Nonetheism
A Non-atheistic Account of a Non-existent God

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ABSTRACT   I briefly defend a view I call nonetheism: the claim that God is a non-existent item. I develop a defense that might be acceptable to a theist, but I also note that arguments for atheism would also support this claim. As such, nonetheism is a form of theism that is actually supported by the case for atheism. I begin by showing that it is possible for there to be a non-existent object—that such an idea is coherent. I then argue that a non-existent item is actual and follow this with a defense of the coherency of claiming that God is a non-existent object. The paper concludes by demonstrating that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* entails the non-existence of God and so any evidence in support of creation from nothing is evidence in support of nonetheism.

For Pidor

1. THE QUESTION OF GOD'S RELATIONSHIP TO BEING

According to the most popular interpretation of the claim, "God exists," God cannot be one more thing that has being in the way that you and I have being. His existence must be special compared to the other things. Within Christianity, a consensus has emerged that the category of being is one of the primary ways in which God transcends the created order. One traditional view is that God's existence is metaphysically necessary, and so He exists in every possible world.[1]

Another very ancient idea is that God is beyond being. This is usually understood to mean that God is too great to be contained by such concepts. It is not entirely clear to me what it could mean to say that something is

neither existent nor non-existent. Compare it to the very clear understanding we have of necessary existence, which can be articulated in terms of possible world semantics or the Aristotelian concept of a thing's essence. In addition, the fact that this position seems to violate the Law of Excluded Middle (LEM) would seem to count against it.

Not everyone has agreed with the idea that God's existence is in some sense special. The final quarter of the twentieth century saw philosophers defending the idea that God exists contingently.[2] This is not saying that such philosophers deny that God is transcendent, but such transcendence is to be characterized in terms of properties other than existence.

But there is a possibility that has not been seriously considered: the position that *God fails to exist*. By this I do not mean the same thing as an atheist means when he utters these words. I do not mean that there is nothing at all that answers to the label "God" or that what does answer to the label is reducible to some very homely entity—such as our sense of purpose. I am claiming that there is a God, but He does not exist. I should also emphasize that it does not amount to some sort of post-modern analysis of theistic mythology either. By the claim "God is a non-existent object" I do not mean that God is merely an object sustained by our beliefs and practices. On the contrary I have in mind a realist view of God. The term *realist* is intended to mean that this view picks out something that is independent of our beliefs, narratives and rituals, and it is identical to the way God has been understood in classical theism, other than the fact that it fails to have being.

For want of a better term I will call the theological position that I am defending *nonetheism*—a combination of noneism (the view that some things do not exist) and theism. Given that nonetheism is named after noneism, there is a need to clarify the relationship between these. Some may be tempted to think that nonetheism leads in some way to noneism. After all, if God is non-existent, aren't other things non-existent too? And given that noneism is so deeply problematic, surely it follows that nonetheism should be rejected? Whatever one might think of the arguments for and against noneism, I would like to make it clear that nonetheism can be articulated independently of noneism and certainly does not inherit any implausibil-

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1. The discussion in this section is a simplified account of the history. Obviously there are complexities that I do not entertain. For example, the position I defend has similarities to the views of Plotinus and it might be that his is not an alternative to my own. However, these complications are not relevant to the argument I develop.

2. Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004).

ity that may or may not infect noneism.[3] Noneism and nonetheism are committed to very different accounts of what it is for an object to exist, and so very different accounts of what it means for an object to be non-existent. According to the nonetheist, to exist is to exemplify properties.[4] So to fail to exist is to fail to exemplify properties. But then there would be nothing left to differentiate one non-being from another. Hence, according to nonetheism, and contra noneism, there can be only one non-being and that non-being must be God. Noneism holds that there is a plenitude of non-existent items and so a non-being can have any number of properties. It would appear that most contemporary noneists take something to be non-existent if and only if it cannot causally interact with the physical objects of this universe—i.e., contemporary noneists tend to be physicalist in their metaphysics and empiricist in their epistemology.[5]

Now it might be thought that there is another position that can be taken in analyzing the relationship between God and being. This is the so-called Scholastic view of God's existence, according to which the relationship in question is one of identity, and not exemplification. Rather than God possessing existence, God is identical to his existence or God's essence is to exist. I am rather reluctant to interpret the scholastic position as an alternative to nonetheism. To identify divine existence with divine essence is to offer a reductive analysis of divine existence—God's existence is nothing more than his essence. In other words, God does not exist—he is just an object with a specified essence. There is likely to be a response along the following lines from the Scholastic tradition. The identity between existence and essence cannot be understood as a reductive move. This is because the sense of *existence* being used in the claim is not univocal with the meaning of the term as we use it for other objects, but it has an analogous sense. The difference between the two notions of existence is captured by the fact that God's is identical to his essence and ours is not. Or to put it in a slightly different way, it is not that there is no existence in this instance, rather it is that there is a different "kind" of existence.

My response: if the Scholastic wishes to call such a state *being* or *existence*, then that is fine by me. But such a stipulation does not compel, for it is

3. Graham Priest, *Toward Non-Being: The Logic and Metaphysics of Intentionality* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), hereafter cited as *TNB*; and Richard Routley, *Exploring Meinong's Jungle and Beyond: An Investigation of Noneism and the Theory of Items* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1980), hereafter cited as *EMJ*.

