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On the compatibility of Meinong's Theory of Objects with Russell's Theory of Descriptions with regards to nonexistent entities

Sobre a compatibilidade da Teoria dos Objetos de Meinong com a Teoria das Descrições de Russell em relação a entidades não existentes

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Resumo

Este artigo discute a Teoria dos Objetos de Meinong e a Teoria das Descrições de Russell para argumentar que, mesmo sendo comumente vistas como rivais, as duas teorias na verdade se complementam. Começamos explicando brevemente a Teoria das Descrições e quais aspectos dela costumam ser interpretados como contradizendo a Teoria dos Objetos. Em seguida, explicamos a Teoria dos Objetos de forma detalhada, fornecendo também algumas interpretações específicas de seus conceitos. Críticas construtivas das categorias conceituais da Teoria dos Objetos são então apresentadas, preparando o terreno para a alegação de compatibilidade que desenvolvemos ao final do artigo. Concluímos afirmando que a Teoria das Descrições trata da forma lógica dos juízos existenciais expressos por meio descrições, enquanto a Teoria dos Objetos se preocupa os pressupostos da própria existência de descrições e, ainda, com uma taxonomia dos juízos descritivos.

Palavras-chave: teoria dos objetos; teoria das descrições; não-existência; ontologia; Meinong.

Abstract

His paper discusses Meinong's Theory of Objects and Russell's Theory of Descriptions in order to claim that, even though both theories are usually seen as rivals, they actually complement each other. We start by briefly explaining the Theory of Descriptions and its main criticism towards the Theory of Objects. Afterwards, we explain the Theory of Objects in great depth, while also providing some particular interpretations of its concepts. Constructive criticism of conceptual categories of the Theory of Objects is then provided, which lays the ground for the compatibility claim we develop in the final part of the paper. We then conclude by claiming that the Theory of Descriptions concerns itself with the logical form of existential judgments expressed by descriptions, whereas the Theory of Objects concerns itself both with preconditions of the existence of descriptions and with a taxonomy of descriptive judgments.

Keyword: Theory of Objects; Theory of Descriptions; Non-existence; Ontology. Meinong.

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1 INTRODUCTION

When talking about something that does not exist, we seem to be talking about *something* - but, at the same time, about *nothing*. The conditions for meaningful discourse can be fulfilled even when its subjects or objects do not exist empirically, so we are clearly capable of talking about things that do not exist. But there are distinct non-existent things to which we can refer, so in some sense they must have qualities allowing such distinctions. We thus find ourselves in the position of recognizing that not only we can meaningfully talk about something without really talking about anything, but also that it is possible to meaningfully talk about different kinds of "nothing".

Possibilities, ideas and conjectures are no less important to our lives than facts, yet we seem unable to grasp precisely what those are. Since we need to perceive something in order to describe it, how can we describe something that can't be perceived, even in principle? When we say that unicorns are visually similar to horses, what sort of things are we comparing horses to, and what type of comparison are we making? What are we talking about when we talk about contradictory objects such as the "round circle"? What is, in short, the nature of nonexistence?

This is, of course, not a new topic on the metaphysics of being. Some important contemporary thinkers have provided interesting answers to these questions, which can be used to dispel our most concerning initial doubts. In particular, this was the subject of Bertrand Russell's famous Theory of Description (Russel, 1905), which was in part formulated as criticism of the not as famous Theory of Objects of Alexius Meinong (Meinong, 1904). Although contemporary philosophers have engaged with Meinong's theory in greater depth, and even provided modern reconstructions of it that might be immune to Russel's criticisms, Meinong is frequently considered to have lost his debate with Russel (Parsons, 1975, p. 73). In this essay we will argue that, although Meinong's theory does have flaws, it provides important contributions to the debate that are overlooked by its critics. In fact, it complements Russell's theory in many interesting ways.

