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A MEINONGIAN MINEFIELD? THE DANGEROUS IMPLICATIONS OF NONEXISTENT OBJECTS

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Abstract: Alexius Meinong advocated a bold new theory of nonexistent objects, where we could gain knowledge and assert true claims of things that did not exist. While the theory has merit in interpreting sentences and solving puzzles, it unfortunately paves the way for contradictions. As Bertrand Russell argued, impossible objects, such as the round square, would have conflicting properties. Meinong and his proponents had a solution to that charge, posing genuine and non-genuine versions of the Law of Non-Contradiction. No doubt, they had a clever response, but it may not adequately address Russell's concern. Moreover, as I argue, *genuine* contradictions are inherent to the set of *all* nonexistent objects. And such contradictions lead to even further absurdities, for example, that nonexistent objects have and lack every property. Unfortunately, such implications of the theory make it too treacherous to adopt.
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Introduction and background

In the early 1900s, Alexius Meinong introduced the philosophical world to nonexistent objects, such as the round square and the perpetual motion machine. While his position may sound radical, it actually gave a simple way of interpreting descriptions and sentences, and it solved some traditional philosophical puzzles. But initially, the academic world was not ready for unreal objects. In fact, Meinong's theory fell on deaf ears for about 70 years after its introduction, and partly, this was due to the influence of Bertrand Russell. In 1905, Russell introduced his Theory of Descriptions, a method for paraphrasing sentences with definite descriptions (expressions of the form "the such-and-such"), which quickly gained wide acceptance within philosophical circles. This theory proved useful for solving the same puzzles that Meinong's did—only through a focus on logical form, as opposed to object expansion. With Russell's newfangled ways of paraphrasing sentences, few philosophers saw any need for a mysterious realm of unreal objects. But Russell did more than expound an analysis of descriptions; he raised worthy objections to Meinong's nonexistents, including one that seemed particularly damning: they allowed for violations of two logic principles, the Law of Excluded Middle (LEM), and, more importantly, the Law of Non-Contradiction

(LNC). And so, given the Russellian influence, it is hardly surprising that nonexistents did not, initially, gain much favor.

Nonetheless, the world has seen a resurgence of Meinongianism in more recent years, as various philosophers have endorsed and advocated unreal objects, such as Richard Routley (who later changed his name to "Richard Sylvan"), Terence Parsons, and Dale Jacquette. The Meinongian proponents have developed existence-free logic systems that incorporate nonexistents. They have uncovered difficulties with Russell's Theory of Descriptions—especially as applied to "empty" descriptions. And they have tried to address Russell's most damaging criticisms, bringing Meinong's previously-ignored rejoinders to the fore, and sometimes further building on them. A closer examination is warranted in light of the Meinongian revival and the clever developments made in its favor. However, as I argue, even if we grant the Meinongian rejoinders, the theory is still inherently contradictory, leading to treacherous implications. This, unfortunately, seems to call for its reburial.

Meinong's theory and rationale

Although I ultimately have concerns about a theory of nonexistents, I do not deny its benefits and initial plausibility. Unfortunately, in the past, Meinongianism has sometimes been dismissed too quickly—out of confusion and misunderstandings about what nonexistents were about. So, we need to first be clear on the position and its rationale. We know, for example, that Meinong describes the round square and perpetual motion machine as *objects*, but what exactly does he mean by that? Well, for starters, he does *not* mean they have any kind of being or pseudo-being, and he does *not* mean they exist in the world. Rather, he simply means they can be *objects of thought*—meaning we (or an unlimited intellect) *can* imagine, conceive, or direct our minds towards them, even if none of us actually *do* (Meinong 1960, 91-92). But even more importantly, Meinong thinks they can be *objects of knowledge*—meaning we can acquire true facts about them. For example, we can know that the round square is round and square, or the perpetual motion machine is always in motion. That being the case, these unreal entities have objective, knowable properties in their own right. They have essential characteristics comprising their nature or *Sosein*, independently of whether or not they exist (Meinong 1960, 82). Moreover, we can rationally discover these essential features of unreal objects (whether or not we actually do), making them objects proper that we can no longer dismiss as "mere nothing" (Meinong 1960, 79).

Meinong (1960) finds a theoretical place for nonexistents in his proposed Theory of Objects—a universal science of the highest generality, completely unrestricted in its subject matter. Such a science, he thinks, is needed *in addition* to the specialty fields, for a comprehensive system of knowledge. His Object Theory was meant to encompass all knowable facts, even if they fell outside the scope of traditional disciplines. And in particular, it was meant to cover our knowledge of *nonexistents* and their properties. Without this inclusion, Object Theory would be significantly and artificially limited. As Meinong observes, "[T]he totality of what exists, including what has existed and will exist, is infinitely small in comparison with the totality of the Objects of knowledge" (1960, 79).

Apart from their role in a universal science, "nonexistents" provide us with several advantages. Most significantly, they give us a straightforward solution to a traditional philosophical puzzle: how sentences with seemingly-empty descriptions can be meaningful *and* true or false. Consider these claims, for example:

(1) The round square is round.
(2) The perpetual motion machine does not exist.

The description in each case—"the round square" and "the perpetual motion machine"—is "seemingly-empty" in the sense that it describes nothing real. If each description has no referent, and each sentence, no subject, then we need to explain how we can make sense of (1) and (2). Oddly enough, they still appear meaningful and true.[1] And the truth of (2) is particularly mysterious, given it *depends* on there being no actual subject—no perpetual motion machine. Here, Meinongianism comes to the rescue in explaining what is going on. These sentences are indeed about something—the round square and the perpetual motion machine, respectively. Each sentence genuinely has a subject with a set of essential properties, only it is an unreal object.

Meinong's key tenets

As a starting point for his theory, Meinong assumes a straightforward understanding of descriptions: they directly refer to whatever fits them. For example, "the first man on the moon" would directly refer to Neil Armstrong. Under Meinong's theory, virtually any description of the form "the such-and-such" directly refers to an object or individual—but it may not be a real one.[2] For instance, "the round square," "the golden mountain," and "the perpetual motion machine" all refer to unreal particulars, as does "the King of France's long lost cousin on the golden mountain." And all these referents have the properties in their characterizations, the descriptions that characterize them. As Meinong observes, "Not only is the much heralded gold mountain made of gold, but the round square is as surely round as it is square" (1960, 82). This fact is generated by, what Richard and Valerie Routley (1973, 228) call, the "Characterization Postulate" or "Assumption Postulate"—the tenet that objects have the properties in their characterizations and those derivable from them. I refer to the facts generated by the Characterization Postulate as "characterization facts," and the properties, as "characterization properties."

Characterization properties are of particular importance to Meinong. According to him, objects must have characterization properties in order to have any other properties, such as that of non-existence (Meinong 1983, 61). We might suppose, then, that nonexistent objects are reliant on our thoughts—on the particular characterizations or descriptions we happen to conjure up in our heads. But Meinong assures us that this is not so. He says we never even have to think of an object in order for it to be an object. According to Meinong, not only are "all objects which are actually judged or presented, to be included as Objects of our scientific knowledge (*Wissens*), but also all Objects which are Objects of our cognition only in possibility" (1960, 91-92). And the facts about these objects, he contends, are also mind-

[1] On Russell's Theory of Descriptions, (1) comes out false. Some tout this as an advantage of Meinongianism.

[2] Meinong (1972, 18-21, 161) made some exceptions for paradoxical or "defective" expressions, such as "the thought about itself"—which did not refer to an object proper.

independent, just as the objects are themselves. For example, the perpetual motion machine has non-existence, and thus, also characterization properties, even if nobody has ever thought of it (Meinong 1960, 83; Meinong 1983, 61). This may sound odd at first blush, but Meinong wants beingless objects to be *objective* and *discoverable*, and the facts about them to be *objective* and *discoverable.* That gives them more credence as "objects of knowledge" that deserve a home in an objective and universal science.

This emphasis on objectivity might explain Meinong's main focus: what I call "isolated objects." These are nonexistent objects, such as the round square as used in logic examples, that are not part of a made-up context, such as a story or a dream. With isolated objects, the characterization *soley* furnishes a nonexistent with *nuclear* properties, which are ordinary, constitutive properties that describe the nature of the object.[3] Isolated objects are distinct from dream or fictional ones, such as Frankenstein's monster from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. This individual has nuclear properties, such as feeling lonely or wanting a female companion, that go beyond those in its immediate description, "Frankenstein's monster." Fictional or dream particulars, and the claims about them, are no doubt intriguing, but require a different and complex analysis.[4] In the interests of keeping a focus, I will, like Meinong, home in on isolated ones.

Russell's main criticism

Meinong's theory of isolated objects definitely has intuitive appeal. When we say, for example, "the round square is round," we seem to be (a) referring to the round square and (b) saying something true. Both these intuitions are captured by Meingongianism, and the Characterization Postulate further explains why our sentence actually *is* true. However, as Russell fears, perhaps a realm of unreal objects inevitably falls prey to logic contraventions and absurd implications. To demonstrate his point, Russell gives his example of the present King of France—a "nonexistent" given France no longer has a monarchy. If this king were a genuine individual, Russell contends, he would be neither bald nor not bald. Nothing affords him with either property. And so, facts about him would violate the LEM, a fundamental logic principle (Russell 1905, 485). This, in itself, is a worry, but Russell seems even more concerned about the LNC. The round square, if an object, would have to be round and square, and therefore, round *and* not round—a seemingly clear contradiction (Russell 1905,

[3] Nuclear properties are distinct from *extranuclear* or higher-order properties, such as non-existence or incompleteness. Extranuclear properties tend *not* to describe the object's nature per se, but rather its properties, ontological status, or role in a psychological state. Relational properties fall into both camps. Some are nuclear, for example, "being the husband of X." And some are extranuclear, for example, "being thought of by Y."

[4] Claims about such contextualized characters are more complicated than we might expect. In the absence of qualification, they are generally not true. For example, we might want to say, point blank, "Frankenstein's monster was bitter." After all, this accords with the novel *Frankenstein*. However, by the same token, we would have to say, point blank, "In 2005, the President of the United States was Jed Bartlet." This accords with the television show, *The West Wing*. Yet *unqualified*, we cannot say this is true; in 2005, George Bush was president. While beyond the scope of this paper, claims about contextualized individuals require a separate and more complicated interpretation. I propose an interpretation in my book, *Reburial of Nonexistents*.

483). But, given logic laws are necessary and universally applicable, Russell deems this intolerable, and, partly on this basis, he denounces the theory. Nonetheless, Meinong and his followers provide a clever solution to Russell's main criticism, and a serious examination of the issue ought to consider that response. Perhaps it can immunize the theory from logical absurdities and contradictions.

Meinong's solution to Russell's criticism

Meinong's solution to Russell's logic concern rests on two stipulated types of negation: wide and narrow. As we might expect, the difference in negation reflects a difference in scope: wide negation is used to negate whole propositions, whereas narrow negation is used to negate only properties (Meinong 1915, 171-74; Routley 1979, 86-92). Meinong (1915, 173) shows how this works, giving two ways of negating the propositional form "*A* is *B*":

(3)	It is not the case that *A* is *B*.	[wide negation]
(4)	*A* is *not B*. (*A* is *non-B*.)	[narrow negation]

Sentence Form (3) employs wide negation; the word "not" negates *the entire proposition* "*A* is *B*" (Meinong 1915, 178). The use of wide negation in (3) indicates a lack or absence, so that (3) basically says "*A* has an absence of *B"* or "*A* lacks *B*" (Routley 1979, 89). For example, in the sentence "it is not the case that four is male," wide negation is used to convey an absence of being male—whether four is the sort of thing that could have a sex in the first place.

In Sentence Form (4), the word "not" negates only the property *B*. Unfortunately, Meinong does not fully explain (4), but Routley (1979, 89) claims, and Meinong (1915, 172-8) suggests, that *not B* signifies a property in itself—an opposite of *B*.[5] So, for example, in the sentence "four is not male," "not male" indicates an opposite of male, namely, female. So, this sentence, which is false, means that four has the property of being female.

We should note that *non-B* is *not* the complement of *B*, *nor* does it even *imply* an absence of *B* (Routley 1979, 90). A bisexual earthworm, for example, is both female and male, or, in negative terms, both non-male and male. We can see, then, that "non-male" does not imply an absence of male, and in general, narrow negation does not imply wide. Narrow negation has been represented formally in different ways. But, following Nicholas Griffin (1986, 393) and Michael Thrush (2001, 161), I use the bar (-) for narrow negation and the standard tilde (~) for wide negation. These negation types, for Meinong, are key to addressing Russell's concern about logic principles.

[5] In a few places Meinong describes "not heavy" as the opposite of "heavy" (1915, 172, 178). He also describes these two judgments as opposites: "It is not the case that A is B" *and* "It is not the case that A is not B" (Meinong 1915, 173). The only difference between them is one of narrow negation: *B* versus *not B*.

The Law of Excluded Middle

Based on the negation distinction, Meinong posits a wide and narrow version of the LEM, which be represented as follows (Marek 2008):

Wide LEM: (∀F)(∀x) (Fx v ~Fx)
For any property *F*, everything must have or lack *F*.
Narrow LEM: (∀F)(∀x) (Fx v -Fx)
For any property *F*, everything must have *F* or *non-F*.

Meinong (1915, 174, 275) thinks the wide version of the LEM is genuine and holds universally, but *not* the narrow version of the LEM, which can be acceptably "violated." To demonstrate, suppose *F* is the property of being a sister. The number two must either have or lack this property (and indeed, two lacks it). Otherwise, we have a violation of the wide-LEM. Nonetheless, the number two does *not* have to be either a sister or a non-sister (a brother), which is clearly a category mistake. This merely "violates" the narrow version of the LEM, which is perfectly acceptable.[6] This all said, Meinong has an avenue for addressing Russell's objection. As Russell suggests, the King of France is neither bald nor non-bald (hairy), but this, according to Meinong, is entirely permissible. It merely and innocuously violates the LEM in its *narrow* form, which is not a genuine rule of logic.

Meinong, in fact, *draws* on the narrow version of the LEM, and "violations" of it, to explain indeterminacy. According to Meinong, most nonexistents are incomplete or indeterminate. This means that for some relevant property *F*, they neither have *F* nor its opposite, *non-F* (Meinong 1915, 171-80). Meinong (1993, 160) gives the example of the round square, and claims it is indeterminate with respect to being blue; it is neither has blue *nor* its opposite, non-blue (presumably, some other color). Nothing about the round square's characterization suggests it has either property in particular. Similarly, nothing *apart from its characterization* (such as a story context or intentional act) suggests it has either property in particular. And even a perfectly wise intellect, capable of knowing everything there is to know, could not determine if the round square was blue or non-blue. This suggests, according to Meinong (1993, 158-61), that the round square is genuinely and objectively indeterminate with respect to being blue.