4. James Porter Moreland, *Universals* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001).

5. *TNB*, 106; Richard Sylvan, *Transcendental Metaphysics: From Radical to Deep Plurallism* (Cambridge: White Horse Press, 1997), 220.

nothing more than a stipulation. Now Scholastic philosophers will probably resist this interpretation of their theology because they are of the view that God would need to exist in some ontologically significant sense in order for him to exercise his omnipotence and create the world. Later in the paper I will show that this is not required, and so there is nothing stopping them from taking the next step to nonetheism. This would make nonetheism, at least in the eyes of the Holy See, an orthodox account of the divine.

The remainder of the paper is a defense of nonetheism, i.e., the view that God is a non-existent object. I defend four main claims: that it is possible for there to be a non-existent object; that there actually is a non-existent object; that it is possible for God to be a non-existent object; and that God is / must be a non-existent object. With regard to the first of these, I argue that a non-existent object is an object that fails to exemplify properties, and I defend the account of objecthood that this presupposes. I then examine three arguments that purport to show that such a thing is impossible. Firstly, that various indispensable logical concepts presuppose that an object has existence and so it is impossible to coherently speak of non-existent objects. Secondly, that objects are merely bundles of properties and so there cannot be a property-less object. Thirdly, that a property-less object entails various contradictions, and given that a contradiction lacks meaningful content, there cannot be a property-less object. I show that all of these arguments fail to be convincing, and so it would appear to be possible for an object to be non-existent.

I follow this defense of the possibility of a non-being with an examination of whether there is in fact such an object. Noneism has a number of arguments for the actuality of non-existent objects and I show both why these are not compatible with nonetheism and why some of them are not even sound. I then present my own argument for why there is an actual non-existent object as postulated by nonetheism.

I then proceed to examine the issue of whether it is coherent to suppose that God could be a non-existent object. The primary reason for thinking that such an object could not be identified with God centers on the fact that God is not only causally responsible for existent objects but that there is no limit to his causal powers. But, or so the objection goes, a non-existent object cannot causally affect existent things. This is because a non-existent God has no properties and properties are the necessary source of causal capability. I respond by showing that there is no sound reason for thinking that an object without properties cannot be the source of existent effects. In addition, it turns out that there is good reason for thinking that a non-existent object is omnipotent.

I conclude the paper by arguing that there is good reason for thinking that God, the creator of the universe, is a non-existent being. This arises from the fact that creation from nothing is metaphysically impossible and so only a non-existent object can perform such an act. But given that there is good evidence that the universe was brought into existence from nothing, it follows that there is good reason for thinking that God is indeed non-existent.

Before proceeding I should emphasize that I provide a defense of nonetheism that someone with theistic inclinations may find convincing. In this paper I do not make use of the many atheistic arguments that, if sound, would also support the claim that God is non-existent. But nonetheism is a version of theism that, far from being undermined by the case for atheism, will be confirmed by it. It is clear that nonetheism has access to a defense that is unavailable to other forms of theism and this counts in its favor.

2. Can There Be a Non-Existent Object?

As a first attempt at articulating what is wrong with the claim that it is possible for there to be a non-existent object, the opponent of nonetheism may wish to assert the following: *existence is a necessary condition for being an object.* Such a claim assumes that actuality is exhausted by being. But this is to beg the question against the position I am advocating. The point being made by views such as noneism and nonetheism is that actuality is not exhausted by that which exists.

Alongside that which exists, there are non-existent items residing as fellow inhabitants of the actual world. In order for the objection to have any force, it would need to be conjoined with an argument showing that a non-existent entity is impossible.

One such argument has been raised by opponents of noneism.[6] According to this view claims about non-existent objects are incoherent because notions such as quantification are existentially loaded. Take the use of the term "there is" in the claim "there is an object that does not exist." Classical logic holds that quantification is existentially loaded. That is to say, when one refers to objects, and ascribes properties to them, one is implying that these objects exist. Statements such as "some things are red" entail that the red things exist. It follows that quantifying over non-existent objects—by saying, for example, that some things do not exist or $\exists x \, \neg E! \, x$—is inher-

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6. Terry Horgan, "Retreat from Non-Being," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 84, no. 4 (2006): 615–27, doi:10.1080/00048400601079185.

ently contradictory. But quantification is not the only logical concept that is said by the classical logician to be existentially loaded. Even the logical particle "is" is existentially loaded—both the "is" of reference and the "is" of predication. Statements such as "there is some object and it is red" entail that an object of that description exists. The word "is" denotes or captures what it is to exist. Hence, it makes no sense to claim that "there is a winged horse and it does not exist."

