A Model-Theoretic Argument against Meinongianism and Modal Realism

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H. Putnam’s famous model-theoretic arguments against metaphysical realism ([16], [17], [18] chapter 2, [19], [21] lecture 1 and [22]) have been extensively discussed; some of the commentators have tried to explicate the real power of his arguments ([1] and [2]) while others endeavored to show that these arguments are “wrongheaded” ([3], [5], [6], [7], [9], [12] and [13]). I think much of the debate has been directed to irrelevant aspects and the strength of Putnam’s arguments has still not been fully appreciated. My purpose, however, is not to add to the already enormous amount of literature on Putnam’s arguments, but to point out an unnoticed application of them. In what follows, I will show how one of Putnam’s model-theoretic arguments can be modified to give a lethal objection against both Meinongianism and modal realism.

The version of Meinongianism that I have in mind is exemplified by T. Parsons’s [15]. Meinongians typically claim that there are mind-independent non-existing objects as well as existing ones and that truth consists in a determinate correspondence or reference relation between our talk and facts involving these objects, on the other hand. The version of modal realism that I have in mind is, of course, exemplified by D. Lewis’s [11] and [14]. Modal realists typically assert that there are mind-independent non-actual mere possibilia as well as actual ones and that (modal) truth consists in a determinate correspondence or reference relation between our talk and facts involving these possibilia, on the other hand. The model-theoretic argument that I shall appeal to exploits the so-called “Upper Lowenheim-Skolem theorem” according to which a first-order theory (formulated in a countable language) has a model of every infinite cardinality if it has an infinite model. Putnam used this theorem to show the unintelligibility of the metaphysical realism’s thesis that even an ideal theory can be false ([16], [17]), but I shall apply it for a different purpose.

I shall assume that the reality consists of infinitely many (actually) existing objects, and I shall count every sentence of our language as an object if this assumption bothers you. Of course, both Meinongians and modal realists will want to say that there are more objects than what I have admitted in the reality. Call the reality that I assumed “the actualist reality”, and call those assumed by Meinongians

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and modal realists “the Meinongian reality” and “the modal realist reality” separately. Let $T_1$ be an ideal Meinongian theory and $T_2$ be an ideal modal realist theory, both formulated in a formalized language $L$ and both saying that, among other things, there are more objects than the actually existing ones. Being ideal, both $T_1$ and $T_2$ satisfy all the operational and theoretical constraints that we would like to impose upon a theory; especially, both $T_1$ and $T_2$ are consistent. So, both $T_1$ and $T_2$ have (only) infinite models. But then, by Upward Lowenheim-Skolem theorem, both have a model of every infinite cardinality. Pick a model $M_1$ for $T_1$ that has the same cardinality as the actualist reality. Map objects of $M_1$ 1-1 onto the pieces of the actualist reality, and use the mapping to define relations of $M_1$ directly in the actualist reality. The result is a “correspondence” relation (in fact, there are infinitely many such correspondence relations by permutation) between terms of $L$ and sets of pieces of the actualist reality such that $T_1$ comes out true in the actualist reality. By similar reasoning, there also is a “correspondence” relation (in fact, there are infinitely many such correspondence relations) between terms of $L$ and sets of pieces of the actualist reality such that $T_2$ comes out true in the actualist reality. The upshot is: for any ideal Meinongian theory, there is a deflationist interpretation for it which contains only existing objects, and, for any ideal modal realist theory, there is a deflationist interpretation for it which contains only actual objects.

To be sure, both Meinongians and modal realists will want to say that the actualist reality is not the intended domain of their theories, and any correspondence between terms of $L$ and the furniture of the actualist reality is not the intended reference relations between their theories and what they are about. Meinongians will further want to say that it is the Meinongian reality that is the intended domain and that some (there are infinitely many such correspondence relations after all) correspondence relation defined in the Meinongian reality is the intended reference relation. Similarly, modal realists will want to say that it is the modal realist reality that is the intended domain and that some (there are infinitely many such correspondence relations after all) correspondence relation defined in the modal realist reality is the intended reference relation. The problem for them, however, is to specify exactly what that is which makes the actualist reality and all correspondence relations defined in it unintended while the Meinongian reality and the modal realist reality and some correspondence relations defined in them intended.