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[6] Meinongians might object to this example. Technically, Meinong (1974, 226; 1915, 169) thought that *real objects* (existents and subsistents), including the number two, were fully determined and subject to the narrow version of the LEM. However, Meinong probably *meant* that real objects were subject to the narrow-LEM only with respect to *applicable properties* (so that two does not have to be a sister or a brother, which are both non-applicable to a number.) Even with that stipulation, Meinong's assumption is dubious. Real people, for example, can be neither sisters nor brothers (non-sisters). They can be neither far-sighted nor near-sighted (non-far-sighted). And they can be neither intelligent nor dumb (non-intelligent). However, we can make better sense of Meinong's assumption if we apply a little charity. He probably meant that when (*F* or *non-F*) was exhaustive and necessary for a real object of a certain type, the object indeed had to be *F* or *non-F*. A real object would *not* have the luxury of having a gap where F was concerned; however, an unreal one might. So, for example, a *real person* must be either married or non-married (single). But an unreal person, say, the present King of France, could have a gap where such properties were concerned.

Many nonexistents are in a similar boat. They have relevant property gaps, where they have neither a property *F* nor its opposite *non-F*. To express such indeterminacy symbolically (where *x* is indeterminate with respect to *F*), Meinongians have given us two general formulas:

$\sim (Fx \vee -Fx)$
It is not the case that *x* is either *F* or *non-F*.
$\sim Fx \cdot \sim -Fx$
x does not have *F*, and *x* does not have *non-F*.

The first formula reflects the breakdown of the narrow version of the LEM, which again, was how Meinong defined indeterminacy. The second formula is its logical equivalent, according to DeMorgan's Theorem. It also captures Routley's formal definition of indeterminacy or incompleteness (1979, 196). Both formulas tell us that *x* has neither *F* nor *non-F*. And this makes sense. If *x* had either property, it would not be indeterminate with respect to *F*.

So, going back to Russell's present King of France, Meinong is obviously not concerned that he is neither bald nor non-bald. This, again, is a mere "violation" of the *narrow* version of the LEM, a non-genuine principle. But moreover, Meinong requires this type of narrow "violation" to explain indeterminacy and to show how nonexistents can have property gaps—in the King of France's case, a gap with respect to baldness.

The Law of Non-Contradiction

Meinongians, we see, have a compelling response to Russell's charge about the LEM. But, we recall, the LEM was not the only principle at stake. Russell (1905, 483) was even more troubled by violations of the LNC, which he identified as "the chief objection" to Meinongianism (1905, 483). However, as we might expect, Meinong again had a response, relying on his types of negation. As with the LEM, he introduced two different versions of the LNC—a wide version and a narrow one—which can be represented as follows (Marek 2008):

Wide LNC: $(\forall F)(\forall x) \sim(Fx \cdot \sim Fx)$
For any property *F*, nothing can have and lack *F*.
Narrow LNC: $(\forall F)(\forall x) \sim(Fx \cdot -Fx)$
For any property *F*, nothing can have *F* and *non-F*.

As we might expect, Meinong (1915, 275) thinks the wide version of the LNC holds absolutely and universally, but the narrow version does not always hold, because it is not a genuine law of logic. It merely appears that way because it is easily confused with its wider counterpart. Again, a worm cannot have *and* lack the property of being male; this *would* violate the *wide* version of the LNC, a definite taboo. Nonetheless, a worm *can* have the properties of being male and non-male (female). In other words, it can have both male and female sex organs and reproductive functions. This merely "violates" the *narrow* version of the LNC, which is perfectly acceptable.

With this in mind, we can see why Meinong and some of his followers are unfazed by Russell's concern: the round square is round and not round. According to them, that merely "violates" the narrow version of the LNC, given "not round" represents narrow negation. And so, there is no genuine contradiction. For Meinong, nonexistents pose no real threat to logic laws, including the highly-cherished LNC. Once genuine and faux logic principles are sorted out, the theory appears to be consistent.

Wide contradictions still at large

No doubt, Meinong and his followers have made valuable distinctions and insights that further work towards explaining their theory. The narrow version of the LEM can explain, in part, how some objects can be indeterminate. The narrow version of the LNC can explain, in part, how some claims *are* consistent, despite first appearances. That said, should we still worry about consistency in a theory of nonexistents? Unfortunately, the answer is "yes."

Meinongians propose a clever solution to Russell's consistency challenge (that the round square is both round and not round), but it appears to be inadequately worked out. Firstly, neither Meinong nor his followers adequately tell us what "not round" means, which is not clear, considering "round" has no *obvious* opposite per se. They could be stipulating a new definition of an "opposite property," but they still need to explain what it is. Secondly, the response may not address the *intent* of Russell's criticism. In deeming the round square "round and not round," Russell may not have used any specialized meaning of "not" or "not round." Rather, he probably intended a *standard* usage of these terms, where "not" is taken *widely*, to mean an absence. After all, the round square is a square. And squares, by their very nature, cannot be round; they necessarily *lack* this property. Perhaps, then, he can still infer that the round square both has and lacks roundness—*independently* of whether it is non-round. If so, Meinong has not provided a satisfactory solution.