In their response to these objections, supporters of noneism have denied that quantification is always existentially loaded (*TNB*; *EMJ*). There are existentially neutral forms of quantification and these are illustrated by those cases cited above in which there is an apparently coherent quantifying over non-existent objects. For example, the statement "some of the Greek gods are male" seems to be straightforwardly coherent. As for the logical particle "is," the noneist will either claim that there are existentially neutral versions of this, or that it can be done away with in the case of claims about non-existent objects. For example, the statement "there is an object and it is red and it does not exist" can be rewritten as "the red object does not exist." Even if the former is incoherent, the latter would appear to be straightforwardly unproblematic. But the noneist need not concede that the "is" particle entails being. Perhaps the "is" of natural language is ambiguous between an existentially loaded term and one that is not, and that the noneist is using it in a disambiguated technical sense; or perhaps there are two senses of the word in natural language and the noneist is using the existentially neutral version.

The important point being made here by the nonetheist and the noneist is that our language is grounded in the deeper metaphysical fact that being does not exhaust actuality. Actuality is partly constituted by the non-existent and so we should not be surprised to learn that human thought has evolved so as to capture this. But this response does shift the onus to the nonetheist to offer an alternative account of existence that allows for there to be a non-existent object, and yet is plausible on independent grounds. I am of the view that the traditional account of existence satisfies both conditions. According to this account *an object exists if and only if it exemplifies properties.*[7] It follows from this account that a non-existent

7. Moreland, *Universals*, 134–9. It might be asked how this account of existence relates to the following account: "an existent item is any item that is an actual member of the world." It is not clear that this account is incompatible with the traditional account that an object exists if and only if it instantiates properties. To see this, consider what it might mean for an object to be an actual member of the world. One way to flesh this out is in terms of commonality of properties or nature: what makes something a member of the

object is an object that does not exemplify any properties at all. To claim, therefore, that God is non-existent is to claim that He does not exemplify any properties—God is a property-less object. I will not rehearse the arguments for this account of existence in this paper, as they are sufficiently well known and articulated elsewhere.[8] However, there is a requirement for me to explain how this account of existence allows for the possibility of a non-existent object. This is because on some accounts of objecthood a property-less object amounts to a non-entity, i.e., the complete absence of an object. According to the so-called "bundle" theory of objects, all there is to an object is its properties, i.e., an object is merely a bundle of properties. On this account, it is indeed incoherent to claim that God is a non-existent object.

My response to this objection is to reject the claim that there is nothing left once all the properties are removed. The bundle theory has been found to be problematic, and for some very well known reasons.[9] Such a theory of objects is unable to explain the unity of an object, and the fact that there is a stable core that is the basis of all change that an object goes through. In addition, natural language about objects implies that properties belong to something or are exemplified by something. Indeed, the bundle theory would appear to make properties themselves a kind of substantial core, each of which exemplifies its own characteristics. So it is not clear that the bundle theory avoids entailing a substance theory.

What exactly this substantial core is that lay beneath its properties is a matter of some controversy, with some preferring the "bare particular" theory and others a more Aristotelian account.[10] What is crucial for the discussion at hand, however, is that although the substantial core beneath the properties of an object is indeterminate (because considered in and of itself it has no properties), it does not follow from this that it is a nothing. Rather, there is a perfectly simple item with no structure or differentiation, and it stands in no relations with anything else (again considered in the

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world is that it has something in common with other members. But given God lacks any properties, there is no basis for commonality and thus no basis for membership. Another possibility is to understand membership in terms of causal accessibility on the part of other members. In lacking properties, God cannot be accessed by other members. Hence, God is not an actual member of the universe.

8. Kant famously argued in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (A 600 / B 628) that existence cannot be just another property alongside others but must be another category altogether.

9. Mark R. Nowacki, *The Kalam Cosmological Argument for God* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2007), 203–10; and Edward Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics: A Contemporary Introduction* (Heusenstamm: Editiones Scholasticae, 2014), 177–84.

10. Moreland, *Universals,* 140–57.

absence of its properties). Now you may be of the opinion that the idea of such a thing is incoherent. But why think this? We cannot imagine such a thing but we can conceive it as some sort of ideal limit to the process of abstracting properties from an object. Moreover, there is nothing about the item, as it has no properties, which would generate an incoherency—nothing that could produce any difficulties for anything else. Now you may also be of the view that such a thing could not possibly exist. Well I agree, but this does not constitute a refutation of nonetheism. On the contrary, it is a confirmation of nonetheism. There is nothing about such an object—again because it does not exemplify any properties—that would enable it to get a grip in the realm of being.

Now it should be pointed out that nonetheism can afford to concede that the bundle theory is truly applicable to all non-divine items, yet deny that this is how the object at the center of our discussion (which I identify with God) is to be characterized. But there should also be nothing particularly objectionable for the advocate of the bundle theory in granting that God is an exception to his overall theory of objects. God is an indeterminate and non-composite something rather than a mere collection of properties as other objects in the world are, given the bundle theory.

