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# PLATONIC PUZZLES AND MEINONGIAN TOOLS

## Enigmas platónicos y herramientas meinongianas

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**Abstract**

This paper aims to demonstrate that contemporary Meinongian tools and theories can be employed to address the Platonic puzzles of non-being presented in the *Sophist*. First, we will (i) reconstruct the three aporias regarding non-being, focusing on how the Eleatic Visitor introduces and explores these problems, particularly the challenge of expressing *what is not*; secondly, (ii) we will briefly present what the three main neo-Meinongian trends are — the Nuclear, the Dual-Copula, and the Modal Meinongian trends; then, (iii) we will show how these three Meinongian perspectives can answer the Platonic aporias; and finally (iv), we will see which lessons we can learn from what we argued for, specifically in terms of the role of working on history of philosophy if you are an analytic philosopher.

**Key words:** Non-Being; Metaontology; Plato; *Sophist*; Meinongianism.

**Resumen**

El objetivo de este trabajo es mostrar que las herramientas y teorías meinongianas contemporáneas pueden utilizarse para abordar los enigmas platónicos del no ser formulados en el *Sofista*. En primer lugar, (i) se reconstruyen las tres aporías relativas al no ser, atendiendo al modo en que el Extranjero Eleático las introduce y desarrolla, en particular el problema de la posibilidad de decir o expresar aquello que no es. En segundo lugar, (ii) se presenta de manera sucinta el panorama de las tres principales corrientes del neo-meinongianismo —la Nuclear, la de la Doble-Cópula y la Modal; a continuación, (iii) se muestra cómo estas tres perspectivas meinongianas permiten ofrecer respuestas sistemáticas a las aporías platónicas. Por último, (iv) se extraen algunas conclusiones generales, especialmente en lo que concierne al papel que el trabajo en historia de la filosofía puede desempeñar en la práctica de la filosofía analítica.

**Palabras clave:** No ser; Metaontología; Platón; *Sofista*; Meinongianismo.

## Introduction

The paradox of negative existentials is a relevant topic of debate among those contemporarily working on metaontology and the theory of reference. A precise formulation of this paradox, due to Berto (2012), can be stated as follows:

P1. To deny the existence of something, one refers to that thing;
P2. But if one refers to something, then that thing has to exist;
Thus,
C1. To deny the existence of something, that thing has to exist.

To put it simply, how could <Santa Claus does not exist> be a true proposition, if we are talking about Santa Claus in order to deny its existence? In other words, when we assert a negative existential (a proposition that denies the existence of something), we appear to refer to an object and ascribe it nonexistence. However, if there is such an object for us to ascribe anything to, then it certainly exists (after all, how could we refer and ascribe properties to something that is not?). Therefore, if <Santa Claus does not exist> is true, then Santa Claus *does* in fact exist: a contradiction!

As we will see, this paradox, also known as 'the problem of non-being', is an ancient riddle whose roots can be traced back at least to Plato. Quine himself, when addressing this paradox, calls it Plato's Beard — in reference to the problems of non-being discussed in Plato's *Sophist*. As Quine (1948, p. 21) once expressed, 'nonbeing must in some sense be, otherwise what is it that there is not?'.

In this article, we aim to go back to the roots of the paradox of negative existentials and investigate how some contemporary Meinongian trends can address the problem of non-being as articulated in Plato's *Sophist*. In the first section, we will reconstruct and analyse the three puzzles[1] about non-being presented in the Platonic dialogue. In the second section, we will suggest possible neo-Meinongian ways of answering the Platonic problem of non-being; finally, the last section of this article will draw some conclusions regarding the study of the history of philosophy by analytic philosophers.

[1] Here the '*ἀπορίαι*', in Greek.

## 1. The *Sophist* (237b7-239c8)

The *Sophist* is a complex dialogue that addresses various philosophical riddles[2] in its endeavour to define what being a sophist amounts to. Concerning the *Sophist,* our focus is exclusively on the problem of non-being presented in 237b7-239c8. This problem arises because to properly define the sophist[3], the characters (Eleatic Visitor [EV] and Theaetetus) find it necessary to analyse the notion of non-being in order to approach the problem of falsehood and be able to (i) argue that not every statement is true and (ii) characterise the sophist discourse as a discourse relying on false statements.

That is so because sophistry relies on a thesis that places discourse and truth on a single pillar, namely, which every statement necessarily corresponds to an existent state of affairs. False discourse, in this context, would be that which says *what is not*, sayings that do not express anything and, consequently, meaningless discourse.[4] Such a thesis gives rise to the so-called Falsehood Paradox. This paradox can be articulated as follows:

> P1. It is possible to articulate false statements (that is, to express false propositions *via* linguistic statements).
> P2. False statements aim to express propositions about *what is not*
> P3. Expressing propositions about *what is not* is equivalent to expressing nothing
> C1. False statements aim to express nothing.
> P4. It is impossible to articulate a statement aiming to express nothing.
> C2. It is impossible to articulate false statements — anyone who speaks of *what is not* states nothing *(μηδὲν λέγειν)*.

