distinction between non-existence and absence, and between existence and presence, so far, I have used them interchangeably. Regardless of their being distinct concepts, some cases allow using them together while some other cases do not. As we shall see in the following section, the first two combinations are impossible: (a) an entity cannot be simultaneously non-existent and existent, and (b) an entity cannot be simultaneously absent and present. Yet, there are four other combinations among the concepts above, which do not lead to any paradox. These combinations are, (1) an existent entity can be present, (2) an existent entity can be absent, (3) a non-existent entity can be absent, and lastly, (4) a non-existent entity can be present. All four combinations are indicated by the following case that Spinoza (2002a) describes in his *Ethics*:

> In addition (preceding Cor. and Cor. 2 Pr. 16, II), this gives a clear understanding of the difference between the idea, e.g., of Peter which constitutes the essence of Peter's mind, and on the other hand the idea of Peter which is in another man, say Paul. The former directly explicates the essence of Peter's body, and does not involve existence except as long as Peter exists. The latter indicates the constitution of Paul's body rather than the nature of Peter; and so, while that constitution of

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[8] Like the voluntary acts of separation and combination, the involuntariness of these acts in fabricating the contents of dreams and hallucinations can be observed in Spinoza. Unlike fictions, one cannot voluntarily make/suspend judgments about the content of his dreams. Spinoza contends that he does not believe «there is anyone who thinks that while dreaming he has free power to suspend judgment regarding the contents of his dream, and of bringing it about that he should not dream what he dreams that he sees» (2002a: 275).

Paul's body continues to be, Paul's mind will regard Peter as present to him although Peter may not be in existence (257).

Regarding the combination in case (1), unless it is a hallucination or an illusion, we know the existence of the physically present things in our environment. In the Spinozist case, this corresponds to a situation where Peter exists, and he is where Paul can perceive. If the entity is not within the perceivable environment, it may still exist regardless of our inability to perceive it. This is the case (2) where an existent being can be absent. The case (3) is the case where Peter has never existed and thus never been perceived by Paul. Lastly, it is the case (4) where Peter ceases to exist physically, but he can still be remembered or imagined by Paul.

These cases are simple; however, the truth values of the statements can be complicated, especially when compared to the truth values of the statements about the cases of *nihil negativum* in the second part. Let me evaluate the statement 'Peter exists' in accordance with each case. In case (1) the statement is meaningful and *prima facie* true at least in the accounts such as verificationist theory of truth or the correspondence theory of truth. Unlike the case (1), in case (2) we cannot verify the existence of Peter, i.e., the statement can be true or false, but not true and false simultaneously. This is due to the impossibility of the case (a) above, which is an obvious contradiction. Coming to case (3), the statement is not even assertable because one cannot obtain the knowledge of an entity from any source other than experience. Thus, as we shall see in due course, this is a case of *nihil negativum* where neither is there an object nor is there a concept (or in this case, a name that designates the object). The case (4) is an example where a change in status of the physical entity has an impact on the meaning and the truth value of the statements about it. While 'Peter exists' is meaningful and true in a case such as (1), when the entity ceases to exist the statement about it loses its full meaning, at least in the abovementioned truth theories. However, unlike case (3), it is possible to assert the statement because Paul has the knowledge of Peter by experience. Note that an entity cannot be absent and present simultaneously as indicated by the case (b). Thus, Peter is present only as an image or, in Spinozist terms, an idea with no objective validity. In this case, the meaning or the truth value of the statement has been changed

by physical conditions, and Paul re-evaluates the statement when he learns about Peter.

2. *The Error Case*: Nihil Negativum Irrepraesentabile

It is already stated that formality is the mode of existence of the conceptually representable thought objects. Here, the focus is on one of the necessary conditions of formal existence: *logical possibility*. In that regard, a concept exists formally if it satisfies the condition of being logically possible. To compare, an NP case, such as rest, is based on real opposition, while an NN case is based on logical opposition. We can represent the concept of rest because the real opposition cancels the object, not the concept. As Kant states, in an NP case «the concept is indeed possible, but there is no reality there» (LM, 28:544). On the other hand, there is neither reality nor a concept in an NN case because the concept is also cancelled in the logical opposition. One can represent an object in a state of motion or rest. Nonetheless, one cannot represent the same object in both states simultaneously because it exceeds the limits of our conceptual representation: «a body which is both in motion and also, in the very same sense, not in motion, is nothing at all» (TP, 2: 171). Drawing attention to the inner contradiction that cancels the possibility of its representability, Kant maintains that «[to the negative nothing] no *thought* or representation corresponds at all. It is ordinarily so constituted that it involves an inner contradiction in the representation» (LM, 29: 961). This is a domino effect, where the logical impossibility cancels the possibility of representability, and thus the formal existence of the thought entity in question.

The principle of contradiction plays a key role in detecting and avoiding the error in thought. The error in NN cases is the self-contradicting judgment that eventually evolves into a paradox. Unlike the paradoxes such as those of Zeno, NN cases are self-referential paradoxes where a vicious circle is initiated once the erroneous judgment is made. According to Kant, «The point is that two opposing predicates cannot be either affirmed or denied of the same thing. Both are errors» (LM, 28: 793). There is no difference between the simultaneous denial and the simultaneous affirmation of the opposing predicates. As an example, recall the impossible case (a) in the previous part: *an entity cannot be simulta-*

neously *non-existent and existent.* For Kant, «*Reality* is something; *negation* is nothing» (LM, 28: 543), and once one makes the error of affirming the existence and non-existence of the same thing, it amounts to affirming that the entity is both nothing and something in its material sense. Due to the double negation law, one falls into the same vicious circle if he denies the opposing predicates. According to Kant, the only way to avoid the error is to double-check the reasoning by the principle of contradiction.[9]

There is a seemingly tricky question regarding the discourse and representability of NN. Kant coins NN as the «empty object without a concept» (A292/B348). If there is neither a concept nor an object, there is simply nothing to talk about in both material and formal senses. The question is that how is it still possible to maintain the discourse about NN? For example, how come this part of the article discusses the features of the mere *nothing* as if it is something? To answer the question, let me begin by reminding us that the representational impossibility does not imply the impossibility of the discourse. While logical possibility is one of the conditions that makes the formal existence of the concept possible, it is the mention and use distinction that makes their discourse possible by referring to the terms in their mentioned sense. Defining a *Chimera* as «whose nature involves an open contradiction» (Spinoza 2002b: 178), Spinoza (2002b) presents a brief and precise explanation about the point:

> [A *Chimera is properly called a verbal being.*] Here it should be noted that: 1. Because a chimera is neither in the intellect nor in the imagination, we may properly call it a verbal being, for it can be expressed only in words. For example, we can express a square circle in words, but we cannot in any way imagine it, far less understand it (183).

As is noticed, Spinoza only mentions *Chimera* when he calls it as a *verbal being*. On the other hand, he refers to any chimera in the used sense when he writes that *a chimera is neither in the intellect nor in the imagination.* Once he calls chimera *a verbal being*, the mentioned chimera acts as a general term and can be exemplified by any particular chimera case. When the used and men-

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[9] According to Kant, one can guard himself against contradictions by the principle of contradiction (see LM, 29: 811). Of course, as a field logic advanced a lot after Kant and in evaluating contradictions, there are other alternative positions such as dialetheism. Yet, it seems possible to evaluate them from a Kantian perspective. The details are in due course.

tioned chimeras are transferred in to the Kantian terminology, the used chimera is an NN case, and the mentioned chimera is 'NN'. As a further indication of 'NN', it can be argued that 'NN' is the concept of NN, namely *nothing at all*. Although an NN is mere nothing, 'NN' is a case of 'NP' where there is a term with no object. Due this further indication, it is no surprise that Spinoza (2002b) classifies the mentioned Chimera along with the non-existent things such as «the Fictitious Being and Being of reason» (178), which we cannot identify in experience, yet we are still able to carry out a discourse about. Despite that the formal existence is cancelled by the logical opposition in an NN case, 'NN' is still a formal thought entity that can be represented as a case of 'NP'. If it were otherwise, one would not be able to think about a contradiction without committing to it. Kant affirms the point when he writes, «For formally *<formaliter>* a merely negative thing *<ens mere negativum>* can at least be *thought* without contradiction» (LM, 29:1001).

After this brief sketch of NN and 'NN', let me discuss the first error case, i.e., Frege's definition of zero. His definition is an NN case because he defines zero as a self-contradicting phrase, i.e., «not identical with itself» (Frege 1960: 87). There are no two opposing and distinct predicates in the definition but the law of self-identity that is formulated into self-contradiction through the reflexive pronoun *itself*. Kant formulates the underlying structure by giving the usual definition of NN as «that which at the same time can both be and not be the same thing *<quod idem simul esse et non esse potest>*» (LM, 29: 963). Frege's appeal to this structure and his definition causes two critical problems. The first problem is that despite zero is defined or modeled by the empty set where there is still a set with an empty extension; Frege's definition does not pick out an empty extension, but *nothing at all*. Badiou draws attention to this problem when he writes, «Even the concept 'not identical to itself' could well turn out not to have any existent extension, which is something entirely different from having an empty extension» (2008: 20). This problem is a result of the logical impossibility of the definition *not identical with itself*. Like any NN case, *not identical with itself* «is a thought that cancels itself, a concept that collapses by inner contradiction» (LM, 29: 962). To specify, it collapses into *nothing at all*.

The second problem is about the countless possible predicates that can be used in generating NN cases. Frege is aware that any other quality or a pred-

icate can be used in generating a contradiction. He lists *square circle* and *wooden iron*[10] among the possible candidates. We see the same or similar examples being introduced in Kant's works as NN cases, e.g., «four cornered circle» (LM, 29: 761), or «bright darkness» (LM, 29: 792). Frege seems to be making a point when he explains why he favors *not identical with itself* to the other candidates. According to him, the preferred definition of zero is different from the other contradictions in being provable «on purely logical grounds» (Frege 1960: 88). To clarify, Frege writes that whether a definition involves a contradiction is not always evident at first sight and the demand of designing a definition under which no object falls is satisfied by his *not identical with itself* (see Frege 1960: 87). In other words, he favors an analytic statement over the synthetic ones because while the contradiction in the former is evident, the latter may require further investigation to see if there is a contradiction. Nevertheless, Frege makes a mistake by believing that the self-contradicting definitions do yield concept under which no object falls: «I could have used for the definition of nought any other concept under which no object falls» (1960: 88). Frege mistakes an NN case for 'NP'. Regardless of the analyticity or syntheticity of its components, no logical contradiction produces an empty extension. Due to this, his definition does not serve as a definition of a thought entity, but nothing at all.

The second error case is Russell's paradox. In formulating the paradox, Russell does not only points out the assumption that eventually leads to the paradox but also offers a solution that Kant's treatment of NN has already pointed out. The formulation is as follows:

> A class-concept may or may not be a term of its own extension. "Class-concept which is not a term of its own extension" appears to be a class-concept. But if it is a term of its own extension, it is a class-concept which is not a term of its own extension, and *vice versâ*. Thus we must conclude, against appearances, that "class-concept which is not a term of its own extension" is not a class-concept (Russell 1903: 103).

The whole paradox rests on the assumption that the *class-concept which is not a term of its own extension* is (seemingly) a class concept. The self-reference follows naturally from the assumption because it falsely assumes that there

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[10] See Frege (1960: 87-88).

is a class-concept with an extension. To paraphrase in the symbolic language, the statement $(S \in S) \rightarrow \neg (S \in S)$ and its reverse $(S \in S) \rightarrow \neg (S \in S)$ hold. By the biconditional operator they can be combined into the famous self-contradictory statement $(S \in S) \leftrightarrow \neg (S \in S)$. To avoid the paradox, one can follow any of the following options: (1) banning self-reference and (2) denying that the term *class-concept which is not a term of its own extension* is a class-concept. When compared, I do not endorse the option (1) because it changes the term completely by amputating the part *its own*. (1) is not feasible because it is not the new non-self-referential term we are concerned with. Coming to the option (2), the term denies the possibility of the class-concept that is both a term of its own extension and not a term of its own extension. This option is favored by Russell and can be supported by an appeal to Kant's treatment of NN. Consider Kant's following analysis of *bright darkness*. As he contends, once the logically opposing thoughts are set together, as in the final formulation of Russell's paradox with a biconditional, there is simply *nothing at all* or *no concept* to think about:

> I think nothing at all when I think the affirmative and negative at the same time, e.g., bright darkness. Here I cannot think darkness, because I think brightness, and not brightness, because I think darkness – thus nothing at all. If I think of two opposed things, then I have two thoughts; if I set them together, then I think nothing at all. (LM, 28:792).