In spite of my skepticism, I am willing, for the sake of argument, to grant that Meinong's solution works and can explain the concerns about the round square. Unfortunately, Meinong still cannot wipe his hands free of contradictions. He seems to forget that characterizations themselves can employ wide negation or indicate absences—albeit, some of his followers, for example, Routley (1979, 255, 416, 498), do recognize this issue. Take, for example, "the coaster that has and lacks the property of being round." As per the Characterization Postulate, the referent both has and lacks the property of being round: (Rc · ~Rc). This violates the *wide* version of the LNC, a universal and legitimate law for Meinong. So, even if Meinong can solve Russell's concern about the round square, he still needs to address the amended criticism above.

However, quite apart from this, we encounter an abyss of *wide* contradictions when we consider the *set* of all isolated objects. All such objects, it seems, have and lack every nuclear property. But before explaining why, I should first clarify the nature of certain characterizations that contribute to the problem. Some characterizations are, what I call, "complex"—that is, they contain at least one *embedded* characterization. For example, the following are both complex characterizations: "the dragon's mother-in-law" and "the heavy burden placed on the dragon." Neither denotes the dragon, but "the dragon" appears in both characterizations. And both characterizations indirectly tell us something about the dragon—that it has a mother-in-law (and thus, presumably, a spouse), as well as a heavy burden.

Complex characterizations seem innocuous enough, but they play a role in two main sources of wide contradictions: (1) indeterminacy and complex characterizations and (2) conflicting complex characterizations. I examine each in turn.

Problem source one: indeterminacy and complex characterizations

Recall that isolated objects are generally indeterminate or incomplete, and as such, they lack any nuclear properties that cannot be derived from their characterizations. Meinong's round square, for example, lacks the property of being blue *and* the property of being non-blue. Following Routley (1979, 196), this can be symbolically represented as follows:

~Bs · ~ -Bs

By applying the Rule of Simplification, we can infer that the round square does not have the property of being blue (the first conjunct):

~Bs

This appears fine and well, until we consider complex characterizations. "The round square" can show up in another characterization, and that characterization can imply that the round square *is* blue. Consider, for example:

"the deep blue shade of the round square,"
"the blue sky that matches the color of the round square," or
"the sorcerer who made the round square blue."

According to the Characterization Postulate, each of these describes an object that *perfectly* fits the description. Unfortunately, if that be the case, the round square must also be blue. And so, we should also adopt the following proposition:

Bs

However, this proposition contradicts our earlier inference (~Bs). From the indeterminacy of the round square and from the complex characterizations of other objects, we can infer a contradictory "fact" about the round square:

Bs · ~Bs

The round square *has* the property of being blue and *lacks* the property of being blue. And unfortunately, this violates the *wide* version of the LNC.

The problem is not limited to a few odd facts about the round square. Instead, the problem is wide-spread, and we can easily see why. Beingless objects are, for the most part, indeterminate. And according to the Meinongian formula, when *x* is indeterminate with respect to property *F*, the following is true (Routley 1979, 196):

~Fx · ~ -Fx

Unfortunately, by Simplification, this means that the first conjunct is true:

~Fx

And indeed, both Routley and Meinong expressly agree. Routley (1979, 88), for example, infers (~Bk) from (~Bk · ~ -Bk)—a representation of the King of France's indeterminacy with respect to baldness. And Meinong notes *directly* that an object, *A*, lacks a property *B*, if *A* is indeterminate with respect to *B*. In discussing *wide* negation, he states (my translation), "Whoever denies that A is B [~Ba] . . . is certainly correct if A is merely not determined with respect to B" (Meinong 1915, 178). So, (~Fx) is a fair inference when *x* is indeterminate with respect to *F*. However, unfortunately, *another* characterization denoting a different object will indirectly attribute *F* to *x*. According to the Characterization Postulate, this characterization still denotes an object with all the properties in the characterization, but unfortunately, that also means that *x* has the property *F*. To illustrate, consider a characterization of the following generic form:

"the triangle that could only be a triangle if *x had F.*"

By virtue of the Characterization Postulate, this description must denote a triangle. But that also means *x must have property F.* Otherwise, this triangle could *not* be a triangle. And therefore, we can infer that (Fx) is true. Nonetheless, this contradicts the earlier inference that (~Fx) is true (because *x* is indeterminate with respect to *F*). Therefore, we have to accept (Fx · ~Fx), which violates the wide version of the LNC.

Wide violations of the LNC are a concern for Meinongians. But unfortunately, they seem unavoidable, given the Characterization Postulate and the notion of indeterminacy. Yet Meinongians could *not* easily dispose of either of these tenets. The Characterization Postulate is critical for generating an object's defining or characterization properties. And all other types of properties, such as "not existing" or "being thought of" rely on characterization ones (Meinong 1983, 61; Routley 1979, 45). The notion of indeterminacy is also critical to a theory of nonexistents. We would need it to maintain, for example, that the King of France has a gap with respect to baldness. Without it, he would need to have a property (baldness or non-baldness) when no truth conditions obtain, making this so—no physical events, no a priori principles, no story context, and no pragmatic considerations. Propositions, then, could be true *arbitrarily*—an implication we would surely want to avoid. Thus, Meinongians would want to hold on to the notion of indeterminacy. But *even if* they could denounce or rework this notion, it would not block the contradiction problem. Indeterminacy is only one means of realizing the problem. The same issue arises with conflicting characterizations. They too can yield wide contradictory "facts"—and in a more obvious fashion.