2 RUSSELL'S THEORY OF DESCRIPTIONS

According to Russell (1905), misconceptions about nonexistent objects stem from confusion between the grammatical and the logical form of sentences. This difference is not always obvious during our daily use of language. The structure of a sentence does not always make it clear what are its truth conditions, but this can be fixed by careful logical analysis of its contents (RusseL, 1905). When we say "unicorns exist" or "Pegasus flies", even if we seem to be referring to "unicorns" and "Pegasus", we are actually saying something about two *descriptions*: that of an object having properties such as those of "being a horse" and "having a horn", and that of an object having properties such as "being a horse", "being capable of flight" and "was captured by Bellerophon". The name "unicorn" is a mere abbreviation of the former; the name "Pegasus" of the latter (Quine, 1948, p. 26-27). Whenever a proper name is used with the intention of denoting a singular object, the description is *definite*, and so should be accompanied by a uniqueness claim (not only the object satisfies the listed properties, but it is the *only one* satisfying them); whenever the object is not singular, the description is *indefinite,* meaning it does not contain such a claim (Russel, 1905, p. 481-482; Hooker, 1972 p. 365).

Russell (1905) goes on to argue that the Theory of Descriptions solves the main issues surrounding the use of names for non-existent objects, as it allows us to lay bare the truth condition of such sentences. For instance, the claim "unicorn exists" is nothing more than the claim "There exists something that is a horse and that has a single horn", which is false because it is an existential claim and there is no object with the listed properties (Russel, 1905, p. 484). Likewise, "Pegasus can fly" is equivalent to the sentence "There is a single object that is a horse and that was ridden by Bellerophon", which is false for the same reasons. In other words, the view that names are abbreviations of descriptions implies that, if we need to check the existence of an object to which we refer through any given name, we must *specify* which object this is by providing its description (Quine,

1948, p. 25-26). After a description is provided, we may clarify the logical form of the sentence to lay bare the implicit existential quantification. If the description is a conjunction of different properties that are collectively instantiated in no singular object, the name does not refer to anything, which makes the affirmation of the existence of such an object false (Russel, 1905, p. 490).

This is, of course, an account which aims to enable truth-functional analysis of sentences containing names that do not refer, either because they aim to refer to fictional entities or because they try to refer to real objects but fail at specifying an existent object (Russel, 1905, p. 490). Instead of referring to a non-existent object in some way, sentences are taken to merely list a series of properties associated with such objects and make claims about their instantiation. Since when talking about unicorns, we are merely talking about horses and horns, the theory in no way commits to conceding ontological status to the units being described (Quine, 1948, p. 23). In other words, we are able to speak about unicorns without in any way committing to the existence of something such as an abstract idea of a unicorn. It is for this reason that Quine (1948) endorses Russell's theory while specifically criticizing Meinong's - albeit his name is never expressly mentioned. Quine (*Ibid.*) accuses Meinong (represented by a fictional "Wyman") of advocating for an inflated ontology, forcing us to commit to the being of fictional entities, whereas Russell's theory allows us to deal with such entities without admitting their being.

But is it really the case that Meinong's theory requires an ontological commitment to the being of non-existent entities? We argue that this is not so. In order to obtain an inflated ontology one would have either to make independent commitments or read Meinong's theory in a particular, unflattering light. There doesn't seem to be any aspect of Meinong's theory that makes it strictly incompatible with the kind of ontological minimalism that Russell and Quine desire.

3 MEINONG'S THEORY OF OBJECTS

The Austrian philosopher Alexius Meinong, whose theory of abstract objects is now dismissed by most philosophers (or, at least, by most of those belonging to tradition known as analytic philosophy), is known mainly because of

the views advanced in his so-called Theory of Objects. Meinong (1904) warns us about our ontological "prejudices in favor of being" and argues that, if the question is approached from a cognitive point of view (and he argues it should be), we are bound to treat nonexistence in equal footing with existence. By doing so, we distinguish between the two categories only in respect to the former's nonbeing and, depending on the kind of nonbeing ascribed to it, to the consequences this distinction imposes on us (*Ibid.*).

Meinong's Theory of Objects was developed on top of his Theory of Cognitive Acts, so we need to understand a bit of it to properly understand his ontological account. According to this theory, we must distinguish between the Objects of our knowledge, which are those things towards which we direct our acts of knowing, from the Objectives of knowledge, that is, what we assert about those Objects. The concept of Object is distinct from that of the Objective, but the entities that play the role of Objects and Objectives need not be so; when we make judgments about judgments, the second Objective refers to the first Objective, so the first Objective (in other words, the judgment being judged) becomes an Object (Meinong,1904, p. 80). It is precisely this possibility of alternation between the roles of Object and Objective that allows us to examine propositions about cognitive activities and self-referential judgments, since a judgment can then be viewed both as a statement about something and as the something to which another statement refers (that is, a judgments of judgments) (*Ibid.*).

