REFERENCE AND MEINONGIAN OBJECTS

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I. Introduction

Actualism is the view that the only things there are are actual — i.e., existent — entities. (Since actualism is intended as a nontrivial thesis, the phrase ‘there are’ in its statement should be taken in an ontologically neutral way, and not as meaning ‘there exists’). Actualism seems to have difficulty dealing with certain entities, for example, fictional entities or nonactual possible objects. In such cases the actualist has two choices: (1) he can deny that there are entities of the sort in question; or (2) he can assert that such entities really exist. In the case of fictional entities, the second alternative suffers the defect of being intuitively implausible (although some have taken this alternative. (See [10]). If the first alternative is chosen, however, it would seem that the actualist is faced with the burden of showing how talk about such entities can be paraphrased away in favor of talk about real entities. And it has proved no easy task to give such paraphrases. Faced with such a choice one may decide to give up the actualist position and take what I call the ‘Meinongian position’. The Meinongian position is the view that there are things that do not exist. Meinongianism as applied to fictional entities says then that although fictional entities do not exist, there are such things.

Far from being the bizarre and byzantine view it is often made out to be by philosophers, Meinongianism, of all the possible positions regarding fictional entities, does less violence to our pre-theoretical intuitions. For we do certainly think that fictional characters do not exist. Yet just as surely, it would appear, we refer to such entities, assert propositions about them, have various intentional attitudes toward them, and so on. And how could we do such things if there were no such entities?

But the Meinongian, if he wishes to persuade those on the other
side, cannot simply assert that there are nonexistents. He should provide a theory as to what they are like. In recent years, we have witnessed a revival of interest in Meinongian theories of objects, sparked by Terence Parsons in [5], [6], and [7]. Parsons’ work in this area has greatly increased the respectability of Meinongianism: old criticisms have been answered and a consistent formal theory along Meinongian lines has been spelled out. My criticisms of the Meinongian position will be directed at Parsons’ formalization of this theory.

Parsons’ theory is a theory about nonexistents. My focus is somewhat narrower: I will be concerned only with what the theory has to say about fictional entities. I will argue that Parsons’ theory cannot adequately explain how we are able to refer to fictional entities.

Let me clarify the notion of reference I want to talk about. As I understand this notion, a speaker’s referring to a certain object by means of a name or other referring expression, involves his having an intentional attitude towards that object. If x refers to y by means of name N, then x has y in mind, y is the thing that x intends to be saying something about. If someone says, ‘The man who discovers the cure for cancer will be famous’, but has no particular person in mind in saying that, then he is not referring to anyone in the sense of ‘refer’ I am concerned with.

Since having a de re intentional attitude involves having a particular individual or thing in mind, there is a close connection between reference, in the sense I’m concerned with, and de re intentional attitudes. So any difficulties Parsons’ theory has in accounting for reference to fictional entities should raise related difficulties concerning its ability to account for de re intentional attitudes towards fictional entities. Such difficulties would greatly weaken the attractiveness of the Meinongian position, since one of its main advantages over the actualist position is often alleged to be the ease and naturalness with which it, in contrast to the actualist position, accounts for such intentional attitudes.

II. Parsons’ theory

I begin with a brief sketch of Parsons’ theory (for more details see [5], [6], and [7]). Parsons distinguishes two types of properties: nuclear and extranuclear properties. A nuclear property is, roughly, an ordinary property such as being blue, being six feet tall, being in