Meinongian Merits and Maladies

Willard V. Quine begins perhaps the most celebrated article on ontology of the 20th century:

> A curious thing about the ontological problem is its simplicity. It can be put in three Anglo-Saxon monosyllables: "What is there?" It can be answered, moreover, in a word — "Everything" — and everyone will accept this answer as true. However, this is merely to say that there is what there is. (1948, p. 21)

Has Quine made a methodological mistake in these first few sentences? I do not wish to suggest that, because there are some theorists who deny that "Everything" is the correct answer to the ontological problem, Quine is being irresponsible in saying this answer is universally appealing; it is certainly an answer with which the vast majority of analytic philosophers would agree, in spite of their thinking it utterly uninformative and unsatisfying. But it is far from obvious that this licenses Quine's inference that the sentences 'Everything is' and 'There is whatever there is' are semantically equivalent. Mightn't it be true that, for something x, it is not true that there is an x?

To find an answer, we must determine the semantic content of 'something' and 'there is.' According to what has long been the dominant school of thought in analytic meta-ontology—defended not only by Quine, but also by Bertrand Russell, Alvin Plantinga, Peter van Inwagen, and many others—the meaning of 'there is' is identical to the meaning of 'there exists.' The most (in)famous aberration from this view is advanced by Alexius Meinong, whose ontological picture has endured extensive criticism (and borderline abuse) from several subscribers to the majority view. Meinong denies the identity of being and existence. That is, he denies that 'there is' and 'there exists' are semantically equivalent, and defends a theory according to which there are things that do not exist. Although abstract entities (numbers, properties, etc.) do not *exist*, Meinong contends, it would be wrong to say that *there are no such things*, or that such things have no being.[1]

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[1] Throughout this paper, I use 'thing' and 'object' interchangeably. However, because of its tight connection with words (in English and in several other languages) such as 'ontology' and 'being,' I reserve the word 'entity' for things that *are*, things that *have being*. For Meinong, neither 'x is something' nor 'x is an object' entails 'x is an entity.'

Knowing that Quine thinks 'there is' and 'there exists' mean the same thing, we can safely assume that he would reject the possibility of a Meinongian nonexistent object just as surely as he rejects the possibility of something that has no being. But positing a distinction between being and existence does not provide a clear answer to the original question I raised for Quine: is it possible that, for some thing *x*, (which *is* a thing/object,) it is not the case that *x is*, that *x has being*? Might some objects lack being? The short answer, according to Meinong, is 'Yes.' To see why, we must take a brief detour into Meinong's theory of objects—home to what has been not-so-affectionately labeled 'Meinong's Jungle,' an overcrowded repository of things that do not exist and even things that could not possibly exist: round squares, married bachelors, and the largest prime number.

In the first two sections of this paper, I explicate and critically assess Meinong's theory of objects and the most forceful objections to it, two of which are owed to Russell. This discussion sets the stage for what remains: adjudicative analysis of the debate between what I take to be the most plausible version of Neo-Meinongianism on the one hand and what I shall hereinafter call 'meta-ontological orthodoxy'—the view that there are no objects that do not exist—defended by theorists such as Russell, Quine, van Inwagen, and Plantinga on the other. This analysis begins in the third section of the paper, in which I argue that a Neo-Meinongian ontology is actually more compatible with fundamental common-sense truths than are the theories proposed by Meinong himself and van Inwagen, whom I perceive to be the most outspoken critic of Neo-Meinongianism alive today. I defend this evaluation by (i) showing how a refined Neo-Meinongian theory of objects can obviate the most powerful objections to strict Meinongianism, (ii) raising objections to the alleged semantic equivalence of 'there is' and 'there exists,' and (iii) demonstrating that van Inwagen's blunt dismissal of the distinction between being and existence is based on serious misconceptions of Meinong's theory of objects and ultimately fails to undermine this distinction.

1. Meinong's Theory of Objects

The origins of Meinong's theory of objects seem inextricably linked to his views on the intentionality of mental phenomena—including general thoughts and mental representations as well as propositional attitudes like belief, desire, and fear (Reicher 2019). Both the problem of intentionality and the principle of intentionality are crucial to Meinong's meta-ontological motivations; it will therefore be useful to begin discussion of his theory of objects with clarification of this problem and principle.

In the first sentence of "The Theory of Objects," Meinong writes:

> That knowing is impossible without something being known, and more generally, that judgments and ideas or presentations […] are impossible without being judgments about and presentations of something, is revealed to be self-evident by a quite elementary examination of these experiences […] To put it briefly, no one fails to recognize that psychological events so very commonly have this distinctive 'character of being directed to something' as to suggest very strongly (at least) that we should take it to be a characteristic aspect of the psychological as opposed to the non-psychological. (1904/1960, p. 76)

To say that a mental phenomenon is intentional is to say that it is directed toward an object. For our purposes, then, we can define Meinong's principle of intentionality as the claim that all judgments and ideas (and nearly all other mental phenomena) are directed toward an object.

The problem of intentionality arises because the objects toward which mental phenomena are directed do not always exist. Plenty of people fear the devil and pray for peace in the Middle East, and yet we declare with confidence that the devil does not exist, and that there is (at the moment, at least) no peace in the Middle East (Reicher 2019). One might see this problem as the principle of intentionality's fatal flaw; it shows that commitment to the principle of intentionality leads to all sorts of *prima facie* absurdities. If every idea has an object, and I have an idea of the devil, aren't we forced to concede (contrary to our presupposition) that the devil exists?

