1 Introduction

Meinong’s philosophy grows in stature with the years. He is best known as the philosopher
who believed there are objects outside being. While this is indeed the single most important
fact about his thought, it is the detail with which he works out the idea that ensures him a
place as a fixed star in the philosophical firmament, along with such philosophers as Spinoza,
Leibniz and Wittgenstein who, whether they are right or not, must be taken into account in
any systematic philosophising.

Meinong’s strong brand of realism always had more opponents than supporters, and his
unexciting style of thought ensured an even greater neglect, so, while a great philosopher, he
is not a popular one. Nevertheless he greatly impressed Russell, and some of his ideas have
been revived in the writings of logicians concerned with the semantics of modal logic and the
logic of fictional discourse. It is in this guise of Meinongian semantics that he presently exerts
the most influence. Meinong’s own rather cursory semantic theory contains elements missing
from the modern versions, and offers a quite different perspective in the context of his other
theories. Since to understand Meinong’s semantics one must first know something of these
surrounding theories, I shall give a brief outline of what is necessary. In doing so, I shall
largely abstain from criticism, evaluation, or an account of Meinong’s development. Fortu-
nately Meinong’s philosophy after 1899 developed almost cumulatively, so the last five years of his life from 1915 provide a temporal section giving a fair synchronic portrait of his system in its definitive form.

2 Psychology

Meinong’s chief philosophical concerns were descriptive psychology, epistemology, value theory and ontology, which he preferred to call ‘object theory’. The latter is the keystone of his system, although he only recognised its importance quite late. But it is impossible to understand Meinong’s object theory apart from his psychology, so we turn to that first.

2.1 Intentionality. Content and Object

Meinong’s interest in psychology came from his teacher Brentano, and Meinong founded the first psychology laboratory in Austria-Hungary. He largely left experimentation to others, and in his work dealt chiefly with the a priori descriptive psychology Brentano also called phenomenology. For Brentano, the essential feature of the mental was its intentionality: every experience has an object. In his formulation of this doctrine, Brentano at first did not make clear the distinction between having an immanent, intramental object, and having a transcendent, extramental object. This ambiguity was first pointed out in print by Meinong and his student Höfler. Meinong later took over the terminology of another Brentano student, Twardowski, calling the immanent object content (Inhalt) and the transcendent object simply object (Gegenstand). Brentano’s doctrine could therefore be taken in one of two ways: (1) every experience has a content, (2) every experience has an object as well as a content. Husserl took the first way and acknowledged objectless experiences, but Twardowski took the second, arguing against Bolzano that all presentations (Vorstellungen) have objects. Twardowski was forced to conclude that sometimes, the object of presentation does not exist, although it has determinate qualities. This thought, later stylised as the Principle of the Independence of Being from Being-So, is thus to be found in Twardowski before Meinong, and can even be found in embryo in the writings of Thomas Reid.

The importance of the content is that it is that aspect or moment of an experience, in virtue of which it is directed at its object. But the object of experience in general exists independently of its being experienced. This mind-independence thesis is the basis of Meinong’s realism. The content/object distinction formed the basis for Meinong’s rejection of psychologism in ontology and value theory, and also plays a key role in his theory of meaning.

2.2 Classification of Mental Phenomena

Brentano, following Descartes, divided experiences into three basic classes: presentations, judgments, and the phenomena of love and hate, the last subsuming affective and conative attitudes in a single class which Marty called ‘interests’. Presentations (the ideas of the British tradition) simply present things to a passive mind, whereas in judgment the mind is active, taking up an intellectual stance for or against the existence of objects. Interests are likewise positive or negative attitudes to objects judged to exist, but polar rather than binary opposites.
In the course of time Meinong thoroughly revised Brentano’s scheme. Like many others he regarded the third group as heterogeneous and split it into affections (emotive feelings, likes and dislikes) and conative phenomena (desires, wants, wishes, willing). Meinong’s second and most original revision was to recognise intellectual attitudes which are neither presentations nor judgments. He called them assumptions (Annahmen). Like judgments, they have positive/negative polarity, but like presentations, they lack the moment of conviction or commitment found in judgment. Meinong’s discovery was disputed by loyal Brentanians, but his case is overwhelming: in hypothetical and disjunctive judgments, neither part is judged or asserted, and in many subordinate clauses reporting others’ beliefs or doubting something, the embedded clause does not mark a judgment.

Having seen this difference in “seriousness” between judgments and assumptions, which Meinong subsumed together under the general title of thoughts (Gedanken), Meinong generalised the distinction between “serious” and “phantasy” experiences to presentations, feelings and desires, for example those unserious feelings and desires experienced by someone watching a play.

3 Object Theory

3.1 Objectives

Twardowski worked out the content/object distinction fully only for presentations. Meinong in effect extended Twardowski’s dichotomy to the other three basic classes of experience. Brentano had talked about contents of judgment, but what these were remained unclear until the content/object distinction was clarified. Several of Brentano’s students more or less independently developed the idea that judgments have their own category of object. Marty called them judgment-contents (Urteilsinhalte), Stumpf and Husserl called them states of affairs (Sachverhalte), while Meinong, who came to the conviction that there are such things only while working out his theory of assumptions, preferred the term objective (Objektiv). Next to the content/object distinction, the distinction between objects of presentation, objecta (Objekte), and objectives, the objects (Gegenstände) of thought, is the most important distinction for Meinong’s semantics. It had a catalysing effect on his work and impelled him to take Twardowski’s nonexistent objects fully seriously. Objectives are for Meinong the true objects of thought. This latter phrase is deliberately ambiguous, and we shall see that Meinong’s theory indeed harbours a deep ambiguity. It suffices for the moment just to contrast objectives with objecta. When I judge that Franz is tall, then I judge something about Franz, the objectum, but what I judge is not Franz, but that he is tall. Objectives are typically signified by that-clauses in this way. An objective can also be judged about, as when I judge that it is surprising that Franz is married. What an objective is about we call its subjects. The relationship between a subject and its objective is not that of part to whole, although it is tempting to take this analogy. But if I judge that Rumpelstiltskin does not exist, while the objective does not exist in space and time, it does subsist or obtain (bestehen) and so has an ideal being, but Rumpelstilstskin has no being whatever, and so cannot be part of the objective. Meinong avoids here the cheap option of saying that he has being in thought, what he calls pseudo-existence, which is not a kind of being at all, but simply being-thought-of.

We notice here that there are various kinds of objective: objectives of being, e.g. that Franz exists, of non-being, e.g. that Rumpelstiltskin does not, of being-so e.g. that Franz is
tall, and of being-not-so, e.g. that Franz is not blond. Meinong later added objectives of being-with *Mitsein*, corresponding to hypotheticals, e.g. that if Franz is married, then Franz is not a Catholic priest. The parallels between categories of objective and categories of sentence or judgment are obvious here.

### 3.2 Dignitatives and Desideratives

Objecta and objectives are both objects of cognitive or intellectual experiences. Meinong later added two further categories of object, corresponding to feelings and desires, which he called *dignitatives* and *desideratives* respectively. Both presuppose objectives and objecta, but dignitatives are akin to objecta, whereas desideratives are akin to objectives (one likes something, but desires *that* something be the case). Meinong did not jump straight to the conclusion that feelings and desires have their own objects: he made the move only when he had become convinced that a subjectivistic account of values was not wholly sufficient. Dignitatives and desideratives are the bearers of objective values and desiderata, which Meinong termed *impersonal*. As elsewhere in his philosophy, he secures objectivity via the mind-independence of the relevant category of objects.

### 4 Analogy between Psychology and Object Theory

There is a fearsome symmetry about Meinong’s two classification schemes, the psychological and the ontological. Each basic class of experience corresponds with a basic class of objects, and vice versa: presentations with objecta, thoughts with objectives, feelings with dignitatives, and desires with desideratives. Had Meinong been an idealist, this would have been unsurprising, since the objects would then be the products or reflections of the mental acts giving them. But Meinong is adamant in his realism. With very few exceptions, he thought that the objects of acts are quite independent of experience. So e.g. the object *airship* was not invented, but discovered, when men found out how to make airships. While acts of the right kind are precisely suitable for grasping objects of the right kind, the general independence of the objects is inviolate. Meinong had no Leibnizian God to establish this harmony beforehand, and offered no other explanation, such as an evolutionary one, to take the place of the theological one, so what can explain the parallels?