The implications of the points discussed through the two error cases can be observed in comparably recent debates in logic. The concern is about the existence of paradoxes and the truth values of the paradoxical statements. Before getting into the details, let me introduce the truth value gluts and the truth value gaps. A sentence has a truth value glut if its truth value is interpreted as both true and false. Such a sentence is called a *dialetheia* and the existence of dialetheias is defended by dialetheists, most eminently by Priest and Routley.[11] In search for an answer to this question, a proposal by Wittgenstein is worthy of consideration. This proposal is one of the influential motivations of dialetheism. It reads as follows:

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[11] See Priest (2006) and Priest *et al.* (1989).

> Why should Russell's contradiction not be conceived of as something supra-propositional, something that towers above the propositions and looks in both directions like a Janus head? ... The proposition that contradicts itself would stand like a monument (with a Janus head) over the propositions of logic (Wittgenstein 1978: 256 (III. 59)).

Considering the differences between an NP and an NN, *Janus head* is an NP, a fictitious entity. If one follows Wittgenstein and construes the third value as a supra-propositional truth-value glut, this would be mistaking NP for an NN. The reason is that the third value as both true and false is an NN. While *Janus head* is a representable NP, the third value is only an irrepresentable NN, which is why one cannot use them interchangeably. Hence, it can be claimed that Wittgenstein's proposal is an example of conceptual confusion. There is no doubt that the paraconsistent logics are legitimate, and it is possible to interpret the third value from a Kantian point of view. From this perspective one can support the view that the paradoxical sentences lack a truth value that we can represent or comprehend. In other words, they have a truth-value gap because their truth value exceeds the limits of conceptual representation. From a Kantian perspective, neither can one fill that gap nor can defend such an attempt.

Conclusion

The conceptual representation of the different concepts of nothing seems to be a confusing issue. That having been said, we can comprehend and represent not only the particular cases of absence and non-existence but also the concepts absence and non-existence in general. However, there are always some limits of conceptual representation. The mention and use distinction plays a key role in distinguishing the representable and irrepresentable types of nothing from each other. Accordingly, a concept of nothing is representable if mentioning or using it as a concept is logically possible. The logical possibility is one of the necessary conditions of formal existence of the thought entities. It can be concluded that a *nihil privativum* case is a concept with no object. As the mentioned version, 'NP' is a general term from its linguistic aspect, and a representable concept from its epistemological aspect. *Nihil negativum* is mere nothing when used. Nonetheless, when mentioned, it is a representable and formal object of thought and an example for 'NP'.

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Maria Cristina Fornari

(Università del Salento)

Errore, menzogna e finzione tra Nietzsche e Derrida

Abstract: Jacques Derrida opens his *Histoire du mensonge* (1997) with a famous passage from Friedrich Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols*: «How the 'true world' finally became a fable. The history of an error». Derrida defines this brief *excursus* into the history of philosophy as a «fabulous narration about a fable»: how, in fact, can one believe in the truth of the narration about a supposed "true world", which is itself a fable? In this sort of vicious circle, Derrida's aim is to develop a deconstructive genealogy of the concept of lying, and therefore of truthfulness: in this process, the influence of Nietzsche is significant, not to say decisive; Nietzsche, for whom «error regarding life [is] necessary to life» (*Human, All Too Human* 33) and who dedicates the first of his philosophical writings to *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-moral Sense*. The aim of this article will therefore be to examine Nietzsche's considerations on lying and error in the light of his extraordinary defining capacities. While it is true that lying, deception, deceit and error all fall into the category of the pseudological, Nietzsche was clear about what distinguishes them, what their ontological nature is and above all what consequences they have had and still have in the moral, religious, sociological and political spheres.

Keywords: *Nietzsche, Derrida, Truth, Error, Lie*

Jacques Derrida apre la sua *Histoire du mensonge*[1] muovendo da un celebre passo del *Crepuscolo degli idoli* di Friedrich Nietzsche: *Come il mondo vero finì per diventare favola. Storia di un errore*. Il pensatore francese definisce questo breve *excursus* di storia della filosofia «narrazione favolosa su una fabulazione (*narration fabuleuse sur une fabulation*)»: come si può, infatti, credere alla verità della narrazione su un presunto "mondo vero", che è esso stesso una favola; che ci racconta, anzi, «come una favola si è affabulata (*comment une fable s'est affabulée*)»? *Favola*, per Derrida, assieme a *fantasma*, non appartengono né al registro del vero né a quello del falso, né del verace né del menzognero. «Non più del mito, la favola o il fantasma indubbiamente non sono delle verità né degli enunciati veri in quanto tali. Ma a maggior ragione non sono degli errori, degli

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[1] Si tratta di una conferenza tenuta nell'aprile del 1997 al *Collège International de Philosophie*, tradotta in inglese nel 2002 e pubblicata in francese nei *Cahier de L'Herne Jacques Derrida*, n. 83 (2004), diretti da Marie-Louise Mallet e Ginette Michaud; cfr. Derrida (2005/2006).

inganni, delle false testimonianze o degli spergiuri». Ancor più problematico, allora, il racconto nietzscheano, che pretende di affabulare sulla verità come affabulazione, e il cui esito rappresenta, per il pensatore francese – come Nietzsche ci ha spesso abituato –, un vero e proprio «coup de théâtre»[2].

A dispetto del sottotitolo del noto capitolo del *Crepuscolo*, la storia di una menzogna non dovrebbe e non potrebbe comunque essere la storia di un errore, fosse pure un errore nella costituzione del vero, nella storia stessa della verità in quanto tale[3]. Pur appartenendo entrambe, infatti, alle categorie dello pseudologico[4], le esperienze della menzogna, dell'errore, dell'inganno (e dell'ingannarsi) non sono sinonimiche. Anche nello scritto giovanile, pubblicato postumo, *Su verità e menzogna in senso extramorale*, Nietzsche sarebbe caduto nell'equivoco – se ci è permesso aggiungere un altro elemento alla già rilevante famiglia concettuale – di porre, o supporre, una certa continuità tra errore e menzogna («dunque tra il vero e il verace»), cosa che gli permetterebbe di trattare la menzogna «nella neutralità di uno stile extramorale, come un problema teoretico ed epistemologico»[5]. Ciò che invece interessa a Derrida è la dimensione irriducibilmente etica della menzogna[6], laddove il fenomeno della menzogna in quanto tale è estrinsecamente estraneo al problema della conoscenza, della verità, del vero e del falso.

Derrida non ha del tutto torto: la storia dell'errore che Nietzsche racconta in quel breve quanto noto *excursus* di storia della filosofia (ma, si potrebbe convenire, anche di filosofia della storia) è in realtà la storia di una menzogna,

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[2] Cfr. Derrida (2005: 7-9/2006: 5-7). Sul tema, molto più modestamente, si veda Fornari (2015: 353-57).

[3] Derrida commenta un passo del medesimo testo anche in *Eperons. Les styles de Nietzsche* (Derrida 1978), con il consueto approccio decostruzionista: «Senza parodia discreta, senza strategia di scrittura, senza differenza o scarto di penna, senza lo stile insomma, quello grande, il rovesciamento lascia le cose allo stesso punto nella dichiarazione rumorosa dell'antitesi» (Derrida 1991: 88).

[4] «*Pseudos*, in greco, può significare la menzogna così come la falsità, l'astuzia o l'errore, l'inganno, la frode, così come l'invenzione poetica, moltiplicando i malitesi su ciò che un malinteso può voler dire» (Derrida 2005: 11/2006: 9).

[5] Derrida (2005: 7/2006: 8).

[6] Derrida richiama tipicamente Sant'Agostino del *De mendacio*, con la sua definizione di menzogna intenzionale, ossia il mentire con la volontà di ingannare l'altro, il che non esclude il farlo tramite l'esposizione di ciò che si ritiene vero. Stesso punto di partenza per Jankélévitch (1998/2010), sebbene quest'ultimo sembri veder riemergere la possibilità o il potere di mentire a sé stessi, in particolare col «desiderio», quella «vertigine passionale» che ci rende tutti, prima o poi, «testimoni sinceri» del falso.

perpetrata originariamente da Platone, inteso come padre di tutti i dualismi metafisici, a scapito del cosiddetto mondo apparente e di tutti coloro che lo abitano. Ma la dimensione dell'errore non vi è estranea: Nietzsche ha ben chiaro come, se è stato possibile cadere nelle trappole metafisiche, ciò sia accaduto a causa della nostra conformazione psicofisica, che non ci permette di leggere il mondo se non, per l'appunto, sbagliando su di esso e su noi stessi. Non siamo conformati per il divenire, per immergerci nel flusso degli eventi, per concepire un "fare" che non sia un "agire", un agire che non sia conseguenza di un "volere", o un condizionato che non sia il riflesso di un incondizionato[7]. «In un mondo in divenire, in cui tutto è condizionato, l'ammettere un incondizionato, una sostanza, un essere, una cosa, eccetera, può essere solo un errore. Ma com'è possibile l'errore?»[8]. Nietzsche ci riconosce un impulso a inventare e a inventarci cause – l'uomo è preda di un vero e proprio *Ursachentrieb* – collocando su un terreno propriamente psicologico e perfino fisiologico la rassicurante arte di mentire a sé stessi[9].

Ma se mentire, seguendo Derrida, è possibile soltanto là dove si abbia chiara la nostra *voluntas fallendi*, per la quale

> mentendo ci si rivolge ad altri (poiché non si mente che all'altro, non si può mentire
> a sé stessi, tranne nel caso in cui sé stesso venga considerato un altro)[10]

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[7] Se anche lo fossimo (stati), la nostra storia evolutiva ha preferito altro, una falsa logica all'illogicità del reale: «In sé e per sé, già ogni grado elevato di cautela nell'argomentare, ogni inclinazione scettica è un grande pericolo per la vita. Non si sarebbe conservato alcun essere vivente, se non fosse stata coltivata, in modo estremamente vigoroso, l'opposta inclinazione, diretta ad affermare piuttosto che a sospendere il giudizio, a errare e immaginare piuttosto che a restare in posizione d'attesa, ad assentire invece che a negare, a esprimere la propria opinione invece che a essere giusti» (*Gaia Scienza* 111). Si veda anche *Frammenti Postumi* 34[49] 1885.

[8] *Frammenti Postumi* 35[51] 1885. Sia detto *en passant*, non possiamo escludere che Nietzsche abbia letto *De l'erreur* di Victor Brochard (1879), del quale conosceva *Les Sceptiques grecs* (1887, nella sua biblioteca personale). «Cos'è la credenza? Cos'è la certezza? È un senso comune che la credenza possa essere applicata a qualcosa di diverso dalla verità. D'altra parte, chi non fa a volte molti errori e non li considera veri nel momento stesso in cui li fa? Così lo stato di certezza è indipendente dalla verità della cosa pensata, e da quel momento in poi non si differenzia più dallo stato di credenza. Infatti, non è perché le cose sono evidenti che le crediamo, è perché le crediamo che le affermiamo come evidenti. L'evidenza è il marchio di una credenza ostinata: lungi dall'essere un carattere inerente alle cose pensate, come sostengono i dogmatici, è un carattere che dipende in gran parte dallo stato del soggetto che afferma» (Dauriac 1880: 98-104).

[9] Basti per tutti la sezione *I quattro grandi errori* del *Crepuscolo degli idoli*. Ma già in *Umano, troppo umano* 9: «tutto ciò che finora ha reso [per gli uomini] *preziose, terribili, piacevoli* le ipotesi metafisiche, e che le ha prodotte, è passione, errore e volontario inganno».