Meinong does not think so. Everything is an object, Meinong thinks (1904/1960, p. 84), but existence cannot be correctly ascribed to all objects. Moreover, some objects lack not only existence but any sort of being at all. He maintains that non-being, being, and existence are all properties, and that every object has at least one of them (1904/1960, p. 86). According to Meinong's theory, there are three basic kinds of objects: (i) things that *exist*—physical and psychological things—such as cows, tables, dreams, and desires; (ii) things that merely *subsist*—which Meinong calls 'ideal'—e.g., numbers, properties, similarities, and differences; and (iii) things that merely *absist*—i.e. things that neither exist nor subsist, but rather have the property of non-being—including incomplete objects (e.g., the golden mountain) as well as contradictory objects (e.g., the largest prime), among other sorts of beingless things. The use of 'merely' in these contexts is quite important. Using Meinong's terminology, all objects absist, a subset of those objects also subsist, and some subsistent objects also exist; only objects that *merely* absist have the property of non-being, and these objects, along with merely subsistent objects, have the property of nonexistence. Meinong can therefore swiftly dissolve the problem of intentionality by denying that 'there is an *x*' or 'there exists an *x*' logically follows from '*x* is the object of a mental phenomenon *m*.'

Meinong's theory also provides ample equipment for solutions to a host of puzzles that arise from sentences containing expressions that are often called 'empty terms.' Let us first consider the challenge of true singular negative existentials. Most would agree that 'The present King of France does not exist' expresses a true proposition by denying the existence of something that is uniquely presently King of France. But if 'the present King of France' is a singular term, mustn't it refer to *something* if the sentence in which it occurs is to have a truth value? Meinong has no difficulty accounting for this. The singular term 'the present King of France' *does* refer to

something—something that does not exist. Meinong similarly has little trouble with the problems of fictional discourse.[2] We intuitively think that sentences like 'Santa Claus is not clean-shaven' and 'Harry Potter is a fictional wizard' express true propositions, but, again, how can these sentences be true if Santa Claus and Harry Potter do not exist? The Meinongian answer, of course, is that, irrespective of whether there are such things as Santa Claus or Harry Potter, the sentences in question truthfully deny and affirm the attribution of specific properties to these fictional characters. Whether they have the properties of existence or being is, according to Meinong's theory of objects, neither here nor there. Meinong's solution to puzzles involving empty terms implies that the terms we often think of as failing to refer to anything do, in fact, have referents: nonexistent objects. In short, such terms are not genuinely empty.

Meinong's ontology is both difficult to make sense of and easy to mischaracterize. Matters are only made more complicated given his assertion of the paradoxical claim: "There are objects of which it is true that there are no such objects" (Meinong 1904/1960, p. 83). Fortunately, Meinong does not burden us with the task of deciphering this line entirely on our own. He attempts to assuage such apparent absurdity by appealing to two principles that play key roles in his theory: (i) the "principle of the independence of so-being from being" (Meinong 1904/1960, pp. 82-83) and (ii) the "principle of the indifference of the pure object to being" (Meinong 1904/1960, p. 86).

The former, which I (following Marek) will call the *independence principle*, results from the combination of two more specific principles: the *characterization principle*, which holds that "any object has those properties that it is characterized as having," and the *denial of the ontological assumption*, which rejects the common-sense notion that propositions about things that lack being cannot be true (Marek 2019). Meinong illustrates the independence principle by applying it to two

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[2] Although Meinong does not explicitly discuss objects of fiction, one can reach these results by treating fictional characters the way Meinong treats objects such as the golden mountain.

merely absistent objects: "Not only is the much heralded golden mountain made of gold, but the round square is as surely round as it is square" (1904/1960, p. 82). As I shall explain later, I find the independence principle untenable, and disavowal of it is common among Neo-Meinongians.

According to Meinong's second key principle, the *indifference principle*, "The object is by nature indifferent to being, although in any case one of the object's two objectives of being, its being or its non-being, subsists" (1904/1960, p. 86). What exactly it means for an object to be "indifferent" to being, of course, requires some clarification; Meinong assures us that this indifference ought to be interpreted as meaning neither (i) that something "can neither be nor not be," as this is about as obvious a logical contradiction as they come, nor (ii) that whether or not an object has the property of existence, mere subsistence, or non-being "is purely accidental to the nature of every Object," and he gives two counterexamples to (ii): "An absurd Object such as a round square carries in itself the guarantee of its own non-being in every sense; an ideal Object, such as diversity, carries in itself the guarantee of its own non-existence" (1904/1960, p. 86). These claims shed further light on the operative criteria for existence and being in Meinong's theory of objects. Contradictory objects, by definition, neither exist nor merely subsist, because something cannot *be*—i.e. cannot have the property of being—if it is contradictory, although it still has the properties it is characterized as having. Ideal objects cannot exist, according to Meinong, because existence is intrinsically temporal, while the realm of the ideal is timeless (Marek 2019).

Do we now have the Meinongian toolkit necessary to make sense of the apparent paradox that "there are objects of which it is true that there are no such objects"? It seems to me that the only charitable reading is to interpret Meinong's first use of 'there are' in this claim as meaning 'there absist,' and to take his second use of 'there are' at face value. If this is right, our discussion of Meinong's theory of objects up to this point has merely given us a few reasons in favor of

Meinongianism—its aptitude for solving the problem of intentionality and the puzzles involving

empty terms—all the while revealing the sorts of oddities for which Meinongianism is frequently

charged as guilty of "failure for that feeling of reality that must be preserved in even the most

abstract of studies" (Russell 1919, p. 169). With an adequate (albeit somewhat simplified) account

of Meinong's theory of objects, then, let us shift our focus to criticisms and counterarguments.