We have seen that operational and theoretical constraints of a theory cannot draw the

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2 It cannot be objected by saying that Meinongian theories, such as the one of Parsons’s, are usually formulated in a second-order language and that Lowenheim-Skolem theorem is not provable in second-order logic. A theory formulated in a second-order language is still subject to interpretations of Henkin-style semantics, and, when thus interpreted, Lowenheim-Skolem theorem remains true.
distinction, so Meinongians and realists must come up with something else that singles out the right domain and the right correspondence. But what exactly is this something else?

When such questions are addressed to metaphysical realism, we normally get a quick reply ([3], [5], [6] and [10]): it is the (actual) causal relation between our words and the real reality that distinguishes. This reply may or may not provide just “more theory” of metaphysical realism, and Putnam may or may not be able to reject those who give it. But certainly such a reply is not available either to Meinongians or to modal realists. A typical Meinongian will not admit that we ever get into causal relations with non-existing objects, and a typical modal realist will deny that we are causally related with other worldly possibilia ([14], p. 78). And, when they deny this, they are denying it with good reasons: no one of us ever pets or rides Pegasus, and none of us can ever bump into Quine’s fat man in the doorway. So, if there has to be something that singles out the right domain and the right reference relation for Meinongianism and modal realism, it must be something other than causal relations.

There is, perhaps, another candidate for consideration. D. Lewis ([12] and [13]) supposes that, among all classes of things, there are “elite” ones. These “elite” classed are “carved at the natural joints” of things, and their boundaries are established by objective sameness and difference in nature. Only interpretations respecting the objective joints in nature are “eligible interpretations” according to Lewis, and what makes an interpretation unintended is simply that it does not respect this “objective inegalitarianism of classifications”. Since the aforementioned actualist interpretation $M_1$ will not carve the domain “at the same joints” as Meinongians do, nor will the actualist interpretation $M_2$ carve the domain “at the same joints” as modal realists do, it seems that both Meinongians and modal realists can appeal to an interpretation’s (degree of) conforming to their supposed natural, inegalitarian classifications to draw the desired distinction. This hope, however,

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3 A typical Meinongian would say that our relations with non-existing objects are always intentional while our relations with existing ones are normally physical or causal. He would further say that our being able to be intentionally connected with non-existing objects is what makes our metal activities so special; it is the characterizing property of our metal activities. Although it is not clear what Parson would say about this, yet he says: “… no real object ever has a relational property … with an unreal object, and thus no real object will bear any nuclear relation to an unreal one.” ([15], p. 60.) Since there is a tendency to take causal relations as nuclear relations, I suggest that we should take Parsons as denying that we ever have any causal relation with any non-existing object.

4 Putnam ([22]) replied to Lewis’s objection by saying “… I do not see the advantage of adding to our conceptual scheme an unfamiliar metaphysical primitive like ‘naturalness’ over just taking the notion of reference itself as an unreduced primitive notion. Does’t Lewis’s account amount to saying that we-know-not-what fixes the reference relation we-know-not-how?” I think Putnam’s retort here is weak. Unfamiliarity with a novel notion can hardly be a good reason for rejecting it, and, since realists’ notion of truth is non-epistemic, there is nothing wrong for them to
cannot last long.

There is a special reason why a Meinongian should not take this way out. Meinongians are supposed to be generous in ontology, and, indeed, most of them are willing to posit an object for every class of properties. Positing an elite minority among all classes of things would, then, be gratuitous for his ontology of properties; it would be inegalitarian to his ontology of properties. It is for this reason, I think, most Meinongians, such as Parsons ([15]) and Butchvarov ([4]), are very generous both to properties and objects. For most Meinongians, the following two principles

(P): Corresponding to every class of things, there is a property shared by and only shared by these things; and

(O): Corresponding to every class of properties, there is an object having and only having these properties.

hence sound like a tempting dual, and no revision of them is acceptable without sound philosophical reasons. Fortunately, modal realists, exemplified especially by Lewis’s [14], are not subject to this objection, for they normally do not appeal to any principle like (O) for their ontology of mere possibilia.