In the particular case of Objectives which pertain to the existence (*Sein*) or nonexistence (*Nichtsein*) of any given Object, we must first deal with the problem of the preliminary status of the object being judged - as, in order for the judgment to be made, the Object being judged must, in some way, be "given" to us *before* the judgment about it is made (Meinong,1904, p. 84). But, if what is being judged is a certain Object's *existence*, then that thing which "gives" it to us cannot be existence itself, since this would make our judgment trivial; hence, Meinong (1904) asserts that existential judgments presuppose not an object's existence, but its *subsistence* - that is, its abstract characterization. So, when affirming the existence of an object, we are claiming that it has both *subsistence*

and *existence*[1] (ibid., p. 104). When we are denying that it exists, we are affirming that the object merely subsists, meaning that is well-defined but not instantiated, thus being an abstract or potential object (*Ibid.*, p. 80).

Since this well-defined character is a requirement for subsistence, not all nonexistent objects subsist. When we make claims about unicorns, we are claiming that there are subsistent objects with the properties (or, as Meinong (1904) would say, with the characteristic of being-so, "*Sosein*") of being horned horses, which are two things that remain conceivable even when they are not factual. However, when we make claims about the "round square" or the "triangle with only two angles", we are making claims about objects that *cannot exist in principle* – in other words, which *necessarily do not exist*. Since they cannot be clearly characterized in terms of their properties, those objects do not have abstract existence and, therefore, *do not subsist* (Meinong,1904, p. 86).

Aside from the objects that can both *exist and subsist* or merely *subsist without existing* and those that can *neither subsist nor exist*, there is a category of objects whose ontological status is defined as continuous and never-ending subsistence. Those ideal objects, which include concepts such as that of number, are well-defined but necessarily do not exist (Meinong,1904, p. 79).

It seems clear that the Meinongian notion of *subsistence*, when applied to instantiable objects, is similar to that of *possibility*, which makes it so that judgments about a certain object's "*Sein*" or "*Nichtsein*" are similar (if not equivalent) to judgments about their instantiation or non-instantiation. Accordingly, judgments about a nonexistent non-ideal object's "*Sosein*"[2] are

1 Which cannot be made for abstract objects such as numbers. Since existential claims cannot be applied to those objects in a factual manner, but only in an "ideal" manner, their being is defined precisely by their continuous and neverending subsistence (Meinong, 1904, p. 80). However, this does not preclude the attribution of properties to particular subsistent Objects, and we are still allowed to make different statements about different numbers (*Ibid.*, p. 98-99).

2 The concept of Sosein is essential for Meinongian philosophy, since there are objects for which only judgments of Sosein are meaningful (MEINONG, 1904, p. 109). Questions about properties of numbers or about the functioning of mathematical concepts in no way depend on questions about the existence or nonexistence or those same entities, which led Meinong (1904) to state that judgments of Sosein are independent of those of Sein. This means that one can attribute properties to objects without inquiring about whether they exist or not, as well as question their existence without appealing to their properties.

judgments about properties that could, in principle, be instantiated, together with other properties attributed to the same nonexistent object. Furthermore, when applied to ideal or contradictory objects, *subsistence* is either similar or equivalent to the intuitive notion of *conceivability*, understood as the mere requirement of abstract coherence during conceptualization of the object. Since possibility implies conceivability, but conceivability does not imply the possibility of being instantiated, this means that *subsistence is equivalent to conceivability* and that *subsistence of non-ideal objects is equivalent to possibility*, that is, conceivability qualified by the concrete possibility of existence of the object. Possibility is thus a category pertaining specifically to empirical objects, whereas conceivability applies to those and also to non-empirical objects (such as numbers or similar types of abstract constructs).

In an attempt to quickly summarize all that has been presented, we could say that, according to Meinong (1904), before an object is apt to be judged *existent* or *nonexistent,* it must be considered *conceivable*; that every *existent* object is *conceivable* (existence implies subsistence), but not every *conceivable* object *exists* (some objects subsist but not exist); that some objects are *conceivable* without ever being subject to the possibility of instantiation (ideal existence, or continuous subsistence) and that some objects should not even be considered conceivable (having neither existence nor subsistence due to its contradictory characterization).