2. Objections to Strict Meinongianism

We begin our critiques of Meinong's theory of objects—or 'strict Meinongianism,' as I

will call it—where we began our exposition. Clearly the problem of intentionality does pose at

least a *prima facie* concern for the principle of intentionality. Does Meinong's solution hold up? I

am inclined to say that it does. In fact, I find that his taxonomy of objects is, in many cases, rather

useful; given that many of us intuitively agree that a significant portion of the objects of our mental

phenomena do not *exist*, our ability to speak meaningfully about nonexistent objects takes us one

step closer to developing a common-sense ontology. But Meinong's theory starts to become very

strange very fast when he claims that contradictory objects can be genuine objects of thought. I

simply cannot understand how I am supposed to imagine that I can think about alleged objects like

the largest prime number, the round square, or the person who is and is not my twin.

This sort of concern is almost certainly (part of) what Russell has in mind when he states:

> [Meinong's] theory regards any grammatically correct denoting phrase as standing for an *object*. Thus 'the present King of France,' 'the round square,' etc., are supposed to be genuine objects. It is admitted that such objects do not *subsist*, but nevertheless they are supposed to be objects. This is in itself a difficult view; but the chief objection is that such objects, admittedly, are apt to infringe the law of contradiction. It is contended, for example, that the existent present King of France exists, and also does not exist; that the round square is round, and also not round. (1905, pp. 482-483)

Before evaluating the critique of strict Meinongianism this passage contains, we must first try to make sense of it. While the message Russell intends to convey is relatively clear, there are serious problems with his execution, as Ronald Suter has convincingly argued. First, Russell says not that propositions such as 'the round square is round and not round' violate the law of contradiction, but rather that (merely absistent) *objects* do. Although the original Aristotelian law of contradiction amounts to an assertion that no object can both have and not have a given property in the same respect at the same time, Russell himself explicitly supports a different version that applies exclusively to propositions and sentences (1940, pp. 198, 259). Worse, Russell seems to be guilty of ignoring the use-mention distinction. The "objects" to which he attributes aptitude "to infringe the law of contradiction" are not the things to which the denoting phrases 'the present King of France' and 'the round square' are supposed to refer, but the linguistic expressions themselves—and, in Suter's words, "practically everyone's ontology includes *phrases*, qua linguistic tokens, as genuine objects. Consequently, if this is the view to which Meinong is committed, his theory has not yet shown to be defective or even unusual" (Suter 1967, p. 513).

In accordance with the principle of charity, then, let us assume that in the passage above Russell means to claim that strict Meinongianism is inevitably committed to the truth of contradictory propositions, such as 'the round square is round and not round' and 'the existent present King of France exists and does not exist.' While rejecting each of these contradictions may seem to reflect the same specific source of dissatisfaction with strict Meinongianism, closer inspection reveals that there are actually two distinct objections here: (1) Several propositions about impossible objects infringe the law of contradiction. (2) While we can presumably all agree that 'the existent present King of France does not exist' is true, it follows from Meinong's characterization principle that we must also be able to truthfully say 'the existent present King of

France exists and does not exist,' because such a King is characterized as having the property of

existence (Marek 2019).

Russell gives no argument for 1 or 2, but we can construct them on his behalf. The first of

the following arguments is patterned after a *reductio* of strict Meinongianism proposed by Suter

(1967, p. 516). The second is a more thorough version of Marek's *reductio* in support of 2.

(1.1)   'The round square' is a grammatically correct denoting phrase.
(1.2)   Therefore, the round square is an object (principle of intentionality).
(1.3)   The round square is both round and square (characterization principle).
(1.4)   For all *x*, if *x* is square, then *x* is non-round (analytic truth).
(1.5)   Therefore, the round square is both round and non-round (1.3, 1.4)
(1.6)   Therefore, the round square is not a genuine object (absurdity of 1.5).

(2.1)   'The existent round square' is a grammatically correct denoting phrase.
(2.2)   Therefore, the existent round square is an object (principle of intentionality).
(2.3)   The existent round square exists (characterization principle).
(2.4)   The existent round square does not exist (common-sense truth)
(2.5)   Therefore, the existent round square does and does not exist (2.3, 2.4).
(2.6)   Therefore, the existent round square is not a genuine object (absurdity of 2.5).

It is true that 1.6 and 2.6 as I have formulated them are not the only intended conclusions of these

arguments; the salient point is that, if sound, these arguments are fatal to strict Meinongianism.[3]

No more than two years after the publication of Russell's critiques of strict Meinongianism

in "On Denoting," Meinong defends his theory of objects from objections 1 and 2 (1907/1978).

To objection 1, the charge that his theory entails the violation of the law of contradiction—namely,

that the round square is round and not round—Meinong presents two responses. First, he claims

that the Aristotelian version of the law of contradiction is not a logical law, as it has no jurisdiction

over impossible objects (Marek 2019). For Meinong, neither of the above arguments would qualify

as a genuine *reductio ad absurdum* because the absurdity of their fifth premises is illusory. If these

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[3] Russell would agree that the round square and its existent counterpart are not genuine objects, but, presumably, he wants to go much further. The difficulty arises in trying to discern exactly which tenets of strict Meinongianism he finds untenable. Further exploration of this topic, however, is not within my remit.

arguments are to refute strict Meinongianism, therefore, the fourth and fifth premises must be rephrased such that they expose an inconsistency with the version of the law of contradiction endorsed by Meinong and Russell: it is not the case that p and not p. Let us attempt such reconstructions of the arguments espoused on Russell's behalf:

(1.1)   'The round square' is a grammatically correct denoting phrase.
(1.2)   Therefore, the round square is an object (principle of intentionality).
(1.3)   The round square is both round and square (characterization principle).
(1.4.0) For all x, if x is square, then it is not the case that x is round (analytic truth).
(1.5.0) Therefore, it is and is not the case that the round square is round (1.3, 1.4.0).
(1.6)   Therefore, the round square is not a genuine object (absurdity of 1.5.0).

