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ON SOME SEMANTIC ASPECTS OF MEINONG'S  
THEORY OF OBJECTS

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Meinong's theory of intentional objects and the act of judgment, formulated primarily in his work, "The Theory of Objects," is of interest not only from the point of view of semantics. In his description of cognitive acts, and psychical acts in general, Meinong makes use of the concept of intentionality. He took that concept from Brentano who introduced it in order to distinguish between psychical and physical phenomena. For Brentano, the distinctive characteristic of psychical acts is that they are directed toward their objects: we admire something, perceive something, or form a judgment about something. Although the act of judgment does involve a specific psychical attitude toward its object, Meinong insists that psychological analysis is insufficient for the purpose of building a complete theory of judgment. The act of judgment is a double fact (*Doppeltatsache*) in the sense that it involves the subject's psychical act as well as a specific object to which the act is directed. A full description of that cognitive structure, free of the charge of psychologism, clearly requires an analysis of the object of judgment. Consequently, Meinong's theory complements the psychological analysis with an ontological description of the objects of cognition and thus constitutes a theory of knowledge.

Meinong's investigation seems to include a semantics that, however, remains only implicit in his theory, as his analysis is epistemological in nature. This paper will attempt to reveal the semantic aspect of Meinong's theory; this is a challenging undertaking since his intricate theory is articulated in a language rich in metaphors and philosophical neologisms. The interpretation

proposed in what follows is justified and not only through a purely historical interest in the philosopher; his ideas recur in some contemporary works. A form of contemporary philosophical logic, named by its adherents "free logics," i.e., logics free of existence assumptions, investigates the possibility of building a logic in which the nominal non-denoting expressions would be admitted without a paraphrase (Woodruff 1970: 121-142). Russell formulates a well known opposite view in his theory of definite descriptions in which a paraphrase is requisite for any non-denoting expression (Russell 1905). In "free logics" two ideas are pursued, both of which Russell rejected in "On Denoting." First, Frege's idea, further developed by Strawson, to treat the propositions that include non-denoting expressions as meaningful but devoid of logical value; second, Meinong's proposal to solve the problem by postulating subsisting objects.

Our assumption is that if, according to Meinong, every cognitive act is directed to its object, then every proposition that articulates such an act has an object as its correlate. A description of this object and an interpretation of the relation between the proposition and its correlate are undoubtedly interesting from the semantic point of view.

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Meinong's investigation in "The Theory of Objects" opens with the claim that judgment is about objects that are not constituents of the act of judging. In the case of judgments about empirical objects, which are located in space and time, it is natural to think of them as objects of knowledge and to assume that the subject stands to them in a cognitive relation that can be expressed in a statement of the type "I believe that Mount Everest exists." But we also make judgments about what does not really exist. This is obviously true of mathematics. Geometry, Meinong observes, does not concern real figures, and numbers do not exist along with what is numbered. In that case, our cognitive interest is directed toward the ideal objects that subsist (*bestehen*), such as relations or numbers. Furthermore, we also make judgments about possible objects, such as the golden mountain; objects of that sort are possible in the sense that empirical circumstances prevent us from asserting their existence. Judgments about ideal and possible objects involve a cognitive relation between the judging subject and the objects that exist in a weaker sense, i.e., they subsist. The contradictory, hence impossible, objects present difficulties of their own. When we make a judgment about the square circle, to which we attribute the properties of being round and square, we cannot ascribe to it any mode of being. Meinong considered

ascribing to contradictory objects pseudo-existence (*Pseudoeistenz*), but abandoned that solution as unsatisfactory.

Meinong holds the view that since the propositions expressing judgments sometimes include non-denoting phrases, the intentional object of judgment cannot be identified with what the nominal expressions designate. Hence the intentionality of judgment requires that the act of judgment be directed to its objective (*Objektiv*), that is, its specific intentional object. The objective is the object intended by the that-clause of the type "I believe that." If one judges that the antipodes exist, the intentional object of the judgment is the objective intended by the phrase "the antipodes exist." Furthermore, Meinong holds the view that the objective is the correlate of judgments as well as assumptions (*Annahmen*). Although judgment and assumption have intentional objects of the same type, the judgment involves a belief concerning what really is the case, while such commitment is absent in the assumption.