In my view nothing can successfully explain them, since I do not believe there are such neat correspondences, but why did Meinong think there were? Here I think we must dig a little deeper into Meinong’s motivation, which emerges only here and there. In my view, Meinong was guided by linguistic considerations. The basic categories of object as well as the basic categories of experience both correspond fairly neatly with certain simple grammatical distinctions: objecta with words and phrases, objectives with dependent and independent declarative clauses. Optatives, imperatives and questions all express certain desires, and hence correspond in many cases to desideratives. Meinong rarely makes much fuss about the importance of language, but at one crucial juncture he says: “In dealing with the meaning of words and sentences, linguistic science is necessarily also concerned with objects, and grammar has done the spadework for a theoretical grasp of objects in a very basic way” (Meinong 1968–78 b: 496, Meinong 1960: 88). Later he adds: “One is tempted to say that the general theory of objects must learn from grammar just as the specialised theory of objects must learn from mathematics” (Meinong 1968–78 b: 513, Meinong 1960: 103).
At various points where Meinong is weighing up the pros and cons of admitting another sort of object, he is swayed by examples where language points out affinities: for instance, when coming down in favour of objective, impersonal values, he notes that *The sky is blue* and *The sky is beautiful* are both predications of the same form. While not determined by these natural linguistic affinities, Meinong let himself be guided in his decisions by them. This entitles us to describe Meinong’s attitude to language as naïve, pre-critical or commonsense. That does not mean it is wrong: the evidence of untutored common sense is often right against the sophistications of various idealisms. But the case cannot rest with common-sense intuitions. They have to be examined. Unfortunately, Meinong’s own philosophy of language is too undifferentiated to provide the wherewithal for such an examination, as we shall now see.

5 Theory of Meaning

5.1 General

Meinong took no particular interest in language as such, neither for its own sake, like Marty, nor for its importance to logic, like Husserl. What little he says about grammar seems to have come down to him from the tradition. Yet the relation of presenting or signifying obtaining between experiences and their objects is of absolutely central importance to his philosophy. His semiotics is principally one of mental rather than linguistic signification, which places him in the tradition of Aristotle and Ockham.

On the general relationship of signifying Meinong has not much to say, being content with a formulation of Husserl’s to the effect that A is a sign of B if the presence of A allows one to infer that of B. Thus while something may be a sign of something else without being taken as a sign of it, it only functions as a sign when someone makes the inferential move from sign to significatum. Meinong’s theory of meaning, like that of Husserl, has no place for an impersonal relationship between sign and significatum which does not go via the experience of conscious subjects.

5.2 Expression

It should be noted that Meinong starts from the concrete phenomenon when discussing language: the particular episodic use (utterance or reception) of a sign by a language user. In the case of sign production, what such an uttering first signifies is that the utterer has something in mind. The words serve as the expression (Ausdruck) of a mental episode on the part of the utterer. When Franz says *The cat is on the mat* he expresses with the sentence a judgment to this effect normally, while his utterance of *cat* expresses his having a presentation of a cat. When he says *Doris is beautiful* he gives expression to a positive evaluative feeling, and when he says *If only it were sunny!* he expresses a wish to this effect. The utterance of expressions in modified circumstances, for example on the stage, still serve as expressions, but for the most part of corresponding phantasy-experiences.

That which a concrete sign or sign-use expresses is not what the expression means – Meinong castigates the Lockean theory that words in general mean something mental. He sees this as a special case of failing to distinguish content from object.
5.3 Presenting and the Relative Product Theory

What a sign in fact means on any occasion of use is the object of the experience which it expresses. The relationship between experience and object Meinong calls presenting (präsentieren – vorstellen is only a special case, that of ideas or presentations.) Summing up his theory for the case of words, Meinong (1968–78: IV.28) writes: “A word means something insofar as it expresses a presenting experience, and the object which is presented by this experience is the meaning.”