(2.1)   'The existent round square' is a grammatically correct denoting phrase.
(2.2)   Therefore, the existent round square is an object (principle of intentionality).
(2.3)   The existent round square exists (characterization principle).
(2.4.0) It is not the case that the existent round square exists (common-sense truth).
(2.5.0) Therefore, it is and is not the case that the existent round square exists (2.3, 2.4.0).
(2.6)   Therefore, the existent round square is not a genuine object (absurdity of 2.5.0).

This new-and-improved version of the first argument will only succeed if 'x is non-round' is equivalent to 'it is not the case that x is round.' But this leads us to Meinong's second, more contentious claim: the predicate negation 'x is non-F' and the sentence-negation 'it is not the case that x is F' are *not* equivalent where 'x' stands for an impossible object (Marek 2019). Meinong would assent to 1.4 but not 1.4.0, citing the round square as a clear counterexample. Similarly, he would agree that the round square has the property of non-roundness but not that it is not the case that the round square is round. Premise 1.5.0 would infringe the law of contradiction if it were true, but Meinong thinks it is false, and so the first of these two arguments on Russell's behalf seems unsuccessful.

Even more complicated than his response to Russell's first objection is Meinong's reply to objection 2, which depends crucially on the indifference principle. More specifically, it depends on the distinction he posits between propositions about an object's *so-being*—the properties it is

characterized as having—and propositions about an object's *being* (*per se*).[4] When this distinction

is applied to an object such as the existent round square, Meinong argues, we can maintain that

this object has the property of being existent "as a determination of so-being" without commitment

to the *existence* of such an object as a "determination of being" (Marek 2019). If this move is

granted, Meinong can reject 2.3 on the grounds that it mischaracterizes his characterization

principle; this premise wrongly assumes that an object's being characterized as 'being existent'

entails that it exists. Thus the contradictory fifth premise does not follow, and Meinong can claim

to have defeated both arguments. As one might expect, Russell did not understand the distinction

between 'being existent' and 'existence' and said that he had "no more to say on this head" (1907,

p. 439).

Though this marks the end of the (publicly accessible) back-and-forth debates between

Russell and Meinong on beingless and otherwise nonexistent objects, Russell's most scathing

critique of strict Meinongianism comes in his *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*:

> For want of the apparatus of propositional functions, many logicians have been driven to the conclusion that there are unreal objects. It is argued, *e.g.* by Meinong, that we can speak about "the golden mountain," "the round square," and so on; we can make true propositions of which these are the subjects; hence they must have some kind of logical being, since otherwise the propositions in which they occur would be meaningless. In such theories, it seems to me, there is a failure of that feeling for reality which ought to be preserved in even the most abstract studies. (1919, p. 169)

I would speculate that this passage has played an enormously influential role in the predominance

of anti-Meinongianism in analytic philosophy over the past century. Whereas Russell in 1905

correctly interprets Meinong as thinking that 'the golden mountain' and 'the round square' refer

to merely absistent objects, in this case he has either forgotten the crucial details of Meinong's

framework or is guilty of, for lack of a more accurate phrase, ontological libel. Meinong never

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[4] As Marek observes, "Meinong's distinction between judgments of so-being and judgments of being, combined with the indifference principle that being does not belong to the object's nature (so-being), reminds one of Kant's dictum that being is not a real predicate" (2019), although Kant did not distinguish between being and existence. For a convincing refutation of Kant's famous dictum, see section III of Nathan Salmon (1987, pp. 62-67).

claims that *there are* any unreal objects; he explicitly says that the golden mountain and the round square lack being altogether, despite their having the properties they are characterized as having. Unless Russell means 'some properties' when he says 'some kind of logical being,' he is plainly mistaken about strict Meinongianism; it is simply wrong to suggest that Meinong is ontologically committed to golden mountains and round squares. He does say that the golden mountain is golden, and that the round square is round, but he never implies that merely absistent objects have being, except in the deliberately paradoxical 'there are objects of which it is true that there are no such objects'—which, as I have argued, he might have better expressed by saying 'for some objects, it is true that there are no such objects.'

The question remains: what happened between 1905 and 1919? It seems rather unlikely that Russell would merely forget how strict Meinongianism is supposed to work. At the risk of sounding Freudian, I think that Russell is projecting his own previous ideas about the meanings of words like 'thing,' 'existence,' 'subsistence,' and 'being' onto Meinong's theory of objects. In his *The Problems of Philosophy*, Russell argues that the proposition 'Edinburgh is north of London' would be true "even if there were no minds at all in the universe," after which he notes some of the difficulties associated with realism about universals: "the relation 'north of' does not seem to *exist* in the same sense in which Edinburgh and London exist […] It is neither in space nor in time, neither material nor mental; yet it is something" (1912, p. 98). Russell's claim that the relation in question *is something* seems to entail the rejection of Meinong's notion of absistence; for Meinong, if *x* is something, it follows neither that *x* exists nor that *x* has being. For Russell, on the other hand, *x*'s being something entails that *x* has being. He continues, sounding rather Meinongian:

> We shall find it convenient only to speak of things *existing* when they are in time, that is to say, when we can point to some time *at* which they exist (not excluding the possibility of their existing at all times). Thus thoughts and feelings, minds and physical objects *exist*. But universals do not exist in this sense; we shall say that they *subsist* or *have being*, where 'being' is opposed to 'existence' as being timeless. (Russell 1912, pp. 99-100)