Problem source two: conflicting complex characterizations

To demonstrate my concern, consider this set of complex characterizations:

"the presence of blue on the round square" and
"the absence of blue on the round square."

From the first characterization, we know, indirectly, that the round square has the property of being blue and from the second, we know, indirectly, that it lacks this property. Or, for example, consider this set of characterizations:

> "the blue surface of the round square" and
> "the bachelor who would have been married if any round squares were blue."

From the first characterization, we know, indirectly, that the round square is blue. From the second characterization, we know, indirectly, that the round square lacks the property of being blue. Otherwise, the bachelor would not be a bachelor, but a married man. So, given each of these sets of characterizations, we can infer a "fact" that violates the *wide* version of the LNC, namely, the round square has and lacks the property of being blue: (Bs · ~Bs).

If we had only a few contradictory facts, this might be a lesser concern. But, we can conclude, unfortunately, that every isolated object has every property and lacks every property. To see how, let "the *G*" represent any characterization, and let "*F*" represent any property. We have to deal with the following sorts of characterization sets (or variations there of):

> "the wizard who gave *the G* the property *F* (at time *t*)" and
> "the wizard who zapped the property *F* from *the G* (at time *t*),"

> "the man who correctly discovered *the G* has the property *F*" and
> "the man who correctly discovered *the G* lacks the property *F*," and

> "the blue triangle that could only be a triangle if *the G* has property *F*" and
> "the blue triangle that could only be a triangle if *the G* lacks property *F*."

And in many cases, we would also have to deal with the following characterization set (or variations thereof):

> "the presence of *F* on *the G*" and
> "the absence of *F* on *the G*."

Unfortunately, many characterizations *indirectly* indicate the presence of a particular property in a particular object, and many others *indirectly* indicate an absence of that same property in that same object. This being the case, beingless objects have *and* lack every property, or at least the isolated ones do. This means that some facts violate the *wide* version of the LNC, a taboo even for Meinong. However, it also means that further absurd implications will prevail.

First, virtually all claims about beingless objects are true *and* false. To illustrate, consider "the round square is blue." This is true in light of "the blue surface of the round square" and false in light of "the absence of blue on the round square." Different characterizations indirectly attribute a presence and an absence of blueness in the round square. Second, we have no means of distinguishing one isolated object from any other. Every one of them has and lacks all nuclear properties. That means, then, that every isolated object has the same contradictory set of nuclear properties. Meinongian proponents tend to adopt G. W. Leibniz's Identity of Indiscernibles (or versions thereof) whereby objects are identical or *one and the* *same* if they have all nuclear properties in common (Parsons 1980, 19; Pasniczek 1995, 296; Zalta 1983, 13). Since all isolated objects have the same set of nuclear properties, "they" would all be one and the same.

The problems are not restricted to nonexistent objects. We can discern many bogus "truths" about the real world by application of the Characterization Postulate. Routley (1979, 267), for example, recognizes the vexing nature of "Joan of Arc's husband." If this description truly denotes someone, then we can rationally determine that Joan of Arc had a husband. Nonetheless, this defies our empirical knowledge of her. So, an a priori claim conflicts with an empirical one. But "Joan of Arc's husband" is only one example leading to this sort of conflict.

Other problematic characterizations arise, such as "the Pop-Tarts at the Last Supper," "Adolf Hitler's overly compassionate nature," and "William Shakespeare's electric blender collection." According to Meinong, each expression denotes an object that truly fits the description. Nonetheless, this would mean that Pop-Tarts were served at the Last Supper, that Hitler was overly compassionate, and that Shakespeare did have a collection of electric blenders. Following this line of reasoning, we could discern anything and everything about real objects from characterizations denoting unreal ones.

Parsons, among others, has offered an ad hoc solution, explaining some problem characterizations. According to Parsons, unreal objects can be related to real ones, but real objects *cannot* be related to unreal ones (in a nuclear way). As Parsons states, "No existing object bears any nuclear relation to any nonexistent object (though this prohibition does not extend to extranuclear relations, such as 'worships' or 'is different from')" (1979, 660).

This all assumed, Joan of Arc's husband would be married to Joan of Arc, but *she* would *not* be married to him. Joan of Arc, a real individual, cannot be related (in a nuclear way) to an unreal one, her beingless husband. (But this gives us cause to wonder, then, how he could be married to an unwed woman). Even if this is an acceptable solution, the first problem still remains. Beingless objects, according to Parsons (1979, 660), *can* bear nuclear relations to one another. So, we are still left with characterizations attributing and denying relations between beingless objects. As I mentioned, isolated objects would have and lack almost every property, contravening the LNC in its wide form. Thus, we have cause to wonder if, as Meinong thought, we can have significant knowledge of such entities. And we would be wise to consider possible rejoinders to see if the wide contradictions can be blocked.