There are other arguments with the potential to show that a property-less object is a non-object and so impossible. One such example is rooted in an ancient theory of negation and the alleged contradictory nature of a property-less object. I have in mind here the *cancellation* account of negation and its attendant account of contradiction, the *null* account. According to the cancellation account of negation, when we negate a sentence p we cancel or erase its content. A contradiction, $p \wedge \neg p$, will, therefore, fail to have any content at all. According to this, a contradiction, being the conjunction of a sentence and its negation, would be self-nullifying:

> $\sim$ A deletes, neutralizes, erases, cancels A (and similarly, since the relation is symmetrical, A erases $\sim$ A), so that $\sim$ A together with A leaves nothing, no content.[11]

A contradiction is a meaningless string of symbols. It is without propositional content and so can be neither true nor false—that is to say, it is not the kind of thing that can have a truth value. It should be emphasized that in saying that contradictions fail to have a truth value, I am not saying

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11. Richard Routley and Val Routley, "Negation and Contradiction," *Revista Colombiana de Matematicas* 19 (1985): 205.

that they have a truth value of neither true nor false. At times some logicians have expressed that they find it difficult to see the distinction.[12] But the distinction seems to me to be obvious. On the cancellation account a contradiction is just not the kind of thing that can have a truth value (because such a thing does not say anything). That is to say, it is a category mistake to give a contradiction a truth value. This is very different from a proposition that has a third truth value that is different from either true or false. Whilst the latter violates the LEM, the former does not—the LEM only applies to sentences with content.

If it turns out that the notion of property-less object entails a contradiction, then there is no such object. This is because the proposition describing the object would entail a contradiction and so a contentless proposition. But a proposition with meaningful content cannot entail a contentless/meaningless proposition. So the proposition describing the object cannot have meaningful content either. A contentless proposition does not describe anything let along an object. The nature of the object would amount to sheer nonsense.

Does a property-less object entail any contradictions? Some may be tempted to answer that it does, and on the basis of the claim that predication is necessarily rooted in property possession. We have claimed that the object in question is without properties. But this is to predicate of the object that it has no properties. However, according to this theory of predication, this is rooted in the property of *an absence of properties*. Hence, we have contradicted ourselves and the notion of a property-less object is internally inconsistent. My response is to simply deny that all predications are rooted in properties. In particular the predication "is without properties" is made true not by the fact that there is a property of *without properties* but by the fact that the object has no properties. Does that mean that the notion of a property-less object entails no contradictions? I think it does entail various contradictions and I will be outlining some of these in a later section of the paper. It turns out that such an object has no limits to what it can achieve. As is well known, such a concept of omnipotence generates various contradictions. But, as I shall show below, these will not count against the truth of nonetheism.

There are good reasons, however, for thinking that the cancellation view of negation, and the null theory of contradiction, are unacceptable. Very few logicians would accept the null account as the true account of nega-

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12. Graham Priest, *An Introduction to Non-Classical Logic* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 126.

tion. Certainly it is not the classical account. In classical logic, far from contradictions having no content, they have total content, because in classical logic a contradiction entails any proposition at all. Opponents of the cancellation view have pointed out that it entails that all contradictions have equivalent content. Take the following comment on of the cancellation view:

> The simple cancellation view is . . . defective, since not all contradictions carry the same information: they differ in what they entail, some of them entailing some things, others entailing other things.[13]

I agree that one of the implications of the cancellation view is that all contradictions have the same content, specifically they have no content at all. As such, $A \wedge \neg A$ entails $B \wedge \neg B$, which in turn entails $C \wedge \neg C$, and so on. However, it is clear that the sentence "it is both raining and not raining at the present time" is making a very different claim to the sentence "the ball is both red all over and not red all over." So it cannot be the case that contradictions lack content.

Moreover, it is not at all clear that the cancellation account of negation entails the null account of contradiction. The above two descriptions from Routley and Routley explaining how the cancellation account of negation entails that contradictions have no content is arguably mistaken. If S cancels out not-S, then not-S cannot cancel out S. But by symmetry of reasoning, S cannot cancel out not-S, as the former has itself been canceled out by the latter. So, far from canceling each other out, the two should be perfectly balanced, much like two equally strong but opposite physical forces as proposed by Newtonian mechanics. If this is correct, then the cancellation view of negation will entail what has been termed a partial account of contradiction.[14] According to this account, the contradiction $A \wedge \neg A$ will entail both A and $\neg A$ individually. This is to be contrasted with the total account of classical logic in which the contradiction $A \wedge \neg A$ will entail B, i.e., anything at all. The partial account is the basis of paraconsistent logics and non-trivial forms of dialetheism, and is arguably the nature of negation as used in natural reasoning (*CST*, 17–25).

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13. Routley and Routley, "Negation and Contradiction," 212.

14. This typology is from Graham Priest, "Negation as Cancellation, and Connexive Logic," *Topoi* 18, no. 2 (1999): 141–2, doi:10.1023/A:1006294205280. The typology, but with slightly different terminology, can also be found in Graham Priest, *In Contradiction: A Study of the Transconsistent*, 2nd ed., (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 31–2 (hereafter cited as *CST*); and Routley and Routley, "Negation and Contradiction," 205–9.

