Out of Nothing (Philosophy of language)

Abstract. Graham Priest proposed an argument for the conclusion that 'nothing' occurs as a singular term and not as a quantifier in a sentence like (1) 'The cosmos came into existence out of nothing'. Priest's point is that, intuitively, (1) entails (C) 'The cosmos came into existence at some time', but this entailment relation is left unexplained if 'nothing' is treated as a quantifier. If Priest is right, the paradoxical notion of an object that is nothing plays a role in our very understanding of reality. In this note, we argue that Priest's argument is unsound: the intuitive entailment relation between (1) and (C) does not offer convincing evidence that 'nothing' occurs as a term in (1). Moreover, we provide an explanation of why (1) is naturally taken to entail (C), which is both plausible and consistent with the standard, quantificational treatment of 'nothing'.

1. Graham Priest (2000: 23) rightly observes that the sentence:

(1) The cosmos came into existence out of nothing

is naturally understood to entail that

(C) The cosmos came into existence at some time (viz., the cosmos's life does not extend indefinitely towards the past).

According to Priest, we cannot account for this *prima facie* entailment if we adopt the standard, quantificational treatment of 'nothing'. For in that case, (1) could be equivalently rewritten as

(1*) No thing *x* is such that the cosmos came into existence out of *x*,

which does not entail (C). Priest concludes that 'nothing' occurs as a term in (1) (see also Priest 2002: 241). He would add that 'nothing', when so used, denotes *the object that is nothingness* (see Priest 2014). Others would regard it as an empty term (see Oliver and Smiley 2013).

Priest has a point here. It seems that (1) does entail (C), whereas (1*) does not. And plausibly, if 'nothing' is a quantified expression in (1), then (1) is tantamount to (1*).

If Priest is right, then the paradoxical notion of an entity that is nothing is needed to make sense of a purely extensional sentence like (1).[1] Which means, arguably, it is also needed to make sense of annihilation, of the very idea that our universe may be limited in space, and the like (for example, if we think that the entity that is nothing is involved in our understanding of (1), it is natural to think it is also involved in the understanding of claims like '*x* vanished into nothing'). Therefore, if Priest's argument is sound, paradoxical notions lie very deep in our conception of reality.

The main aim of this note is to argue that Priest's argument is unsound: the intuition that (1) entails (C) does not provide convincing evidence that 'nothing' occurs as a term in (1). However, the phenomenon Priest appeals to—viz., the semantic difference between (1) and (1*)—has independent interest. As a side task, we propose and discuss an account of this phenomenon that is both plausible and consistent with the quantificational treatment of 'nothing'.

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[1] Compare Priest (2014: 55): 'We may say that Hegel and Heidegger both wrote about nothing. This does not mean that for no *x* did Hegel and Heidegger write about *x*'. We agree with Priest that 'nothing' is used as a term in

(*) Hegel and Heidegger both wrote about nothing.

But the difference between extensional and non-extensional contexts matters a lot here. At best, the truth of (*) proves that a thing called 'nothing' is an imaginary item in some philosopher's mind. The truth of (1), assuming that 'nothing' occurs as a term therein, makes for a dramatically stronger conclusion, namely, that the thing called 'nothing' had a role in the very foundation of reality. (To get a feeling of how deep the contrast between (*) and (1) is, compare 'Milton wrote about Satan's desires' with 'The universe came into existence out of Satan's desires'.)

2. Here is our objection to Priest's argument. Let us assume that (1) is true, that is, that the universe did come into existence out of nothing. If so, we can conclude that the universe came into existence out of nothing *pre-existing*. Therefore, (1) entails:

(2) The cosmos came into existence out of nothing pre-existing.

Some philosophers would be happy to take (2) not just as a consequence of (1) but as equivalent to (1).[2] In any event, if (1) entails (2), then *a fortiori* it entails:

(3) The cosmos came into existence out of no pre-existing chunk of clay.

