

Noneism or Allism?

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Some few entities—present, actual, particular, spatiotemporal, material, well-bounded things—exist uncontroversially. Scarcely any philosopher denies them. Other alleged entities are controversial: some say they exist, some say they do not. These controversial entities include past and future things, the dead who have ceased to be and those who are not yet even conceived; unactualized possibilities; universals, numbers, and classes; and Meinongian objects, incomplete or inconsistent or both. An expansive friend of the entities who says that all these entities exist may be called an *allist*. A tough desert-dweller who says that none of them exist may be called a *noneist*. In between come most of us, the pickers and choosers, *some-but-only-someists*.

Richard Routley declares himself a noneist.¹ If we may take him at his word, he holds that none of the controversial entities exist. But may we take him at his word?

Sometimes it is wrong to take a philosopher at his word when he tells us what he believes to exist. For if we differ with the philosopher on some point of semantics, then we must make allowance for that difference if we want to report his position in our own words, in indirect quotation. Example. If someone seemingly tells us that God exists, and then goes on to tell us that 'God' denotes the evolutionary-historical process that has brought us into being, and if we ourselves think that this evolutionary-historical process is far from deserving the name he gives it, then we should count him an atheist. We may report that he says the words 'God exists', but we would be wrong to say that he says *that* God exists. (Or at least we would be wrong to say it without immediate qualification.²) He believes in something that he thinks deserves the name 'God'. But if we are right and he is wrong about what it takes to deserve the name, then he does not believe in anything that would in fact deserve that name, and we would be wrong to say otherwise.

Second example. Unless we can agree that a congeries of human and divine ideas could deserve the name 'tree in the quad', we ought not to report that Berkeley holds that the tree in the quad exists, no matter how

¹ Richard Routley, *Exploring Meinong's Jungle and Beyond: An Investigation of Noneism and the Theory of Items* (Australian National University, 1980). For short: *Jungle*. Routley, as he then was, is now Richard Sylvan, but I shall refer to him by the name under which the book was written.

² Gordon Kaufman, *Theology for a Nuclear Age* (Manchester University Press, 1985); cited in Alvin Plantinga, 'Two Concepts of Modality', *Philosophical Perspectives*, 1987, pp. 189–231.

much Berkeley himself may boast of his adherence to common opinion. Third example. If I analyse propositions as classes of possible worlds, and if Plantinga takes it to be wholly obvious (though not *obviously* obvious!) that no class could deserve the name of 'proposition', then I must grant that he makes no mistake when he reports me, by his own lights, as denying the existence of propositions.³ Or rather, no *new* mistake—his premiss about what it takes to deserve the name 'proposition', say I, is mistake enough. Fourth and fifth examples. I say that a behaviourist denies the existence of experience, even if he himself says he does no such thing; likewise a qualia freak might say that I, as a materialist, also deny the existence of experience. Both of us are within our rights, and so is the behaviourist in his self-description, given our respective premisses. The only difference is that, as we would all three agree, one of us is proceeding from true premisses about what it takes to deserve the name 'experience' and the other two are not.⁴

The lesson is that whether 'we' may take a philosopher at his word depends crucially on who 'we' are, and what philosophical premisses we ourselves argue from. That is distressing. It would be nice to arrive at a non-partisan consensus about what the several philosophical parties say, before we go on to take sides in the argument. And it would be nice to do this in our own words, translating all parties into a common language, rather than by the brute force of direct quotation. We can go some distance by giving the utmost benefit of doubt. We should be at least as generous as conscience will allow in letting things bear names we think they do not very well deserve, especially when we report a position according to which there is no better deserver of the name to be had. But there is a limit to generosity. When we must quietly go along with (what we take to be) someone's mis-speaking in order to give a non-partisan report of his position, the price is too high. For then the advantage of common language is already forsaken.

With Routley likewise there is a semantic difference between him and some of the rest of us, though this time it concerns not the deserving of names but rather the idioms of quantification. So when I ask whether we may take Routley at his word when he declares himself a noneist, again the answer will depend on who 'we' are. Routley sees himself as defying an established orthodoxy; and I am prepared to appoint myself spokesman for the orthodoxy he defies. Or at least for those among the orthodox, if any, who will accept me as their spokesman. (For the solidarity of the Northern establishment is less formidable when viewed from the inside.)