If we assert that the antipodes exist, then the existence of the antipodes, i.e., the objective of our judgment, merely subsist, while the antipodes themselves exist in reality. The objective subsists regardless of the ontological status of the object the that-clause talks about, and its subsistence secures the intentionality of judgment. The cognitive relation involved in judgment does not obtain between the knowing subject and one or several objects the proposition is about; it is always obtained between the subject and the objective.

According to Russell's multiple relation theory of judgment, the act of judgment is a multiple relation of the judging subject to several terms that include constituents of the proposition and their arrangement. For example, Othello's belief that Desdemona loves Cassio is true if the terms are arranged as follows: Othello, Desdemona, to love, Cassio; any other arrangement would make the belief false. In contrast to Russell's theory, Meinong interprets judgment as a dual relationship between a judging subject and an objective, which is a single object.

Arguments in support of the interpretation of judgment as a dual relation are developed by Quine in his paper "Quantifiers and Propositional Attitudes." Expressions of the kind "I believe that," called propositional attitudes, prove difficult to quantify. The statements:

- (1) John thinks of unicorns;
- (2) John thinks of lions;
- (3) John believes that a certain man in a hat is a spy;

can be rendered respectively as:

- (4)  $\forall x (x \text{ is a unicorn} \cdot \text{John thinks of } x)$ ;  
 (5)  $\forall x (x \text{ is a lion} \cdot \text{John thinks of } x)$ ;  
 (6)  $\forall x [(x \text{ is a man in a hat} \cdot \text{John thinks that } x \text{ is a spy}) \cdot \bigwedge_y (y \text{ is a man in a hat} \rightarrow x = y)]$ .

The paraphrase (4) does not adequately render the meaning of (1) because of the non-existence of unicorns. The paraphrase (5) suggests that John thinks of an individual lion or several lions, while (2) makes no such suggestion. The incorrectness of rendering (3) by (6) will become clear if we consider the following example. Let's assume that John has glimpsed at a certain man in a hat in the dubious circumstances that make him think the man is a spy. However, John does not know that the man in question is his brother Peter, hence the statement:

- (7)  $\forall x [(x \text{ is Peter} \cdot \text{John thinks } x \text{ is a spy}) \cdot \bigwedge_y (y \text{ is Peter} \rightarrow x = y)]$ ,

is false because John does not think his brother is a spy (Quine 1956: 178-180).

The quantification of belief propositions from the outside implies interpretation of (1) — (3) in the *relational sense*. Such an interpretation assumes the subject of having a belief relates to the objects that the that-clause is about, which leads to the difficulties that the above examples show clearly. According to Quine, incorrectness of the external quantification reveals the peculiar role the nominal expressions play in that-clauses: they are "referentially opaque" (Quine 1956: 183). The problems they create can be eliminated by the quantification within belief propositions; for example, "John believes that  $\forall x (x \text{ is a unicorn} \cdot x \text{ has four legs})$ . In that case belief sentences are interpreted in the *notional sense*, which means they express the relation between the subject having a belief and the intension, that is, the proposition expressed by the that-clause.

There is a degree of similarity between the concepts of relational and notional sense and Meinong's theory of objects. As we observed earlier, Meinong's investigation, which is epistemological in nature, indirectly implies a semantics based on the idea of intentionality of cognitive acts. He postulates the referential understanding of that-clauses precisely because the statements

that articulate judgments may include some non-referential expressions. From the point of view of semantics, the intentionality of judgment becomes inseparable from the meaningfulness of the proposition that articulates a judgment. Neither the intentionality nor the meaningfulness depend on whether the nominal expressions refer to any objects, but they depend on the fact that the proposition itself names a certain object. Hence a statement is meaningful and can express a judgment even if the expressions it contains are empty names, i.e., they do not name any existing objects. According to Russell's theory of descriptions, developed in "On Denoting," such expressions are objects in a merely grammatical sense, and his theory offers a method of transforming propositions with the denoting phrases, including empty names, into propositions without such phrases (Russell 1905). Nominal expressions can play the proper role of objects only if they name objects known by an acquaintance, that is, if they are proper names.