The relationship between word – in general expression – and that which it means is thus what logicians call the relative product of the two relations of expressing and presenting. This theory is generalised by Meinong initially from ideas to thoughts, i.e. from words and phrases to clauses, so that the meaning of a clause is the objective presented by the thought expressed, which may be a judgment or an assumption. The obvious further generalisation to dignitatives and desideratives is not so straightforward however, since these only correspond to objectively valid values and desiderata. In any case, Meinong does not deal with the language of likes and wants in any detail, so any account would have to be an extrapolation of his account of cognitive language.

Two things must be noted about the relative product theory. The first is that the meaning of an expression, if it has one, is always an object. It is only half-correct to say that this involves Meinong in a referential or Fido-Fido theory of meaning. For referring or naming is only one of the modes of meaning, that of phrases, perhaps only noun-phrases. On the other hand, to the extent that the relationship between a name and its bearer serves as the prototype for the meaning-relation in general – and it does appear to serve this role in Meinong – the charge has something to it. In this Meinong is no worse than his contemporaries, and better than most, in that he goes to some lengths to stress the categorical difference between meaning an objectum and meaning an objective. For Meinong, as for Frege and Wittgenstein, sentential or clausal meaning is primary, and names and other phrases only mean to the extent that they occur in clauses. This insight was extremely important to Meinong, and coincided with his placing objectives at the centre of his ontology. This central position of objectives or states of affairs is what subsequent Meinongian semantics has most neglected, and to that extent Meinong has been followed only half-heartedly.

The other point to note is that language owes its signifying power entirely to that of the mind. It is only because people may grasp objects presented to them in experience that words may mean. Words are, strictly speaking, inessential to this achievement. Words serve in communication, and communication succeeds when the utterance of the speaker arouses in the hearer experiences which have just the same objects as those of the speaker. To the speaker himself such utterances are unnecessary except perhaps as auxiliaries to clarity. Of course in this rather primitive theory Meinong is overlooking the possibility that certain kinds of experience rely heavily, even in some cases essentially, on the supporting framework of a language. Whether such support is only a reflection of the limitations of human psychology is not discussed by Meinong, who does not pursue the social dimension of language any further than we have indicated.

5.4 Secondary Meaning

While the concrete occurrence of a sign is the primary linguistic phenomenon, Meinong accepts that we may say of a sign in the abstract that it has a certain meaning, which we may call a potential meaning as distinct from the current meaning of its particular uses. This
potential meaning is roughly speaking the common denominator of the various current meanings; it is this which finds its way into a dictionary.

There is another way in which expressions may acquire a secondary meaning. When Lucki says *I have a toothache*, then on this occasion the token of *toothache* means just his toothache, but because we know that a toothache is unpleasant, the word secondarily indicates Lucki’s negative feeling, and so, via this secondary expression, the word acquires a secondary meaning.

Not all expressions which express an experience thereby mean something: exclamations like *Ouch!*, the answer-words *Yes* and *No* and empty politeness phrases like *My pleasure* have no *sense*, although they serve to convey something about the speaker to the hearer, e.g. his assent or his pleasure. Of course any expression which *does* express an experience has meaning in the broader sense of importance or significance, but not in the technical sense of presenting the object of an experience. At the time he compiled this theory, Meinong was inclined to reckon all expressions of feeling as meaningless in the technical sense; the later acceptance of value-objects partly revised this view.

6 The Semantic Role of Objectives

Objectives are the objects of thought. As such they are intimately connected with the properties of truth and falsity. But there is more than one way to be connected with these properties. Meinong’s view was this: what we state, judge or assume is true if and only if the objective *obtains* (*besteht*). Obtaining or subsisting is a form of ideal being outside space and time, shared also by mathematical objects like numbers. Since Meinong accepts a law of excluded middle for objectives, and objectives come in contradictory pairs, an objective obtains if and only if its contradictory does not obtain. So the objectives of false thoughts have no being at all, although false thoughts do *have* objectives – otherwise they would be meaningless. Obtaining objectives may be said to be *factual*, or simply called *facts*. So true judgments are ones which mean facts. But the truth of a judgment or other thought is a derivative property: it is the obtaining or not obtaining of the objective which secures the objectivity of truth. To this extent objectives are what *make* thoughts true or false: they are *truth-makers*. On the other hand Meinong regards the truth or falsity of thoughts as derivative from the primary truth or falsity of objectives themselves, an objective being true if and only if it both obtains and *is* grasped by someone, and false if and only if it both fails to obtain and is grasped by someone. In this sense objectives are also the primary *truth-bearers*. If we compare this with theories like those of Husserl, Reinach, Russell and Wittgenstein, for whom the roles of truth-bearer (typically a *proposition*) and truth-maker (typically a *state of affairs*) are played by different objects, we see that Meinong cannot hold to a correspondence theory of truth – Findlay rather aptly calls it an *identity* theory. To the extent that Meinong did not clearly distinguish these two roles, his theory is confused. In my view objectives better fit the role of truth-maker; Meinong’s insistence that they *be* true or false seems more dispensable. With this modification it is possible to push Meinong towards a more traditional correspondence theory, the truth-bearers being primarily thoughts, and secondarily sentences.