Now let us assume that the prepositional objects 'nothing pre-existing' and 'no pre-existing chunk of clay' are quantified expressions. If so, and if the traditional style of paraphrase is correct, then (2) and (3) are tantamount, respectively, to

(2*) No thing *x* that pre-existed the cosmos is such that the cosmos came into existence out of *x*,

(3*) No chunk of clay *x* that pre-existed the cosmos is such that the cosmos came into existence out of *x*.

But again, these are the wrong results. Intuitively, (2) and (3)—precisely like (1)—entail (C), while (2*) and (3*) do not.

If Priest's reasoning were sound, we should conclude that 'nothing pre-existing' and 'no pre-existing chunk of clay' occur as terms in (2) and (3), respectively. But we feel no temptation to do so. For one thing, we cannot see what sort of object, say, 'no pre-existing chunk of clay' would denote in that case (the object that is *no-pre-existing-chunk-of-clay-ness* not being an option). Note that the problem is not that the denotatum does not exist;

[2] Referring to Aquinas' *Summa contra gentiles* (932), Kretzmann (1999: 74) claims that 'out of nothing pre-existing' (*ex nullo praeexistente*) is "a wordy surrogate for the familiar, elegant 'out of nothing' (*ex nihilo*)".

the problem is that no reasonable candidate denotatum comes into mind at all. Moreover, Priest's intended conclusion is that there is something special with 'nothing', which makes it deeply different from ordinary negative quantified expressions. Therefore, holding that 'no pre-existing chunk of clay' is a singular term as it occurs in (3), besides being a major departure from any contemporary semantic theory we know of, would defeat the very purpose of Priest's argument.

In passing, let us observe that there is nothing exceptional in prepositional phrases like 'out of nothing (pre-existing)' or 'out of no pre-existing chunk of clay'. Consider, for instance, the following sentences:

(4) John hit Tom for nothing;

(5) Lincoln began to study jurisprudence with nobody;

(6) Mary said 'Hello!' to no one in particular.

The inference from (4) to 'John hit Tom' is intuitively valid, or at least as valid as the inference from (1) (or from (2), or from (3)) to (C). And the same holds for (5)–(6): each of them intuitively entails the sentence obtained by dropping the prepositional phrase therein. But again, we feel no temptation to regard 'nothing', 'nobody', and 'no one in particular' as singular terms.

It is thus plausible to suppose that (1) is naturally understood to entail (C) for reasons that are independent of whether 'nothing' occurs as a term or a quantifier in (1). Therefore, Priest's argument does not provide convincing evidence that 'nothing' occurs as a term in (1) (regardless of whether 'nothing' actually occurs as a term or not). We conclude that Priest's argument is invalid and, hence, unsound.

It has been sometimes objected to us that, in our case against Priest's argument, we rely on false analogy. More specifically, we presuppose that (1) has the same form as (2) (or (3)). This presupposition is false, so the objection goes, precisely because there is a neat

difference between ‘nothing’ and ‘nothing pre-existing’. It is independently plausible to suppose that ‘nothing’ occurs as a term (and not as a quantified expression) in (1), while it is not plausible to suppose that ‘nothing pre-existing’ occurs as a term in (2)—for instance, because the former, but not the latter, can be substituted *salva significatione* with a term like ‘nothingness’. If, however, ‘nothing’ occurs as a term in (1) and ‘nothing pre-existing’ occurs as a quantified expression in (C), then we are comparing sentences endowed with different logical forms.

The problem with this objection is obvious: it begs the question. It is dialectically unfair to rebut our objection against Priest’s argument that ‘nothing’ occurs as a term in (1) *based on the view* that ‘nothing’ occurs as a term in (1). This kind of dialectical move can be used to secure any possible argument from any possible attack.

We are prepared to grant that there are further arguments for the view that ‘nothing’ occurs as a term in (1), independent of the one we have discussed thus far. However, it exceeds the scope of this brief note to rebut any such argument.