A proposition is meaningful and expresses a thought, Meinong maintains, because it is related to the objective given to a judging subject. The objective is distinct from but semantically related to the proposition: the proposition names the objective. The semantic interpretation of propositions as expressions that have been denoted has been widely accepted among the followers of Frege. Furthermore, the objective is not a psychic object created in the act of judging, since the same person at different times, or several persons on various occasions, may assume different cognitive attitudes toward one and the same objective. In "The Theory of Objects," Meinong repeatedly rejects psychological interpretations of his position, especially a psychological interpretation of judgment. It is worth mentioning that his theory does not preclude an ontological interpretation of objectives as timeless entities, but a discussion of that possibility goes beyond the scope of this paper.

Meinong makes use of the concept of objective to address two semantically troublesome problems: the negative existential propositions and the propositions that assert something of non-existing objects. In order to deny that something exists, e.g., to assert that Sherlock Holmes does not exist, we must know whose existence we are denying, hence we must use the expression "Sherlock Holmes" as referring to something. If so, the negative existential propositions would always be false. If the expression is used non-referentially, we do not know what we are talking about, and it becomes doubtful whether the proposition is meaningful.

There are two ways to solve the above difficulty. The first solution is to distinguish between two concepts of being: real existence and subsistence; the latter applies to the entities that have no spatial and temporal location.

Russell adopted that solution in his work *The Principles of Mathematics*, written in 1903. Linguistic expressions refer to entities, but only some of these entities have real existence while others merely subsist. Hence all negative existential propositions are false if they deny the subsistence of their objects, and may be true if they deny the existence of real objects.

The second solution of the problem of the negative existential propositions retains the usual concept of existence and seeks the source of the difficulties in the misleading linguistic form of the propositions themselves. According to Gilbert Ryle, propositions of the sort "Satan does not exist" are systematically misleading because they appear to have the syntactical form of the subject-predicate propositions. In spite of the grammatical appearances, the subject of the proposition conceals a predicative expression that comes to view in a suitable paraphrase. Thus "Satan does not exist," Ryle argues, can be paraphrased as "nothing is both devilish and alone in being devilish," or "nothing is both devilish and called 'Satan'," or even "some people believe that someone is both called 'Satan' and is infinitely malevolent, but their belief is false." None of these statements, Ryle argues, are about Satan; instead, they are about the word 'Satan' or else about people who misuse that word (Ryle 1931-1932: 143-149). According to Russell, on the other hand, the negative existential propositions are not about what the grammatical subject supposedly refers to, but about the propositional functions the appropriate paraphrases reveal. To say that there are no unicorns is to say that the propositional function "x is a unicorn" is always false (Russell 2009: 66-85).

Meinong's position appears closer to the first of the above solutions. The that-clause "that the antipodes exist" names the objective of being (*Seinsobjektiv*) that subsists independently of the existence of the antipodes. If we maintain that Sherlock Holmes does not exist, the objective of non-being (*Nichtseinsobjektiv*) subsists in spite of the non-existence of a person so named. The affirmative as well as the negative existential propositions refer to and name their respective objectives independently of whether the subjects of those propositions are used referentially or not. To say that the gold mountain does not exist is to deny its real existence; to say the square circle does not exist is to deny existence in a weaker sense of the word, that is, to deny the subsistence of an impossible object. In both cases what subsists are the corresponding objectives of non-being.

At this point the following question arises. Since the expression "square circle" names no object, even a subsisting one, does the proposition about the non-existence of the square circle speak of nothing? Meinong proposes

to answer this question as follows: A contradictory object does not exist in either of the senses being discussed above; it neither exists nor subsists. Nonetheless, it remains an object of knowledge, since any object that is not real must at least be grasped as non-being. Meinong does not cover up the paradoxical nature of his position. He admits that one can say: "There are objects of which it is true that there are no such objects," but admits that the paradox demands an even closer examination of the matter (Meinong 1960: 83).

