THE PARADOX OF NONBEING

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In their admirably clear and very useful *First-Order Modal Logic*, Melvin Fitting and Richard L. Mendelsohn present thorough semantic and proof-theoretic treatments of several languages in which many philosophical puzzles of ongoing interest can be stated with clarity and precision. It is thus surprising and somewhat disappointing that their discussion of what they call the Paradox of NonBeing fails to make use of the formal tools that they have developed with such care. I shall attempt to remedy this situation by using Fitting and Mendelsohn's own formalism to clarify the matters they discuss. I hope thereby to make at least some progress in understanding certain longstanding philosophical problems. Specifically, I formalize their arguments and use their semantics to show that: (a) Actualism is a consistent position, despite their claims to the contrary; (b) The position they call 'Deflationism' is a caricature of actualism and is a straw man; (c) Their semantic framework contains the means for devising a plausible actualistic resolution of the Paradox of NonBeing.

Central to Fitting and Mendelsohn's presentation of the Paradox of NonBeing is the following argument (168–169):

(A) If an individual (call him "John") denies the existence of something, then John refers to what he says does not exist;

(B) Things which do not exist cannot be referred to or mentioned; no statement can be about them.

the following conclusion is drawn:

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1. I wish to thank Alana Yu and an anonymous referee for *Grazer Philosophische Studien* for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

2. All page references are to Fitting and Mendelsohn (1998), unless otherwise indicated.

3. 'Paradox of non-existence' would have been a better term, since the authors distinguish existence from being, the paradox they discuss concerns existence rather than being, and they recognize (175) that being has its own distinct, though analogous, paradox. (I plan to discuss this latter paradox, a genuine paradox of non-being, in another paper.) To maintain continuity with their presentation, however, I shall use their term throughout this paper.
If John denies the existence of something, then what John says does not exist does exist.

Fitting and Mendelsohn say that this argument is valid but that its conclusion is paradoxical and must be rejected. And they think there is a genuine puzzle involved in seeing how to reject at least one of the premises in order to avoid being committed to the conclusion. The difficulty involved in solving this puzzle, in coming up with a plausible rationale for rejecting either (A) or (B), is the core of their Paradox of NonBeing. They follow Berlin (1949–50) in calling those who accept (A) and deny (B) Inflationists, and those who deny (A) and accept (B) Deflationists.

The authors devote sections 8.3–8.6 of their book (167–178) to discussion of the Paradox and related matters. They themselves are Inflationists, and in the sections just mentioned they strive to show the advantages of Inflationism over Deflationism. Unfortunately their discussion, couched as it is in ordinary English, is not as precise as it might be, and it is marred by their apparent failure to recognize that Inflationists and Deflationists (who are species of possibilists and actualists, respectively) speak different languages. Yet these problems can be avoided, and the underlying issues significantly clarified, when the argument on which the Paradox is based is stated in the language of first-order modal logic with identity that the authors have so painstakingly developed.

Consider the following abbreviations of the key terms in (A)–(C):

Ex: \( x \) exists

Rxy: \( x \) refers to \( y \)

Dxy: \( x \) denies the existence of \( y \)

Sxy: \( x \) says of \( y \) that it does not exist

j: John

Using these symbols, a first attempt at formalizing the authors’ argument might be:

\[
\forall x (Djx \supset (Rjx \land Sjx)) \\
\neg \exists x (\neg Ex \land \exists y Ryx)^4 \\
\forall x (Djx \supset (Sjx \land Ex))
\]

4. I symbolize only the first part of (B), but this will not affect the subsequent discussion. Notice that symbolizing the first part of (B) in what is perhaps the most straightforward way, namely as \( \forall x (\neg Ex \supset \neg \exists y Ryx) \), stacks the deck against Deflationists. For this formula, claiming as it does that a thing which doesn’t exist in the actual world can’t be referred to in any possible world, is intuitively less plausible than the one given in the text.