[2] These issues can be divided into several sections: (i) 216a1-236d4 and 264b11-268d5, where the *diairetic* method, which endeavours to define the sophist, is presented; (ii) 236d5-242b5, where the paradox of falsehood, the distinction between *εἰκαστική* (likeness-making) and *φανταστική* (image-making), and the problem of non-being are examined; (iii) 242b6-251a4, which addresses the problem of being; (iv) 251a5-259d8, which explores the issues of negative predication, and the concepts of identity and difference; and (v) 260e1-264b10, which discusses the problem of how *λόγος* (statement) is possible.

[3] This will be in the seventh definition, where the sophist is defined by EV and Theaetetus as the imitator of the wise, who produces a false appearance of wisdom, creating a false belief in his knowledge through a false appearance of refutation (*Soph*. 268c8-d5).

[4] Cf. Seligman (1974, p. 13).

This is the core of the problem that compels Plato to analyse the concept of non-being: if a statement, expressing what is not is unsayable — and even unthinkable, and unknowable[5] —, then all statements must be true. This reasoning would enable the Sophists to argue that falsity and appearance do not exist, thus denying the possibility of appearing wise without being wise. Consequently, for the horror of Socrates, philosophy and sophistry would be indistinguishable.

## 2. The problem of non-being in *Soph*. 237b7-237e7

This section addresses the first of three Platonic puzzles concerning non-being as articulated in *Sophist* 237b7–239a12. The standard division follows three successive aporias: (i) the first puzzle (237b7–e7) questions the possibility of speaking about non-being; (ii) the second puzzle (238a1–c12) explores the interweaving of being and non-being, particularly through numerical predication; and (iii) the third puzzle (238d1–239a12) recognizes contradictions in the very act of inquiring into non-being. To thoroughly examine these puzzles, we will subdivide the relevant passages into key sections. Thus, [T1] will be designated as the principal passage for the first puzzle, [T2] for the second, and [T3] for the third.

### *2.1. The first puzzle (237b7-e7)*

The first puzzle about absolute non-being can be framed as the challenge of expressing propositions about *what absolutely is not* (*τὸ μηδαμῶς ὄν*). The initial assumption, articulated by the Eleatic Visitor (EV) from within an Eleatic framework, is that somehow a proposition about *what in no way is* (*τὸ μηδαμῶς ὄν*) was expressed[6]. However, to what would

[5] Cf. Parmenides, *DK*, B2.

[6] There is substantial interpretative debate surrounding the meaning of 'non-being' in *Sophist* 237b7–239c8, particularly regarding the expressions *τὸ μὴ ὄν* and *τὸ μη δαμῶς ὄν*. For example, in the context of the three puzzles of non-being (the section under consideration), two principal interpretations of the expression 'non-being' have emerged in the literature: (i) 'non-being' as denoting something ($x$) that entirely lacks attributes ($F$), that is, for all predicates $F$, $x$ is not $F$; and (ii) 'non-being' as denoting something that absolutely does not exist, to which no attribute implying existence can be assigned. For interpretations as (i), see Bluck (1975, p. 64); Bondeson (1973, pp. 13-16; 1976, p. 8); Frede (1967, p. 75); Lewis (1975, p. 110); Malcolm (1967, pp. 136-137; 1985, p. 520); Mourelatos (1977, pp. 59, 66-67); Owen (1971, pp. 235-236, 247, 266). And for interpretations as (ii), see Cornford (1935); Crivelli (2011, pp. 46-48), Thomas, (2008, p. 649). Our purpose here is not to engage with the arguments that either support or dispute each interpretation, for that, see Ambuel (2007); Bluck (1975); Crivelli (2011); Kahn (2013). In this article,

'non-being' apply if, in order to be applied to something, the intentional object that *is not* must possess qualities and be presentable to thought? The EV articulates the problem as follows:

> [T1 i] [...] that which is not [*τὸ μὴ ὄν*] can't be applied to any of those which are. [...] So if you can't apply it to that which is, [ii] it wouldn't be right either to apply it to something [*τι*]. [...] [iii] It's obvious to us that we always apply this something [*τι*] to a being [*τὸ ὄν*], since it's impossible to say it by itself, as if it were naked and isolated from all beings (*Soph.* 237c6-d3)[7].

The paradox arises because, as shown in T1 i-iii, the absolute non-being was applied to something (*τι*). According to EV, any attempt to refer to a non-being implicitly treats it as *something* (*τι*), which entails a minimal form of being. The claim made[8] by the EV was that the term 'something' (*τι*) can only be used in connection with being, *'τι'* always implies ontological commitment, thus one cannot say 'something' without presupposing being[9].