In order to develop further and clarify his position, Meinong introduces another type of objective, namely *Soseinobjektiv*. If we ascribe contradictory properties to an object, then we must grasp it mentally. In other words, it is possible to consider the properties of an object regardless of whether we judge that the object exists or not. *Soseinobjektiv* is the objective correlated with propositions that predicate something of the non-existing objects or the objects whose existence are not under consideration. The subsistence of *Soseinobjektiv* does not depend on the referential function of the subject of the proposition; its subsistence is guaranteed by the principle that *Sosein* is independent of *Sein*. At this point Meinong introduces the concept of pure object (*Ausserseiend*), which remains beyond being, and is known regardless of whether the question of its existence has been decided at all or even if its existence is denied. Meinong's theory stands in a tenuous relation to metaphysics if we understand metaphysics as the investigation of everything that there is, since the theory of objects deals with all objects of knowledge, including pure objects.

In "On Denoting," Russell accused Meinong of crowding the world with the objects that violate the principle of contradiction, such as the square circle (Russell 1905: 484). Russell's criticism is misguided since, according to Meinong, the square circle is an impossible object and thus remains beyond being. The opposition of being and non-being applies to the objectives, not to pure objects. Meinong tried to improve his ontology by banishing the contradictory objects from the domain of being, while Russell was comfortable with introducing them in his early book *The Principles of Mathematics*. Although Meinong denied any form of being to the contradictory objects, he introduced the objectionable concept of pure object, which is non-existing but still remains an object. This not only results in an excessive ontological complexity of the theory of objects, but the meaning of pure object eludes semantic analysis.

The above difficulties of Meinong's approach will become more obvious when we consider once more the negative existential propositions. His position



is close to the above discussed first solution to the problems those propositions create. It consists in introducing the distinction between existence and subsistence, but refrains from ascribing being to the contradictory objects. He does that at the price of introducing the ontologically obscure pure object. It should be said, in Meinong's favor, that he rejects the second solution to the problem because he does not want to deviate from the ordinary use of language. The second solution calls for a transformation of the negative existential propositions into statements that do not have empty names as their subjects, but the meaning of the paraphrases deviates from the linguistic intuitions of ordinary speakers. For example, if a parent tells a child that Santa Claus does not exist, both the parent and the child think they are talking about Santa Claus rather than something else.

According to the already mentioned principle that *Sosein* is independent of *Sein*, a proposition that has *Seinsobjektiv* as its objective does not belong to *Sein* or *Nichtsein* propositions. Therefore the *Sosein* proposition

(8) A golden mountain is golden

cannot be correctly rendered by the *Sein* proposition

(9)  $\bigvee_x$  (x is a mountain . x is golden).

The incorrectness of the paraphrase becomes clear when we consider the logical values of both propositions. According to ordinary language intuition, (8) is true while its paraphrase (9) is false, as is the case with all propositions in which a descriptive phrase has a primary occurrence. There is a similar discrepancy when a descriptive phrase has a secondary occurrence, that is, when it is the subject in the that-clause (Russell 1905: 489-490). The statement

(10) I believe, that a golden mountain is golden

is true. Its paraphrase, according to the theory of descriptions,

(11) I believe that  $\bigvee_x$  (x is a mountain . x is golden)

is false, since I do not believe that the golden mountain really exists.<sup>1</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup>The correctness of paraphrases of propositions in which descriptive phrases have primary or secondary occurrence does not depend on whether those phrases are def-



discrepancy can be explained if we consider the difference between Meinong's and Russell's theories. According to Meinong, the that-clause (10) names *Soseinobjektiv*, while its paraphrase (10) names *Seinobjektiv*. According to Russell's theory, all propositions are of the *Sein* type, hence their paraphrases are correct if we assume or believe that the golden mountain really exists. The following *Sein* propositions

- (12) A golden mountain exists;  
 (13) I believe that a golden mountain exists;

can be correctly rendered by

- (14)  $\bigvee_x (x \text{ is golden} \cdot x \text{ is a mountain})$ ;  
 (15) I believe that  $\bigvee_x (x \text{ is golden} \cdot x \text{ is a mountain})$ .

The propositions (12) and (14) are false, while (13) and (15) will be true if I am in error. Let's keep in mind that, according to Meinong, judgments and assumptions have the same objective; the difference lies in the absence of an existential opinion in the case of assumptions.