Given that the cancellation and null accounts are to be rejected, any contradictions entailed by the property-less object will provide us with further reason for thinking that such an object is non-existent and yet still an object. This is based on the assumption that the Law of Non-Contradiction (LNC) is true of the realm of being. Note that I am not claiming that the LNC is true without restriction. Rather, I am claiming that it applies to existent things only. This is a view of the LNC that even a dialetheist can be comfortable with.[15]

Of course, some may be of the view that such inconsistencies would do far more damage than merely entail that the object that instantiates them could not possibly exist. According to classical logic, a contradiction entails anything, as the so called inference of explosion is valid (from a contradiction anything follows). If a situation entails a contradictory object, then everything is true in that situation, including the situation in which nonetheism is true. My response to this is to reject the claim that explosion is valid. It is clear that some sort of paraconsistent logic (a logic in which explosion is invalid) is the logic of natural reasoning. Classical logic, despite accurately simulating natural reasoning in many other ways, fails in this regard. This is evident from the very fact that we can sensibly reason about contradictory situations without everything holding in that situation (*CST*, 56–64). This is not to say that we have at hand a complete formal system of paraconsistent logic. There are currently attempts along such lines and they have met with some success.[16] But the lack of such a system does not tell against the evidence from natural language that paraconsistency is a characteristic of a true logic.

3. Is There a Non-existent Object?

Now at this point the opponent of nonetheism may wish to concede that it is possible for an object to be non-existent, but point out that there is no satisfying reason for concluding that there actually is such an object. In replying to this, it might be thought that a good place to start is with the arguments that have been developed by contemporary noneists. At least

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15. The most plausible forms of dialetheism restrict true contradictions to the logical realm, such as the liar sentence. Other less plausible forms espouse contradictions generated by change (see *CST*, 159–81).

16. *CST*, 110–24. See Diderik Batens et al., eds., *Frontiers of Paraconsistent Logic* (Baldock, Hertfordshire: Research Studies Press, 2000). See also Graham Priest, *An Introduction to Non-Classical Logic: From If to Is*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 120–85, 456–533.

two positive arguments can be made for the truth of noneism. The first is based on the simple observation that non-existent objects appear to play an indispensable role in natural language, science and fiction (*TNB*; *EMJ*). The second is that postulating non-existent objects provides a very attractive solution to some difficult and outstanding problems in philosophy and that this utility entails that there are such objects.[17] Both of these arguments are attempts to show that if we postulate a plenitude of non-beings, then we can make sense of language and thought about non-beings. If such arguments are sound, then they will undermine nonetheism. This is because nonetheism entails that there is only one non-existent object and not a plenitude of these. It is in the interest of the nonetheist to show that such arguments are not convincing.

How convincing are these arguments? I would like to suggest that they are not particularly convincing and this is because they assume that there are no alternative accounts of non-being in thought and language other than noneism. However, there are alternative accounts of thought and language about non-being. One viable alternative is to claim that thought and language about non-being correspond not to concrete objects which exemplify certain properties but to sets of abstract objects such as properties or propositions.[18] The nonetheist will make use of such alternative theories in accounting for the frequent reference to non-being in natural language, science and mathematics. But, strictly speaking, the nonetheist will believe that there is only one non-existent object. All other references to non-beings are references to sets of properties or propositions.

However, the noneist has independent reason for postulating a plenitude of non-being that does not depend on showing that noneism is the best account of language and thought about non-being. The line of argument is fundamental to contemporary noneism, and it forms part of the defense of what is known as the Characterization Principle (CP): that a non-existent object has the properties it is described or characterized as having. This principle enables the noneist to postulate a non-existent object satisfying any particular set of conditions, and this in turn enables the noneist to correlate any thought about non-being with a non-existent

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17. Routley explores noneist approaches to a number of issues including the problem of abstract objects, the mind-body problem, the nature of possibility, the problem of change and the nature of fiction (cf. *EMJ*). Sylvan applies noneism to the problem of the nature of ultimate reality. For Sylvan ultimate reality is a non-existent item called the *wholle* (cf. Sylvan, *Transcendental Metaphysics*).

18. Kenneth J. Perszyk, *Nonexistent Objects: Meinong and Contemporary Philosophy* (London: Kluwer, 1993), 24, 33 note 1, 151–223.

object. The CP is said to follow from a simple premise: "only being, as opposed to non-being, requires special conditions." The following quote from an opponent of noneism expresses this fact well:

> Nobody needs to think of a thing in order for it not to exist, . . . [non-existent objects] . . . pertain even if nobody has thought of the object. So, even if nobody has ever thought of a perpetual motion machine, it still does not exist.[19]

According to this line of thought, existence is a special state that requires explanation, whilst failing to exist is the default state and so requires no explanation. As such, the set of conditions required for the actuality of non-existent objects, the null set, obtains and so non-existent objects are actual. It follows that there is a plenitude of non-being, and the CP is true.

It is not difficult to see the error in this line of reasoning. It is true that a non-existent object does not require an explanation for why it is non-existent. This is because there is no such property as non-existence. Rather than amounting to the possession of the property of non-existence, being non-existent amounts to the failure to possess the property of existence (assuming, as the noneist does, that existence is a property). Because non-existence is not a property, there is no need to account for why something is in possession of it. However, it is clear that a given non-existent object does possess properties, and the fact that it possesses such properties does require an explanation. Not only that, but the explanation must be external to a given object, because an object in possession of properties is not self-explanatory. It does not follow that such objects obtain without the need for special conditions. On the contrary, they require the presence of something that explains the instantiation of these properties in that object—something that explains why these particular properties, and not some other properties or no properties at all, form, or inhere in, a single object. In the absence of such special conditions, there is no reason to think that these objects are a part of the actual world. Their non-being is not sufficient reason for thinking they are actual.