[10] Cfr. Derrida (2005: 23/2006: 19).

colui che – emulando Adamo nell'atto di appropriarsi del creato – ha istituito il linguaggio,

> credeva veramente di avere nel linguaggio la conoscenza del mondo. Il creatore di linguaggio non era così modesto da credere di dare alle cose appunto solo denominazioni; al contrario egli immaginava di esprimere con le parole la più alta sapienza sulle cose; in realtà il linguaggio è il primo gradino nello sforzo verso la scienza. *La fede nella verità trovata* è anche qui ciò da cui sono scaturite le più potenti fonti di energia. Molto più tardi – solo oggi – comincia a balenare agli uomini che essi, con la loro fede nel linguaggio, hanno propagato un mostruoso errore[11].

Del resto, non siamo solo preda di inganni percettivi: «l'intelletto, come mezzo per conservare l'individuo, spiega le sue forze principali nella finzione (*Verstellung*)»[12], categoria universale della sopravvivenza. Da qui, e dall'omissione arbitraria di ciò che è proprio dell'esperienza individuale, nasce per il giovane Nietzsche quel colombario di concetti che in seguito chiameremo, erroneamente quanto convintamente, verità[13]; ma anche per il Nietzsche maturo l'intelletto – ultimo prodotto dell'organico, così come la coscienza – si affaccia solo a posteriori, a balbettare qualcosa riguardo a processi pulsionali dei quali non ha alcuna contezza[14].

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[11] *Umano, troppo umano* 11. In modo analogo, «la scoperta delle leggi dei numeri è stata fatta in base all'errore già in origine dominante che ci siano più cose uguali (ma in realtà non c'è niente di uguale), o che perlomeno ci siano cose (ma non ci sono "cose"). L'ammissione della molteplicità presuppone sempre già che ci sia *qualcosa* che si presenta come molteplice: ma proprio qui regna già l'errore, già qui fingiamo (*wir … fingiren*) esseri e unità che non esistono» (*Umano, troppo umano* 19). Ancora, ad esempio, in *Gaia Scienza* 112: «[…] Operiamo, né più né meno, con cose che non esistono, con linee, superfici, corpi, atomi, tempi divisibili, spazi divisibili: come potrebbe anche soltanto essere possibile una spiegazione, se di tutto noi facciamo per prima cosa una *immagine*, la nostra immagine! È sufficiente considerare la scienza come la più fedele possibile umanizzazione delle cose; impariamo a descrivere sempre più esattamente noi stessi, descrivendo le cose e la loro successione».

[12] *Su verità e menzogna in senso extramorale* [1873] 1.

[13] Non mi trovo del tutto d'accordo con Andrea Tagliapietra, per il quale lo scritto del 1873 è «interamente posto sotto il registro della bugia» (2001: 374). Se la volontà di mentire, dal punto di vista logico, è sempre cosciente di sé stessa, i parlanti cadono piuttosto in un inganno perpetrato dall'oblio: «quando l'uomo dimentica se stesso in quanto soggetto, e precisamente in quanto soggetto *artisticamente creativo*» ecco che si ritrova tra le mura segregatrici della fede (*Su verità e menzogna in senso extramorale*, 1).

[14] «Le leggi del pensiero come risultato dell'evoluzione organica – si deve supporre una forza positiva della finzione (*eine fingirende setzende Kraft*) – del pari eredità e durata delle finzioni» (*Frammenti Postumi* 35[50] 1885).

La penetrante e pervasiva "tensione al vero", tuttavia, sembra andare oltre le mere ragioni dell'utilità illustrate nello scritto giovanile[15]. Se, come insegna Bernard Williams, l'impegno costante e quotidiano nei confronti della veridicità (*Truthfulness*) è posto in tensione col dubbio se vi sia qualcosa come la verità (*Truth*)[16], Nietzsche riconosce che, perché si instauri la disciplina propria dell'indagine, è necessaria preventivamente una *fede* nel valore stesso della verità:

> La domanda se sia necessaria la *verità*, non soltanto deve avere avuto già in precedenza risposta affermativa, ma deve averla avuta in modo tale da mettere quivi in evidenza il principio, la fede, la convinzione che "niente è più necessario della verità e che in rapporto a essa tutto il resto ha solo un valore di secondo piano". Questa incondizionata volontà di verità, che cos'è dunque? È la volontà di *non lasciarsi ingannare*? È la volontà di *non ingannare*? [...] Si noti che le ragioni della prima domanda si collocano in un ambito del tutto diverso da quello in cui si trovano le ragioni della seconda[17].

Non potendo stabilire a priori il carattere dell'esistenza, e dunque dell'utilità o meno dell'inganno[18], la fede incondizionata nel valore e nell'importanza della verità non può (più) derivare da un calcolo utilitario delle sue conseguenze. La "verità del vero", la "verità a tutti i costi" lasciano anzi trapelare la loro pericolosità, il loro svantaggio per la vita («"Volontà di verità": potrebbe essere un'occulta verità di morte»[19]): tuttavia, ce ne si assume il rischio, e stavolta – Derrida ne converrebbe – la partita si gioca sul terreno della morale[20].

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[15] In questo scritto, l'amore per la verità viene smascherato in ragione delle conseguenze negative della menzogna: ostracizzando chi mente, «gli uomini cercano di evitare, non tanto l'essere ingannati, quanto l'essere danneggiati dall'inganno [...] In tale senso limitato, l'uomo vuole soltanto la verità: egli desidera le conseguenze piacevoli – che preservano la vita – della verità, è indifferente di fronte alla conoscenza pura, priva di conseguenze, mentre è disposto addirittura ostilmente verso le verità dannose e distruttive» (*Su verità e menzogna in senso extramorale* 1). La convenienza pratica del dire la verità rispetto al mentire, anche in *Umano, troppo umano* 54.

[16] «Queste due cose, la devozione nei confronti della veridicità e il sospetto diretto verso l'idea di verità, sono connesse tra di loro. Il desiderio di veridicità conduce a un processo ciclico che indebolisce la certezza che ci sia una verità stabile o formulabile senza eccezioni» (Williams 2005: 7). È, in pratica, ciò che Nietzsche definisce "autosoppressione della morale per moralità".

[17] *Gaia Scienza* 344.

[18] Ovvero, non si può stabilire *a priori*, e probabilmente nemmeno *in itinere*, quale sia la scelta più conveniente tra la pillola rossa e la pillola blu, a meno che non si assuma di rinunciare a *Matrix* su base ideologica.

[19] Interessante come Nietzsche recida espressamente e con forza il legame classicamente probatorio tra verità e vita.

[20] È quanto ammette lo stesso Nietzsche in *Gaia Scienza* 344.

> Ebbene, si sarà compreso dove voglio arrivare, vale a dire che è pur sempre una *fede metafisica* quella su cui riposa la nostra fede nella scienza; che anche noi, uomini della conoscenza di oggi, noi atei e antimetafisici, continuiamo a prendere anche il *nostro* fuoco dall'incendio che una fede millenaria ha acceso, quella fede cristiana che era anche la fede di Platone, per cui Dio è verità e la verità è divina… Ma come è possibile, se proprio questo diventa sempre più incredibile, se niente più si rivela divino salvo l'errore, la cecità, la menzogna, se Dio stesso si rivela come la nostra più lunga menzogna?[21].

L'opzione di Nietzsche è per la verità, ma la scoperta spiazzante consiste nella concezione di una verità autodestituentesi[22]. Non in senso radicalmente nichilistico, come vorrebbero coloro che lo pongono tra i negatori *tout court* – se non altro perché Nietzsche stesso è convinto di averci consegnato delle verità terribili[23] – ma, piuttosto, la difficoltà o l'impossibilità di cogliere la "verità" diventa la cifra della verità stessa. Non c'è alcun punto di vista dal quale le nostre rappresentazioni possano essere confrontate col mondo così com'è realmente (perché, naturalmente, un tale "mondo vero" non esiste): è il prospettivismo, «condizione fondamentale di ogni vita»[24], a rappresentare una via d'uscita tutt'altro che antialetica:

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[21] *Gaia Scienza* 344. Ma, analogamente: «[…] o Zarathustra, sei più devoto di quanto tu non creda, con questa tua miscredenza! Un qualche dio dentro di te ti convertì al tuo ateismo. Non è la tua stessa devozione che non ti fa più credere in un dio? e la tua onestà estrema finirà per portarti anche al di là del bene e del male!» (*Così parlò Zarathustra*, "A riposo"). La dimensione dell'errore tocca naturalmente anche l'ambito della morale e della religione: a questo proposito, il dibattito contemporaneo si affanna a stabilire se Nietzsche possa o meno essere considerato un proto-rappresentante della "Error Theory". Si veda, per un'utile sintesi delle varie posizioni, Stellino (2015).

[22] L'autorefutazione della verità fa parte della tradizione scettica, in particolare di Sesto Empirico: le tesi scettiche sono da intendersi come *kathartiká phármaka*, farmaci purificanti che tolgono sé stessi insieme alle scorie del corpo. Lo scettico dunque usa la verità, ma per disfarsene, incapace di difendere la propria posizione.

[23] «[…] – la verità parla in me. – Ma la mia verità è *tremenda*: perché fino a oggi si è chiamata verità la *menzogna*» (*Ecce Homo*, "Perché io sono un destino", 1). Dice bene, ancora una volta, Williams: «Ripetutamente Nietzsche – il "vecchio filologo" come chiamava sé stesso – ci ricorda che, del tutto indipendentemente da qualsiasi questione di interpretazione filosofica, incluse le proprie interpretazioni, ci sono fatti da rispettare» (2005: 20).

[24] Cfr. *Al di là del bene e del male* 'Prefazione'.

> Quanta verità può *sopportare*, quanta verità può *osare* un uomo? questa è diventata la mia vera unità di misura, sempre più. L'errore (– la fede nell'ideale –) non è cecità, l'errore è viltà[25].

Ma se l'errore è viltà, allora – con Derrida e Jankélévitch – presuppone il mentire a sé stessi: ma quanto abbiamo il potere di nasconderci una verità dolorosa e quanto, invece, siamo ciechi alla sua evidenza? Ci sarebbe da chiedersi se sia davvero possibile, per il Nietzsche psicologo, l'inganno volontario, e quanto, invece, non si tratti piuttosto dell'esito ineludibile di una determinata forma di vita[26].

Chi non è vile è senz'altro Nietzsche, che si mostra consapevole non solo del dolore inflitto dallo scomparire della verità dall'orizzonte, ma anche del carico di responsabilità che la nuova conoscenza comporta: e se abbiamo tanto amato «tutto questo mondo, che noi abbiamo creato», «poesia originaria dell'umanità», rimanere *ora* nella non verità non è fatalità, ma una scelta necessaria, «posto che in generale vogliamo vivere»[27]:

> Ahimè *ora* dobbiamo abbracciare la non verità, e l'errore diventa soltanto ora *menzogna*, e il mentire a noi stessi diventa necessità vitale![28]

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[25] *Ecce homo*, 'Prologo' 3. In un appunto del periodo, Nietzsche sembra prendere in considerazione l'ipotesi che il vuoto aperto dalla destituzione della dicotomia platonica possa bastare a sé stesso: «La forma estrema del nichilismo sarebbe il sostenere che ogni fede, ogni tenere per vero sia necessariamente falso: *perché non esiste affatto un* MONDO VERO. Dunque: un'*illusione prospettica*, la cui origine è in noi (*avendo* noi costantemente *bisogno* di un mondo ristretto, abbreviato, semplificato). In tal caso la MISURA DELLA FORZA è costituita dal punto sino al quale possiamo ammettere, senza rovinarci, l'illusorietà e la necessità della menzogna. *In questo senso il nichilismo, come* NEGAZIONE *di un* mondo vero, di un *essere, potrebbe risultare un modo di pensare divino: – – –*» (*Frammenti Postumi* 9[41] 1887). Come sappiamo, l'ultimo passo della *Geschichte eines Irrthums* nella sua formulazione definitiva è invece l'avvento di Zarathustra: il lunghissimo errore è finito ed è il momento dell'ombra più corta, ossia dello Zenit del sole della conoscenza.