Possible rejoinders for either problem source

Meinongians may object to my analysis, arguing that *the round square* mentioned in each of the following characterizations is different. Each instance of "the round square" below denotes a different object:

(5) "the round square,"
(6) "the blue surface of the round square," and
(7) "the absence of blue on the round square."

This being the case, no contradictions arise. Sure enough, (5) and (6) *appear* contradictory. Given the round square's indeterminate nature and (5), the round square appears *to lack* the property of being blue. However, given the implications of (6), the round square appears *to have* the property of being blue. Nonetheless, the problem disappears if "the round square" in (5) and "the round square" in (6) refer to different objects—different round squares.

In a similar fashion, (6) and (7) appear contradictory. Given (6), the round square appears *to have* the property of being blue, and given (7), the round square appears *to lack* the property of being blue. But again, Meinongians could stipulate that "the round square" in (6) and "the round square" in (7) each refer to a different object, and the problem would dissipate.

This may be a tidy solution, but why would it be the case? A characterization or description, for Meinongians, has a naming function in that it directly denotes an object. Consider, then, a name, such as "Alexius Meinong." This name refers to the same person on its own, as it does when part of a description. So, with each mention of "Alexius Meinong" in the following expressions, we are referring to the same person:

(8) "Alexius Meinong,"
(9) "the wife of Alexius Meinong," and
(10) "the bachelor-life of Alexius Meinong."

To determine the referent of (9), we would consider the person designated by "Alexius Meinong" and find out who his wife is. We would not assume that "Alexius Meinong" referred to a different person when used in "the wife of Alexius Meinong" as it did when used on its own. Otherwise, the expression "the wife of Alexius Meinong" would refer to the wife of somebody else. In a similar vein, to determine the referent of (10), we would assume "Alexius Meinong" refers to Alexius Meinong, and not, say, Immanuel Kant. We consider Alexius Meinong's "bachelor-life"—and not somebody else's. Since descriptions have, allegedly, the same function as names, the same considerations should apply. Whether we are talking about *the round square* on its own or *the round square* as part of another description, we are still talking about *the round square*. And indeed, for Meinongians, expressions within expressions retain their referent. After all, Meinongians are concerned about "Joan of Arc's husband." They assume that "Joan of Arc" by itself and "Joan of Arc" in "Joan of Arc's husband" still refer to the same person. This being so, they might want to look for another rejoinder. And certainly others are available to them.

Meinongians could argue that "the round square" is an abbreviated characterization, similar to "the man." We can refer to someone as "the man" even though he has properties external to this description, such as residing in Ottawa and owning a shovel. Similarly, then, the round square may have properties external to its description, such as being big, blue, explosive, and shiny. Nonetheless, we pick out its most prominent features—being round and being square—and refer to it as such. This would address my concerns with characterizations (5) and (6), "the round square" and "the blue surface of the round square." After all, (5) could still denote a *blue* round square even though blue is not specified in the description. This reply could also address my concerns with (6) and (7), "the blue surface of the round square" and "the absence of blue on the round square." The round square mentioned in (6) could be different from the round square mentioned in (7). Characterizations (6) and (7) might be abbreviated for, respectively, "the blue surface of the *blue* round square" and "the absence of blue on the *green* round square." Again, this would solve the problem.

This solution may work well for existents, fictional objects, or some objects of thought that can have nuclear properties external to their characterizations. Consider again, Frankenstein's monster. He has many properties, such as being lonely and bitter, that go beyond the properties in the descriptive phrase, "Frankenstein's monster." However, the same is not true of isolated objects. They have *only* the nuclear properties implicit in their characterizations (Findlay 1963, 159). This assumption, again, is integral to Meinong's theory of indeterminacy. "The round square," for example, refers to an object with no nuclear properties apart from "round" and "square," and those derivable from them. That is why it is indeterminate with respect to blueness; neither blue nor non-blue is implicit in its characterization. An appeal to abbreviated descriptions, then, will not solve the contradiction problem. For an isolated object, the description determines all of its nuclear properties, and thus, cannot consist of an abbreviated or selected set of them. Meinong's own work concentrates on isolated objects, helping to explain examples about the round square and the perpetual motion machine that were not part of a story or context. And, as mentioned at the outset, I am restricting my own focus to isolated objects.

Possible rejoinder for problem source one

So, a good solution to the consistency problem identified should account for isolated objects. But Meinongians might still find one that does. Complex characterizations, they could argue, show that isolated objects are not genuinely indeterminate, which, again, was the first source of wide contradictions. Perhaps, for example, we are mistaken to think the round square is indeterminate with respect to being blue, given the "the round square" is included in other characterizations, such as (6) "the blue surface of the round square." That being so, maybe the round square *is* blue. No gap, then, exists where blueness is concerned. And that would help solve the problem. Characterizations (5) "the round square" and (6) "the blue surface of the round square" would not be in conflict. Instead, (5) would denote a *blue* round square (as opposed to one without this property).

Unfortunately, this solution is still unsatisfactory. We should probably still uphold the tenet of indeterminacy. While we could say the round square is blue in light of (6) "the blue surface of the round square," we could also say it lacks blue, in light of (7) "the absence of blue on the round square."[7] Depending on which characterization we look at, the round square will have the property of being blue or it will lack the property of being blue. Thus, this response does not look promising. Furthermore, it does not address conflicting characterizations—the *second* source of wide contradictions. However, perhaps Meinongians have a different, but ready-made response for this concern.