In that sense, non-being cannot be applied to a thing (*τι*), since '*τι*' is used exclusively for things that exist (as shown in T1 iii). In contemporary terms, we could say that the Eleatic problem around non-being arises due to the thesis according to which all objects we can quantify over exist (in some sense), and, therefore, there are no absolutely nonexistent objects, even in the widest domain of quantification.

Besides that, for Plato, every *λόγος* act is directed at something: at entities. If there is no entity whose act of saying is directed to, then one is saying nothing (*μηδὲν λέγειν*). In this sense, (i) anyone who speaks, speaks of something that is (because being, ultimately, is being-something) and, thus, something (*τι*) cannot be dissociated from being; and (ii) 'something' ('*τι*') is a term whose function is to grasp things that constitute reality.[10] When

for the sake of exposition and analysis, '*τὸ μὴ ὄν*' and '*τὸ μηδαμῶς ὄν*' will be rendered as 'non-being' and 'what is not', treated as broadly synonymous. Both terms will refer to supposed objects that do not exist and do not instantiate any properties, but which are still treated as thing-like —that is, as candidates for objectual reference. They are not to be understood as states of affairs, propositions, or properties, but rather as something more closely analogous to individuals or substances— although purely hypothetical or intentional ones.

[7] We use Nicholas P. White's translation (1961), and for the Greek, E. A. Duke, W. F. Hicken, W. S. M. Nicoll, D. B. Robinson, and J. C. G. Strachan edition (1995).

[8] Cf. also 237d5-6.

[9] Cf. Crivelli (2011); Kahn (2009).

[10] Cf. *Soph*. 237d6-11: *Ἆρα τῇδε σκοπῶν σύμφης, ὡς ἀνάγκη τόν τι λέγοντα ἕν γέ τι λέγειν*; [...] *Ἑνὸς γὰρ δὴ τό γε 'τὶ' φήσεις σημεῖον εἶναι, τὸ δὲ 'τινὲ' δυοῖν, τὸ δὲ 'τινὲς' πολλῶν*.

one says something[11], one linguistically designates an object qualified by properties — something that can be shown or exhibited, even if only in reasoning. Consequently, one who attempts to express a proposition concerning *what is not contradicts* (i) and (ii). This passage raises a paradox akin to the modern problem of negative existentials: we seem to speak about something when denying its existence, yet our act of reference appears to confer existence upon it[12].

This puzzle can be reconstructed as follows:

1. For anything to be a legitimate subject of discourse (*τι*), *it must in some way be* (*τὸ ὄν*).
2. *τὸ μὴ ὄν* is precisely *what in no way is.*
3. Therefore, *τὸ μὴ ὄν* cannot be a legitimate subject of discourse.

Nonetheless, despite these arguments against the possibility of expressing propositions concerning non-beings, we (in this discussion) and the interlocutors of the dialogue have just done so within this very analysis: when saying that propositions concerning *what is not* cannot be expressed, we indeed expressed something about what is not. When saying that we cannot talk about the range of 'absolute non-being', we did talk about absolute non-beings. I.e., by discussing *τὸ μὴ ὄν*, we already treat it as *τι*. These considerations regarding the problem of expressing propositions concerning *what is not* resulted in the first puzzle about non-being.

*2.2. The second puzzle (238a1–238c12)*

The exposition of the second puzzle regarding the notion of non-being aims to strengthen or even specify that nothing can be predicated on *what is not*, since it is an absolute non-being. While the first aporia emphasised the contradiction in speaking about *what is not (τὸ μὴ ὄν)*, the second aporia targets a specific form of predication: numerical attribution. The Eleatic Visitor begins by stating that number (*ἀριθμός*) belongs only to the things that are *(τὰ ὄντα)*, and that it is therefore illegitimate to attribute any numerical value, even unity, to *what is not:*

> [T2 i] EV: To that which is there might belong [*προσγίγνεσθαι*] some other of those which are. [...] But shall we say that any of those which are

[11] To different interpretations of 'saying something' cf. Diès (1925, p. 280); Wiggins (1971, pp. 271; 279).

[12] Cf. Thomas (2008).

> can ever belong to that which is not? [...] [ii] Now then, we take all the numbers to be beings. [...] [iii] Then let's not even try to apply either plurality of number or one to that which is not (*Soph*. 238a5-b3).

This passage focuses on the thesis that an attribute can only be attached[13] to beings, and that an absolute non-being cannot bear any attribute, because that would make it participate in being.[14] That is, even when we avoid substantial predication and merely speak of *what is not* as *one* or as *many*, we still introduce an attribute (number) which presupposes being. Plato implies that numbers are not just a convenient tool of language, but also a mark of being. Numerical determinacy requires ontological individuation: in order to say that something is 'one' or 'many,' it must already exist as a thing that can be counted or divided.[15]

Thus, the core of the second puzzle follows the first: attributes cannot be attached to non-beings, but statements about non-beings often introduce numerical attributes, such as unity, duality, or multiplicity, contradicting T2(iii). This is shown explicitly in the very question of the EV:

> T2 [iv] Then how would anyone try either to say those which *are* not (*τὰ μὴ ὄντα*) or that which *is* not (*τὸ μὴ ὂν*) out loud, or even grasp them in thought, apart from number? (*Soph.* 238b6-8).