We of the establishment think that there is only one kind of quantification. The several idioms of what we call 'existential' quantification are entirely synonymous and interchangeable. It does not matter whether you

³ Plantinga, *op. cit.*

⁴ Here I am indebted to conversation with Saul Kripke.

say 'Some things are donkeys' or 'There are donkeys' or 'Donkeys exist'—you mean exactly the same thing whichever way you say it. The same goes for more vexed cases: it does not matter whether you say 'Some famous fictional detective uses cocaine', 'There is a famous fictional detective who uses cocaine', or 'A famous cocaine-using fictional detective exists'—whether true or whether false, all three statements stand or fall together.

We grant, of course, that often the idioms of quantification are tacitly restricted. They may be restricted, for instance, to salient and well-bounded things, as opposed to gerrymanded chunks of stuff; or to spatiotemporal, material things; or to the here and now; or (in my own opinion) to the here and now and actual; or in ever so many other ways. We gather from context what restrictions are in force, guided by our presumption that what a speaker says is meant to make sense.⁵ But we do not think the several idioms correspond in any permanent way to several alternative restrictions. 'Some', 'there are', and 'exist' can all alike be used to quantify unrestrictedly over absolutely everything; or they can all alike bear any of many restrictions.

Routley disagrees. He thinks there are two different kinds of quantification. There is 'existential' quantification rightly so-called, or existentially *loaded* quantification; and there is existentially *neutral* 'particular' quantification (*Jungle*, pp. 174–80 and elsewhere). 'Exist' is the word reserved for loaded quantification, whereas 'there are' and 'some' may be used neutrally. Neutral quantification is weaker than loaded quantification: when ϕ s exist it follows that some things are ϕ s, but not conversely. In fact, loaded quantification is simply a restriction of neutral quantification: ϕ s exist iff some things are ϕ s and exist. And y exists iff there exists some x such that $x = y$.

Thus Routley is ready to say 'Some things do not exist'. This is no contradiction, according to him, so long as the 'some' is neutral and the 'exist' is loaded. Whereas if we of the orthodox party said the same words, we would mean something like 'For some x , it is not the case that for some y , $y = x$ ', or 'There is x such that there is no y such that $y = x$ ', or 'There exists x , such that there does not exist y such that $y = x$ ' with the same sort of quantification both times. These three sentences are contradictory, as much by Routley's lights as by ours.

When Routley declares himself a noneist, his quantifiers are loaded: none⁶ of the controversial entities *exist*. When his quantifiers are neutral, however, he becomes a kind of allist: *there are* all those controversial entities. Or rather, there are all those 'items'; for Routley takes 'entity' to be another existentially loaded term. Some items are past, future, unactualized; some items are universals, numbers, classes; some are incomplete

⁵ Tacit restrictions on the idioms of quantification are thus a component of 'conversational score' governed largely by a 'rule of accommodation'. See 'Scorekeeping in a Language Game', in David Lewis, *Philosophical Papers*, vol. I (Oxford University Press, 1983).

⁶ Well, almost none. 'The account of existence given is an almost minimal one. . . . The only controversial objects admitted . . . are microentities and complexes and aggregates' (*Jungle*, p. 755).

Meinongian objects, and some are inconsistent; but none of all these interesting items *exists*. Speaking loadedly, he is an uncompromising desert-dweller. Speaking neutrally, he relishes 'the beauty and complexity, richness and value of a jungle' full of all the varied items any philosopher could wish (*Jungle*, reverse of the frontispiece).

Which is he really: noneist or allist? His own words do not answer the question what *we* ought to say in reporting his position. He has his two kinds of quantification, the neutral and the loaded; we of the establishment have only one kind. Which of his two corresponds to our one? How should we translate his idioms of quantification into ours? We have two main hypotheses. (1) Perhaps it is Routley's loaded quantification that translates into our one quantification. Under that translation, he holds (as we and he both would say it) that none of the controversial items exists. Then indeed we should take him at his word and call him a noneist. Or (2) perhaps instead it is Routley's neutral quantification that translates into our one quantification. Under that translation he holds (as we would say it though he would not) that all the controversial items exist. That makes him no true noneist, but rather an allist.