[26] Intendiamo qui psicologo nel senso che Nietzsche stesso si attribuisce, come indagatore delle configurazioni psico-fisiche che stanno alla base di ogni posizione di valore, secondo la nota e significativa asserzione programmatica di *Al di là del bene e del male* 23: «Tutta quanta la psicologia è rimasta sino ad oggi sospesa a pregiudizi e apprensioni morali: essa non ha osato scendere nel profondo. Concepirla come morfologia e *teoria evolutiva della volontà di potenza*, come io la concepisco: – questo non è stato da nessuno neppure sfiorato col pensiero: stando al fatto, cioè, che ci è consentito di riconoscere, in quel che finora è stato scritto, un indizio di ciò che finora è stato taciuto».

[27] Cfr. *Frammenti Postumi* 14[8], 14[9] e 15[9] autunno 1881.

[28] *Frammenti Postumi* 12[32] autunno 1881.

Infatti, conoscere l'errore non elimina l'errore, ma pone il saggio di fronte all'aperta contraddizione tra le sue decisioni ultime, dettate dalla passione della conoscenza, e la vita stessa. Auspicare il perire in una ostinata volontà di verità antivitale probabilmente non sarebbe da Nietzsche: piuttosto, abbracciare la necessità dopo aver fatto tesoro della nuova consapevolezza; arrendersi e immergersi nei "duri fatti", dopo aver dimostrato che i fatti non esistono; «Amare e promuovere la vita per amore della conoscenza, amare e promuovere l'errore, l'illusione, per amore della vita»[29], questo sì, è proprio di Nietzsche, che destatosi improvvisamente dal sogno deve continuare a sognare («allo stesso modo in cui un nottambulo deve continuare a sognare per non piombare a terra»), ma con l'acquisita coscienza che di un sogno si tratta[30].

Ma qual è, allora, il nuovo statuto della parvenza (*Schein*)? Vale la pena ascoltare il filosofo, che ci rende mirabilmente partecipi della sua personale esperienza di fronte alla verità scoperta:

> In che modo meraviglioso, nuovo e insieme tremendo e ironico mi sento posto con la mia conoscenza dinanzi all'esistenza tutta! [...] Cos'è ora, per me, "parvenza"! In verità, non l'opposto della sostanza – che cos'altro posso asserire di una sostanza qualsiasi se non appunto i soli predicati della sua parvenza? In verità, non una maschera inanimata che si potrebbe applicare a una *x* sconosciuta e pur anche togliere! Parvenza è per me proprio ciò che opera e vive (*Schein ist für mich das Wirkende und Lebende selber*), che si spinge tanto lontano nella sua autoderisione da farmi sentire che qui tutto è parvenza e fuoco fatuo e danza di spiriti e niente di più – che tra tutti questi sognatori anch'io, l'"uomo della conoscenza", danzo la mia danza; che l'uomo della conoscenza è un mezzo per prolungare la danza terrena e con ciò appartiene ai sovrintendenti alle feste dell'esistenza; e che la sublime consequenzialità e concomitanza di tutte le conoscenze è, forse, e sarà il mezzo più alto *per mantenere* l'universalità delle loro chimere di sogno e la generale comprensione reciproca di questi sognatori e con ciò appunto *la durata del sogno*[31].

E chissà se Derrida ha riflettuto su questo bell'aforisma de *La gaia scienza*, lui che si è chiesto – in tutt'altra occasione e con tutt'altro scopo – se «il sognatore può parlare del suo sogno senza svegliarsi», mentre per la filosofia c'è «l'imperativo razionale della veglia», «dell'io sovrano». Infatti, commenta Der-

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[29] Cfr. *Frammenti Postumi* 11[162] primavera-autunno 1881.

[30] Cfr. *Gaia Scienza* 54.

[31] Cfr. *Gaia Scienza* 54.

rida, «che cosa è la filosofia per il filosofo? Svegliarsi e destarsi»[32]: ma per Nietzsche è anche accogliere e disciplinare il sogno, in un certo senso, dopo che se ne è riconosciuto tutto il valore festivo e salvifico.

Se la veglia, in questo caso, è proprio *das Wirkende und Lebende selber*, il sogno, a mio parere, non ne è la contrapposizione: la vita come volontà di potenza, primordiale e indicibile, si mostra fenomenologicamente nelle sue manifestazioni, tra le quali la parvenza è quasi un suo *alter ego* parodistico («*Schein ist für mich das Wirkende und Lebende selber, das soweit in seiner Selbstverspottung geht*»): una volta acquisita questa consapevolezza (il risveglio improvviso), si può attuare una sorta di quello che oggi si chiamerebbe "sogno lucido", fatto in coscienza di stare dormendo («mi sono destato di colpo in mezzo a questo sogno, ma solo per essere cosciente che appunto sto sognando e che *devo* continuare a sognare»), onde la capacità di muovervisi dentro in maniera deliberata.

Possiamo allora tornare al paragrafo del *Crepuscolo degli idoli* da cui abbiamo preso le mosse. Se è senz'altro vero che la critica di Nietzsche al "mondo vero" e il suo conseguente invito a sbarazzarsi di esso (e, assieme a quest'ultimo, anche del "mondo apparente") lascia lo spazio per una nuova definizione dei concetti di "vero" e "falso", è altrettanto vero che la stessa dicotomia di vero/falso ha perso ormai ogni attrattiva. C'è un unico mondo, quello del sogno deliberato (ovvero, assecondare la vita che si presenta "in veste di apparenza"), da parte dei rari conoscitori del mondo, tra i quali senza dubbio Nietzsche si annovera.

Non si tratta dunque soltanto di emendare la *menzogna* platonica («Io, Platone, sono la verità»[33]) lasciando svaporare la cosiddetta cosa in sé e restituendo dignità ai fenomeni: l'ultimo atto di questa storia, l'avvento di Zarathustra come di colui che lega tutti gli opposti in una nuova unità[34], pone fine anche a un lunghissimo *errore*: il non aver penetrato la reale natura della vita come volontà di potenza, che informa di sé il tutto, e il gioco inesauribile delle sue forme.

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[32] Faccio qui riferimento al discorso pronunciato da Derrida a Francoforte il 22 settembre 2001, in occasione della consegna del "Premio Adorno", e che prende spunto da un sogno che Walter Benjamin raccontò per lettera a Gretel Adorno. Pubblicato col titolo di *Fichus* (2001), è uscito in italiano come *Il sogno di Benjamin*; cfr. Derrida (2001/2003).

[33] *Crepuscolo degli idoli*, 'Come il mondo vero finì per diventare favola' 1.

[34] «Fino ad allora non si sapeva […] che cos'è la verità». Cfr. *Ecce homo*, 'Così parlò Zarathustra' 6.

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Mario De Caro

(Università degli Studi "Roma Tre")

The Antinomy of Omissions

Abstract: This article deals with an antinomy regarding omissions: on the one hand, common sense, morality, and the law generally accept the idea that omissions can play a genuine causal role; on the other hand, most metaphysicians strongly deny that possibility because of their ontological status: how can non-being cause anything? An alternative view, inspired by Hilary Putnam's causal pluralism, in which the notion of causation depends on the explanatory context, is sketched. In this perspective, it will be argued that omissions can be seen as genuine causes notwithstanding their non-existence.

Keywords: *omissions, causal pluralism, Hilary Putnam*

1. *Omissions and their antinomy*

Actions are at the center of our existences. In a normal day, each of us performs a large number of them: a few are well thought out, several are intentional and a large number are automatic or almost automatic. However, whatever the number of actions we perform, it is certain that we "perform" a stratospherically greater number of omissions: to each action corresponds an enormous number of possible alternative actions that we omit to perform, and consequently never become actual. Now, for example, I am performing the action of writing on the computer, but alternatively I could have read *The New Times* online or begun to study Sanskrit or gone to buy a new hair dryer.

Every action that is potentially accessible to the agent but it is not carried out, is an omission; and the number of actions potentially accessible to the agent, and therefore of omissions, is endless. But there is more. In principle, even the actions we actually perform can be traced back to omissions: every action, in fact, is nothing but a non-omission or, if we want, the omission of a possible omission. By deciding to write on the computer, for example, I did not omit to write on the computer - that is, I omitted to omit to write on the computer. To make a long story short: a young resourceful ontologist could build an honorable career by tacking on an ontology in which omissions are among the basic categories and actions among the subordinate categories.

Someone could object, however, that these are nothing more than the typical concoctions of hard analytical philosophy but do not show at all that omissions are a phenomenon that philosophers interested in the really relevant phenomena should be concerned with. To be interested in omissions – our objector could continue – is like being interested in *impossibilia* or, to go on the classic, in angelology: bizarre things, that are perhaps good for rabid ontologists or old-fashioned theologians but have no connection with what one really cares about. In reality, however, things are not like that. (Strictly speaking, they are not like that even for the *impossibilia*, but this is not the place to discuss this issue.)

That omissions are an important phenomenon in our existence, for example, is clearly indicated by the law, which punishes the omission of official acts (when public officials omit to perform a legally required act), failure to report (when doctors fail to report that they have provided assistance in situations that appear to be criminal), the omission of official duties (such as when public officials omits to take steps to restore an interrupted service), and failure to assist (when, for example, one fails to notify the competent authority of the discovery of persons in need who were lost). Moreover, what are, if not omissions, the felonies committed by those who do not pay their taxes or by those who – in violation of, say, Article 364 of the Italian Penal Code – do not report particularly serious crimes, such as kidnapping, of which they became aware?

And what about the redacted parts in certain documents (i.e., the cases in which, by making a deed public, the authority omits certain data, for brevity or out of respect for the privacy of the persons involved or to protect the investigation in progress or for other reasons, perhaps unspeakable)? It should also be noted that omissions have important moral, as well as legal, implications: how many human relationships are based on the fact that we fail to say everything we really think about each other? And how often are we morally responsible for some kind of omission, such as when we don't spend enough time with our children or when we fail to tell a spouse that they don't have long to live?

And isn't it true that regret – a feeling that permeates our lives from the beginning, or almost to the end – often depends on the fact that on certain occasions we could have behaved differently from what we did? To put it another way: not infrequently we regret having failed to do what we could (or should)

have done. At the political level, on the other hand, we can think of the etiquette of diplomacy, in which omissions with respect to burning issues are routine: as when, for example, in an international forum where a brutal dictator is present, the other participants carefully avoid mentioning the issue of human rights. Finally, we can mention the contribution that to the theme of omissions is offered by Catholic penitential theology: according to it, one falls into the sin of omission when one does not do what the divine law would require them to do.

For this discussion, it is very important to note that in many cases we commonsensically attribute causal power to omissions: an omission, we think, can cause the failure of an engagement, the collapse of a business, or the death of a person. On the other hand, jurists themselves have coined the category of "omissive causation", precisely to account for cases in which omissions act as causes, generating legally relevant consequences.

There are very good reasons, then, to think that omissions play an important role in our lives. One might therefore expect philosophers to have dealt extensively with this issue and to have recognized its importance. Instead, this does not happen, or has happened only recently (Bernstein & Goldschmidt 2021). The positive exception is represented, besides legal philosophy, by the few moral philosophers who in the last decades have discussed the possibility that events caused by actions (such as drowning someone or practicing active euthanasia) and those caused by omissions (such as not rescuing someone who is drowning or letting a terminally ill person die) have the same moral consequences. According to some philosophers, actions and omissions are morally indistinguishable if they are followed by the same consequences (Rachels 1975, Glover 1977, Honderich 2002, Harris 2011); according to others, in the case of omissions there is instead a lower level of responsibility (Foot 1977, Haidt & Baron 1996). At any rate, none of the authors who have addressed these issues have denied that there are cases in which omissions are morally relevant.

However, if some practical philosophers (i.e., some philosophers of law and moral philosophers) have treated omissions as a relevant and genuine phenomenon, philosophers of a theoretical orientation have dealt with this issue much less and, when they have, it has generally been to sanction their substan-

tial irrelevance.[1] More specifically, the most heated theoretical discussion has concerned the ontological status of omissions: are they facts, states of affairs, *possibilia*, non-abstract states of affairs, *sui generis* objects, particular features of space-time regions, or nothing more than pure non-entities or absences (Clarke 2014, Silver 2015, Nelkin & Rickless 2015)? These conceptions differ widely: some treat omissions as non-entities, others as abstract ontological oddities. The most important thing to note, in any case, is that many of these conceptions deny any causal power whatsoever to omissions: and, in this way, they place themselves in a diametrically opposed position with respect to common sense, law, and morality, which, as we have seen, tend to consider omissions as possible causes of changes in the world, and sometimes even very relevant changes. As an example, let us consider the conception according to which omissions are merely potential events (events that could have happened, but in fact did not happen and will not happen): in this perspective, omissions are mere non-entities or absences. And the *communis opinio* of metaphysicians with respect to absences is strongly skeptical: one cannot attribute any causal power to what has not happened and will not happen – in short, a non-entity. The celebrated Australian philosopher David Armstrong (1999: 177), for example, has written in this regard:

> Omissions and so forth are not part of the real driving force in nature. Every causal situation develops as it does as a result of the presence of positive factors alone.

This position, on the other hand, should not be surprising: much of contemporary metaphysics argues that anything lacking causal powers (abstract entities, absences, non-entities) cannot have a respectable ontological status. That is, according to a majority thesis, only "positive factors" – i.e., concrete substances and events that are able to generate changes in the world – can be taken seriously from the ontological point of view. In our ontology, then, there is no place for omissions (Beebee 2004, Moore 2009).

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[1] An important exception is represented by Sarah Bernstein (2016; 2021), who advocates a causalist view of omissions, framed in an ontological context in which there are different ways of non-being: *omissions*, in particular, do not exist in a different sense from mere *absences*; and some omissions do not exist in a contingent sense, others are simply impossible

The dynamic of this discussion is very similar to that of other contemporary philosophical discussions in the analytic world. Hartry Field, for example, has argued that mathematical judgments (e.g., "5 + 7 = 12") are all hopelessly false: and this is precisely because they refer to supposed abstract entities (such as numbers and sets) that, if they existed, would have no causal power. Thus, also Field accepts the thesis that existence implies the possession of causal powers; and for this he concludes that the supposed entities of mathematics are mere fictions. It follows, in his view, that utterances mentioning such entities are false for the same reason that utterances concerning fictitious entities in literature such as "Oliver Twist was born in London" are false (Field 1980; see also Balaguer 2009). In a similar vein, John Mackie (1977) stated that moral judgments are false: these judgments, in fact, refer to alleged entities (i.e., the Good) that in reality are ontologically unacceptable because, if they ever existed, they would be "queer" - strange, bizarre - exactly because they lack all causal powers. And so, according to Mackie, since moral entities do not exist, all judgments that refer to them (i.e., moral judgments) are false.

Let us now return to omissions. As mentioned, many philosophers think that omissions cannot be given a serious ontological status because they do not actually have any causal powers. In this way, however, an obvious antinomy arises: how can one reconcile the common philosophical thesis that omissions have no causal powers (nor, consequently, a respectable ontological status) with the fact – empirically evident and also recognized by legal and moral philosophers – that they play a very relevant role in our lives? That is, to use a more synthetic formula, how can the "antinomy of omissions" be solved (or dissolved)?

2. Beyond the antinomy of omissions

Before addressing the antinomy of omissions, it is important to distinguish two kinds of omissions, intentional and unintentional, which have different relevance both in ordinary life and from the philosophical point of view. Unintentional omissions (those that the subject does not consciously make) are not of much relevance either to our lives or philosophically; intentional omissions, on the other hand, can have considerable existential and moral implications and pose urgent problems for philosophy.

Let us consider the issue more closely. An intentional omission is characterized by the fact that a particular action is not performed because the acting subject has intentionally decided not to perform it (Foot 1977, Sartorio 2009). This occurs, for example, when a witness intentionally fails to mention particular events that would be important for an investigation or when a relative decides not to tell a sick person how serious their condition is. In both cases, these are intentional omissions, for which one is morally responsible toward both oneself and the others (moreover, in some situations, one may also be legally responsible for this kind of omissions). It is intentional omissions, then, that give rise to the antinomy of omissions: on the one hand, they are of great importance to ordinary life; on the other, until very recently they have been substantially neglected by philosophy.

This antinomy has much to do with the issue of causality. As we have seen, on the one hand, common sense, morality, and the law agree in attributing causal powers to omissions; on the other hand, many metaphysicians believe that omissions are causally inert and, for this very reason, deny them any ontological dignity. We are thus faced with one of the cases in which the intuitions on which the ordinary image of the world is based collide with the most sophisticated metaphysical theories. In cases of this kind, what the late Lynne Rudder Baker wrote may come to mind: «We should not lend faith to metaphysics that render ordinary but significant phenomena unintelligible» (2013: 73). In short, Baker argues, if a metaphysics fails to account for an existentially important phenomenon, so much the worse for that metaphysics. However, if we were to take Baker's suggestion too literally, we would soon run the risk of arriving at a sort of intellectual nihilism, in which common sense would win a priori over metaphysics. If we want to adequately contrast the conceptions that make existentially relevant phenomena incomprehensible – a point for which Baker argues convincingly (De Caro 2020b) –,without ending up with the very naïve view that commonsense trumps metaphysics in *all* cases, we must then proceed with caution, articulating conceptions that can legitimize the idea, implicit in common sense, that the phenomena that are essential for conceptualizing our lives

actually have ontological dignity.[2] In the present context, in particular, we need to identify a sensible alternative to the conceptions that deny omissions any causal power and, for that reason, delegitimize them ontologically. The keystone in this direction is represented, in my opinion, by the refusal of the monistic causal character of such conceptions, or at least of most of them.

In order to understand what problems causal monism encounters, it may be useful to consider one of its most influential versions, i.e., that incorporated by Donald Davidson (1970) in his famous "anomalous monism", the conception according to which every occurrence of a mental event is identical to an occurrence of a physical event, but no type of mental event is identical to a type of physical event. The crucial point here is that anomalous monism accepts the so-called "nomological principle of causality", according to which all causal relations (i) are relations between events and (ii) exemplify a physical law. In this perspective, it can happen that the occurrences of two different mental events are causally related to each other: but in order to understand which specific physical law is exemplified by that relation one has to consider the description of those events in the terms of the physical events to which (as occurrences) they are respectively identical. For a couple of decades, Davidson's conception seemed able to satisfactorily reconcile ontological physicalism and causal monism with anti-reductionism with respect to the mental. Later, however, Jaegwon Kim (1992) and others convincingly argued that, in fact, anomalous monism collapses onto epiphenomenalism, the discredited conception that mental events are devoid of any causal power (in the sense that no desire, belief, or intention of ours can ever cause anything). Kim's argument is simple. According to Davidson, in order for a relationship between events to be said to have causal character, it must exemplify a law of physics. However, this means that the events involved in that relation play a causal role only insofar as they are describable by means of physical predicates – which of course are the only predicates that can figure in physical laws (there are no physical laws that have use of predicates such as "belief", "intention", and "desire"). It is natural, on the other hand, to think that the predicates by means of which events are described refer to the

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[2] See De Caro (2016; 2016; 2020) for some defense of the idea that the ordinary view of the world (which is manifested in common sense) can be reconciled with the scientific view of the world in the context of a liberal naturalism.

properties of those events: and, consequently, it is because of the physical properties alone, and not also because of the mental properties, that the relation between those events exemplifies a physical law and can therefore be considered a genuine causal relation. However, Kim asks, in such framework what remains of the causal relevance of the mental? Actually, nothing, because nothing can be caused by the mental properties of events: everything is caused solely by their physical properties. Kim's argument is convincing, and Davidson's attempts to defend himself on the basis of his peculiar theory of events are, according to most critics, not persuasive (Heil & Mele 1993). In this regard, what is important to note here is that it is precisely the causal monism inherent in the "nomological principle of causality" that produces the collapse of Davidson's anomalous monism onto epiphenomenalism.

This example how desirable it is to abandon causal monism, accepting instead causal pluralism. Of course, another problem that immediately emerges is what version of causal pluralism one should accept (Godfrey-Smith 2009, Hitchock 2007, Psillos 2009); however, what is important to note here is that if one abandons the idea that there is only one kind of causality, many of the seemingly irresolvable problems faced by contemporary philosophy (such as free will, mental causation, or the possibility of singular causation) begin to seem more approachable; and this is true, in my opinion, also in dealing with the antinomy of omissions.

It is time, therefore, to abandon the idea that there is one unitary and homogeneous causal history of the world: which is the idea that, as we have seen, led to the collapse of Davidson's anomalous monism. In short, it is necessary to conceive a satisfactory form of causal pluralism: and in this sense an interesting proposal by Hilary Putnam can help us. According to Putnam, who in this refers to an idea of John Haldane, «there are as many kinds of cause as there are senses of 'because'» (1999: 143). An example can help to clarify this thesis, which has at the same an Aristotelian and a pragmatist flavor. Let us imagine that an individual has a heart attack. One can ask oneself why this happened: but if this question is clear, it is not clear how one should answer it. There are, in fact, many types of legitimate answers, and in order to understand which is the most appropriate answer in particular case, one must consider the context in which the question is asked. If, for example, one wants to explain the heart at-

tack from a physiological point of view, the answer will be based on the recon-struction of the causal processes that led to the occlusion of an artery of the patient. If, however, it was the family doctor of the patient who had explain the sad event, the cause of the heart attack might be identified in the fact that the patient was not diligent in taking the drugs that had been prescribed to them. And so on: a medical statistician might refer to the hereditary risk factors in the family history of the patient, a family member might take responsibility for the event for not having been convincing enough in explaining to the patient what behaviors he should have avoided, etc. etc. All these explanations, it should be noted, have a causal character, but they are very different from each other: none is *the* correct explanation: all of them, however, taken in the right context, can be correct. It is therefore the context in which one tries to explain a given event that indicates what kind of causal explanation can be adequate. And this is true, it should be noted, even in the cases in which one wants to explain a certain omission: the idea that, for every omission, there is, in principle, an explanation that is more correct and fundamental than the others is – in the perspective outlined by Putnam – nothing more than the product of a monistic metaphysics that is as commonly held as unjustified.

In this perspective, explanation and causation are intrinsically linked: le-gitimate explanations are as numerous as the plausible causal histories that can be provided with respect to a given phenomenon (may it be an event, an action, or an omission). It is essential to note, however, that the constitutive link with the intentional notion of explanation in no way deprives causation of its objec-tivity: indeed, the correct causal explanations are only those that refer to how the world is really made (Putnam 1999: 137-150).

To understand how this applies to the antinomy of omissions, it may be useful to use a thought experiment. Let's imagine that a corrupt police officer, in charge of manning a checkpoint, intentionally omits to stop a group of bandits who are their accomplices and are going to carry out a robbery (which they ac-tually do carry out). From the point of view of common sense, morality, and law, it is clear that, among the many correct causal explanations of why that robbery took place, there is also the one according to which the police omitted to carry out an action that they should have performed: and it is precisely by virtue of

this explanation – centered on an omission – that we consider the incrimination of the policeman to be just.

The metaphysical conception that denies causal power and ontological legitimacy to omissions is in stark contrast to the commonsense intuition that the cop should be indicted because the cop's omission was one of the causes of the robbery (how can you indict someone for something that does not exist, the metaphysician would say?). A form of causal pluralism *à la* Putnam, on the other hand, is perfectly in line with common sense intuition. Indeed, in the latter perspective, omissions are real causes to the extent that they are mentioned in one of the adequate explanations of a given phenomenon. And, in our case, the omission on the part of the policeman can be considered one of the causes of the robbery (and for this he can be legitimately indicted), because the explanation that mentions his omission offers an adequate answer to the question "Why did that robbery happen?".

Conclusion

In this article I have discussed the "antinomy of omissions", the cognitive dissonance generated, on the one hand, by the idea of common sense, law and morality that omissions play a very relevant role in our existences and, on the other hand, by the view of many contemporary metaphysicians that omissions have neither causal relevance nor ontological dignity. This antinomy can be dissolved, I have argued, by renouncing the causal monism on which the conceptions that delegitimize omissions from both the causal and the ontological point of view are generally based. In this perspective, I have hinted that a promising option is Putnam's causal pluralism, which connects the notion of causality to that of explanation, without making it merely subjective.