In T2(iv), more precisely in 238b6, the EV uses '*τὸ μὴ ὂν*' and '*τὰ μὴ ὄντα*', where the definite articles '*τὸ*' and '*τὰ*' themselves introduce singularity and plurality, respectively, along with the verb '*εἰμί*', presented in singular ('*ὂν*') and plural ('*ὄντα*') of present active. This results in expressions like 'non-being' and 'non-beings', respectively. This grammatical structure itself smuggles being into the formulation of non-being: to say '*τὸ μὴ ὄν*' is already to say 'the one thing which is not', but if it is one, it is something; and if it is something, it is. In effect, these expressions assign numerical properties to *what is not*, which inherently contradicts the nature of absolute non-being.

[13] The verb used in the T2 that recover this is '*προσγίγνομαι*', what White translates as 'belong', but can also be rendered as 'attach' or 'to be added'.

[14] To a being, it is possible to attach another being, i.e., an attribute. Conversely, non-beings cannot bear any attribute, because doing so would make them participate in being.

[15] Not just here in the *Soph.*, but also in *Parm*. 164a-b, *Tim*. 47a1-b2; Thomas (2008, p. 641), argues that Plato is not the first to suggest that speech and thought require number, considering also the fragment attributed to Philolaus, 'all things that are known have number. For without this it is not possible to think or to apprehend anything whatever'.

T2 suggests that numbers serve as a method for quantifying and distinguishing between beings, and the numerical attribute attached to non-being, as shown in T2(iv), appears to be an attempt to quantify over absolute nonexistents, introducing a form of multiplicity into non-being. Yet, since number belongs to the totality of things that *are*[16], one cannot apply to absolute non-beings numerical multiplicity or unity.[17] The EV says:

> T2[v] whenever we speak of *those* which are not, aren't we trying to apply numerical *plurality* to them? [...] when we speak of that which is not aren't we applying *one* to it? [...] But we say it isn't either right or correct to try to attach that which is to that which is not? (*Soph.* 238b10–c6).

In other words, it is impossible to state or think of something without making a singular or plural attribution, whether through terms like 'are', 'them', 'is', 'the', or 'one'. Such language involves an illicit application of *what is* to *what is not.* The contradiction lies in the performative nature of *λόγος*: to speak at all is to apply categories of being. However, *τὸ μὴ ὄν* resists this categorisation by definition. The second puzzle thus reveals that the very conditions of meaningful discourse, namely, numerical determination and reference to individuated beings, are unavailable when we attempt to speak of absolute non-being. Consequently, absolute non-beings are unspeakable and unthinkable – they are excluded from being the subject of any *λόγος.*[18]

This is the source of the second puzzle concerning non-being: even though non-beings cannot be the subject of *λόγος,* one somehow attributes numerical properties when speaking of them. In this sense, non-beings paradoxically become the subject of *λόγος*, even though they are conceptually barred from being such. Anyone who accepts the conclusions of the second puzzle must confront a deeper issue: the problem of explaining the meaningfulness of propositions containing non-referring expressions.

[16] In the *Theaetetus*, Plato argues that the 'one' is among the things that are: 'if someone sees something as one, they see something that is. [...] Therefore, one who sees something as one, sees something that is.' (*Tht.* 188e8-10). In the *Parmenides*, Plato presents the notion that the meaning of 'one' can be ambiguous, either because (i) the 'one' appears as possessing the attribute of unity or because (ii) the 'one' is the attribute itself. In 163c, Plato argues that if the 'one' is in no way, nothing can be said or known about it. This 'one' correspond to the problem of the puzzle in *Sophist* 238a1-c10.

[17] Cf. *Soph.* 238a10-b3.

[18] *Soph.* 238c7-10.

### *2.3. The third puzzle (238d1–239a12)*

What we designated as a third puzzle is actually EV's admission that some steps claimed previously are inconsistent. These inconsistencies are embedded in T2(iii) and T2(vi). While the earlier puzzles aimed to inquire about the concept of non-being, this third puzzle problematizes the very act of enquiring about it. This third puzzle confronts a performative collapse: the process of inquiry itself violates the constraints established by the earlier arguments.

Accordingly, the EV acknowledges that

> T3 [i]: [it was made a] statement that which-is-not should not share either in one or in plurality. But even so I've [sc. EV] continued after all that to speak of it as one, since I [EV] say that which is not. [...] [ii] And again a little earlier I said that it is unutterable, unsayable, and inexpressible in speech (*Soph*. 238d9-e6).

In T3(i), the EV acknowledges his previous claim that *what is not* participates neither in unity nor in plurality.[19] However, this is self-contradictory because, as he denies unity to non-being, the EV simultaneously affirms it by using the expression '*what is not,*' which necessarily implies singularity.