This interpretation effectively deflects Quine's claim of an inflated ontology because *conceivability should be considered an epistemic category, not an ontological one*. This means that, when affirming that something subsists, we are merely affirming that its description is consistent, and so that the object itself is conceivable. No ontological commitment to the "abstract being" of unicorns is made in judgments such as "unicorns subsist, but do not exist". In other words, acceptance of subsistence as a valid conceptual category has no ontological bearing.

Thus, it seems that today's analytic philosophers' disregard for the Theory of Objects is misdirected, as Meinong's theory gives an account of existence and possibility that is in many respects similar to those given by contemporary analytic

metaphysics. Meinong's ontology is not necessarily "inflated", in the sense that it commits one to the reification of possibilities; it is merely an ontological theory which takes possibility, instantiation and epistemic considerations into account. To obtain an inflated ontology, one would need to eliminate the epistemic aspect of subsistence and consider all subsistent objects as actual objects in some relevant sense, a reification that does not seem to be a necessary consequence of Meinong's account[3].

4 SOME CRITICISMS OF THE THEORY OF OBJECTS

Even though Meinong's theory is more robust than often acknowledged, it has shortcomings that ought to be left out of contemporary metaphysical accounts of ontology. First of all, the Theory of Objects does not give us a truly satisfying reason for distinguishing between ideal objects, which are said to have being only through subsistence, and contradictory objects, which have neither subsistence nor existence. Since both are incapable of being subject to existential judgments, it is clear that the difference is purely conceptual instead of pragmatic; it is not clear, however, if contradictoriness is a property strong enough to justify the existence of an entirely distinct conceptual category. We thus argue that "contradictory ideas" should be viewed just as special cases of "essentially abstract ideas", both being characterized by their necessary nonexistence. Contradictory objects thus should be regarded on equal footing with general abstract ideas, and there seems to be no reason for denying them this. It should also be noted that Meinong's unjustified distinction has a nefarious consequence:

3 It should be noted that the quote most frequently attributed to Meinong, "There are objects of which it is true that there are no such objects", is originally presented between quotation marks and referred to as "paradoxical" (Meinong,1904, p. 83). Meinong only used it as an illustrative example, not a claim of the "existence" of subsistent objects.

The original (translated) text is as follows:

"But such things may be alien to our natural way of thinking; it is even more instructive to recall this trivial fact, which does not yet go beyond the realm of the Seinsobjektiv; any particular thing that isn't real (Nichtseiendes) must at least be capable of serving as the Object for those judgments which grasp its Nichtsein. It does not matter whether this Nichtsein is necessary or merely factual; in order to know that there is no round square, I must make a judgment about the round square. If physics, physiology, and psychology agree in asserting the so-called ideal character of sense-qualities, they implicitly assert something about color as well as about sound, namely, that one exists no more than the other. Those who like paradoxical modes of expression could very well say: "There are objects of which it is true that there are no such objects"." (*Ibid.*, p. 82-83).

the very possibility of judging some objects “contradictory”, “nonexistent” or “necessarily nonexistent” indicate that they must be “given” to us beforehand, that is, must have something akin to *subsistence*. But, since they are *unconceivable* and therefore do not properly *subsist*, in what way are they given?

This complication did not escape Meinong, and it led him to oscillate between acceptance of the idea of a *Quasisein*, which would belong to every object indistinctly, and the convoluted idea of *Aussersein*, that is, the quality of something that has neither *existence* nor *subsistence*, and which is “beyond being and non-being” (Meinong, 1904, 86; Grossman,1974; Chisolm,1973). One way of interpreting his rather complex characterization[4] is to say that the *Aussersein*, or *absistence*, presents an object that can be judged to exist or subsist, hence some Objects can be judge as merely subsistent and others as neither existent nor subsistent. This requires a distinction between objects that guarantee their non-being in every sense, such as contradictory objects, and objects that only guarantee their non-existence, such as non-contradictory but essentially abstract objects, claiming that only the latter can be judged to subsist (MEINONG, 1904, p. 86). As for the ontological status of this third category, Meinong himself seems to oscillate between considering it a third mode of being[5]

4 “if someone judges, e.g., "a perpetual motion machine does not exist," it is doubtless clear that the object whose existence is denied must have properties, namely those in terms of which it can be characterized, and that without these properties, the conviction of non-existence could have neither sense nor justification. to have properties, of course, is tantamount to "being thus and so" ["*sosein*"]. but this so-being [*sosein*] does not have existence as its necessary condition, for existence is precisely what is being denied-and correctly denied, moreover. analogous things could be pointed out in instances of the knowledge of subsistence. in connection with knowing or wanting to know, it often proves useful to make a general distinction between two successive ways in which the object in question is apprehended: there is one's fastening upon an object, and there is the making of a judgment about it. with that, it is immediately obvious that we may say: one fastens upon objects in their so-being; and what is then judged and perhaps known is either the being of what one has fastened upon in its so-being, or else some further so-being of it. one can fasten upon this so-being, and through it the thing which is thus and so, without restrictions as to being, as the possibility of negative knowledge shows. insofar as that is the case, our fastening-upon finds something already there or given [*etwas vorgegeben*] in the realm of objects, regardless of how the question as to being or non-being is decided. in this sense, "there are" ["*es gibt*"] also objects that do not exist or subsist [*die nicht sind*], and i have designated this fact as the "absistence of the pure object" [*das "aussersein des reinen gegenstandes"*] - a somewhat barbaric word-formation, i fear, but one which is hard to improve” (Meinong, 1910, p. 61-62).

5 “[…] since the Objective strictly prevents us from assuming that A has being, (being, as we have seen, can sometimes be understood as existence, sometimes as subsistence), it appears that the requirement that the object have being (which was inferred from the being of the *Nichtseinsobiektiv*) makes sense only insofar as the being in question is neither existence nor

or a complete absence of being[6], although some authors argue that his principal theory should be associated specifically with the latter (Grossman, 1974, p. 67). In any case, even without further clarification of how an object could neither exist nor subsist or what its ontological status would be, we can deem the concept of absistence as unacceptable and consider a concept of *Quasisein* distinct from that of subsistence as useless, since the latter makes the notion of subsistence redundant and the former still leaves our main question unanswered.

The doctrine of the *Aussersein* is quite problematic, since it leaves unanswered our question about the way in which those objects are given for we to judge – that is, precisely what Meinongian philosophy and the concept of *subsistence* are supposed to answer. If *subsistence* is taken as the basis for judging objects, the absence of *subsistence* would mean that the object is not "given" and, therefore, cannot be judged – which makes it contradictory to say that these objects are contradictory, that they neither exist nor subsist, or that they are "beyond being and non-being", since in order to make those statements about any object it must, in some way, be subsistent. If *absistence* is taken as the basis for judging objects instead, it is not clear why we would need an independent concept of *subsistence* at all; since all that is required for an object to be given is *absistence*, we could simply judge abstract objects (such as numbers) as objects that are given for judgments by *absistence* but which are never actually existent. By doing so we would be equating being with existence and saying that both contradictory and non-contradictory objects are "beyond being and non-being", which does not seem to be a particularly unreasonable position. As such, it is not clear what conceptual benefit this problematic third category would bring, but it is clear that it would bring about many issues.

On the other hand, if we were to identify *subsistence* with *conceivability* and introduce the third, weaker category of *definability* (without any consistency

subsistence - only insofar as a third order of being, if one may speak this way, is adjoined to existence and subsistence" (Meinong, 1904, p. 86).

6 "In view of the paucity of what I can presently set straight in such an important matter as this, the word "absistence" seems to me to afford an advantage, by virtue of its natural indefinitness; it is at least a suitable means for keeping the question open for further inquiry in the theory of objects. In at least this sense it will be advisable to set absistence alongside existence and subsistence as a third something" (*Id.*, 1910, p. 62).

requirements), we would have an easily characterizable conceptual category capable of giving the same treatment to contradictory objects as *subsistence* originally did for the remaining objects. Instead of requiring something to be *conceivable* in order for it to be the object of a judgment, then giving exceptional treatment to judgments concerning unconceivable objects, we could just say that, in order for something to be the object of a judgment, it must at least be *definable*, even though its existence or instantiation is not conceivable even in principle. In other words, when considering specifically the question of what makes judgments possible, we may replace the concept of subsistence by a broader concept of *definability*, meaning that it is definability that gives us the possibility of judgment even before existence (or even conceivability) is established.

