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OBJECTS AND ONTOLOGY
IN
MEINONG'S JUNGLE

by
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Except where acknowledged within the text, all parts of this thesis represent my own original work.

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We join spokes together in a wheel,
   but it is the centre hole
that makes the wagon move.

We shape clay into a pot,
   but it is the emptiness inside
that holds whatever we want.

We hammer wood for a house,
   but it is the inner space
that makes it livable.

We work with being,
   but non-being is what we use.

ABSTRACT

It is often sensible, coherent and true to deny that certain things exist. When talking about fictional characters, imaginary objects of thought, and impossible things, it is also appropriate to attribute specific features which distinguish these subjects of discourse. Sometimes it is important to make such attributions in order to ascertain whether such items could exist in the first place. It therefore seems that there are nonexistent things, and that they are constituted in quite definite ways. At the very least, this is the most simple and intuitive way to explain a great deal of our discourse. It suggests that the term “object” does not necessarily mean “existent”.

Using a general phenomenological method, Alexius Meinong developed these observations into his theory of objects. He argued that existence is a substantial property, which has both instances and noninstances, and also claimed that we know about things which fail to exist through postulation, assumption, and imagination. The general principle of his original theory was that, for any property f, there is an object: “the f-er” which has that property. He was later forced to modify this principle in response to Bertrand Russell’s objections, for it appeared to imply that the existent round square exists, which is false, and it also seemed to contravene the law of noncontradiction. Without a developed logical theory, his modifications were not very appealing. Consequently Russell’s alternative theory of descriptions, which dispenses with nonexistent objects, flourished.

The logical theory which Meinong could not supply was eventually constructed by Terence Parsons and Richard Routley, and variations were devised by Hector-Neri Castañeda and William Rapaport. They have made use of several distinctions, the most
important of which is that between characterising properties, which describe and classify things, and non-characterising properties, which include existence and possibility. It is by invoking this distinction, and modifying Meinong’s general principle so that “the f-er is f” is restricted to characterising properties, that Russell’s objections are met. It is principally through the notion of the characterisation of a thing (its set of characterising properties) that the simple and intuitive explanation of our attributions of nonexistence can be reconstructed by a revised version of the theory of objects.

This work does not deal with Meinong’s original theory in any detail. Instead, the version presented by Routley and Parsons is examined, and mostly endorsed. It is argued that the distinction between characterising and non-characterising properties needs a more substantial justification than has been supplied, and an account of how to draw it is given. The problem of universals, which is relevant because it is an ontological matter, and because (it is argued) non-existent objects really do instantiate properties, is also examined. In the first three chapters, I explain the basic theory of objects, attempt to show that universals are things which fail to exist, and provide an account of characterisation. The last two chapters are (mostly) independent of the first three, and address the problems of ontology. If the theory of objects is correct, then the question of what it is to exist is given an entirely new meaning. For one thing, it is then possible to give a substantial account of ontological status.

The main problem with the project of characterising existence is that it is difficult to distinguish existing things from fictions, because anything that a real thing can be, an imaginary thing can also be. My conclusion is a little radical: there is no way of separating fiction from reality, other than by the external and logical features of their stories. In effect, anything which exists has the same form as a fictional character, and even appears in stories. I consequently present a holistic ontology, in which universal coherence of stories and descriptions, and connection to the real world, are the criteria for existence.
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