If my suspicion is correct, Russell charges Meinong with lacking the "feeling for reality" necessary to properly participate in philosophical inquiry because he conflates his own ontological notion of subsistence with Meinong's conceptual notion of absistence, which is infinitely broader and includes literally everything (or, as Russell might put it, much *more* than everything)—not only existent and nonexistent entities, but even nonentities. It is this conflation, in turn, that results in Russell's accusation that Meinong is among the theorists who have been driven to believe that unreal objects—those that merely absist, in Meinongian terms—have some sort of being. I bring up Russell's 1912 position not merely for Freudian speculation; it is an ontology for which I have a great deal of respect. Interestingly enough, I see the Russell of 1912 as the founding father of Neo-Meinongianism. His critiques of Meinong's theory of objects demonstrate that it entails not only rejecting the (extremely intuitively attractive) Aristotelian law of contradiction but also positing some strange distinction between the property of being existent and the property of existence. As I articulated in the first paragraph of this section, I find it impossible to imagine (and even to imagine that I *could* imagine) anything that has contradictory properties, and I see no good reason for granting Meinong the peculiar distinction between the meanings of 'is existent' and 'exists.' These concerns, in my view, are sufficient for rejecting strict Meinongianism. But this in no way entails the rejection of Neo-Meinongianism, an approach to ontology I find very plausible.

3. Noncontradictory Neo-Meinongianism

I will use the name 'Noncontradictory Neo-Meinongianism' (NNM) to refer to a very broad construction of the ontology I defend in the remainder of this paper. The fundamental thesis of NNM is that, although there are things that do not exist, plenty of the alleged 'things' or 'objects'

Meinong claims to recognize are not things or objects at all—most importantly, there are no such things as contradictory objects. A subscriber to NNM can therefore have the exact same ontological commitments as Meinong, in the sense that she needn't disagree with Meinong's answer to the ontological question 'What is there?' She might not give the same kind of answer Meinong gives—she might, e.g., claim that there are no abstract (or, in Meinong's terms, ideal) objects—but she certainly cannot include in the set of all things that *have being* any objects of which it is true that there are no such objects; this would be to admit that objects can be contradictory. Perhaps the most basic of the differences between strict Meinongianism and NNM is that the former, unlike the latter, does not seem to have any reservations about violating the Aristotelian version of the law of contradiction.

Another tenet of strict Meinongianism that is categorically denied by NNM is Meinong's answer to what we can call the conceptual question: 'What has the property of being an object?' Or, equivalently (for Meinong): 'What has the property of being something?' On a superficial level, of course, NNM and strict Meinongianism can produce the same answer: 'Everything.' But proponents of NNM, unlike Meinong himself, maintain that the round square and the largest prime number are not objects. In fact, this way of putting things is misleading; it is better to articulate these negative ontological (rather than merely existential) propositions by saying that NNM's adherents endorse statements such as 'there is no such thing as the round square' and 'nothing has the property of being the largest prime number.'

Not only does NNM entail that the contradictory nonentities Meinong calls 'objects' and 'things' are not objects or things at all, it also entails the rejection of Meinong's original version of the characterization principle. According to this principle, if x is characterized as having contradictory properties, it follows that x is a contradictory object, which NNM says is impossible.

Strictly speaking, NNM does not require abandoning Meinong's independence principle or, more specifically, the denial of the ontological assumption; NNM says neither that an object must have being in order to have other properties nor that we can only make true propositions about the objects that there are. It is up to each theorist to decide for herself the details about the kind of NNM she would like to advocate. Nonetheless I must admit that I find these Meinongian doctrines difficult to defend. I do not see any theoretical benefit in denying the ontological assumption aside from its (apparent) ability to empower our affirmation of tautologies like 'if there is a unique omnipotent being, then there is a unique omnipotent being.'[5] Relatedly, I have trouble making sense of the supposition that an object does not need to *be* in order to have properties. How exactly is it that one can consistently claim that there is no such thing as *x* but that *x* has property *p*? One might say, for instance, that, even though it is true that Santa Claus has the most marvelous beard of all the fictional characters in Christmas folklore, there is no such thing as Santa Claus. I see it as much more sensible to say that there *is* such a (nonexistent) thing as Santa Claus.[6] In fact, I think it is precisely *because* he has being that we can correctly or incorrectly ascribe other properties to him. How could Santa Claus have complex properties like having the most marvelous beard of all the fictional characters in Christmas folklore without having the most fundamental property of all?

The claim that there are no contradictory objects shows that Meinong's notion of absistence is importantly less inclusive for any exponent of NNM who does not discard it; the notion of mere absistence is only available to those who maintain the independence principle. NNM is itself

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[5] I call this empowerment 'apparent' because I suspend judgment about the subjects of such trivially true expressions. While I think that a sentence like 'God is omnipotent' is clearly (and intended to be) a claim about an alleged being, God, and is non-vacuously true only if there is an omnipotent God, I think it is at least plausible that 'if there is an omnipotent being, then there is a unique omnipotent being' is true even if 'a unique omnipotent being' fails to refer.

[6] I take for granted the intuitive view that fictional characters do not exist, as I am neither sufficiently confident nor sufficiently well-read on this subject to present and defend an original argument for this claim. Notable metaphysicians who postulate that fictional characters exist include Saul Kripke (2013), Salmon (1998), and van Inwagen (2003).

indifferent regarding the indifference principle, although, again, I see this principle as another relatively impotent feature of strict Meinongianism. Unlike the other Meinongian principles I have been criticizing, however, I think there is something quite valuable to be extracted from the indifference principle. I will call this modification the *existential indifference principle*: the object is 'by nature' indifferent to existence (rather than being), although it either exists or does not exist (rather than has being or does not have being). This is not to be interpreted as saying that anything can exist no matter what sorts of properties it has. Just as for Meinong the round square's non-being is predetermined or guaranteed by its having the property of absurdity, Santa Claus' nonexistence is predetermined by his being fictional. Application of the existential indifference principle is even more fruitful in attributing properties to things that no longer exist: e.g., 'Plato is the author of the *Republic*.' Without the existential indifference principle, we might reasonably think that *x*'s being the author of a philosophical text entails that *x* exists, as we don't typically associate nonexistent things with having written philosophical texts. The principle reminds us that Plato, the nonexistent (but formerly existent) entity, has the properties that he has, irrespective of his not having the property of existence.

