FUNCTIONS, EXISTENCE AND RELATIONS IN THE RUSSELL-MEINONG DISPUTE, THE BRADLEY PARADOX AND THE REALISM-NOMINALISM CONTROVERSY

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1. Negation, Existence and Russell’s Point

Let us take Russell’s contradiction to be the two-fold claim that if it is true that the round square is both round and square then it is true, first, that the round, non-round square is both round and not round, and, second, that the existent golden mountain both exists and does not exist. Both cases appear contradictory. The first argument is countered by distinguishing between not being $\phi(\neg\phi x)$ and being non-$\phi$ (non-$\phi x$) and holding that while ‘$\neg\phi x$ iff non-$\phi x$’ may hold for all existents, it does not hold for non-existents or “incomplete” objects. Thus, since $(\exists x)(\phi x \& \text{non-}\phi x)$ does not exist, it can be both $\phi$ and non-$\phi$ without acknowledging the contradiction that it both is and is not the case that it is $\phi$. This can be taken to accept:

$$(\phi)(x)(x \text{ exists iff } (\neg\phi x \text{ iff non-}\phi x)),$$

where ‘x’ ranges over existents and non-existents. This blocks the first but not the second case, since by the Meinongian Sosein Principle (MSP), that for any $\phi$, $(\exists x)(\phi x \& ...)$ is $\phi$, and Meinong’s non-limitation of assumption, the existent round square exists; yet, of course, it does not exist. With existence, the trick with negation cannot be played, even if one distinguishes non-existence from not-existing. Thus, Meinong’s distinction between so-being and being is developed to distinguish, in the tradition of Aquinas’ and Kant’s rejection of the ontological argument, between “nuclear” properties like golden and non-nuclear concepts like existence.

To avoid Russell’s problem, one insists that existence is not a
constitutive property or concept and ‘exists’ not a predicate that can occur inside a description. But Meinong and some Meinongians try to avoid such a declaration as constituting a limitation on the freedom of assumption. So the dialectic advances a further step and arrives at the modal moment and the watering down of being. A contemporary Meinongian has tried to explain why Meinong can take his existence undiluted, avoid the algebra and regresses of modal moments, allow for descriptions like the existent golden mountain, and bypass Russell.¹ The idea is that ‘the existent golden mountain’ and ‘the golden mountain’ denote the same non-existent object, but judgments expressed in terms of the different descriptions differ in content. In short one allows for the term ‘existent’ to occur in the description, but takes ‘the existent golden mountain is golden’ to express a judgment that the golden mountain as existent is golden – that the golden mountain exists and is golden. As the difference between the judgments is now relegated to the realm of content, the judgment that the granite temple on the Acropolis is pink is “about” the marble temple, and not about a non-existent object.² Problems of Meinong interpretation, and questions about differences in his earlier and later views, aside, on the view offered the glorious, golden, circular halo hovering over my head (surely a non-existent object) can, by such neo-Meinongian magic, become the circular bald spot on my head that is neither glorious nor golden nor, unfortunately, non-existent. This “streamlining” of Meinong might save Santa Claus and Pegasus as Ausserseins, but not my halo


² This is reminiscent of a familiar criticism of Russell’s theory of descriptions that rests on the specious distinction between referential and attributive uses of definite descriptions. To see why it is specious, assume one names an English child ‘the present King of France’. Is the phrase (token) so used a definite descriptive phrase? The point is that if it is appropriate to point out that the child is neither a King nor French then the expression is attributive as well as referential. If it is taken as “purely” referential, like a name or label, then, in spite of its linguistic form, it is not a definite descriptive phrase. As Russell distinguished between logically proper names and (ordinary language) grammatically proper names, one must distinguish between logically proper descriptions and grammatically descriptive phrases in the context of a perspicuous schema.