Why this fuss over translation? Routley writes in English, after all. Is he not the final authority on his own position? Should we not translate him homophonically? No. He is the final authority on *his* position, but not on *ours*. Therefore he does not have the final word either on how his position should be expressed in our language, or on how ours should be expressed in his. Nor do we. There is no authoritative final word; we can only seek the translation that makes him make sense to us, and us to him. And whatever presumption there may be in favour of homophonic translation, we cannot translate him altogether homophonically if he sees a distinction where we see none. If we translate idioms of quantification that are not synonymous for him into idioms that are synonymous for us, we make hash of what he is saying, as surely as if we translated all his idioms of quantification by the very same one of ours. This third hypothesis, that our one kind of quantification is *both* of his, amounts to the assumption that despite what he thinks, his two are synonymous. Homophonically translated, Routley incessantly contradicts himself: when he says 'Some things are ϕ s but they don't exist' he means what we would mean by 'Some things are ϕ s and it is not so that some things are ϕ s' or by ' ϕ s exist and it is not so that ϕ s exist'. To impute contradiction gratuitously is to mistranslate.

(Is it so even in Routley's case? After all, Routley does not shun contradiction as we do: 'The consistency of the world . . . is not at all easy, and perhaps impossible, to establish in a non-question begging way. . . . Good arguments in favour of the consistency assumption, as distinct from prejudice, are hard to come by' (*Jungle*, p. 913). If he is prepared to embrace some contradictions, is it so bad to impute to him others? Might we

interpret Routley as holding that some things exist paradoxically, they exist and also do not exist, whereas other things exist unparadoxically; and that neutral quantification differs from loaded quantification because the former is quantification over all things that exist whereas the latter is restricted to things that exist unparadoxically? This is the position we would impute by homophonic translation. It is a position not without interest, though like all positions that embrace paradox it is necessarily and certainly false. But surely it is a misinterpretation. Not because we may never impute contradictions to Routley—translating an explicit friend of contradiction is indeed a special case—but simply because there is, so far as I know, no textual evidence in its favour. Surely if Routley saw his distinction between neutral and loaded quantification as something to be explained in terms of true contradictions, he would not hesitate to tell us so.)

A fourth hypothesis is that our one kind of quantification is neither of Routley's two, but something else again. I can see no possible advantage in this alternative and shall pursue it no further. So we are back to the two main hypotheses. Is our one quantification the same as (1) Routley's loaded quantification, or is it (2) Routley's neutral quantification?

Routley takes the first hypothesis for granted. He assumes it is orthodox to take all quantification as loaded, heretical to insist as he does that there is neutral quantification as well. When we use the several idioms of quantification interchangeably—as he knows that we do, at least in our theoretical moments—he thinks that is because we are giving all of them, even 'some', an existential loading (*Jungle*, pp. 427–30).

Under the hypothesis that our one quantification is his loaded quantification, Routley may fault us in several ways. (Not to mention the ways having to do with disagreements not part of the present discussion.) For one thing, because we have no understanding of how existentially neutral quantification is possible—and to that charge, *if* the present hypothesis be granted, we may unabashedly plead guilty. Also, because most of us—the some-but-only-someists—are extravagant in our imputations of existence. Finally, because even so we cripple ourselves in our theorizing by declining to quantify in any way over all the items that, according to Routley speaking neutrally, there really are.

In return, under the present hypothesis, we fault him in one big way: he purports to quantify without quantifying. For when he quantifies neutrally he is not quantifying in the one and only way there is to quantify, since *ex hypothesi* the one way is the loaded way. This we find altogether unintelligible.⁷ Now Routley may unabashedly plead guilty to the charge

⁷ See, for instance, William Lycan, 'The Trouble With Possible Worlds' in Michael J. Loux (ed.), *The Possible and the Actual* (Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 290: 'I have to take my place among those who find *Relentlessly* (i.e. *genuinely* or *primitively*) Meinongian quantification simply unintelligible. . . . I am not expressing any tendentious philosophical *qualm*. I mean that I really cannot understand *Relentlessly* Meinongian quantification at all; to me it is *literally* gibberish or mere noise.'

of being beyond our dogma-blinded understanding. And there we reach a standoff.

We might think that when Routley quantifies without quantifying, he is engaging in some sort of *simulated* quantification. That is something we can understand, and often even accept. Substitutionalists simulate quantification over fictional characters by quantifying for real over fictional names. Bogus Meinong simulates quantification over Meinongian objects, including the incomplete and inconsistent ones, by quantifying for real over property bundles (such as the bundle of goldenness and mountainhood, or the bundle of roundness and squareness).⁸ Morton shows how we might simulate quantification over composite entities by infinitely long blocks of genuine quantifiers over simples.⁹ Pluralists like Black and Armstrong simulate quantification over classes of individuals by means of irreducibly plural quantification over the individuals themselves.¹⁰ Sturch simulates quantification over (what he takes to be) non-existent Australians by putting genuine quantifiers within the scope of a modifier 'in Australia' which looks as if it merely restricts the quantifier but really functions as a negation symbol.¹¹ Likewise Prior and Fine simulate quantification over past or future or unactualized things by quantifying within the scope of tense and modal operators.¹² There are many ways to simulate quantification, and thereby quantify without quantifying. We might find Routley's neutral quantification intelligible enough if it turned out to be just another of these exercises in deceptive simulation. Is it?—No; there is no textual evidence in favour.¹³ And if it were, he would have no reason to present himself as a heretic. For he himself would agree with us, in the end, that there was really only one sort of genuine quantification.

⁸ Bogus Meinong, invented (but not under that name) by Terence Parsons, is an orthodox figure who has found a way to speak more or less as Meinong does by quantifying over property bundles and getting it up to look as if he is quantifying over Meinongian objects that instantiate the bundles. See Parsons, 'A Prolegomenon to Meinongian Semantics', *Journal of Philosophy*, 1974, pp. 561–80. Note well: Bogus Meinong is *not* Meinong, or Parsons, or Meinong as he struck Parsons. His role is just to prove the consistency of (one form of) genuine Meinongianism. For he speaks enough as the Meinongians do that if they fell into contradiction, so would he; and yet his position, however deceptively presented, is just an innocent theory of property bundles, which we of the establishment would presume to be consistent.

⁹ Adam Morton, 'Complex Individuals and Multigrade Relations', *Noûs*, 1975, pp. 309–18.

¹⁰ Max Black, 'The Elusiveness of Sets', *Review of Metaphysics*, 1971, pp. 614–36; D. M. Armstrong, *Universals and Scientific Realism*, vol. I (Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 32–4. For further discussion of plural quantification, but without any suggestion that it ought to be used to explain away quantification over classes of individuals, see George Boolos, 'To Be is To Be a Value of a Variable (or To Be Some Values of Some Variables)', *Journal of Philosophy*, 1984, pp. 430–49; and 'Nominalist Platonism', *Philosophical Review*, 1985, pp. 327–44.

¹¹ 'Report on "WHY?" Competition—Problem No. 1', *Why?*, June, 1958, pp. 2–5.

¹² See Fine's 'Postscript' to A. N. Prior and Kit Fine, *Worlds, Times and Selves* (Duckworth, 1977), especially pp. 142–5.

¹³ And see *Jungle*, p. 81, against a substitutional interpretation; p. 879 against an interpretation in terms of Bogus–Meinongian surrogates.

Under the second of our main hypotheses—that being the hypothesis that our one quantification corresponds not to Routley's 'loaded' quantification but rather to his 'existentially neutral' quantification—we get quite a different picture of the relationship between Routley's position and our orthodoxy. Disagreement remains. But Routley's heresy becomes more intelligible from the standpoint of orthodoxy and, reciprocally, orthodoxy becomes more intelligible from Routley's standpoint. In so far as mutual intelligibility is a desideratum for translation, that makes the second hypothesis better than the first. Therefore I say that the second hypothesis is the right way for us to understand Routley, and the right way for us to report his position in indirect quotation. We go wrong if we take him altogether at his word, and overlook that his meaning of 'existence' might not be the same as ours, just as we go wrong in taking Berkeley altogether at his word when he says 'The tree in the quad exists'.

I also say—though I say it hesitantly, lest my advice be found impertinent—that Routley ought to understand us according to the second hypothesis. He should not say that we dogmatically reject neutral quantification, but instead that we dogmatically reject loaded quantification. He should not say that we impose existential loading on 'some' and 'there are', but rather that we *unload* 'exist' itself. He should say that we outdo him in noneism: we never affirm the existence of *anything*, not the controversial items and not the uncontroversial ones either. Of course we say the words 'donkeys exist', and some of us say 'numbers exist too', but he should understand that by these words we do not mean what he would mean. We talk of our 'existential commitments', and many of us try to cut these down in order to dodge questions about the nature of what we are committed to. But all the while, we are talking only of our neutral-quantificational commitments—the counterpart for us of Routley's own neutral-quantificational commitment to the whole beautiful jungle. Our main fault, he should say, is that we are blind to the distinction between what exists and what does not; and a lesser fault is that we cripple ourselves by our unwise cutting-down of neutral-quantificational commitments.