In addition, it is clear that the CP can be used to construct a *reductio ad absurdum*. Since noneism was revived by Meinong in the early twentieth century, opponents have argued that noneism entails various falsehoods. These come in two varieties. The first are those that entail violations of

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19. Carolyn Swanson, *Reburial of Nonexistents: Reconsidering the Meinong-Russell Debate* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), 10.

fundamental logical laws such as the LEM and the LNC.[20] The CP clearly entails that there are non-beings with contradictory properties and others with indeterminate properties. Consider, for example, the object characterized as being square and as being round. Such an object is both square and round and so it is both square and not square. Also consider the object characterized as being neither bald nor hairy—this object neither has hair nor fails to have hair.

The second type are those that imply empirically false claims about existent objects.[21] Take for example, the object that is characterized as being the current Pope and being married. According to the CP, this entails that the Pope is married. Or take the object described as being Australia and a Republic. According to the CP, this entails that Australia is a republic and not a constitutional monarchy.

Opponents of noneism often argue that because noneism treats existence as being on the same ontological level as other properties (i.e., existence is treated as just another property or set of properties) noneism entails not only a plenitude of non-existent objects but also a plenitude of existent objects. For any property or set of properties (including existence), there is an object that is characterized as possessing that property. It is generally thought by these opponents that noneism is committed to a more generalized version of the Characterization Principle, CP*: any object has the properties it is characterized as having. But any principle that entails that everything exists is obviously false.

Now there are various ways in which the noneist has responded to these objections, and these have involved either showing that the implications are not as problematic as initially thought, or by showing that these are not really implications of noneism by restricting in some manner the application of the CP. Often defenders of noneism combine both into a unified approach.[22] I will not examine these in any detail, because it is not clear such responses work. This is because noneism insists that existence be treated as just another property alongside other properties. So long as this is the case, it is difficult to see such responses as other than ad hoc solutions. What is missing is an attempt to show how these approaches fall naturally out of the notion of existence rather than merely being stipulated in order to avoid absurdity. One way to do this is to treat existence as another type of logical category altogether. This is the approach taken

20. Ibid., 13–28.
21. Ibid., 29–34.
22. *EMJ*, 507–10; *TNB*, 83–5; *CST*, 82–92, 110–22; Graham Priest, *Doubt Truth to be a Liar* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), 56–74.

in the traditional account of being: where existence is not a property but the very exemplification of a property. But as we have seen, this will collapse the plenitude of non-being into a unity of non-being.

So the nonetheist need not fear the various arguments the noneist has formulated in support of the claim that there is a plenitude of non-beings. But does the nonetheist have any reason for postulating a single non-being? This question is made more urgent by the fact that the nonetheist rejects the CP. But this raises a problem: how can we be sure that there is a non-existent God if the CP is not true? Surely it was the CP that acted as the foundation for being able to make claims about non-beings. What then is the foundation of nonetheism? The answer lies in what can be termed a non-ontological argument for a non-being—a *nontological* argument. We are guaranteed a non-being simply because such an object does not have any properties. It follows from the fact that such an object has no properties that it does not require any conditions for its being an object. Nothing at all has to take place for this object to be actual. But then it follows that this object is actual. After all, in the actual world, the set of conditions required for its actuality, the empty set, are present. So an object of pure non-being is most certainly actual. We have good reason, independent of the CP, for thinking that there is a single non-being of the kind postulated by nonetheism.

4. Can God be a Non-Existent Object?

There is reason for thinking that denying the existence of something need not lead to the conclusion that there is an absence of that thing. But is it possible for such a non-existent thing to be God? I suspect that although a theist might be willing to concede that a non-being is possible, he would baulk at the idea that such an object could be divine. Contrary to this, I will show that there are no good reasons for concluding that it is impossible for God to be non-existent.

One obvious reason for thinking that God could not be a non-existent object is as follows. God instantiates properties such as omnipotence, omniscience, immateriality, timelessness, omnipresence, and so God must exist. My response: omniscience, omnipotence, immateriality, and so on, are *not* properties. Rather, these terms denote the absence of certain restrictions, and therefore the absence of certain properties, in the divine nature. The claim that God is omnipotent, omniscient, immaterial, omnipresent, etc., means that there are no limits to God's power and knowledge, and He possesses no physical properties including a spatial location. What is es-

sential to the divine nature is not any specific set of properties, but rather the lack of any restrictions and, therefore, properties.

But there are further arguments for the claim that God is existent. For example, many theists claim that God is the most perfect being conceivable and that such perfection entails existence. Indeed, divine perfection has been the basis for one of the more infamous methods for proving the existence of God: the so-called *ontological argument*. The argument takes God's perfection as the defining nature of divinity, and it is claimed that existence is a necessary condition for perfection. But why think that perfection and existence are liked in this way? The most obvious link is via the concept of omnipotence. In order to qualify as perfect, it must be the case that God is capable of controlling any other possible object. But something must exist in order to causally affect that which exists—non-existent things cannot cause other things to exist nor can they have a causal influence on that which already exists.