Factuality is a modal property of objectives, and Meinong considers others, in particular those of necessity and possibility. His theory is rather obscure, and has rarely been carefully considered, in part because it adopts a quite different approach than that usually found in modern modal logic. Part of the theory involves consideration of *incomplete* objects, which are more interesting for his semiotic.
7 Incomplete Objects and Mediated Reference

Meinong is notorious for his defence of impossible, self-contradictory objects, even in the face of penetrating criticism by Russell. In fact, despite the self-congratulatory account Russell gives of the exchange, Meinong came out at least even. Impossible objects are, however, relatively uninteresting philosophically, whereas incomplete objects are more promising. An object is incomplete if it is undetermined with respect to at least one contradictory pair of properties. For instance fictional objects are determinate with respect to only finitely many properties. When we apprehend a real object, we are given only finitely many of its characteristics in thought, whereas every real object, being fully determinate, can never be grasped in all its aspects. The experience which presents an object has a content which is, however, adequate to a much sketchier object which has just those properties meant as aspects of the content. This object is incomplete. We may therefore, for epistemological purposes, indulge the convenient fiction that this incomplete object is the immediate object of a schematic experience, and by virtue of the mediation of this auxiliary object we have access to the ultimate target object, which is the complete object of which we have only a sketchy grasp.

Meinong develops an elaborate theory of the relationship between auxiliary and target objects, including the idea that by being embedded, or, as he says, implected in a complete object, an incomplete one may gain a vicarious hold on existence, which Meinong calls implexive being.

The details of this theory are less important for us than the fact that it throws up numerous parallels to other semantic theories. For one thing, incomplete objects are very similar to Locke’s abstract ideas, if these are tidied up logically, and therefore indirectly to the universals of realist tradition. They are also comparable with Leibniz’s full concepts, which, unlike his complete concepts, are only finitely complex, and constitute the meanings of general terms. Finally Meinong’s incomplete objects bear more than a passing resemblance to Frege’s senses, and could therefore be profitably fitted into a Fregean framework of sense as auxiliary object and reference (target object), the main difference being that Meinong regards the mediating role of incomplete objects as a convenient fiction only, the real work being done by the content whose reflection the incomplete object is. It is ironic that Russell, who attacked both Frege and Meinong on their semantic theories, and did away in his own account with anything like senses, went over to a theory structurally similar to Meinong’s original one (psychology aside), while Meinong, as it were, passed him going in the opposite direction, seemingly introducing an extra layer of complexity into his semantic theory. Had he been more interested in language for its own sake, Meinong might have worked out the promising consequences of his theory, but instead he returned to his abiding interest in value theory in the remaining few years of his life.

8 Bibliographical Guide

To fully document Meinong’s views as here reported would entail doubling the length of this article. For comprehensive references see the paper Morscher & Simons 1985. Meinong’s works are collected in an eight-volume Gesamtausgabe (Meinong 1968–78); particularly relevant are Über Annahmen (Meinong 1968–78 d), Über Möglichkeit und Wahrscheinlichkeit (Meinong 1968–78f) and Über emotionale Präsentation (Meinong 1968–78 c: 283–468). The best introduction and commentary is still Findlay 1963, but Grossmann 1974 is also worth reading. For modern Meinongian semantics see especially Parsons 1980 and

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