The price to pay for a conception of this kind is, of course, the price that any form of pluralism has to pay – the loss of unity of the phenomena that one wants to understand. The possible dissolution of the antinomy of omissions, however, offers in my opinion an excellent reason to believe that such a price is not too high.

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Louis Rouillé

(Collège de France)

The Logic of Fictional Existence

Abstract: Fictional characters have a complex relationship with existence. Intuitively, they do not exist in our world, but they exist in their fictional world, as shown by the following intuitively true statements:

(1) In the Lord of the Rings, Frodo exists.
(2) Frodo does not exist.

This is not yet a problem, for it merely shows that the natural language expression "to exist" must have an indexical shade of meaning, which is well known. But it calls for attention, for it is not clear how readers keep track of the fictional characters (non)existence in practice. In this article, I give a semantic analysis of this pair of statements combining two ideas. First, I motivate (Leonard 1956)'s not so original idea that "to exist" means something like "to have at least one contingent property". Second, I build on Currie (2003)'s argument to show that fictional characters have contingent properties in their fictional world but only necessary properties outside it. Combining these two ideas nicely explains the fictional characters' subtle ontological status which crucially depends on the perspective we (readers) take when thinking about them.

Keywords: *fiction, indexicality, existence, modal logic*

1. *The fictional character's complex relationship with existence*

Some famous fictional characters, like Hamlet, have a complex relationship with existence *in the fiction*. But I think that *all* fictional characters have a complex relationship with existence *outside the fiction*. This is due to the status of fictional discourse in general, which is but one kind of discourse about nonexistents.[1] But, contrary to other discourses about nonexistents, it is plain that fictional characters must exist *somewhere*, namely in their fiction of origin. The subject of this paper consists in explaining how fictional characters can be said to exist *in the fiction* while not existing *outside the fiction*. In order to do this, I will first set up the problem based on some linguistic data. Then, I will consider

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[1] Alongside with error and lies. Error, lies and fiction form a family called the "false discourses" in Plato's *Sophist*: they are discourses which "say the things that are not as if they are" (262e-263b).

a definition of singular existence which I find very interesting for the data to be explained. Finally, I will analyse the data by exhibiting some subtle interactions between the necessity operator and the fictional operator.

1.1. *Fictional characters as existents*

Here is a statement that I take to be intuitively true:

(1)   In *the Lord of the Rings*, Frodo exists.

Indeed, it would be preposterous to claim that Frodo does not exist *in the fiction*. The intuitive ground for the truth of (1) is that Frodo does many things in the story. In particular, he carries the Ring to Mount Doom so as to destroy it. But one can only walk and carry things if one exists. In other words, existence is a precondition for doing the things Frodo does in the fiction. Hence, even if Tolkien did not write explicitly so, it is clear that Frodo must be existing in the fiction.

This line of reasoning works well for Frodo and *the Lord of the Rings*, but it can be objected that it does not generalize to all fictional characters. One famous example is Italo Calvino's *the Nonexistent Knight*. It tells the story of a Knight in Charlemagne's army which is but an empty armour. He is characterised as being an over-zealous spoilsport and other soldiers in the army despise him for that. A disguised woman soldier in the same army is in love with him and wishes he was existent, for he would have a body and they could make love. You can see how this fictional character has a strange ontological status *in the fiction*, and this is surely part of the novel's originality: In *the Nonexistent Knight*, the Knight does not exist. This is thus a counter-example to a generalisation based on (1). Of course, Calvino's Knight is not alone: there are many so called "metafictions" in which fictional characters are fictional *in the story*.

Interesting though such counter-examples are, I think we can put them aside as exceptional cases. Fictional characters are *usually* not like that, and their ontological status within their fiction of origin is *usually* not bizarre. Besides, there are good reasons to think that metafictions presuppose as a general rule that fictional characters usually exist in the fiction. Indeed, Calvino's novel

intentionally violates this rule, so as to produce the amusing metaphysical alienation he is after. So Calvino's novel presupposes that something like (1) is usually true. One should thus theorize about metafictions where ontologically bizarre characters dwell separately, and this falls out of the scope of this paper.[2]

1.2. *Fictional characters as nonexistents*

Here is another intuitively true statement:

(2)   Frodo does not exist.

Suppose for instance that my little cousin read *the Lord of the Rings* in such a way that she thinks Tolkien's saga talks about genuine historical facts. She would thus believe that Frodo really existed. In that situation, I should tell her that she misread *the Lord of the Rings*, that it is in fact a fiction and, consequently, that Frodo is a purely fictional character. Of course, fictions can contain historical figures, but Frodo is definitely not one of those historical figures. The fact that Frodo is "a purely fictional character" entails the truth of (2). Indeed, part of what it means to "be purely fictional" consists in lacking existence.

Though (2) is intuitively true, many theorists about fictional characters are ready to deny that (2) is, strictly speaking, true. In other words, many philosophers have good reasons to think that Frodo does exist *in some sense*. The reason is that we can talk about him, think or feel about him. Yet, talking, thinking and feeling are clearly relational properties. Hence, we are related to fictional characters in some sense. These often dubbed "intentional relations", they continue, presuppose a mode of existence. As a result, fictional characters should not be thought of as *lacking* existence by virtue of being fictional, but rather as enjoying a different mode of existence from ours. This line of reasoning develops into a family of theories about fictional characters (and other intentional entities) that is generally called "neo-meinongianism" as a tribute to the

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[2] For more on ontologically bizarre characters and a discussion of the so-called "reality principle" which grounds the usual non-problematic ontological status of fictional characters in their fiction of origin, see Everett (2005).

Austrian philosopher Alexius Meinong (the first contemporary philosopher to have explicitly defended such a position). There are many versions of neo-meinongianism.[3]

I will not discuss neo-meinongianism in this paper and I will take as a working hypothesis that there is some truth in the idea that fictional characters do not exist. As a matter of fact, as the reader will see below, I think the problem I discuss here is orthogonal to whether (2) is *really* (as opposed to merely intuitively) true or not. Indeed, the problem I consider consists in examining the *contrast* between (1) and (2). So neo-menongians should rephrase my linguistic data so as to make a difference in the *mode of existence* fictional characters enjoy inside and outside the fiction. This contrast is thus an empirical, linguistic datum that needs to be explained regardless of one's preferred analysis of statements like (2).

1.3. *Setting up the problem*

The linguistic data is thus the following:

(1)   In *the Lord of the Rings*, Frodo exists.
(2)   Frodo does not exist.

Both statements are intuitively true. I talked of a *contrast*, but it might well be remarked that there is no apparent tension between the two statements. For once, intuition is not contradictory, and maybe we should leave it there. So I should explain what I have in mind when I say "theorize about this contrast". This linguistic data points to a more general (and familiar) point about the meaning of the natural language expression "to exist". The idea, broadly speaking, is that the expression "to exist" is an indexical expression. By which I mean that in order to understand statements containing "to exist", one needs to have some information about the context of utterance. Entities can exist *there*, without existing *here*: it all depends wherefrom we utter the sentence. As for fictional char-

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[3] To name a few: Parsons (1980) and Zalta (1983) think that fictional characters enjoy a mode of existence akin to other abstract objects like numbers; Van Inwagen (1977) and Thomasson (1999) think they are "abstract artefacts" like symphonies; Lewis (2015) thinks they are unactualized *possibilia*.

acters, the data suggests, they do exist *in their fiction of origin*, but they do not exist *outside it*.[4] The crucial difference between (1) and (2) is obviously the presence of what might be called a "fictional operator" in (1).[5] In other words, it is the presence and absence of a fictional operator that explains why there is no contradiction (or even tension) between the two statements. This observation is true regardless of one's preferred analysis of the fictional operator. It may even be seen as a general constraint on a good analysis of the fictional operator: a fictional operator is a linguistic expression which, among other things, shifts the relevant indexical parameter attached to the natural language predicate "to exist".

The indexicality of "to exist" is indeed *familiar*, for it has been forcefully argued in the famous (Lewis 1986). Lewis claimed that "to exist" is part of a family of expressions like "to be actual" or "to be real" which are fundamentally indexical expressions whose semantic role is to indicate one's position in the modal space. Consequently, a statement like (2) should be analysed so as to mean something like "Frodo is not part of *our* world", uttered by a speaker like you and me. This paraphrase comes out true, for Frodo is not to be found in any part of the world we live in. The linguistic parameter attached to "to exist" (and other similar expressions), which can typically be shifted using a fictional operator, is, according to (Lewis 1978), a *world* parameter. Consequently, a statement like (1) should be analyse so as to mean something like "Frodo is part of the worlds targetted by *the Lord of the Rings*". This paraphrase comes out true, whatever one's preferred way of selecting those worlds, for Frodo is indeed a part of Middle Earth, if we can get there.

I think this general, familiar point is fundamentally correct. However, in the rest of this paper, I want to remain neutral on whether the relevant parameter typically shifted by a fictional operator is a *world* parameter. Indeed, there

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[4] The linguistic data I examine suggests that "outside the character's fiction of origin" means "in reality". However, I could produce other statements showing that one can be outside a character's fiction origin without being in reality. For instance, consider the intuitive truth of "In Jane Austen's *Emma*, Frodo does not exist". Of course, one would need to specify *in which non-original fictions* Frodo exists and in which he does not. I set aside these complications here to focus on the contrast I am trying to build.

[5] The expression is canonical, and is defined, for instance, in Lewis (1978).

are good reasons to doubt that fictions typically select possible worlds.[6] I will thus only retain the idea that *there is* a linguistic parameter attached to "to exist and that this linguistic parameter is typically shifted by fictional operators. This existential claim is supported by the linguistic data. For simplicity, let us call it a "fictional parameter".[7]

The problem can now be expressed as follows: How does the shifting back and forth of the fictional parameter work? It is an empirical problem, so to speak. We, readers of fiction and dwellers of reality, have very firm intuitions about *where* fictional characters stand. We know that they are not *here* to be found and that they are *there*. In other words, we (readers) keep track of the fictional character's (non)existence intuitively.[8] Answering this question consist in giving a theory of fictional existence: how can we infer the fictional existence of fictional characters while preventing the inference to the real existence of fictional characters?

2. *Existence and contingency*

Singular existence is a notion which should be contrasted with *general existence*: the distinction was first clearly made in (Quine 1939). When we say that "winged horses do not exist", we deny *general existence* to winged horses; in other words, we say that the natural language predicate "winged horse" is empty, i.e. instantiated by no real individual. When we say that "Pegasus does not exist", we deny *singular existence* to Pegasus; in other words, we say that the natural language singular term "Pegasus" is empty, i.e. denotes no real individual. Let us focus on singular existence only.

In (Leonard 1956), the author is interested in what he calls "the modern logic presupposition". This presupposition is that, in classical predicate logic, a

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[6] These doubts have been raised again and again in the philosophy of fiction literature. It consists in showing that fictional worlds are always incomplete and sometimes inconsistent, whereas possible worlds are, by definition, complete and consistent. See Currie (1990: 54) and Walton (1990: 64) for a classic exposition of this view. See also Woodward (2011) for a review of the literature on this point.

[7] The reader may keep Lewis's world parameter in mind for the rest of the paper, for I do not think it crucially affects my argument.

[8] Maybe there are cases, like in some metafictions, where intuition flickers. But I think it is a remarkable, empirical fact that we *almost always* know where we stand relative to the fictional characters we read about.

singular term always refers. This presupposition is the one I used when eliciting the intuitive truth of (1): one can only do the things one does if one exists. According to this presupposition, one can infer the existence of something under the assumption that one can truly predicate on that something. Such inferences, Leonard remarks, are the building blocks of famous "existential arguments", like Anselm's argument for the existence of God or Descartes' *cogito*. Commenting on the *cogito* in (Leonard 1956: 57), Leonard suggests an interesting way to revise this presupposition:

> Notice that Descartes starts with "I think". There are other predicates than thinking with which he *might* have started. (Whether *he* would have regarded them as producing equally evident premises, I do not know or care. I should have been willing to grant them to him.) For example, he might have said,
>
> "I am I."
>
> Or again said, "Either I think or I don't think". In other words, he might have taken *any* law of thought and affirmed it relative to himself, and I should have been willing to accept the affirmation as true.
> But I should *not* have granted that Descartes existed. In other words, existence is not implied by necessary, or analytic, predicates. It is, rather, a consequence only of *contingent* truths. That I think is a contingent truth, rather than a necessary one, and I say that despite of Descartes' *later* claim that thought is of my essence.