And what should we say of him, under the second hypothesis? Not that he purports to quantify without quantifying. Not that he denies the existence of some of the items he quantifies over. No; he quantifies just as we do; over everything; that is (as we would say) over everything that exists. We should have no problem understanding his neutral quantification. We may indeed look askance at the extent of his existential commitments—for, despite what he tells us, he is an allist. He affirms the existence of all the controversial entities (as we may call them). He does not join us when we dodge questions about some of these alleged entities by denying that they exist.

Like us, Routley sometimes restricts his quantifiers. When he restricts

them to, say, trees, we have no problem understanding him, because we too distinguish trees from non-trees. (We might have a harder time of it if we had to apply the distinction to such Meinongian objects as the tree that is not a tree. But it is unlikely that a Meinongian would be stumped by this problem.) And if he restricts his quantifiers to present things, or to non-numbers, or to individuals, . . . we still have no problem, because again we understand and accept the distinctions whereby he restricts. Maybe not perfectly, but well enough; and in so far as we do not, we should not call the kettle black.

But when Routley 'loads' his quantifiers, he restricts them to the entities which, he says, 'exist'. And then we do not understand, because we ourselves make no such distinction among the entities. If 'existence' is what he thinks it is—a distinction among the items we are committed to—then we dispense with existence.¹⁴ Our main complaint against Routley is that he sees a distinction that is not really there.

Under the second hypothesis, the issue is squarely joined. He says we are blind, we say he is hallucinating. The meaning of quantification *per se* does not enter into it.

The picture is still none too irenic. But our desideratum for translation was not reconciliation, just mutual intelligibility. And there the second hypothesis does better than the first. Difficult though it may be for us to understand how Routley sees a distinction that is not there, and difficult though it may be for him to understand our supposed blindness, a disagreement over whether some alleged distinction is genuine is at least a familiar and intelligible *sort* of disagreement. The same would not be true of the supposed disagreement over ways of quantifying.

At this point you might surmise that the distinction Routley has in mind is genuine, and what is more that we accept it no less than he does. It is just that he calls it the distinction between what 'exists' and what does not; whereas we call it the distinction between present, actual, particular, spatiotemporal things and all the rest. (He may join us in giving it the latter name, though we will not join him in giving it the former.) For does he not say that it is exactly the present, actual, . . . things that 'exist'?—He does. But plainly he takes that to be a highly controversial substantive thesis, not a trivial matter of definition. This hypothesis is altogether too irenic. Or rather, it is one-sidedly irenic: it squares Routley's position on loaded and neutral quantification with orthodoxy, but at the cost of making nonsense of Routley's evident conviction that his position is deeply opposed to orthodoxy. To suppose that Routley mistakes mere terminological difference for profound philosophical disagreement is to accuse him of stupidity far beyond belief.

¹⁴ In the way explained in Donald C. Williams, 'Dispensing with Existence', *Journal of Philosophy*, 1962, pp. 748–63.

In short: we dispense with existence—but heed what this means and what it does not. Of course we do not dispense with the word ‘exist’ as one of our pronunciations for the quantifier. Neither do we dispense with a trivially universal predicate of existence, automatically satisfied by absolutely everything.¹⁵ But if ‘existence’ is understood so that it can be a substantive thesis that only some of the things there are exist—or, for that matter, so that it can be a substantive thesis that everything exists—we will have none of it.¹⁶

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¹⁵ It might be a queer predicate, though, in the same way that ‘selfidentical’ and ‘proper class’ and Routley’s ‘item’ are queer predicates: it might have no extension. For the extension of a predicate is supposed to be the set, or at least the class, of all its satisfiers. But if there are things that cannot be members of any class, and if some such things are among the satisfiers of a predicate, then that predicate has no extension.

¹⁶ I am indebted to Mark Hinchliff, William Lycan, Ken Perszyk, and others for valuable comments; and to Harvard University for research support under a Santayana Fellowship.