Similarly, in T3(ii), the EV claims that propositions regarding what is not are inexpressible, unsayable, and unspeakable,[20] which generates another contradiction. By assigning attributes such as unintelligibility or ineffability to non-being, the EV paradoxically treats it as something capable of being characterised, thus presupposing a form of being. Thereby, when referring to non-being as 'one'[21], the EV effectively attaches being (*εἶναι*) to non-being, contradicting the very distinction he aims to maintain: the attempt to deny non-being is carried out in terms that affirm it.

Analysing those three puzzles concerning non-being reveals how the discussion of non-being in Plato's *Sophist* inevitably leads to self-contradiction: to think or speak about absolute non-being is already to grant it a form of being (as the object of thought or language).

The inquiry culminates in a problem without a solution (at least for this part of the dialogue) because the *rules* established in the first two

[19] Cf. T2(iii); 238b2–3.

[20] Cf. T2(vi); 238e5–6 and 238c8–11.

[21] *Soph*. 238e8-a3 '*Οὐκοῦν τό γε εἶναι προσάπτειν πειρώμενος ἐναντία τοῖς πρόσθεν ἔλεγον;* [...] *Τί δέ; τοῦτο προσάπτων οὐχ ὡς ἑνὶ διελεγόμην;*'

puzzles are violated during the investigation, and the third puzzle puts into question the very possibility of establishing such rules.

As we will see, the aporetic nature of non-being continues to disturb contemporary philosophers to this day. Nevertheless, we will argue that Meinongian metaphysicians can attempt to answer the Platonic puzzles by assuming certain metaontological principles. The goal of the next sessions is to discuss this topic.

## 3. Meinongianism

Now that we have reconstructed the Platonic scenario and the puzzles, it is time to present three neo-Meinongian perspectives and how we can use their theoretical tools to solve the puzzles. A natural way to start this task is by clarifying what we mean by the term 'neo-Meinongian'. For the sake of convenience, let us begin from this natural starting point.

Meinongianism is a set of metaontological doctrines, inspired by the works of Alexius Meinong, according to which it is possible to quantify over nonexistent objects and have intentional states toward them. From a Meinongian point of view, existence is a property that not every object has, even though nonexistent objects can have a series of properties characterising them. Take Freddy Krueger as an example. Meinongians in general would agree that Freddy Krueger does not exist, even though it is true of Freddy Krueger that he has properties such as *being-fictional* and *being-feared-by-many-actual-children*. (Keep in mind that the term 'nonexistence' has a wider meaning for Meinongians than it has in the Platonic dialogue. We will address this topic in the next subsection).

Neo-Meinongianism, on the other hand, is the set of contemporary Meinongian trends that originated from the efforts to overcome Bertrand Russell's objections to the original Theory of Objects proposed by Meinong. The most important of those, the Triviality Objection, focused on the so-called Characterisation Principle of Meinong's Theory of Objects, which established that every nonexistent object has the properties characterising it. According to Russell (1905), if Meinong was right in embracing this principle, we would have to accept the existence of an infinity of unwanted objects, such as the objects characterised as *the existent unicorn* or *the actual King of France* (given that they are characterised as existent and actual, respectively). Thus, neo-Meinongianism is ultimately a philosophical movement whose aim is to keep the original Meinongian intuitions, somehow restricting the Characterisation Principle.

There are three main versions of neo-Meinongianism developed in the last decades. Nuclear Meinongianism, the perspective endorsed by

philosophers such as Richard Routley (1980), Terence Parsons (1982), and Dale Jacquette (1996), draws a distinction between nuclear and extranuclear properties, arguing that the correct Characterisation Principle only applies to nuclear properties. According to them, for every set of nuclear properties, there is an object corresponding to it. Properties such as *being-red, wearing-pants*, or *being-round* are examples of nuclear properties. Since *existence*, as well as *being-fictional* or *being-actual*, for example, are considered by Nuclear Meinongians to be extranuclear properties, Russell's Triviality Objection is avoided.

Dual-Copula Meinongianism, on the other hand, advocated primarily by Edward Zalta (1988), holds that there are two kinds of predication (opposed to Nuclear Meinongianism which holds that there are two kinds of property), so that while nonexistent objects (or abstract objects, according to Zalta's terminology) can encode properties like *being-red* or *being-round* — that is, they are determined by those properties —, existing, or concrete, objects can exemplify *redness or roundness* — instantiating those properties in the more usual senses.