I should strongly emphasise that Leonard's claim is not a historical claim about Descartes' argument. Indeed, in the controversies subsequent to the publication of *Meditations on first philosophy*, Pierre Gassendi opposed a similar argument to the *cogito*, saying that Descartes could as well say "I walk, therefore I am" but this would have prevented him from later inferring that he was a thinking substance. In his response to Gassendi, Descartes made explicit why it is important to his argument that the existence of the soul be tied up to *thinking*, as opposed to walking. This shows that Leonard's comment is beside the point when it comes to explaining the Cartesian doctrine. The appeal to Descartes is merely a forceful illustration of his point about singular existence.

The point is the following: one should *not* infer singular existence from predication *only*; one must also make sure that the predication is contingently

true. Given standard notations of second-order, modal logic, and $E!$ standing for singular existence, we thus get Leonard's definition of singular existence:[9]

$$(3) \qquad E!\,t =_{def} \exists\varphi(\varphi t \,\wedge\, \blacklozenge\, \neg\varphi t)$$

We can thus define nonexistence in the following way:

$$(4) \qquad \neg E!\,t =_{def} \neg\exists\varphi(\varphi t \,\wedge\, \blacklozenge\, \neg\varphi t) \equiv \forall\varphi(\neg\varphi t \,\vee\, \neg\blacklozenge\, \neg\varphi t) \equiv$$
$$\equiv \forall\varphi(\varphi t \,\rightarrow\, \blacksquare\varphi t)$$

Which says: t does not exist iff all the predicates which are true of t are necessarily true of t.

First, a little comment on the link between existence and modality. In his paper, which was published in 1956, Leonard takes a lot of time motivating the idea that modal logic *is indeed* relevant for a logically motivated discussion of existence. Back then, there was no formal semantics for modal logic, and appealing to modal logic was tantamount to giving up on the formalizing of an idea. Things have changed. And as we remarked with Lewis above, I think it is now generally acknowledged that singular existence *must be* articulated with modality in some sense. However, I do not think that Leonard's idea that we can infer from contingency to existence (and from necessity only to nonexistence) is represented in the contemporary literature.

Second, I want to remark that all existing individuals, according to this definition, enjoy contingent existence. In other words, an existing individual can always truly say: "I might not have existed". I think this squares well with intuition: few will go as far as to say that their singular existence is a necessary feature of the universe they live in.

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[9] One could be surprised by this sudden call for second-order logic here. But this is not that surprising if we consider that the other standard logical predicate, namely identity (=), is also defined using second-order logic. Identity is usually taken to be defined by Leibniz's law which is the following second-order logic formula:

$$\forall x\, \forall y\, \forall\varphi\, ((\varphi x \,\leftrightarrow\, \varphi y) \,\leftrightarrow\, x = y)$$

For an inquiry into the connection between identity and singular existence, see the seminal Hintikka (1959).

Third, it seems that Leonard's definition of singular nonexistence captures nicely the idea of "being merely supposed" or "being an artifice of a theory". Indeed, one can stipulate that some individual exists. But the stipulated individual *actually* exists only if the underlying theory is *actually* true. Otherwise, the stipulated individual remains what is standardly called an "artifice of the theory" (or an erroneous supposition). In such cases, the individual's properties are all and only the stipulated properties as well as the logical consequences one can draw from the theory it comes from. The individual holds its properties by definition, hence necessarily.[10] Consequently, by Leonard's definition, artifices of wrong theories do not exist.

But take Vulcan, the famous artifice of Newton's gravitation theory introduced by Urbain Le Verrier. It might be objected that some intentional properties are contingently true of Vulcan. For instance, it is contingently true that:

(5)   Le Verrier thought the discovery of Vuclan would make him famous.

I think that these statements are not as bad for Leonard's definition as one might first think. Indeed, (5) merely implies that Le Verrier *thinks* that Vulcan exists, which is true. Vulcan has indeed a contingent property *in Le Verrier's thinking* (that of making Le Verrier famous in the near future), over and above the necessary properties predicted by the theory. So from (5), we can infer:

(6)   Le Verrier thought that Vulcan has a contingent property (that of being discovered by Le Verrier).

but not:

(7)   Vulcan has a contingent property (that of having been discovered by Le Verrier).

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[10] I suppose Williamson (1990) made a similar observation when defining what "object-hood" means. He remarks that «objecthood is not obviously subject to contingency at all». He calls this the «principle that all objecthood is necessary objecthood».

since Le Verrier did not in fact discover Vulcan, though he wrongly thought he did. So there are two distinct perspectives to be distinguished: that of Le Verrier believing that Newton's theory is right; and that of the enlightened astronomer (you and me) knowing that Newton's theory is inaccurate on this one prediction. Within each perspective, Leonard's definition applies and makes good predictions (Vulcan exists in Le Verrier's head but not in reality). This suggests that the theorizing of perspectives is compatible with Leonard's definition, despite *prima facie* counterexamples like (5). This, as the reader will see below, applies to fictional characters too.

3. Fictional characters and contingency

I cannot hope to have established Leonard's definition of singular existence in general. My remarks only aim at showing that the definition is workable. I will now turn to the part of my argument that needs to be defended as true. To make it clear, the argument of this paper should be understood as follows: under the assumption that there is some truth in Leonard's definition of existence, we can explain why (1) and (2) are true statements, given the truth of what I defend in the next section.

The agenda is now clear. The fact that (1) is true is explained by the fact that fictional characters have contingent properties in their fiction of origin. Simultaneously, explaining that (2) is true amounts to showing that fictional characters have only necessary properties outside it. The keeping track of fictional characters' (non)existence is then explained by our ability to keep track of modalities, when we focus on fictional characters.

3.1. Interaction between the fictional operator and the necessity operator

While reflecting on the fact that Anna Karenina might have resisted her inclination for Vronsky, in Tolstoi's novel, it is argued in Currie (2003: 137):

> I think it makes good sense to say that Anna might not have fallen for Vronsky. Indeed, we all think that it is true that she might not have. The contingency of this event in this and other stories is important; the story would affect us in a quite different way if it were thought to be working out of a necessity.

Let us indeed consider Frodo in *the Lord of the Rings*. It is clear in several points of the story that Frodo might have abandoned his quest to destroy the Ring; for instance, he might have surrendered to Sauron. I say that this possibility is clear in *the Lord of the Rings* because it is undoubtedly true in the story that Frodo has wilfully *resisted* the huge temptation not to destroy the Ring several times. Relevantly, near the end of the saga, when Frodo is supposed to throw the Ring into Mount Doom, he chooses not to do so, because he has given way to his greed. Hopefully for the plot, Gollum intervenes, bites the Ring off Frodo's hand and then Frodo throws Gollum (with the Ring) into the lava. This crucial passage shows that the possibility that Frodo abandoned the quest is indeed essential to the reading to the story. To imitate Currie's argument on this point, Frodo's *resistance* makes sense only if there is a possibility to do otherwise. In other words, if Frodo was *by necessity* to resist the temptation all along, then the staging of his resistance would not be interesting for the reader. Consequently, in order to make sense of the story, it must be true that:

(8)   In *the Lord of the Rings*, Frodo did not abandon his quest to destroy the Ring, though he might have.

What this observation shows is that fiction reading implies not only imagining the unfolding of some fictional events, but also imagining what might have happened in the fiction, had such and such character acted differently.

Let us now change the perspective and consider Frodo from where we are, outside the fiction. The intuition is now the following: Frodo would not be Frodo if he had abandoned his quest to destroy the Ring and surrender to Sauron. Indeed, had Frodo surrendered to Sauron, *the Lord of the Rings*, i.e. the actual fiction that was written by Tolkien and published in the real world, would not be the same story. At the end of this alternative story, we (readers) would plausibly have had to imagine that Sauron won the war and ruled over Middle Earth.

I think it is useful to back up this intuition with the following observation concerning the mixed feelings we (readers) have when we consider, for instance, the character Isildur. Isildur, it is told to Frodo at some point in the story, was the one who cut the Ring from Sauron's hand. At this point, Isildur had the op-

portunity to destroy the Ring, but he chose to keep it as a war chest. The reader is expected to think that Isildur *should* have destroyed the Ring back then; after all, it would have solved everything, as far as Middle Earth is concerned. But of course, had Isildur destroyed the Ring back then, Frodo's quest would not have happened. Since we (readers) are enjoying[11] *the Lord of the Rings*, we can sense that our real pleasure depends on the necessity that the fictional events are what they are.[12] The idea is that, given the fact that *the Lord of the Rings* is what it is, the fictional events could not have been otherwise. Consequently, from the real world perspective, Frodo, by necessity, does not abandon his quest and surrender to Sauron though he fictionally might have. This grounds the truth of:

> (9)   Necessarily, in *the Lord of the Rings*, Frodo did not abandon his quest to destroy the Ring and surrender to Sauron.

The contrast is now clear: it lies in the interaction between the fictional operator and the necessity operator of natural language. If we simplify the statements, we have:

> (10)   In *the Lord of the Rings*, necessarily, Frodo does not abandon his quest.
>
> (11)   Necessarily, in *the Lord of the Rings*, Frodo does not abandon his quest.

(10) is *false*, for the story is such that Frodo might have abandoned his quest (and this is crucial to the understanding of and emotional engagement with Tolkien's story). (11) is *true*, for if Frodo had abandoned his quest, then the

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[11] Enjoying is presupposed, since the reader reads. But you can invert the mixed feelings if you (as a reader) disliked Tolkien's saga.

[12] This empirical fact about the mixed feelings of the readers has certainly something to do with the so-called "paradox of tragedy" whose first formulation arguably comes from Aristotle's *Poetics*, but is now defined so as to be distinguished from other "paradoxes" about fiction, see for instance Currie (2010) for a recent formulation. The connection might be interesting because the *metaphysical necessity* of fictional events when seen from the outside may have something to do with Aristotle aesthetic claim that some kind of *moral necessity* must be there when we enjoy good tragedies. I do not know enough about Aristotle's doctrine to go further than this.

story would not be *the Lord of the Rings*.[13] This contrast, taken with Leonard's definition of existence, explains both the truth of (1) and (2).

Before I proceed with the objections, let me add a note on the application of Leonard's definition to fictional characters. It follows from this application that fictional characters can be nonexistent in their fiction of origin if they happen to have only necessary properties in the fiction. In that case, such a necessary character would be nonexistent both in reality and in its fiction of origin. This is not a problem for the view. It merely suggests that the intuitive truth of (1) does not generalise, as the case of "metafictional characters" already shows. But one should thus leave some space for other kinds of ontologically bizarre characters who would be nonexistent for logical reasons (and not by author's say-so). Of course, it is possible to combine both ways of creating unusual fictional characters into a logically inspired metafiction.[14]

3.2. On the contingency of books

If I follow my intuition, I would say that the falsity of (10) is far easier to accept than the truth of (11). In fact, I think that there are no objection to the intuitive ground I gave for the falsity of (10), whereas there are many objections one can think of when presented with the intuitive truth of (11).[15] I will try to raise and respond to these objections in the rest of this paper.

First, it might be objected that Tolkien's story is not *by necessity* what it actually is. Indeed, it is possible that Tolkien had written *the Lord of the Rings* in such a way that Frodo surrendered to Sauron at some crucial point. If there is such possible world, then (11) would be false. Instead, we would have:

> (12)   Had *the Lord of the Rings* been different, Frodo would have abandoned his quest.

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[13] Alternatively, if we want to focus on Frodo, we could say with Currie: «Necessarily, someone who would abandon the quest would not be Frodo» (2003).

[14] Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point.

[15] Note that, if my argument is correct, those who would argue that (11) is not true have something in common with those who think that (2) is not true.

And the truth of this counterfactual seems to contradict the truth of (11).