The above interpretation of Meinong's theory leads to the following conclusion. His view is that the propositions that include non-denoting phrases are meaningful because they name their objectives. The objectives subsist when the that-clause is about a really existing object as well as when the subject of the that-clause is an empty name. Meinong's approach has the merit of having a wide scope of application. It secures the meaningfulness of not only the subject-predicate propositions, but also the propositions that state relations. For example, the proposition "Athena is a daughter of Zeus" is true although the names "Athena" and "Zeus" are empty; the proposition names its *Soseinsobjektiv* that Athena is a daughter of Zeus.

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inite or indefinite descriptions. In the above paraphrases the expression "a golden mountain" is an indefinite description. If we use a definite description, "the golden mountain," the respective propositions can be paraphrased as follows:

- (8a) The golden mountain is golden  
 (10a) I believe that the golden mountain is  
     have the following paraphrases:  
 (9a)  $\bigvee_x [(x \text{ is a mountain} \cdot x \text{ is golden} \cdot \bigwedge_y (y \text{ is a mountain} \cdot y \text{ is golden} \rightarrow x=y)]$ ;  
 (11a) I believe that  $\bigvee_x [(x \text{ is a mountain} \cdot x \text{ is golden} \cdot \bigwedge_y (y \text{ is a mountain} \cdot y \text{ is golden} \rightarrow x=y)]$ .

Leonard Linsky discusses this matter in "Reference and Referents" (Linsky 1963).

Let's keep in mind that the idea of intentionality of cognitive acts is fundamental to Meinong's theory. If a cognitive act is expressed in a proposition that includes empty names, as is common in ordinary language, then the intentional object cannot be found among the referents of such names. The intentional object is identical with the objective the proposition names, hence Meinong's semantics links meaningfulness of propositions with naming. The existence of an abstract object a proposition names is the necessary and sufficient condition of the proposition's meaningfulness.

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An analysis of the intentional theory of judgment cannot avoid the question of what we mean by the object of thought. It has been pointed out that objects of thought may be interpreted as what we think or what we think about (Prior 1971). If we say that the square circle is square, we certainly think of the square circle rather than about the objective that the square circle is square. According to Meinong, we think of the pure object and remain unconcerned with the question of its existence. The objective, on the other hand, is what we think; in other words, it is the contents of the proposition that names the objective. The above interpretation of the objective as the meaning of the proposition has further support in Meinong's view that the objectives have logical values. When we state that the antipodes exist, we ascribe a logical value to the objective rather than to the antipodes. Truth is ascribed to propositions only indirectly: propositions are true if they name true objectives. What we think about can be understood as an empirical object, or a subsisting object, or else a pure object. What we think, however, always is an abstract object that subsists; it is the contents of a proposition that should not be confused either with a psychic act of thinking or a proposition in the sense of the linguistic articulation of a thought.

The assumption that objectives are identical with propositions, if correct, leads to the conclusion that the same object, namely the objective, is named by the proposition and also constitutes its meaning. Rudolf Carnap develops an argument of that kind in his *Introduction to Semantics*. He uses the concept of designation in a broad sense: designata include not only individual names but also functors and sentences. Carnap refers to Meinong's theory to explain what he means by the proposition and he maintains that propositions are designated by sentences (Carnap 1961: 49-55, 235-236).

Meinong's concept of the proposition gives rise to the question of whether propositions are facts. The concept of fact, important as it is in philosophy and semantics, remains unclear and controversial, and in what

follows we will use the concept of fact introduced by Carnap in his work *Meaning and Necessity*. Carnap maintains that the intension of a declarative sentence is the proposition the sentence expresses, and then he explicates the concept of fact in terms of special type of propositions, namely, the propositions that are true and have empirical contents (F-true, or factually true propositions). In order to avoid the difficulties the negative facts present, Carnap interprets F-false propositions as complex structures. An F-false proposition is not exemplified as a whole, but its components are. ("To be exemplified" means to have a correlate in reality.) For example, the sentence "Walter Scott is human and is non-human" expresses the proposition whose components are the empty property "human and non-human" and the individual concept "Walter Scott." The empty property "human and non-human" can be analyzed in the same manner: it is expressed by the complex predicate whose simple components are exemplified in reality (Carnap 1964: 23-31).