Batman, for example, encodes the properties of *being-a-hero and dressing-in-black* — given that these properties characterise the object he is — but does not exemplify them, given that Batman does not exist. On the other hand, Will Smith exemplifies the properties of *being-an-actor* and *being-born-in-Philadelphia,* but does not encode those same properties — being a concrete existing object. Nonexistent objects, on the other hand, encode properties but may also exemplify them — every nonexistent object, for example, exemplifies the property of *being-nonexistent.*

For theorists such as Zalta, the Meinongian Characterisation Principle must be substituted by another comprehension principle: for every condition on properties, it is necessarily and always the case that there is a nonexistent (abstract) individual that encodes just the properties satisfying the condition. Distinguishing two modes of instantiation, the Dual-Copula Meinongian also overcomes the Triviality Objection (we cannot derive, from its principles, objects exemplifying existence).

Finally, there is the Modal Meinongian trend, more recently developed by Graham Priest (2016) and also endorsed by Franz Berto (2012). The distinguishing feature of this perspective is the fact that it understands the distinction between existent and nonexistent objects in terms of possible and impossible worlds. For these authors, as Reicher (2019) points out, the entire modal space shares a common domain of discourse. Thus, a nonexistent object in the actual world is ultimately an object that satisfies the properties that actually characterise it in some possible or impossible world. In other words, Modal Meinongians do not restrict the original

Characterisation Postulate, but only identify the conditions in which it can hold irrestrictively — the object described as the existent Unicorn is *really* a Unicorn and exists (but in a merely possible or impossible world, not in the actual world we live in).

With these three neo-Meinongian perspectives in hand, let us see how we can use their tools to answer the Platonic aporias of the *Sophist.*

*3.1. Solving the first puzzle*

As stated before, the first aporia is the challenge of explaining how one can truly express that something is not. On the one hand, it seems that we cannot talk about things that absolutely are not; on the other hand, as soon as we express 'we cannot talk about things that absolutely are not', we are already talking about things that absolutely are not. Recall what the EV says:

> [T1 i] [...] that which is not [*τὸ μὴ ὄν*] can't be applied to any of those which are. [...] So if you can't apply it to that which is, [ii] it wouldn't be right either to apply it to something [*τι*] (*Soph*. 237c6-d3).

A reasonable way of trying to better understand this passage is by translating it into a more contemporary (neo-Meinongian) vocabulary. The reasoning would be as follows:

1. One cannot ascribe *absolute nonexistence* to any existent object.
2. But if one cannot apply *absolute nonexistence* to any existent object, then one cannot apply it to anything.
3. Therefore, one cannot apply *absolute nonexistence* to anything.

Worse than that, the EV also expresses that one who tries to talk about *what is not* (an absolutely nonexistent thing) is actually 'not even speaking' (*Soph.* 237d5-e6).

Now, let us analyse this argument under the presumption that it is a faithful reconstruction of EV's point. Premise (2) seems to be committed to what became recently known as the Parmenidean Thesis (PT) — the thesis according to which everything exists. In other words, it seems to imply that something can be the target of quantification if, and only if, it exists. Meinongians firmly reject this thesis, and it is by denying it that a Meinongian can try to solve this aporia.

A point of agreement between all neo-Meinongian trends is their acceptance of the possibility of (i) quantifying over nonexistents,

and (ii) expressing true things about nonexistent objects. According to Meinongians, <Batman is a fictional character> and <Santa Claus is not a real human being> are both true propositions, even if the referents of 'Batman' and 'Santa Claus' do not exist — they are nonexistent objects.

Nevertheless, as we can see, 'nonexistence' for neo-Meinongians means something different from '*τὸ μὴ ὄν*' — that is, absolute nonexistence. In the ultimate instance, Meinongians take nonexistents to be objects devoid of existence but able to have properties just like existent objects. On the other hand, absolute nonexistence, in the Platonic sense of the term, is the feature of that which has no single property. For the EV, fictional objects, in particular, would not be considered absolutely nonexistent, since they are still characterizable through properties.[22]

That being so, the Meinongian strategy we envisage solving the first puzzle is to consider an absolutely nonexistent (in the Platonic sense) as a very special nonexistent object (in the Meinongian sense). That is, we propose that for something to be absolutely nonexistent (in the Platonic sense), it is for this thing to be a nonexistent object (in the Meinongian sense) having no properties. Assuming the Meinongian principle according to which it is possible to quantify over nonexistents, it is possible to reject (2) — given that we can apply *absolute nonexistence to a nonexistent object having no properties*[23] — and thus the first puzzle is dissolved.

### *3.2. Solving the second puzzle*

As we previously saw, the second aporia focuses on two theses: (1) it is not possible to ascribe properties to things that absolutely are not — that is, to absolutely nonexistent objects, and (2) that numerical attributes imply existence, so that you cannot ascribe numerical attributes to absolutely nonexistents. If (1) and (2) are true, how can we talk about non-beings as it seems we do?