The response is that, in (11), the fictional operator is not in the necessity operator's scope. In other words, what is necessary in (11) is not that *the Lord of the Ring* is the story it actually is, but that *given the story we know*, it is not possible that "Frodo does not abandon his quest" be false. (11) should be distinguished from:

> (13) Necessarily, *the Lord of the Rings* is such that Frodo does not abandon his quest.

This statement is indeed contradicted by the possibility of Tolkien writing *the Lord of the Rings* differently. But it should be quite clear that it does not express the same proposition as (11). So the objection misses the point.

It should thus be emphasised that Frodo's not abandoning his quest is a necessary feature of Tolkien's story *as we know it*, and that is what (11) says. This is tantamount to saying that a story in which Frodo abandons his quest would not be the story we imagine when we read *the Lord of the Rings*. This, I think, is uncontroversial. The generalisation is that the necessary features of fictional characters are *conditional* on the identity of the fictional works they originate from. But of course, the identity conditions for fictional works are by no means necessary. For all we know, any work of fiction could have been different, or even not have been written at all. It is even possible that no fictional work was ever written, since it is clearly possible that humans never existed. Consequently, the fictional characters' nonexistence in the real world (expressed in statements like (2)) is conditional upon there being real fictional works.

As an aside remark, I should say that some neo-meinongians want to grant fictional characters a special mode of existence precisely because of this acknowledged dependence on *real* fictional works. These usually refer to arguments made attractive by Thomasson 1999, in which she theorises about this mode of conditional existence. One way of framing the debate between friends of abstract artefacts and those of us anti-realists who want to deny the existence to fictional characters *tout court* would be to ask whether (and how) one wants to distinguish statements like (2) which express the nonexistence of *fictional* characters and statements like the following:

(14)   Shrodo does not exist.

which express the nonexistence of a character which neither exists in the real world, nor in any already written fiction. The debate is whether the natural language expression "to exist" is sensible to the distinction we conceptually make between Frodo and Shrodo. As explained above, I think this is an orthogonal issue which does not affect the contrast I am working on.

3.3. *Fictional characters outside of books*

The second objection consists in remarking that Frodo seems to have many contingent properties, when we consider intentional relations. For instance, suppose Frodo is my little cousin's favourite fictional character. Then, the following is contingently true in our world:

(15)   Frodo is my little cousin's favourite fictional character.

So Frodo has at least one contingent property, namely that of being my little cousin's favourite fictional character. By Leonard's definition of existence, it follows that (2) is not true.

The objection is indeed to the point. I think it is difficult to adequately respond to it, for any response presupposes a theory of intentional predicates which well exceeds the scope of this article. For what it is worth, I will thus give a response which I think goes in the right direction, but it is possible that it is wrong-headed for theoretical reasons about intentionality I do not know about.

First, one might say that we can indeed infer from (15) that Frodo exists outside its fiction of origin, but not that he exists in reality. Indeed, what (15) says is that Frodo has an important place in my little cousin's interior life. But my little cousin's interior life is very different from reality, as anyone's interior life for that matter. Reality is usually defined as the set of all those things which do not depend on anyone's interior life. So my little cousin's life may very well be a place where one can often find Frodo, but that does not make him any more real.

This first remark suggests an important distinction which, I think, is a response to the objection. Frodo *qua* fictional character of *the Lord of the Rings* should be distinguished from Frodo the dweller of my little cousin's interior life. In a sense, it is the same distinction one should make between Frodo, the fictional character of *the Lord of the Rings*, and all the Frodos which are the characters of the numerous fan fictions stemming from Tolkien's saga. A fan-Frodo is, by definition, a duplication of the original Frodo into another fiction (which can resemble the original fiction or not). In a trivial sense, Frodo does indeed exist outside its fiction of origin, since it actually exists in many fan-fictions. And the existence of fan-fictions including Frodo is clearly a contingent fact. But I think we should exclude these facts "about Frodo" when we interpret a statement like (11). Indeed, by construction, everything that is true in a fan-fiction is not true *of the original* Frodo, but of a duplicate of Frodo.[16]

The next step of the response consists in defending that what my little cousin has in mind when she thinks about her favourite fictional character is also a duplicate of Frodo. I think the analogy between intentional attitudes toward fictional characters and fan-fictions should strike the reader as relevant here. Of course, it crucially depends on what one means when one says something like (15). The way I understand it is that my little cousin thinks about Frodo outside of *the Lord of the Rings* and compares it with other fictional characters she knows about, so as to acknowledge that Frodo is definitely the one she enjoys imagining the most. In order to do so, she would inevitably develop imaginative scenarii which are similar to fan-fictions in that it duplicates the original Frodo.

Now, duplicates of the original Frodo may very well have contingent properties. But these are irrelevant to the original Frodo. Just like it would be irrelevant for someone who wants to know all the properties Frodo has in the fiction to come and study my little cousin because she often disguises herself so as to look like Frodo. All the properties the original Frodo has are the properties

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[16] It is conceivable that some fan-fictions are such that what is true in the fan-fiction changes what is true in the fiction of origin. What I have in mind is what is what is called the "retroactive continuity" (retcon) method of writing fan-fictions. It consists in writing a fiction which explains the events in the fiction of origin in such a way that it crucially affects what is taken to be true in the fiction of origin. I set aside these interesting complications for it seems to me that they resemble metafictions, in the sense that they should be theorised about separately.

one can read about in *the Lord of the Rings*. If we look at all and only those properties from the outside, they are necessary, for Frodo would not be Frodo had he not these very properties.

3.4. *How determinate are fictional characters?*

The next objection is the following: Frodo's necessary features (outside the fiction) are not so many. In fact, Frodo has (outside the fiction) many of the contingent features he has in the fiction. In other words, the example given above is fair enough, but it does not generalise, because it is a special case.

(11) is true, because *the Lord of the Rings* would not be *the Lord of the Rings*, had Frodo abandoned his quest. But suppose that, in *the Lord of the Rings*, Frodo was an inch taller than he fictionally is. Would that make *the Lord of the Rings* a different story? Surely not. Even keeping *the Lord of the Rings* what it actually is, it seems that the following is false:

(16)   Necessarily, in *the Lord of the Rings*, Frodo could not have been an inch taller.

Consequently, even under the condition that *the Lord of the Rings* is *the Lord of the Rings*, Frodo's height is not necessary. This, of course, suggests that *many* of Frodo's features which are contingent in the fiction carry over outside the fiction. Any feature of the fictional Frodo which can be altered without breaking the identity conditions for *the Lord of the Rings* can breed such counter-examples.[17] There are, in principle, arbitrarily many, as the example shows.

This objection is obviously very strong. It would be preposterous to argue that *the Lord of the Rings* cannot be altered a single coma without becoming a new fiction. Indeed, one would be forced to conclude that, for instance, the first edition of *the Lord of the Rings* and the second edition of *the Lord of the Rings* are two different works of fiction in the same sense as *the Lord of the Rings* and Jane Austen's *Emma* are two different works of fiction, which is absurd. So

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[17] I do not need to give precise identity conditions for works of fiction, for I merely need that some counter-examples can be constructed.

the natural response consists in making a sharp distinction between Tolkien's fictional *text* and Tolkien's *plot*. In order to make this distinction, I will merely rely on intuition here, for a complete theory of this distinction well exceeds the scope of this article. Besides, it is a distinction that virtually every philosopher of fiction admits for some reason or other.

The *plot* can be understood as a subset of what is true in the fiction. Of course, what is true in the fiction depends on what is explicitly in the fictional text, but it cannot reduce to it.[18] Indeed, many things are true in the fiction, but are derived from explicit fictional truths, e.g. the fictional truth that Frodo exists, for Tolkien never explicitly wrote that Frodo was existent. On the other hand, what is explicitly written in the fictional text may turn out to be false in the fiction, when we discover that the narrator was unreliable.[19] The set of fictional truths, *a fortiori* the plot, should thus be distinguished from the fictional text.

The plot is the subset of fictional truths which corresponds to the narratological structure of the fiction. It thus contains the crucial fictional events and the way they unfold. If we focus on the fictional character, I think it is useful to use Currie's terminology, when he distinguishes between the "identity of the protagonist" and the character's "role". What the plot determines is the character's role, not its identity. Talking about Tolstoi's *Anna Karenina*, Currie adds (2003: 140):

> Think of the Anna-role as a function from worlds to individuals such that it picks out an individual in world w just in case she is the unique individual in w who did all the things Anna is said to do in the story. One of the things she is said to do is fall for Vronsky, and that is why no one in any world who resists Vronsky's charms in that world (or never meets him) would be Anna.

In this picture, the role is a function (determined by the plot) and the protagonist is the result of that function. The plot is thus that which determines

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[18] Except for D'Alessandro (2016), I think nobody ever argued for such a reduction.

[19] Unreliable narrators are narrators whose point of view distort the fictional events the report. The first extensive examination of unreliable narration can be found in Booth 1961. In some fictions, it is crucial to understand that (and how much) the narrator is unreliable. For instance, Nabokov's *Lolita* is a case in point: the reader is expected to understand that Humbert Humbert is unreliable. In such cases, although the narrator explicitly says that Dolores willingly fled with him and pursued her sexual desire for him, the reader implicitly understands that she was abducted and a victim of paedophilia.

the different roles, and the different protagonists are the imagined individuals in the head of the readers. Different readers might imagine, say, Frodo differently. But the plot of *the Lord of the Rings* determines the Frodo-role, and given this plot, it is part of the Frodo-role not to abandon the quest. In other words, an imagined Frodo who would surrender to Sauron would not have been a character which corresponds to the Frodo-role, i.e. a result of the function. In this sense, the Frodo-role is indeed necessarily determined by the plot of *the Lord of the Rings*. Hence, we explain the truth of (11) and generalize to every aspect of the Frodo-role.[20]

4. *Recap*

Let me recap the data and my argument. The data consists in explaining why both of these statements are intuitively true:

(1)   In *the Lord of the Rings*, Frodo exists.

(2)   Frodo does not exist.

The argument is the following: first, I take Leonard's definition of existence according to which the expression "to exist" means "to have at least one contingent property". Then, I show that, in *the Lord of the Rings*, Frodo has many contingent properties, for instance: he might have abandoned his quest to destroy the Ring. Consequently, (1) is true, according to Leonard's definition of singular existence. Simultaneously, I show that if we look at Frodo from the outside of its fiction of origin, we see him as rigidly attached to the plot of *the Lord of the Rings*: given what *the Lord of the Rings* actually is, Frodo could not have been different. Consequently, (2) is true, according to Leonard's definition of singular existence.

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[20] Note that Currie's distinction is in keeping with an open area of research which traces back to Kripke (1973). It consists is explaining how these two senses of the fictional name relate to each other. The reader can consult the important Salmon (1998) on this, and Récanati (2021) for a recent contribution.

I thus defend the view that the linguistic data is explained by a subtle interaction between a necessity operator and the fictional operator, shown by the following contrast:

(10)   In *the Lord of the Rings*, necessarily, Frodo does not abandon his quest. (FALSE)

(11)   Necessarily, in *the Lord of the Rings*, Frodo does not abandon his quest. (TRUE)

There is a sharp asymmetry between (10) and (11), which mirrors Leonard's definition. Accepting (10) as intuitively false, which is easy, suffices to explain why (1) is intuitively true. However, in order to explain why (2) is intuitively true, one must generalise the intuitive truth of (11) to all the properties we can attached to Frodo. This generalisation meets several objections which I tried to answer separately. In answering the objections, my primary aim was to convince the reader that the overall argument is, deep down, valid. If the reader is not convinced, I hope they have enjoyed the attempt all the same.

I once again highlight that my argument is conditional upon Leonard's definition of singular existence, and provided one has reasons to reject it, one might be inclined to dislike my argument. On the other hand, the interest one might have for my argument could be a reason to like Leonard's definition of singular existence. As for the philosophy of fiction proper, I think the argument should be seen as an attempt to explain what is so peculiar with fictional existence and emphasise the complex relationship fictional characters entertain with singular existence. The complexity of the relationship, I suggest, is due to subtle interactions between alethic modality and fiction, when we think about them.

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