

Class #3 - Meinong and Mill

§1. Meinongian Subsistence

The work of the Moderns on language shows us a problem arising in connecting language and truth. Truth, it seems, is a connection between words and the world, saying of what is that it is. But, language, to be meaningful, must be about our ideas rather than the world itself, since we only know our own experiences.

We are, as Berkeley and Hume later show, cut off from the world as it is in itself.

We are stuck inside the veil of ideas.

Even Kant's objective world, his empirical realism, is also a transcendental idealism.

We are in principle unable to say anything about the noumenal world.

Kant's world may be objective, but it is no less psychological than Locke's world.

We construct the objective world by applying our concepts to our intuitions.

Given standard theories of truth, we are unable to say anything true except of our own psychology.

Meinong's starting point is the claim that we can not say anything about nothing.

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 (Meinong 76).

Meinong's argument thus recalls Locke's insistence that our words must be about our ideas in order for them to be meaningful.

When I talk about, say, this computer, we might be confused about whether we refer to the object or our idea of the object.

But when we talk about fictional objects or mathematical objects, the view that what we are talking about is an idea becomes more plausible.

There seems to be nothing in the external world for it to be about.

Instead of seeing language as referring to mental objects, like Locke, Meinong expands the universe of extra-mental objects.

He countenances two distinct kinds of existences.

First, like the computer, a thing can be real.

But second, like a fictional object, it can have a lesser sort of existence.

Meinong calls this lesser sort of existence subsistence.

Among objects which subsist, but not exist, are properties, like blueness, and mathematical objects, as well as the golden mountain.

If I say, "Blue does not exist," I am thinking just of blue, and not at all of a presentation and the capacities it may have. It is as if the blue must have being in the first place before we can raise the question of its being (*Sein*) or non-being (*Nichtsein*). But in order not to fall into new paradoxes or actual absurdities, perhaps the following turn of expression may be appropriate: Blue, or any other Object whatsoever, is somehow given prior to our determination of its being or non-being. We could also describe the situation from its psychological side in this way: if I should be able to judge that a certain Object is not, then I appear to have had to grasp the Object

in some way beforehand, in order to say anything about its non-being, or more precisely, in order to affirm or to deny the ascription of non-being to the Object (Meinong 83-4).

One way to see Meinong's argument for subsistent objects is to start from the theory of truth. Every true sentence has to have truthmakers, things which make the sentence true. Consider a variety of true sentences.

1. I have a blue bicycle.
2. The square root of pi is greater than one.
3. The golden mountain is golden.
4. There are no Na'vi people.

The truthmaker for 1 seems to be my blue bicycle.

For 2, we need real numbers, which are not the kinds of things that we can see, hear, smell, touch, or taste.

The universe of things must thus expand beyond concrete objects if we are to make 2 true.

3 is true even though there are no golden mountains.

So Meinong expands the universe a little further: the truthmaker for 3 is a subsistent, but non-existent, golden mountain.

Similarly, despite the denial in 4 of the existence of Na'vi people, there must be something which makes 4 true.

Meinong concludes that the truthmaker of 4 is the affirmative non-being of the Na'vi.

Returning to 1, for consistency, Meinong concludes that the truthmaker is not the blue bicycle itself, but the being of the bicycle.

The bicycle, mathematical objects, golden mountains, and the Na'vi all subsist.

Subsistence is a less substantial form of reality, but it all the being that is required for the truth of 1-4.

Only my bicycle, of those objects, really exists.

But since we can speak truthfully about all of these objects, they must have some sort of reality.

That there are black swans, but that there is no *perpetuum mobile* [perpetual motion machine], are both true judgments; but the first concerns an existent object, the second a non-existent object. In the one case, the being of the Object in question subsists; in the other case, its non-being subsists (Meinong 90).

In a metaphysics course, we would spend more time on Meinong's distinction between *Sein*, or existence, *Sosein*, or essence, and *Nichtsein*, non-being.

Briefly, here, Meinong is distinguishing the characteristics of an object from its existence.

The bicycle has *Sein* in addition to its *Sosein*, which includes blueness.

The golden mountain has *Sosein*, in that it is golden and a mountain.

It has *Nichtsein*, and not *Sein*, since there is no golden mountain.

Note that Meinong seems to be denying the claim, from Gassendi and Kant, that existence is not a predicate.

He is treating *Sein* and *Nichtsein* as predicates of subsisting objects.

The golden mountain and the square root of π lack properties of existing.

You and I have the properties of existing.

The importance of reading Meinong for us is to show that a puzzle raised by the Moderns for our language persists regardless of the status of the representational theory of ideas.

Our language contains certain terms, like 'golden mountain', 'square root of π ', 'blueness', and 'round square' whose meaning seems problematic.

On the one hand, we know perfectly well what we're talking about when we use such terms.

On the other, we can not point to anything in particular to determine our meaning.

There are no such things.

Locke chose an idealistic theory of language to deal with the puzzle: such terms, like all words, really just refer to my ideas.

Locke's theory of language conflicts with our best theory of truth, and leads to an implausible idealism.

Meinong avoids Locke's idealism by refining the notion of existence (and treating it as a predicate).

