Neither “True” nor “False” nor Meaningless: Meditation on the Pragmatics of Knowing Becoming

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Meinongian ‘objects’ are evoked in an effort to critique and expand upon traditional theories of reference. The argument stems from an account of Peirce’s categories of meaning in light of vague, contradictory, inconsistent, general, incomplete, and incompleteable signs. In addition to signs as either ‘true’, ‘false’, or meaningless, the function of imaginary numbers reveals the possibility of a sign’s being both ‘true’ and ‘false’ or neither ‘true’ nor ‘false’, over time, and dialogically speaking. This demands a tolerance for vagueness, ambiguity, contradiction, and incessantly changing meaning.

1. Strange Objects

Alexis von Meinong proposes two fundamental theses: (1) that there are “objects” that do not exist, and (2) that “objects” that are such that there are no such “objects” are nonetheless constituted in some way or other and thus may be made the subject of meaningful predications. These notorious theses are on a collision course with virtually all theories of reference since Gottlob Frege. Bertrand Russell (1905), in particular criticizes Meinong’s impossible mental objects with the suggestion that we should handily dispense with all such unwanted guests. However, brief exploration of Meinong’s strange jungle of nonexistence things might behoove us.

For example, “The square circle I am thinking of” relates to an “object” that is both square and a circle. The contradictory terms “square” and “circle,” when juxta- or superposed as unactualized possibles, become semantically overloaded, that is, overdetermined. If modern Western thought has manifested a prejudice in favor of the actual — and I believe it has — it prohibits such overdetermined combinations from its hoped for Garden of Logical Positivist Eden. However, a topologist can handily square a circle, while giving the philosopher’s conundrums regarding such tasks little thought. But upon writing
this, I have confused two levels: the equivalent of Meinong’s “being” (Sein, existence) and “near-being” (Sosein, subsistence). Though the distinction of the two levels is apparently a matter of existents and nonexistents, it is actually of little consequence, for the heart of the matter lies not in things related to but in the act of relating. Square circles, golden mountains, black holes, and such, may not exist, we can still talk about them, and in so doing relate to them insofar as they are part of our talk. In contrast, the metaphysical doctrine that became the cornerstone for “standard reference theory” (hereafter SRT) ordinarily limits itself to the “real” objects of “extension,” which correspond to sign-events, “semiotically real” objects “out there.” These are objects of Charles Peirce’s category Secondness, properly speaking, of that “clash” with the hard-core physical existence of our surroundings. Peirce’s vague and general signs (chiefly of Firstness and Thirdness respectively) hardly enjoy any “reference” of this sort. Yet in the Peircean sense these signs are as “real” as the signs of the physical world. If we must use the term “reference” at all in this regard, it cannot but remain as “intensional” (the “semiotic objects” of thought-signs without any necessary relationship to the world “out there”) as it is “extensional.”

This most important point will by and large fall on deaf ears when directed toward true believers of SRT, given its ontological assumptions. Product of the Frege-Russell-early Wittgenstein triumvirate, the banner for which was taken up by logical positivism and apparently has not yet lost some of its steam, SRT quite simply dictates that “truth” (and/or meaning) is a function of “reference.” In more formal jargon, the quantifiers and descriptors tolerated by the theory must carry existential baggage, that which constitutes the “objects” over which the variables and quantifiers can range. The “objects” thus must actually exist, and the domains of quantification must be domains of existents. If universal quantification were to be in effect, then counterexamples, some of them including nonexistents, could always be generated, which would throw SRT for a loop.

In other words, if the term “necessarily” (from within the domain of Peirce’s Thirdness, of generality) were permitted, such opaque predicates as “is both square and round,” and “is a mountain and golden” could be generated. These predicates are not only indeterminate but also generally incomplete, and they consist of logically impossible or contradictory combines, all of which also plays havoc with classical logical principles. In face of this threat, any and all nonexistents are categorically denied by SRT. On the other hand, Russell’s Theory of Logical Types (1910) bars mixture of members and classes to which they belong, thus prohibiting the use of generals within the context of properly qualified existents. While such care and scrutiny is laudable, the fact remains that it was designed for use in strictly formal language — and everyday language if and when it might be adequately