However, the appeal to “elite classes” or “natural joints” to solve the present problem will not do for modal realism, and nor will it do for Meinongianism for a common reason: the condition of conforming to the natural classifications is too weak to single out a unique reference relation. Although the permutation function used in Putnam’s [18] (appendix) will not lead to a new model carving the domain in exactly the same way as the original domain, it is easy to show that, if a very weak condition achieves, then the desired conformation will be resumed. It can easily be shown that, if a model $M$ assigns two terms of $L$ two (not necessarily disjoint) classes of objects of the same cardinality $n$, then the model $M'$ formed by switching the assignment made by $M$ of the two terms with necessary adjustment of other terms will be such a model that (1) for every sentence of $L$, $M'$ assigns the same truth value to it as $M$ does; and

(2) $M'$ carves the domain “at exactly the same joints” as $M$ does. So, if $M_{mc}$ is the intended model of modal realism, then, if it assigns two terms of $L$ two classes of

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5 Though an inconsistent dual. That is one of the reasons why it is so difficult to defend a Meinongian view. For the discussion of it, see Fine ([8]).

6 Let $M$ be a model with the domain $D$, and let “F” and “G” be two terms of $L$ whose extensions $I_M(F)$ and $I_M(G)$ assigned by $M$ are, separately, $D_F$ and $D_G$, where $D_F$ and $D_G$ are equi-numbered. Let $f$ be an 1-1 onto function from $D$ to $D$ such that (i) $f(d)$ is some member of $D_F$ if $d \in D_F$; (ii) $f(d)$ is some member of $D_G$ if $d \in D_G$; and (iii) $f(d)$ = $d$ otherwise. Let $M'$ be the model with the same domain as $M$, and let $I_{M'}(T) = [f^{-1}(d) \in I_M(T)]$ for every term $T \in L$. Then $M$ and $M'$ are isomorphic and they assign the same truth value to every wff of $L$. Further, $M$ and $M'$ carve the domain at exactly the same joints.
objects of the same cardinality, then there is at least one unintended eligible model for modal realism. Similarly, if $M_M$ is the intended model of Meinongianism, then, if it assigns two terms of $L$ two classes of objects of the same cardinality, then there is at least one unintended eligible model for it. Further, it seems that the above condition expressed by the italic clause is very likely true: both Meinongians and modal realists should at least interpret, say, both “being positive square root of 9” and “being positive square root of 4” as true of only one (though different) number. So, here again, a similar problem as our old one recurs for Meinongians as well as modal realists:7 what exactly is it that picks out a certain interpretation as the intended but others as unintended?

Finally, a Meinongian or a modal realist may appeal to the notion of explanation to characterize the intended interpretation. Thus, it might be claimed, it is the Meinongian reality and some reference relation defined in it that “explains” the truth-values of our ordinary fiction talks, and it is the modal realist reality and some reference relation defined in it that “explains” the truth-values of our ordinary modal talks. Yet, as Putnam rightly pointed out in [22], if by “explanation” we mean “the exlicandum is deducible form the explicans”, then the actualist reality and any reference relation defined in it also explains our ordinary fiction or modal talks. And if we impose further pragmatic constraints – plausibility, preservation of past doctrine, simplicity – as additional requirements on a good explanation, then it is arguably that actualist interpretations provide better explanations than Meinongian and modal realist competitors.

With all these considerations, I conclude, following Putnam, that the idea that there is something other than operational and theoretical constraints that singles out the right domain and the right reference relation for either Meinongianism or modal realism is incoherent.

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7 This problem is not exactly the same one as the one we met before. The previous one is to find out a reference fixer which will classify actualist interpretations as unintended, while the present one is to pick out a unique Meinongian or modal realists’ interpretation among many Meinongian or modal realists’ interpretations as the intended one.
References:

