

Meinongian Semantics Generalized

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Alexius Meinong was an analytic philosopher in his methodology, and his techniques are ones that we are comfortable with. He takes a body of plausible data, argues carefully regarding his subject matter, and is willing to go where the data and arguments lead. In his theory of objects he developed an account of a domain of objects that transcend those we normally take for granted. In this paper I propose to take a look at what we can learn from an attempt to generalize these investigations from the point of view of philosophy of language. So this is what happens when a philosopher of language looks at Meinong, and sees something of interest for semantics.

Meinong's theory of objects derives from his investigation of thought. Let me see if I can change the perspective without changing the subject. That is, instead of focussing on what we think about, let me ask about the semantics of thinking about, that is, the semantics of *intensional* locutions of the form 'x is thinking about y'. My plan is to articulate a peculiarly Meinongian approach to thinking, and then to see whether this approach can be generalized to other intensional locutions. In particular, I want to focus on some late Medieval discussions of intensional locutions about promising and owing, and on a theory that superficially resembles Meinong's. I don't think that either of these accounts is successful, but it is extremely difficult to prove that they fail in all their forms, and the present paper will conclude inconclusively.

1. Form and Content

The peculiarly Meinongian approach I have in mind is to look at ordinary reports of interesting phenomena and to take at face value both their form and their content. Suppose as a matter of data that I am thinking about a gold mountain:

I am thinking about a gold mountain.

If we take this *form* at face value, we have:

For some x: x is a gold mountain & I am thinking about x

If we also take the *content* at face value, then the gold mountain that I am thinking

about is gold, and is a mountain. Putting both of these moves together, we conclude that there is something that is both gold and a mountain (and that is what I am thinking about). Since no existing thing is both gold and a mountain, we have to choose between deciding that the theory has been refuted by this absurd consequence, or accepting the provocative Meinongian conclusion that Parmenides warned us against: there is a gold mountain, though not an existing one.

It is essential that we take at face value *both* form and content to get a fully Meinongian analysis. There are orthodox views that accept the quantificational form but alter its content. For example, Alonzo Church (1956) would give our problem sentence a quantificational form, but the quantification would be over Fregean senses, or individual concepts. The logical form would be something like:

Church:

For some x: x is a gold-mountain-sense & I am thinking by means of x.

And Ed Zalta's (1983) Meinong-inspired theory of abstract objects would give it the form:

Zalta:

For some x: x is an abstract object that encodes goldness and encodes mountainhood & I am thinking by means of x

Both of these approaches agree that the original sentence has a quantificational form, but they alter its apparent content, so that it ends up quantifying over not gold mountains but Fregean senses or abstract objects. The object appealed to is no longer a gold mountain, and what is said is no longer that you think about it; rather, you think *with* it, or something like this. There is thus a radical change of content, and, as a result, no radical ontological claims.

The fully Meinongian view I want to explore is what you get by taking at face value both form *and* content. If you do this, you conclude that since you are thinking about a gold mountain, there is a gold mountain that you are thinking about, and it is gold, and is a mountain, and thus there are gold mountains, though not gold mountains that exist. If you are not shy about admitting nonexistent objects, this remains a viable option.

2. Specific and Non-specific

Here is why many philosophers of language think that Meinong's assumptions *must* be mistaken, *quite apart from matters of ontology*. Locutions such as 'think about' manifest ambiguity in their direct object positions, analogous to the more famous case of 'seek'. Suppose I say that I am seeking a dog. You may ask whether there is a specific dog I am seeking, say one that I lost, or whether I am just dog-seeking without a particular dog in mind. The distinction between these two readings of the linguistic construction seems obvious, and all parties to the debate can accept it; the issue is what to make of it. The popular contemporary line is to see the non-specific reading of 'I seek a dog' as containing a special kind of logical form, one that is *not* of the form:

there is a dog that I seek.

The criticism of Meinong from the point of view of semantics is then simple: he failed to notice the corresponding ambiguity in 'think about'. He takes as data the non-specific reading of 'I am thinking about a gold mountain', he concludes rightly that this is true, and then he attributes this truth to the logical form appropriate to the *specific* reading, which he also gets right. But you cannot conclude that since the sentence is true on the non-specific reading it is also true on the specific reading (which is the one that entails that there is a gold mountain). Meinong was just confused. It is especially easy to be confused here if you focus on definite descriptions as your examples, which he did *C* he concentrated on *the* gold mountain and *the* round square. For the specific/nonspecific distinction for definite descriptions is subtle, though much discussed over the last few decades under the titles *de dicto/de re* or referential/attributive.

I don't know whether Meinong was confused or not; that is a psychological matter, and one that I have little interest in debating. Whatever the psychological facts about Meinong himself, I will focus on what happens if we suppose that instead of his *failing to notice* the difference, he merely intended to *analyse the difference differently* than we are inclined to. Let's look at this alternative analysis and see how it works.

What is the approach? It is to consider examples in which intensional idioms such

as 'think about' have both a specific and a non-specific reading, and to construe the difference between these two readings not as a difference in logical form, but just as a difference in the nature of the objects in question. So the specific reading of:

I am thinking about a gold mountain

is:

There is a specific gold mountain that I am thinking about,

and the non-specific reading of

I am thinking about a gold mountain

is:

There is a non-specific gold mountain that I am thinking about.

This approach requires both specific and non-specific objects, and Meinong's ontology provides them under the Meinongian classification of *complete* versus *incomplete* objects. For example, there is an object whose ordinary *nuclear* properties are goldenness and mountainhood and no more. (More on 'nuclear' below.) This is perhaps the object of thought if you are thinking completely non-specifically about a gold mountain; it is an object that is nonspecific in the sense of not possessing either greyness or nongreyness, not possessing either forestedness or nonforestedness, and so on. And although there are many specific (complete) objects that are both gold and mountains, objects that are specific with respect to being grey, or being forested, there are not any *existing* ones. So you cannot think specifically of an existing gold mountain, but you can think of many nonexistent gold mountains.

The point of this paper is to grant Meinong's ontology, and within this framework to explore the above kind of account of intensional locutions, to see if it is a possible alternative to its more common nonmeinongian competitors. (In my book *Nonexistent Objects* I did not explore this Meinongian theme, because I did not find it promising. The present paper is an opportunity to put some of my reservations to the test.)

3. Complications: Nuclear and Extranuclear

If this fully Meinongian approach is absurd, there should be an argument to show this. There is such an argument. A long time ago, Richard Sylvan (then Routley) pointed out in Routley 1980 that the general strategy leads to unacceptable consequences. Here is a simple illustration of the point. Suppose that I think about standing on a gold mountain while having three heads. Then this is true:

I am now thinking of a gold mountain I am standing on while I have three heads.

Thus, by Meinong's analysis:

There is a (nonspecific) gold mountain I am standing on while I have three heads, and I am thinking about it.

Thus:

There is a (nonspecific) gold mountain I am standing on while I have three heads.

Thus:

I have three heads.

But I don't have three heads. So the theory fails. (This reasoning can be spelled out precisely; see Routley 1980.)

What is the response? Well, the most promising that I know of is due to Meinong himself in response to an argument by Russell. Recall that Meinong infers from:

I am thinking about a gold mountain

that there is a gold mountain. When asked why we have never seen this gold mountain, he replies that it must be a non-existent mountain. Russell then replies with the puzzle (which can be seen as an instance from which Sylvan has generalized) that if I am thinking about an *existent* gold mountain, then Meinong's theory lets us conclude that there is an *existent* gold mountain, and we had better

not conclude that the *existent* gold mountain does not exist on pain of contradiction. Not so fast, replied Meinong, existence is a tricky and special kind of property, and not one that the theory will necessarily treat on a par with others. We need to distinguish between ordinary properties, called 'nuclear' by Ernst Mally, 1912, and extra-ordinary quasi-properties, called 'extranuclear'. The theory we are dealing with focusses on ordinary, nuclear properties, not on extranuclear ones. If you try to use descriptions containing extranuclear properties, something special must happen. Exactly what special is to happen depends on how the theory is developed. And Meinong did not work this out. He struggled with various versions of the puzzle over the years, but he did not come up with a general prescription. When people nowadays try to work out his views in general, they end up focussing centrally on how to distinguish ordinary (nuclear) properties from extraordinary (extranuclear) properties, and how these are to function in the theory. In Parsons 1980, I talk about nuclear and extranuclear properties; Routley 1980 talks about *assumptible* versus *nonassumptible* properties, and others such as Zalta 1983 (following Rapaport 1978, who apparently followed Mally 1912) replace the two kinds of properties with two kind of predication (*exemplification* versus *encoding*), but everyone ends up discussing pretty much the same cases. Complications abound, and there is no time here to assess them all. But the general idea is clear enough: we devise a recipe for replacing extranuclear by nuclear predicates (by the watered-down versions of the extranuclear predicates) in the direct objects of intensional locutions. The clearest paradigm case of an extranuclear property is existence. So the example:

I am thinking about a gold mountain that exists

needs to be altered in accordance with the theory to:

For some x: x is an *existent* gold mountain & I am thinking about x.

Meinong held that there is no absurdity in holding that there is a non-specific *existent* gold mountain, though it doesn't exist *C* because you can be existent even without existing. This is a stretch, but it is not inconsistent, and so the theory is at least not refuted.

What about my three heads? For them, we need to consider how relations work. And here we need to conclude that there is a difference between a gold mountain having the relational property: being stood on by Parsons with three heads, and

Parsons having the relational property: standing on a gold mountain while having three heads. There is a difference in the relational *properties*:

a has [_Rb]
b has [aR_]

For centuries the Aristotelian analysis of relations distinguished these two cases, and the late medievals made much over the fact that God could make one hold without the other; he could make the gold mountain to have the property:

I am standing on __ while I have three heads,

without making me have the property:

__ is standing on the gold mountain while having three heads.

The view has a long history, and it is not incoherent, so the approach is still not refuted. (I do not here mean to endorse the idea that relations can be *reduced* to relational properties; the idea requires only that there be relational properties and that we can employ them in doing semantics.)

Whether all this works in general is now a complicated matter, one that I addressed in my book on this subject, where I concluded that the approach is at least promising. I don't want to get into all of this now. Instead, I want to investigate whether we can generalize this technique to other issues that are apparently about quite different subject matters. The issues are formal ones, and they apply to all phenomena that we report using verbs whose direct object places are intensional:

x thinks about an F
x seeks an F
x resembles an F
x owes somebody an F

If a Meinongian approach works when applied to the first, it should work the same when applied to the others. And if it can be refuted in any of these cases, then it is potentially in trouble in the others. This is "Meinongian semantics generalized". In the remainder of this paper I will examine the last example: x owes an F.

4. The Medieval Account of Ampliation

According to late medieval semantics, terms stand for the *existing* things that they signify, unless something interferes. For example, 'human' applies to presently existing people, unless something in the sentence in which it occurs alters this. As an illustration, even though Socrates was certainly human when he existed, he does *not* fall within the extension of the term 'human' in the sentence

Socrates is human.

This is because 'human' in this sentence is expressly limited, by default, to presently existing humans, and Socrates is not one of these. So the sentence is false. But the default limitation to present existents can be over-ridden. In the sentence

Socrates was human

the term 'human' is *ampliated* by the past tense of the verb, so as to stand for both present and past humans. And now it has an extension that includes Socrates, and so it is true. (This is a very different account than the one that sees tenses as operators on sentences. Tense operators change the time reference for the whole sentence that they govern, whereas ampliation affects the individual terms in the sentence.) More interesting for our purposes is what happens in a sentence like 'Clinton is possibly sitting here'. The sentence:

Clinton is sitting here

is false, because Clinton does not fall into the extension of the term 'sitting here' at any time. But in the sentence:

Clinton is possibly sitting here

the term 'possibly' *ampliates* the term 'sitting here', extending its extension to include not just things actually sitting here, but things possibly sitting here as well. And thus it includes Clinton, and thus the sentence is true.

More interesting for our purpose is the sentence:

Some unicorn is possibly sitting here.

The point is that the word 'possibly' (as well as other words) ampliates all of the terms here, and so it includes not just actual things that are unicorns (there aren't any of those), but also possible things that are unicorns (there are plenty of those). Since some possible thing that is a unicorn is sitting here, the sentence turns out to be true. (Cf. Buridan 1966, 152: ". . . the verb 'to know' or 'I know' is ampliative of supposition to past and future, indeed, also to every possible thing. Thus, if I say 'non-being is known', this name 'being' stands indifferently for every being, present, past, or future or possible.")

The technique goes beyond possibility. The medievals thought that chimeras were not only non-existent, they are also impossible. So

Some chimera is possibly sitting here.

is false. But some thought that this is true:

Some chimera is thought to be sitting here.

This is because the verb 'think' ampliates the term 'chimera' to include *conceivable* things, and although there are no possible chimeras, there are conceivable things that are chimeras, and they are enough to make the sentence true. (E.g. Paul of Venice 1984, 162: "Every term standing with respect to a verb or participle, having the nature of transcending indifferently what is either imaginable or impossible, . . . , stands immediately for that which is or can be imaginable or impossible. . . . And in this way is understood or known that which is not able to be -- namely, as that which is able to be. For I understand a chimera or a golden mountain, neither of which is able to be.")

It should be plain by now that this theory of ampliation, applied in this way, presupposes an ontology like Meinong's in several respects. It needs there to be things that are not actual, and even things that are not possible. More important, a conceivable chimera is not just a conceivable thing that is thought of as a chimera, it is a conceivable thing that *is* a chimera. Thus the theory needs the second of Meinong's assumptions: we take content at face value as well as form. Further, I would argue (if I had more time) that Meinong needs the theory of ampliation to

handle the data confronted by his theory. (Meinong made much of what he called the "prejudice in favor of the actual," the tendency to assume that in ordinary discourse we are discussing existing things. The theory of ampliation accepts this as a matter of data and explains how this constraint can be relaxed in certain contexts. But those details are for another occasion.)

5. A Meinongian/Medieval Theory of Owing

Suppose that I promise to give you a specific horse that I own, say Whirlaway. Then I owe you a horse:

I owe you a horse.

This is no problem: I owe you Whirlaway, Whirlaway is a horse, so I conclude that I owe you a horse. But what if I don't promise you any particular horse; I just promise to give you *some* horse. Then again

I owe you a horse.

But now the meaning seems to be different. It seems that the locution:

I owe you a horse

can be read either specifically: there is some specific horse that I owe you, or else I am merely a horse-ower. The case of owing seems to be an exact parallel of the case of seeking, or of thinking.

Note that what I am calling the specific reading is not just a detailed version of the nonspecific. If I owe you a horse in the nonspecific sense I might actually have promised you a grey thoroughbred, in which case I owe you a specific *kind* of horse. This is not what I am calling the specific reading; the specific reading is one in which I don't owe you a *kind* of object at all; I owe you some particular object. In the nonspecific case then there is no particular object that I owe you, though I may owe you an object of a quite specific kind.

The problem that the medievals faced was this: if I owe you a horse in the non-specific sense, then which horse do I owe you? Many different answers were given to this problem, none them the Meinongian one (though a case can be made

that Ockham was committed to the Meinongian one, perhaps without realizing it). Why not? Not for ontological reasons, for they weren't bothered by this. Instead, the medievals approached the issue as follows; they argued that what you owe should have some connection with what you pay when you pay off the debt. If I owe you a specific existing horse, then I pay off my debt by giving you that specific existing horse. But if I owe you a non-specific conceivable horse, I can't pay off the debt by giving you one of those; I pay off this debt too by giving you a specific existing horse. So it appears that I owe you a specific existing horse after all, contrary to the facts.

The trick is to have an analysis of owing that avoids this consequence. Here is an approach, patterned after the analysis of fictional objects in Parsons 1980.

First, when there is an owing, its source is a promise (or sanction, ...), where the object of the promise is always a unique object, a unique specific (complete) object in the specific case, and a unique nonspecific (incomplete) object in the nonspecific case. In the specific case, this principle applies:

Principle A1: If I promise you a specific object *o*, then *o* is the object specified in the promise (and *o* is the object owed).

In the non-specific case the object of the promise is a non-specific object constituted exactly by the nuclear properties specified in the promising act. In particular, in the non-specific case:

Principle A2: If I promise you (non-specifically) an FG then the object specified in the promise is *o*, where *o* has exactly the nuclear properties F and G (and *o* is the object owed).

For example, if I promise you (non-specifically) a grey horse, then the object of the promise is that incomplete object whose nuclear properties are exactly greyness and horsehood.

Principle B: A debt is discharged if I give you an object with all the nuclear properties of the object specified in the promise.

We also tentatively accept this Medieval assumption:

Principle C: You can only give someone an existing object.

In the specific case (Principle A1), the only way I can give you an object with all of the nuclear properties possessed by the object specified in the promise is to give you the object itself. If I have promised you Whirlaway, then there is exactly one existing thing with the nuclear properties of Whirlaway, which is Whirlaway itself, and that is what I must give you to pay the debt.

What about the non-specific case? Suppose that I promise you a gold mountain:

I promise you (non-specifically) a gold mountain.

By principle A2, I owe you g , where g is the nonspecific object that has exactly the nuclear properties of being gold and being a mountain.

So I owe you g .

But g is gold & g is a mountain.

So g is gold & g is a mountain & I owe you g .

— For some x : x is gold & x is a mountain & I owe you x .

That is, I owe you a gold mountain.

By principles B and C, the debt is discharged iff I give you some existing thing with all of the nuclear properties possessed by g .

— The debt is discharged iff I give you an existing gold mountain.

If no gold mountains exist, this is an obligation that cannot be discharged, which seems right. In spite of this, I do literally owe you a gold mountain, as we have seen.

6. Objections

So what is wrong with this? I think what is wrong, if anything, must be this: that the objects of promises, and thus of obligations, are propositional in nature *C* in

Meinong's terms, they are Objectives as opposed to Objects. And this is because we promise (and are obligated) to *do* things, and it is only in the special case of obligations to *give* that we can isolate out the Objekts of obligation. And so the Meinongian hypothesis is to feature an issue that is highly artificial.

But that does not prove the hypothesis is *wrong*. There is a parallel here between owing and fiction. It is equally artificial to demarcate fictional objects, because fictionalizing is primarily propositional, and it is only in a special way that fictional *objects* arise from this activity. So the same issue arises there too. And I submit that it is unresolved in both areas.

I think that the application to owing and seeking is pretty much on a par with the application e.g. to fictional objects, and many of the same problems arise. (E.g. the "play-within-a-play" problem for fictional objects arises with a promise to promise. And in both cases we must distinguish immigrant and native objects, where immigrant objects may even be imported from other obligations. And as in fiction there may be fictional characters that are groups without the individual group members being fictional characters. See Parsons 1980 for a discussion of all of these.)

Counter-examples:

Potential counterexamples arise from the fact that cases arise in which specific objects and nonspecific ones do not correlate with specific owings and nonspecific owings. You can apparently *nonspecifically* promise an object that has characteristics that make it *specific*, and you can apparently *specifically* promise someone a *nonspecific* object. Apparently. Let us see how this will go.

The first example turns out to be a familiar one. Suppose I make the following nonspecific promise statement:

"I promise to give you some horse that *exists*."

Surely if I say 'I promise you a horse that exists' I haven't made a promise that can't be kept. It is as easy to keep this promise as the simple promise to give you a horse. But when we symbolize it we get exactly the same form as for 'I promise you a horse' with one conjunct added:

For some x : x is a horse & x exists & I owe you x .

But recall that this was earlier made true by the nonspecific whose only nuclear property is being a horse, and that object does *not* exist. So we are apparently in trouble. But maybe not. For recall the principle above, that it isn't what you say that counts, it is how it is understood. And now the theory has to insist that no extranuclear predicates can be involved in saying what is owed. In the application of principle A2 we need to reduce any extranuclear predicate to its nuclear watered-down analogue. In effect, this means that for practical purposes we can't distinguish promising to give someone a horse and promising to give them a horse that is existent. But that seems right. So this objection is escaped *C* at least apparently.

Here is the other apparent counterexample:

Consider the incomplete object t that I would owe you if I were to promise you (nonspecifically) a horse. Call this object t . Then I promise to give you t .

Now if I have promised to give you t , then presumably I owe you t :

I owe you t

But if t is the thing I would have owed you had I promised you a horse, then according to the earlier analysis, t is a horse:

t is a horse

Conjoining these and existentially generalizing yields the analysis of 'I owe you a horse':

t is a horse & I owe you t

— For some x : x is a horse & I owe you x .

Since t does not exist, I cannot give you t . But suppose I despair of my inability to give you t , and instead go out and find a real horse that I give you. Now I have given you an object with all of the nuclear properties of t , and thus according to the analysis above, *I have now discharged my debt*. But I *haven't!* I promised you t ,

and you didn't get t; you got an existing object instead.

I see two natural rejoinders to this kind of objection. One answer, according to the Medieval authors discussed in Ashworth 1976, is that an impossible promise cannot establish an obligation. You can say the words 'I promise you a chimera', but in doing so you don't promise a chimera, or, at least, you don't owe one. Here we exploit the analogy between this case and the fictional character case. The author can say anything you like, but what counts for a character is the story, and the story is the net outcome of what happens when the writing is read and understood.

Another answer would go like this. We simply agree that the consequence is true. That is, I have made good on my promise. That is because in giving you an existing horse I *have* given you the incomplete horse I promised you -- it is implexively embedded in the horse I gave you. This requires that we abandon principle C. But what harm is thereby done?

This is an account in which it is not easy to have confidence. But it is also not easy to disprove it.

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