The objects corresponding to the puzzling terms subsist without existing.

Meinong thus avoids Locke's problem of idealism only by positing a much more populated universe.

Quine, later, calls it bloated, and worries about the subsistence of objects such as the round square.

[Meinong's] overpopulated universe is in many ways unlovely. It offends the aesthetic sense of us who have a taste for desert landscapes, but this is not the worst of it. Wyman's slum of possibles is a breeding ground for disorderly elements ([Quine, "On What There Is," 5](#))

The round square is disorderly because, unlike the golden mountain, it does not even possess subsistence. Quine's worry about Meinong's view is at least partly metaphysical.

Again, I won't pursue the metaphysical questions here, though we will return to Meinong's view a couple of times in the course.

For now, let's just note that it would be nice if we could have a philosophy of language which gives some sort of meaning to such terms without bloating our universe.

It would be nice to find a theory of language such that the term 'golden mountain' is meaningful (in the absence of golden mountains) without, like Locke, taking words to refer to my own ideas?

Frege's language revolution is in large part an attempt to find such a theory.

§2. Mill's Non-Connotative Names

Before we get to Frege's solution to the puzzle, we will look at one last important pre-Fregean view about language.

Like Meinong, Mill provides a non-idealist theory of language.

Unlike Meinong, he does not engage the problem of non-being.

But Mill's theory of names, the semantic value of proper nouns, is an important predecessor to the most important contemporary view.

Mill uses 'name' in a broad sense, distinguishing concrete and abstract names, and general and singular names.

We will examine in greater detail a variety of kinds of terms later in the course, and will not spend class time on the first sections of the paper, in which he makes these distinctions.

When reading them, remember that Mill's use of 'name' is closer to our current use of 'noun'.

We are interested mainly in Mill's views about proper nouns, which Mill calls proper names.

Mill argues that they refer directly to individuals, and not to ideas of individuals, or even to subsistent Objectives, as Meinong had it.

Proper names are not connotative; they denote the individuals who are called by them, but they do not indicate or imply any attributes as belonging to those individuals (Mill 38).

Mill thus rejects the idealism of Locke and the Moderns.

He argues that the meaning of a proper name is to latch directly onto an object in the world.

Whenever the names given to objects convey any information - that is, whenever they have properly any meaning - the meaning resides not in what they *denote* but in what they *connote*. The only names of objects which connote nothing are *proper* names, and these have, strictly speaking, no signification (Mill 40).

Mill thus returns to the view that Wittgenstein ascribes to Augustine at the beginning of the *Philosophical Investigations*, and which I mentioned last week.

He distinguishes between connotative and non-connotative (or merely denotative) names.

Non-connotative names merely pick out an object.

Proper names are non-connotative, according to Mill; 'John' doesn't mean anything.

Connotative names, on the other hand, have meaning as well as pick out an object.

'The professor of this class' picks me out, but it also means something.

To see the difference, consider 'Dartmouth'.

It seems to mean something about being near the mouth of the Dart River.

But, as Mill points out, a city could be named Dartmouth without being near the mouth of the Dart.

The city may retain its name even if the river changes course or dries up.

Similarly, 'Russell' seems to mean red-haired but it denotes me even though I'm bald and never had red hair.

Proper names are purely non-connotative.

For Mill, strictly speaking, non-connotative names have absolutely no meaning (signification).

The view that names has no real meaning is revolutionary.

Humpty Dumpty, for example, rejects it.

"Don't stand there chattering to yourself like that," Humpty Dumpty said, looking at her for the first time, "but tell me your name and your business."

"My *name* is Alice, but -"

"It's a stupid name enough!" Humpty Dumpty interrupted impatiently. "What does it mean?"

"*Must* a name mean something?" Alice asked doubtfully.

"Of course it must," Humpty Dumpty said with a sort of laugh: "*my* name means the shape I am - and a good handsome shape it is, too. With a name like yours, you might be any shape, almost" (Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass* 1).

Frege, like Humpty Dumpty, rejects Mill's view of names, though it becomes extremely important in contemporary philosophy of language.

One major problem with the view, as Locke saw, is that some names have no bearers.

If proper names are non-connotative and thus to refer directly to something in the world, those which lack an object are completely puzzling.

How can Mill deal with 'the Easter Bunny'?

Mill provides no real solution to the problem, which is one good reason we will not spend much time on his work.

But others, following Mill, do engage the problem.

Wittgenstein says that the Mill/Augustine view describes only one kind of use of language, only one among many language games.

Augustine, we might say, does describe a system of communication; only not everything that we call language is this system. And one has to say this in many cases where the question arises “Is this an appropriate description or not? The answer is “Yes, it is appropriate, but only for this narrowly circumscribed region, not for the whole of what you were claiming to describe. It is as if someone were to say: “A game consists in moving objects about on a surface according to certain rules...” - and we replied: You seem to be thinking of board games, but there are others (Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* §3).

Wittgenstein is here describing his later view, to which we will get eventually.

Wittgenstein’s later view is a response to an earlier view which he developed in the *Tractatus* directly within the framework of Frege’s logic.

So, let’s get to Frege’s work.