3. At this point, our main task—arguing that Priest’s argument is unsound—is done. We think, however, that the phenomenon Priest pointed out has independent interest. Thus, let us say something positive on the intuition that (1), as opposed to (1*), entails (C).

Let us start by stressing that, albeit there is a natural understanding of (1) in which (1) entails (C), this understanding is not the only possible one. For instance, the following dialogue sounds perfectly coherent to us:

(D) — What did the cosmos come into existence out of?

— The cosmos came into existence out of nothing: it always existed.

Sentence (1), as it occurs in (D), is *not* understood to entail (C). Hence, it is important to keep in mind that the entailment relation between (1) and (C) is not there independently of the way in which (1) is understood.

We think that Priest is definitely right in maintaining that (1) is semantically different from what he takes to be its quantificational analysis, (1*). However, the difference has little to do with the distinction between terms and quantifiers. The point is rather that (1*) is a negative sentence—that is, a sentence in which a negation takes sentential scope—while sentences like (1) and its cognates are naturally understood as positive sentences with negative prepositional objects. To illustrate, compare (1) with:

(1_N) The cosmos didn't come into existence out of anything.

Out of the blue, (1) and (1_N) convey different contents. (1) says that the cosmos came into existence in a certain 'negative' way, namely, out of nothing. In contrast, (1_N) says that the cosmos *did not* come into existence in a certain 'positive' way, namely, out of something. Nevertheless, if our only option of formalisation is the quantificational treatment offered by Priest, we are forced to analyse both (1) and (1_N) as the same, negative sentence (1*).

The moral is, we need a more sophisticated formalisation, which enables us to get the difference between negative sentences and positive sentences with negative prepositional objects right. Within this note, we shall limit ourselves to considering Davidson's (1967) well-known event analysis.[3]

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[3] We stick with Davidson's original style of analysis for it is simple and very well known among philosophers, but our favourite choice would be a neo-Davidsonian treatment (see Maienborn 2012 for an overview of both Davidson's original proposal and its main developments). More specifically, we think that the use of (something like) neo-Davidsonian thematic roles is indispensable to make for a sufficiently general account of the difference between negative sentences and positive sentences involving negative objects.

In a Davidsonian frame, the perceived difference between (1) and (1_N) is dealt with in terms of a scope distinction:

(1†) Some event *e* of the cosmos coming into existence took place and no *x* is such that *e* took place out of *x*,

(1‡) It is not the case that (some event *e* of the cosmos coming into existence took place and some *x* is such that *e* took place out of *x*),

that is (ignoring tense-related complexities):

$\exists e$ (ComeIntoExistence (Cosmos, e) $\wedge \neg \exists x$ (OutOf (e, x))),

$\neg \exists e$ (ComeIntoExistence (Cosmos, e) $\wedge \exists x$ (OutOf (e, x))).

If (1) is analysed as (1†), then it *does* entails (C), for (1†) entails that the cosmos came into existence—and there is no way to come into existence without coming into existence at some time. Let us also note that a Davidsonian treatment allows to account for the distinction between two readings of (1)—a preferred, positive reading and the alternative, negative reading found in (D)—in terms of a scope ambiguity.

While the appeal to a Davidsonian analysis is useful for the purpose of clarity and definiteness, it is not indispensable. If you feel uncomfortable with the ontological commitment to events that an analysis like (1†) seems to inject into (1), you can safely analyse it as (say) 'The cosmos came into existence, and did it out of nothing'.

Indeed, to offer an informal account of the intuition that (1) entails (C), there is no need to resort to a paraphrase at all. All is needed is to keep in mind that, in its most natural reading, (1) is a positive sentence, which concerns the way in which the universe came into existence, and not a negative sentence, which denies that the universe came into existence in a certain way.

Let us note that this explanation of why (1) intuitively entails (C) is much more general than Priest's, as it can be easily extended to sentences like (2)–(6), in which the

prepositional object is not plausibly regarded as a singular term. From this viewpoint, Priest's explanation sounds unmistakably *ad hoc*.