Possible rejoinder for problem source two

With conflicting complex characterizations, we recall, one characterization indirectly indicates that "*X* has *F*" and another, that "*X* lacks *F*." However, Routley might take issue with how we interpret the second type of characterization. Routley (1979, 498-9), as it

[7] We could also appeal to other characterizations, such as "the completely colorless exterior of the round square" or "the completely black exterior of the round square." If black is an absence of all colors, then it is also an absence of blue.

so-happens, says that absences are *non-assumptible*, meaning they pose exceptions to the Characterization Postulate. For Routley (1979, 499), "the round object with an absence of roundness" denotes, at best, something round; "round" is assumptible, but "having an absence of roundness" is not. Routley is happy to let the Characterization Postulate determine the set of nuclear or first-order properties belonging to an object. But, he notes, a property-absence is not a nuclear or first-order property, and cannot be determined by the mere say-so of a characterization (Routley 1979, 90).

Routley's restriction might solve the problem with some conflicting characterizations, for example, (6) "the blue surface of the round square" and (7) "the absence of blue on the round square." If absences are non-assumptible, then (7) presumably refers to *the round square* or simply, a void. Thus, (6) and (7) no longer appear to be in conflict (setting aside potential issues with indeterminacy). Routley's conjecture may indeed solve the LNC-problem for conflicting characterizations, but it may also be an ill-advised tenet. Unfortunately, restrictions on the Characterization Postulate start to undermine the rationale for nonexistents. Meinongianism, we recall, explains how statements with "empty" descriptions can be true and meaningful. It explains, for example, the apparent truth and meaning of "the round square is round," by taking "the round square" at face value, as referring to a *round square*. But, by the same token, the following claims are also apparently true and meaningful:

(11) The absence of blue on the round square is *not* the same as the round square itself.
(12) I discuss the absence of blue on the round square.
(13) The round square's color cannot match my blue jeans' by virtue of the absence of blue on the round square.
(14) The absence of blue on the round square tells us something about the round square's color, but not its size.

If (7), "the absence of blue on the round square," truly refers to an absence so-described, then we can explain why the sentences above are true and meaningful. But if (7) simply refers to *the round square* or a void (as Routley's tenet suggests), then these above claims are not true (with perhaps, the exception of 12), and their common-sense meaning is obscured—if they have meaning at all.

This alone casts doubt on Routley's restriction of the Characterization Postulate. But furthermore, we might struggle with characterizations such as (15):

(15) "the bachelor who would have been married if any round squares were blue."

Like (7), (15) indicates that the round square lacks the property of being blue—only much less directly. In (15), we infer that the round square must not have blueness in order for the bachelor in question to be, indeed, a bachelor. But (15) makes no *explicit* mention of *the* round square itself lacking blueness. Thus, it is not clear if Routley's tenet (that property-absences are not assumptible) even applies to (15). If it does *not*, then the problem of conflicting characterizations remains. It would simply stem from characterizations like (15), as opposed to ones like (7). But characterizations like (15) still imply "*X* lacks *F*." And so, they would be a problem next to characterizations implying "*X* has *F*." Thus, as a solution to the contradiction problem, Routley's characterization restrictions may not work. Furthermore, that would only address the second source of wide contradictions: conflicting complex characterizations. But we would also need a *good* way of addressing the first source of contradictions, which relies on indeterminacy. Otherwise, wide contradictions and absurd implications may well prevail.

Conclusion

So, in summary, what can we say about nonexistent objects? On the one hand, they are both intuitive and helpful at explaining traditional puzzles in philosophy. But, on the other hand, they lead to contradictions and absurd implications that seem particularly dangerous. Meinong and his supporters are, nonetheless, prepared to ward off some of those apparent difficulties. In addressing Russell, Meinong explains how an unreal king could be neither bald nor non-bald. That merely violates the LEM in its *narrow* form—which is not only acceptable, but also required for explaining indeterminacy. Meinong also explains how the round square can be round and non-round without genuine contradiction; such an object, he contends, has opposite properties that merely violate the narrow version of the LNC. Meinong's replies are certainly meritorious, and perhaps successful at countering Russell's concerns. But, more than likely, they will not conquer the abyss of *wide* contradictions generated by the *set* of unreal objects. Indeterminacy and complex characterizations imply both the absence and presence of the same properties in the same objects—a taboo even for Meinong.

These wide contradictions constitute a problem in and of themselves. But moreover, they lead to further absurd implications. Isolated objects may have and lack all the same nuclear properties. And they may, by Leibniz's Law, all be one and the same. This seems to defeat the purpose of introducing unreal objects and including them in a universal science, where certain predicates were allegedly true of some objects and false of others. We have little grounds for holding on to "knowledge" about isolated objects if they are all one and the same, and what we say of them is both true *and* false. The theory seems to lead us through a Meinongian minefield, and may simply be too treacherous to adopt.

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