Meinongians will typically reject that regular nonexistent objects cannot have properties: <Santa Claus is adored by children> and <Batman is a superhero> are two examples of seemingly true propositions in which

[22] This follows from Plato's distinction between absolute non-being and non-being as *Difference*. A fictional object such as a 'mermaid' is not an instance of *τὸ μηδαμῶς ὄν*, for its content is built from elements that *are*—e.g., 'girl' and 'tail.' Since each constituent term signifies something real, the resulting combination yields an object that, while nonexistent in the actual world, is still characterizable and therefore participates in *Difference* rather than in absolute non-being. Hence, the EV can regard fictional objects as relatively—not absolutely—nonexistent. Cf. *Soph*. 254d4–257a12.

[23] This metaphysical inconsistency will be discussed in the next sub-section.

we ascribe properties to nonexistent objects. Different neo-Meinongian perspectives, however, will understand differently how nonexistent objects can be related to properties.

Nuclear Meinongians say that there are two kinds of properties (nuclear and extra-nuclear), but both existent and nonexistent objects can have them — the crucial point is that no nonexistent object has the extra-nuclear property of existing. Dual Copula Meinongians, on the other hand, say that existent and nonexistent objects typically relate themselves with properties differently: nonexistents encode their characterising properties and existent objects exemplify them. This division mirrors the different ways in which things can have a single property: Superman is strong (encoding), but not in the same way Mike Tyson is strong (exemplification) — because Tyson exists and Superman does not.

Modal Meinongians, finally, reject divisions between types of properties and modes of instantiation, but insist that objects have their characterising properties only in the worlds in which they exist. Thus, <Batman is a superhero> would only be a true proposition in the worlds (possible or impossible), realising the description of Batman according to which he is a superhero. This modal move reflects the fact that Modal Meinongians understand characterising properties of objects as typically existence-entailing: after all, if something is a super-hero, for example, then it surely must exist. How could something be a superhero and at the same time be nonexistent?

Nevertheless, that does not mean that Batman, as an actually nonexistent object, has no properties in the actual world. In the worlds where Batman does not exist, he has a series of nonexistence-entailing properties: properties such as *being-fictional, being-nonexistent* or *being-the-favourite-character-of-many-children* (properties that Nuclear Meinongians will identify as extra-nuclear, and that Dual Copula theorists will say that nonexistents can exemplify).

Notwithstanding, Meinongians face a challenge when it comes to dealing with an object that has no properties (the absolutely nonexistent). The problem, of course, is that an object *having no properties* has at least the property of having-no-properties. Actually, there are many other properties an object having no properties must have: the property of *being-the-subject-of-this-discussion*, the property of *being-different-from-the-number-2*, and so on.

Thereby, we envisage three distinct Meinongian approaches to this problem, each for every neo-Meinongian trend. Assuming the Nuclear Meinongian position, one could suggest that absolutely nonexistents are objects having no nuclear properties, but only extra-nuclear properties.

Given that, for Nuclear Meinongians, the identity condition of objects is formulated in terms of the sameness of nuclear properties, a Nuclear Meinongian would have to admit the univocity of absolute nonexistence — that there is only one absolutely nonexistent object. Similarly, a Dual-Copula Meinongian could say that the only absolutely nonexistent object is the object encoding no properties, such that all the properties it has are exemplified—properties such as *being-the-subject-of-this-discussion* or *being-different-from-the-number-two*.[24]

Nevertheless, a more radical understanding of the meaning of '*τὸ μὴ ὄν*' would reject these last suggestions. One could assume, for instance, that the objects proposed by Nuclear and Dual-Copula Meinongians are still different from the absolutely nonexistent, after all, they still have properties, one way or another, and, as we saw, the absolute nonexistence is the feature of that which is devoid of all forms of being or characterisation.

Thus, we propose a dialetheic solution to solve this problem — in other words, a solution that acknowledges the possibility of true contradictions and objects with contradictory properties. The absolutely nonexistent, independently of the chosen Meinongian approach, is the object that has both the property of having no properties and a set of properties describing it (such as *being-the-subject-of-this-discussion* or *being-different-from-the-number-two*). Nuclear Meinongians would say this object (i) has no nuclear properties, (ii) has the extra-nuclear property of *having-no-properties*, and (iii) has all other extra-nuclear properties identified.

A Dual-Copula Meinongian, on the other hand, will say that the absolutely nonexistent encodes no property and exemplifies an infinity of properties (*having-no-properties* being one of these exemplified properties). Finally, Modal Meinongians will simply accept that there is at least one object having a set of properties among which the property of having no properties, but this object only exists in an impossible world. As a matter of fact, all neo-Meinongians will have to say that the absolutely nonexistent object is an impossible object — precisely in the sense that it is metaphysically inconsistent.

Now, back to the second part of EV's thesis. According to him, number attributes imply existence (remember: let us not even try to apply either plurality of number or one to that which is not!). This thesis is interestingly similar to something Peter van Inwagen (1998) has argued for in his reconstruction of the Quinean (and anti-Meinongian) metaontology.

[24] For Dua-Copula Meinongians, the identity condition of nonexistent objects is established by the sameness of properties encoded. Since there is no property encoded in absolutely nonexistents, there must be only one absolutely nonexistent.