I am willing to concede that if something is non-existent, then nothing can causally affect that non-existent object. The capacity to be affected by an existent thing would be a criterion for something to be existent. There is an important sense in which non-existent objects are beyond our reach. The question is whether we are beyond a non-being's reach. Why does the ability to cause things to exist and the ability to causally affect existent things require an object to exist? The reason that is most likely to be cited is that a non-existent object does not have properties, and properties are a necessary condition for something to have the ability to bring about a specified effect.

It is likely in this regard that the opponent of nonetheism will point to our experience of causation, which reveals the general causal structure of the world. Innumerable examples support the claim that exemplifying the requisite property is a necessary condition to be able to bring about certain effects. What is being contended here is perhaps best illustrated with an everyday example. The red hot poker resting in the fire place will burn my skin upon contact. But a stone cold poker will not achieve this. The exemplification of hotness in the poker would seem to be a necessary condition for the poker to burn my skin. It seems completely inexplicable how a poker, without the property of hotness, could cause my skin to burn upon contact. The general point seems to be that the nature of causation in the realm of being shows us that it is a necessary truth that effects ultimately spring from properties exemplified by their causes.

How might the nonetheist respond to this line of reasoning? The nonetheist will argue that the example cited above—the red-hot poker

example—is irrelevant to the question of whether it is possible for a property-less object to bring about effects, and this is for one very important reason. Although the case of the red hot poker involved the loss of the property in question, and this results in the object no longer having the capacity to produce the relevant effects, this is not because the object fails to exemplify any properties at all. Rather, it is because the property in question has been substituted by a new property, and this new property is unable to produce the effects in question. So it is not as if the poker loses all its properties in this incident. Rather, it takes on a new property (coldness for want of a better word) that is incompatible with being hot. A cold object simply does not have what it takes to burn my skin. But this is not at all relevant to the issue at hand. The issue at hand is whether an object with absolutely no properties could produce some set of effects. This is a situation in which an object loses a property without there being any replacement for it. The cases of causation we have in the world do not involve this. Rather, they involve the loss of a property because it has been replaced by another. But all this is quite compatible with the claim that an object without properties is able to also produce such effects.

Is there any positive reason for thinking that the nonetheist is right in claiming that a property-less object can bring about effects? I believe there is and it can be expressed as follows. It cannot be the case that a property-less object is unable to produce effects. This is because if it is the case that an object devoid of properties is incapable of causing effects, then this must be because there is some sort law that determines that an object without properties is impotent. But then this object stands in a relationship with such a law and so it does possess a property—the property of being so related with a law that restricts what effects it can produce. Moreover, there must be something intrinsic to the object that allows it to relate to these laws as opposed to not relating to them or relating to some other set of laws. But this is contrary to our starting assumption that the object is devoid of properties. Therefore, it is not the case that an object devoid of properties is unable to produce effects.

But the same line of reasoning can be used to show not only that a non-existent object can bring about effects, but that it can bring about any effect. A property-less object cannot be restricted by anything if it is to lack properties, as such restrictions constitute properties. There would exist a law that served to specify what this object could do and what it could not do. The object would stand in a relationship with this law. Moreover, the relationship would be rooted in some property intrinsic to the object,

which determined that the object relates to this law as opposed to not relating to it or as opposed to relating to some other law. So given that there is no limit to what such an object can achieve, it follows that such an object is omnipotent.

It is clear that the nonetheist and her opponent have rather different conceptions of the relationship between an object's properties and the effects it can achieve. The opponent of the nonetheist thinks of properties as the ultimate source of an object's power. On this account, the more complexity an object has, and so the more properties it exemplifies, the more it is capable of. The nonetheist, on the other hand, is essentially claiming that the properties act as filters that channel and restrict the powers of the underlying substance. They delineate and define an object to be a certain kind of thing as opposed to another, and so they delineate and define the capacity of an object to produce some set of effects as opposed to some other. The more complex an object, and so the more properties it possesses, the less power it has. This is because it is characterized by a greater number of restrictions that determine how it will behave and what effects it can give rise to. But the simpler an object, the greater its capacity for producing effects, as it contains less restrictions on its nature. Given that properties function to delineate, channel and restrict, an object without properties will have no restrictions on the effects it can give rise to and so will be omnipotent in an unrestricted sense.[23] Of course, the opponent of nonetheism can simply reject the account of causation that is presupposed by nonetheism. But it seems to me that this rejection would only make sense given a bundle theory of object. That is to say, it would only make sense if all there were to an object is its properties—only this would rule out there being any other possible source of effects. But this is not a particularly plausible account of objecthood. Moreover, it should be noted that properties, properly speaking, are abstract objects and so causally inert. At most, what can have causal power is an exemplified property. But this suggests that it is not the property doing the work as much as it is the substance underneath it that is the source of power.

It would appear therefore that an object devoid of properties is not only capable of achieving things, but there is no limit to what it can achieve. It is not the case that a non-existent object lacks perfection. On the contrary, it is existence that would appear to be the source of imperfection. This

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23. This is similar to how scholastic philosophy conceives of divine power—Robert J. Spitzer, *New Proofs for the Existence of God: Contributions of Contemporary Physics and Philosophy* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 121–32.

is because an existent object exemplifies properties and these properties set limits to what such an object can achieve. No longer are we entitled to use an ontological argument to argue the existence of God. Rather, we should be making use of the *nontological argument* outlined in the previous section to show that God is non-existent.