4. Two referees for this Journal have suggested (but not endorsed) two explanations of the perceived entailment between (1) and (C) that are different from both our own account and Priest's. These explanations have independent interest, and we are happy to discuss them here.

According to the first explanation, albeit (1) is correctly analysed as (1*), it conveys something like the content of (C) by way of Gricean conversational implicature. If we understand the proposal correctly, the point is that (1) would amount to an unnecessarily poor (or misleading) informative contribution if used by a speaker who believes that the universe did not come into existence at all. Whatever its merits, it seems to us this explanation cannot be used to rebut Priest's argument. Recall that Priest's point is that (1) is perceived to entail (C) in a way that (1*) (or its informal counterpart (1_N)) is not. But if (1) is correctly analysed as (1*), then (1), (1*) and (1_N) all have the same content, and so the Gricean explanation equally applies to each of them.

The second explanation, mentioned by the other reviewer, pivots on presuppositions. It is well known that manner adverbials such as 'abruptly' or 'with a knife' trigger the presupposition that the main phrase they are attached to is true (see, e.g., Abbott 2006). For instance, 'The cosmos came into existence abruptly' presupposes (C), as witnessed by the fact that its negation also presupposes (C) (albeit this time the presupposition is cancellable, as is generally the case with presuppositions projected from negative contexts). Now, so the explanation goes, it is plausible to assume that phrases like 'out of nothing' and 'out of something' are also presupposition triggers. As evidence for this assumption, the reviewer points out that the negations of (1) and of

(7) The cosmos came into existence out of something

both presuppose (C) as well. And if we take 'out of nothing' as a presupposition trigger, the reviewer suggests, then we are in a position to explain the entailment relation between (1) and (C) with no need to resort to either our explanation or Priest's.

We are sympathetic with the view that (1) presupposes (C)—at least insofar as *out of nothing* counts as a manner of coming into existence. Moreover, if one adopts (some refined version of) our account, one can get this presuppositional fact right, for one can assign 'out of nothing' a formal role akin to that of manner adverbials.

Still, we strongly doubt that the presuppositional explanation is sufficient to rebut Priest's argument. Among other things, it suffers from a similar problem as the Gricean account. Suppose that we analyse both (1) and (1_N) as (1*)—that is, as (a semiformal version of) the negation of (7). If so, the presuppositional explanation predicts that (1) presupposes (C). However, it also predicts that (1_N) presupposes (1). Therefore, the appeal to presuppositions, as such, does not explain why (1) is felt to entail (C) in a way that a negative sentence like (1_N) is not. Priest's challenge strikes back.

We are conscious that these all-too-brief remarks against the Gricean and the presuppositional accounts are not unassailable. As an example, our criticism presupposes Priest's view that (1) is inferentially different from (1*) (and (1_N)), and this presupposition can be contested. As another example, the advocate of the presuppositional account could try to argue that something in the structure of (1_N) blocks the projection of presupposition (C). Lack of space prevents us from discussing these and other possible reactions further. Let us note, however, that even if we are wrong and either the Gricean or the presuppositional account is correct, the main goal of the present note—viz., arguing that Priest's argument is invalid—is still secured, for both explanations are independent of whether 'nothing' occurs as a term or as a quantifier in (1).

5. For all that has been said so far, it may still be true that the notion of an entity that is nothing plays a somewhat basic role in our understanding of reality. Priest's argument, however, clearly fails to prove that. Moreover, as the analogy between (1) and examples (2)–(6) illustrates, there are general linguistic reasons to think that, at least insofar as coming into existence out of nothing is taken to be a way of coming into existence, the notion of an entity that is nothing plays no essential role in our understanding of generation *ex nihilo*. By the same reasoning, similar conclusions hold for annihilation, the (possible) finiteness of the universe, and the like.

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