According to Inwagen (1998, p. 236), there is an 'intimate connection between number and existence' — to say that objects of type X do not exist is to say that the number of Xs is zero. To say that objects of type X exist is to say that the number of Xs is 1 or more.

In order to reject this thesis, neo-Meinongians traditionally throw a bunch of counterexamples to prove the contrary: there are *4* superheroes in the Fantastic Four, but, aside from the fiction, none of them exists! Similarly, we can say that scientists found out that the one planet they thought existed in an orbit between Mercury and the Sun (Vulcan) actually does not exist. Nevertheless, these pointed objects are not absolutely nonexistents in the Platonic sense, given that they can still be characterised with properties and cognitively grasped. That being so, how should Meinongians deal with the problem of numbering absolutely nonexistents?

Nuclear and Dual-Copula Meinongians can affirm, due to the identity condition of objects they propose, that there is only one absolutely nonexistent object (the only object that has no nuclear properties and the only object that encodes no property, respectively). Modal Meinongians, in turn, can admit more absolutely nonexistent objects (if their identity condition is simply established by the feature of having the property of *having-no-properties*), but they still can count and numerically differentiate them (one can say, for instance, that there is an impossible world in which there are two absolutely nonexistents — both dialetheic objects, the first having the property of *having-no-properties* and the property of *being-red*, and the other having the property of having-no-properties and the property of being-blue). Thus, rejecting thesis (1) and (2), neo-Meinongians also dissolve the second aporia.

### *3.3. Solving the third puzzle*

The third aporia is the realisation of the fact that logical inconsistencies arise if we accept some of the theses discussed in the first two aporias. More specifically, if you accept that (i) non-being does not participate in either unity or plurality, or (ii) that non-being is inexpressible in speech, then you fall into contradiction. As we will see, the Meinongian way to deal with both these theses is simply by denying them. Let us tackle them each at a time.

A plausible reconstruction of (i) would state that *absolutely nonexistent objects are neither unities nor pluralities.* However, what is for something to be a unity? That is a tough question, but keeping things simple, we may say that something is a unity if it is one thing. If something is a unity and you are counting a set of things, you can say that this thing

is one among the others. Moreover, what kind of things can be counted this way? Well, basically everything (after all, arithmetic operations should be topic-neutral). In addition, another seemingly tough question seems to arise: which objects fall under the notion of everything? According to a Quinean perspective, everything exists, and therefore only existent objects are things and, in the ultimate instance, only existents can be unities.

That is not the Meinongian reasoning. Hence, for a Meinongian, even absolutely nonexistent objects can be a target of intentional states, and it is plainly possible to count nonexistents: for Nuclear and Dual-Copula Meinongians, there is only one absolutely nonexistent, and for Modal Meinongians, there is potentially an infinity of absolutely nonexistents (all of them inhabiting impossible worlds).

Now, let us move on to thesis (ii). That is basically an instance of the so-called 'paradox of ineffability'. In other words, whatever you try to express that something cannot be spoken or linguistically expressed (or, simply, that it is ineffable), you end up falling into contradiction: by saying that you cannot speak about X, you are already speaking about X. The consequences of that are either you are wrong about the ineffability of this subject matter, or we are facing an actual instance of *dialetheia* – a true contradiction in the actual world.

Nevertheless, Meinongians, as we saw, have no good reason to support the idea that non-being (the property or the objects) is ineffable. We can discuss absolute nonexistence and absolutely nonexistents, and this very article is a proof of that. However, if one wants to stay with the EV, it is possible to ascribe ineffability to absolutely nonexistents as long as one admits another *dialetheia*: absolutely nonexistents would be simultaneously ineffable and subject of many actual discussions – such as this one.

Thus, rejecting (ii) or embracing its very contradictory nature, the last part of the third aporia is also dissolved.

## Conclusion

Our itinerary was as follows: (i) first we introduced the contemporary version of the paradox of negative existentials, (ii) then, we reconstructed how a version of this paradox appears in the form of three aporias in Plato's *Sophist*; (iii) finally, we showed how contemporary Meinongians (or neo-Meinongians) could solve the Platonic aporias by means of their theoretical tools.

It is interesting to note that this paper also exemplifies how prolific a gaze into the history of philosophy can be for contemporary analytic

philosophers. By showing that contemporary tools can solve ancient philosophical puzzles, we testify to an idiosyncratic form of circular progress in philosophy: although we verify ancient problems still causing trouble to contemporary minds, we are now able to clarify these problems and even elaborate clear and precise answers to them – an ability we have been improving since at least the pre-Socratics.

The philosophical answers we find nowadays, we must admit, are still non-consensual. Nevertheless, this non-consensuality is an essential part of the philosophical enterprise — something that, hopefully, will never leave us. Philosophical progress, therefore, must be seen as much more than a matter of discoveries, as a matter of improving our rational tools to understand reality — and gazing at the history of philosophy is a good opportunity to test our newest tools.

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