It is worth noting that, according to Carnap, only the simple components of a proposition must be exemplified; according to Meinong, however, complex components of a proposition are exemplified as well. Carnap treats the expression "golden mountain" as a complex predicate whose simple components, i.e., simple predicates, are exemplified by the properties "golden" and "mountain." According to Meinong, on the other hand, the expression "golden mountain" is exemplified by a subsisting object. If we decide to apply the concept of exemplification to Meinong's theory, we will have to modify it considerably, since we will have to go beyond the empirical reality and accept exemplification by what subsists.

In Carnap's view, true empirical propositions are exemplified by facts. For example, the sentence that my table is black expresses the proposition that my table has the property in question; the proposition, in turn, is exemplified by the relevant fact (Carnap 1964: 26). The F-false, analytic, and contradictory propositions are not exemplified as a whole, but only their simple components are. On the other hand, not only F-true propositions are exemplified by facts as a whole, but their simple components are exemplified as well. Carnap entertains a possible theory that there is a single fact that constitutes the whole of the real world and is expressed by the conjunction of all F-true propositions.

In Meinong's theory, both true and false sentences express propositions because of the intentionality of judgments that in both cases are directed to objects. The objective that Mount Everest is the highest summit of the Himalayas subsists, and so does the objective that Mount Everest is the

highest summit of the Alps. Some propositions, namely F-true propositions, could be identified with facts provided we regard facts as objects that subsist along with the empirical things the proposition is about. For example, the subsistence of the objective that the antipodes exists is distinct from the real existence of the antipodes themselves. It is worth noting that Meinong attributes a mode of being to possible objects, such as the golden mountain, hence the objective that the golden mountain is gold subsists along with the subsisting golden mountain. In his theory, the sentence that the golden mountain is golden expresses the proposition that the subsisting golden mountain has the property of being golden, hence the objective named by the proposition can be identified with a fact that belongs to the realm of subsistence.

The above interpretation of Meinong's theory is questionable because it deviates from the ordinary meaning of fact. Carnap's approach stays closer to the ordinary linguistic usage because he identifies true propositions, not false ones, with facts. At this point the question arises: What is a fact? Since Meinong does not address this question, I attempted to interpret his theory using Carnap's concept of fact. My attempt turns out to be unsatisfactory because both true and false propositions are exemplified by facts. The sense of truth, which Meinong ascribes to objectives, appears to be a simple and unanalyzable concept. We find a similar idea in G. E. More's work *Some Main Problems of Philosophy*. If our judgment is true, the intentional object of the judgment subsists and has the simple and analyzable property of being true. Russell expresses this idea in his well-known statement: "Some propositions are true and some are false just as some roses are red and some white" (Russell 1973: 75).

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The semantic aspects of Meinong's theory of objects discussed in this paper have considerable implications for the intentional theory of judgment. If we claim that directedness to an object is distinctive of judgment, then, as a matter of semantic consequence, we have to seek the object correlated to the proposition expressing the judgment. In this way the meaningfulness of propositions expressing judgments is linked to the concept of reference. Meinong does not look for the object correlated to the proposition among the objects that the proposition is about, i.e., among the objects designated by the nominal phrases the proposition contains, since in ordinary language such phrases may be empty names. What Meinong does is to postulate the existence of an abstract object named by the proposition itself. As I argued,

that object plays a double role: the proposition names it and expresses it. In other words, the object is a designatum as well as an intension.

Finally, my discussion of Meinong's theory cannot escape some negative conclusions. His basic idea is that the objects of knowledge, that is, what we talk about, often do not exist, but a semantics that would accommodate this idea presents serious difficulties. It becomes necessary to introduce the distinction between existence and subsistence. This distinction is not only ontologically troublesome; from the semantic perspective, it frustrates attempts at a satisfactory explication of the concept of fact. Moreover, Meinong's theory introduces the concept of pure fact for which no semantic explication seems feasible.

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