With a rough sketch of NNM at our disposal, I turn now to a brief survey of contemporary philosophers' arguments for and against Neo-Meinongianism, after which I will assess the various prospects and problems we can expect from ontological frameworks that fall under 'NNM.' There are, of course, indefinitely many variations of Neo-Meinongian ontology and meta-ontology, but my discussion of contemporary Neo-Meinongianism will largely be confined to the version of it that Parsons defends in "Are There Nonexistent Objects?" (1982).

While Parsons does not propose a clear set of criteria for distinguishing between being and existing—between the meaning of 'there is' and the meaning of 'there exists'—there seem to be a

few underlying assumptions about this distinction, many of which Meinong endorses. All things

that exist have being, but not vice versa. So what makes being different from existing? This is the

thesis of ontological commitment and distinction I shall defend: being is the most fundamental

property of every object that allows an object to have other properties, while existence is being in

the physical world (as opposed to the realms of the abstract and the mental).[7] Everything has being.

There is no such thing as a beingless object; to say that *x* lacks being is simply to deny that *x* is an

object—i.e. to say that *x* is a nonentity, or that there is no such thing as *x*. There are, however,

things that do not exist. Existence is parasitic on being: it is a complex property that entails

concreteness and, thereby, to have spatial and temporal properties. So there are two kinds of things

and two concomitant ways in which a thing can be: concrete objects, which have a spatiotemporal

mode of being, and, therefore, *exist*, and abstract objects, which have a mode of being that is not

in space and time—though some seem to have temporal properties—and are nonexistent.[8]

Meinong's dictum that 'there are' and 'there exist' are not semantically equivalent plays

an integral role in Parsons' theory (1982, p. 365). Consider the following sentences:

> (1) SpongeBob SquarePants does not exist.
> (2) SpongeBob SquarePants is a talking sponge.

Parsons would likely agree with my judgment that these are both true statements. They both latch

on to the world in a certain way that satisfies our intuitive conditions for truth; SpongeBob

SquarePants is not the sort of thing to which we would normally attribute existence—he is an

abstract fictional character, immune to the laws of the natural world—and yet he is a sponge, and

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[7] Whether mental entities are physical or abstract is not explored further, as it makes little difference for my purposes.
[8] For the theorist who claims that fictional entities are nonexistent abstract objects, there are serious problems with saying that existence is a prerequisite for having temporal properties. It leads to the following dilemma: either (i) fictional characters are abstract, and therefore, eternal; they are not created but discovered; or (ii) fictional characters do have temporal properties, in which case they do, contrary to our intuitions, have the property of existence. It is for this reason that I clarify that some abstract objects have temporal properties (e.g., having the property of being in 2019, lacking the property of being in 2000 BCE, etc.) but that such objects nonetheless do not exist.

he talks. These are all properties that belong to SpongeBob, predicated of him correctly by 1 and

2. But, in order to be able to accurately call these statements true, we must have legitimate reasons

for positing that there is a metaphysical distinction to be drawn between what is and what exists.

Parsons argues that part of what leads thinkers to reject such a distinction in favor of meta-

ontological orthodoxy is our tendency to use 'there are' and 'there exist' "in contexts in which it

is understood that it is only existing things that are under discussion" (1982, p. 366). For example,

consider the following imaginary dialogues between characters I and J and characters K and L:

> I: It's very strange; that unicorn I dreamed about last night bore a very strong resemblance to my
> psychiatrist.
> J: I guess you need more than a psychiatrist; don't you know that there aren't any unicorns?
> K: Meinong thought that some things don't exist.
> L: How peculiar; how could anything think that some things that *exist* don't exist. Are you sure that
> the poor fellow hasn't been mistranslated? (Parsons 1982, p. 366)

If meta-ontological orthodoxy is correct, I and K are making nonsensical claims and the responses

given by J and L are perfectly normal. But, as Parsons argues, we intuitively recognize that I and

K are the ones behaving strangely, and it is precisely because of their assumptions that 'that

unicorn' means something like 'that existing unicorn' and 'some things' means 'some things that

exist' (1982, p. 366). Far from being at odds with our ordinary use of language, Parsons' examples

prove that distinguishing between what we can call the existential quantifier ('there exists an $x…$')

and the ontological quantifier ('there is an $x…$') is frequently an exercise in common sense.

Quine seems to have anticipated this line of reasoning, rejecting the legitimacy of any

semantic distinction between the phrases 'there is' and 'there exists':

> We have all been prone to say, in our common-sense usage of 'exist', that Pegasus does not exist,
> meaning simply that there is no such entity at all. If Pegasus existed he would indeed be in space
> and time, but only because the word 'Pegasus' has spatio-temporal connotations, and not because
> 'exists' does. (1948, p. 23)

Apart from those presented by Quine and Russell, arguably the most famous defender of meta-

ontological orthodoxy is van Inwagen. In his 1998 article "Meta-Ontology," van Inwagen gives

two examples that purport to illuminate his reasons for insisting that being and existence are identical. I will begin by raising difficulties for this claim, after which I will further examine both of van Inwagen's examples with the goal of showing that, while he succeeds in highlighting some contexts which suggest that these expressions are interchangeable, his examples are not adequate to prove that "there exists an x" is necessarily entailed by "there is an x" and vice versa.