I began this section of the paper with a discussion of the implications that a particular style of argument for God's existence has for nonetheism, a style of proof known as the ontological argument. What though of the other types of proof for God's existence: proofs such as the cosmological and teleological arguments? If sound, would they not entail that God exists? It turns out that even if they are sound, they will not show God to be existent. Traditionally these arguments have been used to prove the existence of God based on his causal activity. But, as I have shown, God need not exist in order to be the cause of something. These arguments will not, as they are traditionally presented, show that God exists, even if they are sound. Additional premises are required in order to rule out that the cause of the universe is a non-being. However, as I will show in the next section, the prospects of being able to do this are rather dim.

5. Must God be a Non-Existent Object?

In the previous section I demonstrated that the doctrine of creation is compatible with nonetheism. Because a non-existent God is omnipotent, it follows that He could create a universe. In this section I will show that not only is the doctrine of creation *compatible* with nonetheism, but that the doctrine of creation *requires* nonetheism. But given that there is good evidence that God created the universe, it follows that there is good evidence that He is non-existent.

The specific doctrine I have in mind is that of *creatio ex nihilo*. According to this doctrine, God created the universe out of nothing by efficiently causing the existence of the universe *sans* a material cause. This doctrine is standard among Semitic forms of theism, such as Christianity, Islam, and Judaism. Many such theists seem to be unaware that this type of creation appears to be metaphysically impossible. That it is arguably impossible has resulted in many theists rejecting the doctrine and advocating alternative accounts of creation: so called emanationist accounts where God is both the efficient and material cause (advocated by many Indic traditions such as Non-dual Shaivism, Advaita Vedanta and Vishishtadvaita Vedanta) or accounts where God is the efficient cause acting on matter that exists eternally and independently of God (advocated by later versions of the Vedic

philosophy of Vaiśeṣika). One way to express the nature of this impossibility is with the following argument:

(1)   if it is possible for God to efficiently cause the universe to come from nothing, then nothingness contains the potency for the universe to exist;

(2)   it is not the case that nothingness contains the potency for the universe to exist;

(3)   therefore, it is not possible for God to efficiently cause the universe to come from nothing.[24]

Premise (2) seems obvious enough. After all, nothingness has no properties or structure at all, and so no potencies. But why think premise (1) is true? This premise would appear to be presupposing the following metaphysically necessary law of efficient and material causation:

> EMC: An efficient cause can bring something into existence only if there is available for activation a potency for that thing to exist.

There is very good reason for claiming that the EMC is true and necessarily so: its failure to hold would render the notion of efficient causation unintelligible.[25] In the event that the EMC did not hold, a given efficient cause could be followed by any effect what so ever, including no effect at all. In our universe, the striking of a match brings about a flame within a well-defined period of time.

But in the absence of the EMC, the striking of a match could bring about the production of ice blocks at any moment of time at all, including prior to the cause. In other words, there would be no meaningful connection between the cause and effect, and so no sense in which it was that cause which gave rise to that effect. Instead, there would be utter chaos with any event at all following any other. Such chaos would undermine any possibility of rational agency. Given the EMC, if an efficient cause is to bring a universe into existence from nothing (by acting on nothingness, i.e., no material cause), then that can only be because nothingness contains the relevant potencies. If there are no potencies, then there is nothing for an efficient cause to actualize.

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24. Paul Kabay, "A Noneist Account of the Doctrine of *Creatio Ex Nihilo*," *Sophia* 52, no. 2 (2013): 281–93, doi:10.1007/s11841-012-0323-3.

25. Edward Feser, *Aquinas* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), 51–5; and Feser, *Scholastic Metaphysics*, 88–159.

It is clear that nonetheism has what it takes to solve this difficulty. Metaphysically necessary laws of causation, such as EMC, only apply to things that exist or could exist and do not apply to a necessarily non-existent item such as God. Recall that a non-existent item fails to exemplify properties, because existence amounts to the exemplification of properties. But to be subject to a law of causation is to instantiate a property—specifically the property of being subject to such a law. Moreover, to be so related to this law entails possessing intrinsic characteristics that ground such a relation. So a non-existent item is in no way determined by such a law. It follows that premise (1) of the above argument—"if it is possible for God to efficiently cause the universe to come from nothing, then nothingness contains the potency for the universe to exist"—is false. There is a way to produce something from nothing that does not require nothingness to instantiate properties. According to nonetheism, a non-existent God can create *ex nihilo*, even if nothingness fails to instantiate potencies.

Those theists who insist on the truth of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* are therefore right to do so provided that they are willing to espouse the non-existence of God. The truth of this doctrine entails the truth of nonetheism. Can this be used as the basis of an argument for the truth of nonetheism? It can, but it will only be as convincing as the evidence for the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. Fortunately the evidence for the divine creation of the universe from nothing at all is rather good, as recent defenses of the so-called Kalam Cosmological Argument have demonstrated.[26]

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