The substitution of conceivability by definability also allows us to show the generality of the theory by applying it to itself: definability itself is definable as the possibility of listing all of the object's properties, so it can also be the subject of judgments. Conceivable objects may be defined as definable objects with non-contradictory qualities, and unconceivable objects as those possessing a contradictory description. The same could not be done if *conceivability/subsistence* was used as a bases for all judgments, as unconceivable objects are definable but they are not, of course, *conceivable*. Finally, a new category of *instantiability* can be defined as conceivability of the object plus conceivability of its factual instantiation, excluding objects such as numbers. This creates an ordering of properties in which we can say that *definability precedes conceivability, conceivability precedes instantiability and instantiability precedes existence*.

Meinong's criticism of our "prejudice" towards being also seems ill-founded, as it seems that we can only arrive at a concept of *definability* by abstracting the actual existence of any given object. We cannot talk about the *definability* of a particular object without having met (or in any way getting in contact with) objects that instantiate all its atomic parts; in order to grasp the concept of a unicorn or of Pegasus, we must first grasp the concept of the constituents of "unicorn" (a "horse" that has a single "horn") and the constituents of "Pegasus" (the unique "horse" that "flies" and "was ridden by Bellerophon").

The prejudice towards the *Sein* is, then, inevitable, as the *Nichtsein* is only understandable in terms of it. We can infer the *Nichtsein* of an object with such and such properties from the *Sein* of other objects with those same properties, but we cannot infer the *Sein* of an object with such and such properties by entering in contact with the *Nichtsein* of any object. The *Nichtsein* is out of our sensible grasp by definition. Thus, we can only say that the *Nichtsein* is the opposite of the *Sein* if we understand this "opposition" in a non-substantive way; the *Nichtsein* opposes the *Sein* inasmuch it is the same as the absence of *Sein*.

Despite these criticisms, Meinong's Theory of Objects provides some interesting insights regarding to the relation between existence and nonexistence, especially when we consider that a distinction between *existence*, *conceivability, definability* and *instantiability* is crucial for a proper understanding of nonexistence.

5 THE THEORY OF OBJECTS AS A COMPLEMENT OF THE THEORY OF DESCRIPTIONS

After explaining Meinong's theory and discussing it strengths and shortcomings, we are ready to summarize our arguments and give an interpretation of it that not only is consistent with use of Russell's Theory of Descriptions, but also complements it.

Thinking about an object which does not exist is the same as abstracting properties from objects that *do exist* and using them to compose nonexistent objects. Of course, we are mostly interested in objects that are at least *conceivable*, in the sense that the conjoined properties must not be contradictory, but in order to judge a particular object we need only for it to be *definable*, in the sense that we can associate it with a list of defining properties. Conceivability is a prerequisite for most meaningful judgments, but not for judgments in general. In particular, it is a prerequisite for judgements of instantiability, and thus also of existence. We can, for example, define the contradictory concept "the round square" and say that it is distinct from the defined concept "the round triangle", but since we cannot conceive round squares and round triangles we can safely say that such objets are uninstantiable and cannot exist. Unconceivability

naturally entails uninstantiability, even though conceivability does not entail the possibility of being instantiated.

This notion of definability can thus be seen as a reasonably broader version of Meinong's subsistence, being different from it only inasmuch contradictory concepts are considered incapable even of subsisting. This subtle distinction allows us to do away with notions such as the *Quasisein* or the *Aussersein*, as definability replaces conceivability and becomes the only requisite for subjecting an object to particular judgments. Since the definitions "The round square is round" and "The sky is blue" are intelligible and separable into definite properties, we conclude that both "The round square" and "The sky" are definable entities, but there is no need for further inquiry about their ontological status ("merely subsistent entities", "entities between being and non-being", etc) for the purpose of considering whether they can be the subject of judgements or not. This promotes conceptual economy without requiring any reduction in explanatory power.