   "If you think that there are things that do not exist," van Inwagen invites the reader, "give me an example of one. The right response to your example will be either, 'That does too exist', or 'There is no such thing as that'" (1998, p. 235). Let us test this ambitious hypothesis and see if we can find any examples of nonexistent objects which we are nevertheless inclined to say have being. Some good candidates, in my view, include fictional characters, numbers, and people who (as well as things that) used to exist but no longer do. I am fairly confident that Santa Claus does not exist. But it seems wrong (not to mention overly cynical) to claim that there is no such thing as Santa Claus. This seems to entail that Santa Claus has no properties at all, but I do believe that Santa Claus has all sorts of properties: not being clean-shaven, being a lover of milk and cookies, and, of course, being fictional. With respect to numbers, I certainly have Meinongian sympathies. I think that the number seven, for instance, does not exist; it is a timeless, spaceless object—the kind of thing Russell might have said has its being "nowhere and nowhen" (1912, p. 98)—and yet I think it is quite obvious that it has an infinite number of properties (e.g., being six more than one, five more than two, three less than ten, etc…). And finally, what would van Inwagen say about a deceased person, such as Walt Disney? Well, if my intuition that Walt Disney does not exist is correct, van Inwagen is committed to the claim that there is no such thing as Walt Disney. After whom (or what), then, is the company Disney named? If there is no such thing as Walt Disney, is it, strictly speaking, not true that he posthumously won the Academy Award for Best Animated

Short Film in 1966, that there is no such thing as the alleged recipient of this award? When his

friends and family attended his funeral service, to whom (or what) were they paying their respects?

In my view, the dilemmas that arise for van Inwagen in attempting to answer such questions

suggests that NNM is at a theoretical advantage compared to meta-ontological orthodoxy. All these

difficulties instantly vanish if we suppose that something needn't exist in order to have properties.

The first of van Inwagen's reasons for the identity of being and existence is the following:

> Suppose I am discussing someone's delusions and I say, "There are a lot of things he believes in that do not exist." On the face of it, I appear to be saying that there are things — the poison in his drink, his uncle's malice, and so on — that do not exist. Perhaps someone who reflects on this example will conclude that it is not obvious that to be is the same as to exist. But whether or not it is obvious, it is true. There *is* no nonexistent poison in the paranoid's drink. There *is* no such thing as his uncle's malice. In sum, there are no things that do not exist. (van Inwagen 1998, p. 235)

Let us imagine that we encounter van Inwagen's delusional man, who goes by the name of 'Alex,'

and he informs us that he is as sure as can be that there is poison in his drink. Consider the sentence

(A) Alex believes that there is poison in his drink. By hypothesis, while Alex's drink exists, such

poison does not. But according to strict Meinongianism—specifically, the principle of

intentionality in conjunction with the characterization principle—some object has the property of

being poison located in Alex's drink. Though van Inwagen's step-by-step reasoning in this passage

is not quite transparent, the following interpretation seems to me most probable: according to van

Inwagen's understanding of Meinong's theory of objects, a strict Meinongian analysis of A

requires the assertion that, although there does not *exist* any poison in Alex's drink, there *is*

nonexistent poison in Alex's drink, even though this poison is simply an object of his imagination.

Whether this is the correct analysis of strict Meinongianism in this case is not clear to me;

one's opinion on this matter is contingent on whether one sees Meinong's reply to Russell's second

objection against strict Meinongianism as satisfactory. The reader who thinks the Meinongian

claim that 'some objects are existent (as a determination of their so-being) yet do not exist (as a

determination of their being)' defuses Russell's objection will believe that van Inwagen has simply

misinterpreted Meinong's theory (see above p. 11). Applying the principle of intentionality and the characterization principle to A does not yield the false result that there *is* nonexistent poison in Alex's drink; van Inwagen fails to appreciate the distinction between *being an object* and *having the property of being*. A does not entail that there *is* nonexistent poison in Alex's drink any more than a hallucinatory visual experience of a golden mountain in the distance entails that there *is* a nonexistent golden mountain. Meinong would classify both imaginary objects as merely absistent.

On the other hand, the reader who thinks the Meinongian claim that some objects are existent (as a determination of their so-being) yet do not exist (as a determination of their being) is mere hand-waving and does nothing to resolve Russell's second objection are likely to side with van Inwagen. Even so, the fact that strict Meinongianism leads to absurd conclusions in this case does not show that van Inwagen's example successfully refutes more plausible versions of Meinongianism such as NNM. Arguably, there really is something imagined by Alex to be poison in his drink. But this by no means entails that there is *imagined poison* in his drink, let alone that there really is poison in his drink. To be as clear as possible: illusory poison is *not* poison. Rather, it is something that one falsely imagines to be poison. The same can be said for a toy duck; the fact that my nephew believes that his toy duck is a duck has no bearing on whether or not the object he mistakenly takes to be a duck really is a duck. To say 'there is imagined poison in Alex's drink' would be to attribute spatiotemporal location, a property restricted exclusively to concrete objects, to a non-concrete object—namely, the illusory poison of Alex's imagination.[9] But a non-concrete object could not possibly reside in Alex's drink. Thus I agree with van Inwagen that 'there is poison in Alex's drink' implies 'there exists poison in Alex's drink,' but this is only because the

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[9] It is not always the case that something that is imagined to be poison is non-concrete; I might, e.g., put a material substance into Alex's drink and tell him that it is poison. In neither case does it follow from his imagining that there is poison in his drink that there is nonexistent poison in his drink. All that follows is that there is imagined poison which Alex imagines to be in his drink.

words 'in Alex's drink' connote a spatial property—the kind of property instantiated by concrete

entities, like Alex and his drink. The imagined poison, however, has no such kind of property.