In this interpretation, the Theory of Object and the Theory of Descriptions complement each other inasmuch the Theory of Descriptions tries to explain the logical shape of judgements concerning non-existent entities, whereas the Theory of Objects tries to explain the prerequisites of such judgments. An object can figure in a judgment described by the Theory of Descriptions whenever it is definable, is conceivable whenever it is non-contradictory, is instantiatable whenever its instantiation is conceivable, and is existent whenever it is actually instantiated. Existential claims apply only to empirical, instantiable judgements (such as "there is an animal with such and such characteristics"), whereas instantiability claims are capable of distinguishing between empirical and non-empirical judgements (both of which presuppose conceivability). Non-empirical judgements refer to essentially abstract judgements, being exemplified by mathematical judgements ("there is a number with such and such properties"). If we want to deal only with empirical propositions, we require statements to be *instantiable*, and if we want to deal only with non-empirical judgements, we require them to be *conceivable* but *uninstatiable*. This reinterpretation of the Theory of Objects not only lays down the conditions for judgments in general, but

also provides a simple *taxonomy* of particular descriptive judgments made in the context of the Theory of Descriptions.

It is also important to point out that, since definability, conceivability and instantiability are epistemic concepts, no ontological commitment is made when one states, for instance, that judgment presupposed definability and existence presupposes conceivability, so this interpretation of the Theory of Objects leads to no more ontological commitments than those already warranted by the Theory of Descriptions.

Aside from being clear and conceptually robust, the theory presented here has interesting connections with other charaterizations of Meinong's theory, particularly that of Terence Parsons (Parsons, 1974). For instance, by distinguishing between *nuclear properties*, which are used to define objects, and *extranuclear* properties, which are essentially judgements about their ontological status, Parsons (1974) implicitly uses the concept of definability in his reconstruction of Meinong's theory. On the other hand, he defines both possibility (of instantiation) and existence as extranuclear properties (*Ibid.*, p. 76) instead of providing a conceptual distinction. In fact, while we provide criteria for distinguishing *definability*, *conceivability, instantiability* and *existence*, he does not present any clear criteria for distinguishing *nuclear* and *extranuclear* properties, providing only examples and a tentative account (*Ibid.*, p. 569).

Our theory is also capable of providing concrete contributions to specific topics that require engagement with non-existent objects, such as accounts of the nature of fictional objects. Parsons (1975) uses his reconstruction of Meinong's theory to provide such an account, essentially stating that fictional objects must be characterized by reference to the sources in which they are created. In the case of objects presented in literary fiction, their characterizations would, of course, be given by definitions provided by the body of work that creates them. This is similar to the characterization of van Iwagen (1977), who uses an ascription relation to characterize what he calls "creatures of fiction". This ascription relation consists in an attribution made by an author, or creator, to a fictional object in a particular work. For instance, the judgment "Mrs. Gamp was fat", made about a particular character of Dicken's novel *Martin Chuzzlewit*,

should be understood as the assertion that a particular property, fatness, is ascribed to a fictional object, Mrs. Gamp, by the novel *Martin Chuzzlewit* (Van iwagen, 1977, p. 306). On the other hand, statements made in novels about actually existing objects, such as “Napoleon was described as vain by Tolstoy in War and Peace”, should not generally be subjected to the criteria of the ascription relation, as it only applies to creatures of fiction (*Ibid.*).

To those characterization we add that fictional objects, just like any other objects, are given to us by their *definitions*, and that their *conceivability* is a *judgment about such definitions*. For instance, statements about Sherlock Holmes are statements about the definition of Sherlock Holmes, and the existence of such a character is *conceivable* provided his description is non-contradictory. Depending on whether Sir Arthur Conan Doyle intended Sherlock Holmes to be an essentially fictional character or the description of some possibly existing object, we may judge Sherlock Holmes to be instantiable or uninstantiable. If the author did intend to refer to some possibly existing person, Sherlock Holmes might exist or not; if he intended to create a purely fictional person, then Sherlock Holmes is uninstantiable and cannot possibly exist. This is, of course, just a brief outline of how such a theory might be applied to fictional objects. Further expansion of this discussion is entirely outside the scope of this paper, therefore being left for future work.

The account presented in this essay is, of course, far from complete, as many aspects of nonexistence were left out. In particular, we did not even touch on the subject of the logical form of judgements that apply its categories. However, maybe this first step towards a reconciling of different traditions can show that, when credit is given where credit is due, different accounts of the same phenomenon, as irreconcilable as they might seem, can contribute to each other in such a way that all of them end up being enriched. If this is feasible, perhaps philosophy itself can find fresh insights not from new thoughts, but rather from the reinstatement of dialogues between older ideas.

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