The second example van Inwagen presents is a positive argument for the semantic

equivalence of 'there is' and 'there exists,' dressed up in the form of a clever joke:

One day my friend Wyman told me that there was a passage on page 253 of Volume IV of Meinong's *Collected Works* in which Meinong admitted that his theory of objects was inconsistent. Four hours later, after considerable fruitless searching, I stamped into Wyman's study and informed him with some heat that there was no such passage. "Ah," said Wyman, "you're wrong. There *is* such a passage. After all, you were looking for it; there is something you were looking for. I think I can explain your error; although there *is* such a passage, it doesn't *exist*. Your error lay in your failure to appreciate this distinction." I was indignant. (van Inwagen 1998, p. 236)

The crucial assumption for van Inwagen here is that we have the right to be annoyed when

Wyman uses 'there is' in a way such that we cannot substitute 'there exists' and preserve the

semantic content and ontological commitment of the claim. In these cases, we are not using 'there

is/are' correctly, and *this* misuse leads directly to a Meinongian theory of objects. Yet again, it

appears that van Inwagen's dismissal of the possibility that 'there is' and 'there exists' differ in

meaning is made possible by a straw man of Meinongianism. Meinong would certainly have no

problem allowing that some *object* has the property of being a passage on 253 of Volume IV of

Meinong's *Collected Works* in which Meinong admits that his theory is inconsistent. Again, the

absistence of such an object is no more controversial for strict Meinongianism than the golden

mountain. The source of van Inwagen's indignance in this example is not that such an object is an

object. As far as I can tell, van Inwagen is not annoyed with the Meinongian distinction between

'there is' and 'there exists' but with Wyman's improper use of 'there is' where he should instead

be saying 'there merely absists,' or, equivalently, 'there is not.' Again, van Inwagen has given the

reader nothing but evidence that he is ignorant of the subtleties of Meinong's ontology.

Although Parsons himself never responds to this rendition of the Wyman joke, he proposes

a distinction in a paper sixteen years earlier that van Inwagen appears to have overlooked or

willfully ignored. This is a clarification intended to illuminate a linguistic ambiguity in 'failing to

refer' to something through the use of a denoting phrase: on the one hand, one may fail to refer to an existing object while successfully referring to a non-existent object; on the other, one may fail to refer to either an existing object or to a non-existent one, i.e. one may fail to refer to anything altogether (Parsons 1982, p. 366). We fail to refer in the first respect (provided that fictional characters do not exist) when we say 'SpongeBob SquarePants' and 'the main fry cook at the Krusty Krab in *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie*,' and we fail to refer fundamentally when we say 'The dissertation advisor of SpongeBob SquarePants in *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie*.' According to strict Meinongianism, we must remind ourselves, what Parsons would call 'failing to refer altogether' is impossible when using a grammatically correct denoting phrase, since any such phrase refers to an object. But there is no reason to suppose that NNM is committed to the impossibility of failing to refer altogether—on the contrary, as is evidenced by its most fundamental motivation: maintaining consistency with the negation of there being contradictory objects, e.g., 'there is no such thing as the round square.'

If we accept this principle, the Wyman joke as an objection to Meinongianism is again revealed as a criticism of nothing but van Inwagen's misconceptions about Meinongianism. The depiction of Meinongian theories van Inwagen presents in "Meta-Ontology" is inaccurate at best; he fails to grant Meinongians the recognition that there are true sentences in which we use phrases that fail to refer to any object, existing or not. Just as there is no thing x which has the property of uniquely serving as an advisor to SpongeBob's dissertation in *The SpongeBob SquarePants Movie*, it is not the case that there is an x which is a passage admitting the inconsistency of Meinong's theory of objects on page 253 of the fourth volume of his *Collected Works*. There is no good reason to assent to Wyman's claim that "there *is* such a passage [that] doesn't *exist*" (1998, p. 236). Were van Inwagen's Wyman a true Meinongian, he'd have said instead that *there is no such passage*.

4. Conclusion

I have no doubt that van Inwagen's strong intuitions on being and existence have prevented him from appreciating arguments like mine for the distinction between 'there is an *x*' and '*x* exists.' After all, he claims that the thesis that being is the same as existence is "so obvious that [he has] difficulty trying to argue for it" (van Inwagen 1998, p. 235). Plantinga gives a similar report of unshakeable intuition on this matter, as he writes, "I believe there neither are nor could have been things that do not exist; the very idea of a nonexistent object is a confusion, or at best a notion, like that of a square circle, whose exemplification is impossible" (1976, p. 143). As we have seen through the views of Meinong and Parsons, however, these intuitions about being, existence, and nonexistence are far from universal. While I do think that there is intuitive force on both sides of this argument, I do not think that intuition alone is sufficient for a claim as strong as the one for which van Inwagen is arguing. The challenges I have put forth to van Inwagen's view demonstrate that he has some further explaining to do; to refute NNM, he must give examples that (i) cast doubt on the legitimacy of a distinction between being and existence without relying on a blatant mischaracterization of how this distinction is supposed to work, (ii) do not conflate failing to refer to anything whatsoever with successfully referring to something nonexistent, and (iii) are not guilty of illicitly attributing spatiotemporal properties that connote concreteness to what is obviously a nonexistent object. I have certainly not proven that NNM is the most favorable position with respect to ontological and meta-ontological matters. But that was never the purpose of this paper. All I hope to have demonstrated is that there are many intuitive advantages to such an ontology and it deserves to be regarded as a consistent and philosophically respectable theory— no matter how many esteemed figures in the Western philosophical canon have thought otherwise.

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