IMAGINATION AND NECESSITY
(THE CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE
OF MEINONG' S VIEWS ON THE EVIDENT COGNITION)

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I. Introduction

This paper deals with Meinong's epistemology of alleged a priori cognition.¹ Some propositions of logic, arithmetic and geometry seem necessarily true; moreover, their necessary truth seems to be intuitively evident. Meinong was very much concerned with such propositions, and with their intuitive obviousness, and proposed a theory of evident cognition, encompassing (apparent) conceptual truths as well as logical and mathematical ones. He held them to be a priori in the traditional sense. He focuses upon those cases of evident cognition that appear linked to processes and judgments that we ordinarily consider to be perceptual, e.g. ones concerning colors, or geometrical configurations. We shall follow him in this, and point out those of his ideas we consider still relevant for contemporary epistemology. The main idea worth retaining – in my opinion – is the following: there is a seamless continuity leading from the level of (what is ordinarily taken to be) perception, through the exercise of imagination to judgments of universality and necessity. Let me call this idea the Descriptive unitarianist thesis. This factual conti-

¹. I have profited from sharp criticism from professors Terence Parsons and Herbert Hochberg, and from a long discussion with professor David Armstrong. The present disposition of the paper owes a lot to their insistence that various issues concerning a priori knowledge should be kept separated. Professor Charles Parsons has been kindly sending me his papers on mathematical intuition which have influenced my views in a decisive manner. Thanks go to Elisabeth White for her generous help with language and style.
nuity also has a normative relevance: the source of justification (at least prima-facie justification) is unitary for the whole process of the formation of such judgments. Call this claim Normative unitarianist thesis. I agree with Meinong’s claim that there is a single ultimate source, I disagree with him about what it is: he thinks it is reason, I think it is perception. Each of us picks the opposite end of the chain – leading from perception to imagination to reason – as the source of justification. This determines the groundplan of this paper. In the first part I will discuss Meinong. In the second, I sketch my preferred alternative, that the relevant intuitive judgments derive mainly from the exercise of imagination, that is itself grounded in perception, both in respect to its origin and to its justification.

II. Meinong and the a priori knowledge

Let me start by introducing some handy conventions. First, I shall translate Meinong’s “So-seins Urteile” as “qualitative judgments”. Second, as Meinong has a very particular views on what counts as perception, we’ll need some quick way of distinguishing his usage and the ordinary one. I shall reserve the term “perception” for his usage, and I shall call perception in its ordinary sense “perception*”. Accordingly, the judgment “This table is brown” will be described as a qualitative perceptual* judgment. (It is qualitative by everybody’s standards, it is perceptual by ordinary standards – i.e. perceptual* in our terminology – but it is not perceptual for Meinong.) The third convention concerns quotations. Meinong discusses intuitive evident knowledge most extensively in two places: in his Erfahrungsgrundlagen unseres Wissens (to be quoted as “E”, followed by the page number of the first edition in the sequel) and in his Über die Stellung der Gegenstandstheorie im System der Wissenschaften (also to be quoted from the first edition, as “S”).

Meinong takes intuitive evident knowledge to be a priori and contrasts it to the empirical knowledge, characterizing it in conformity with the philosophical tradition. It is free from the influence of experience (from “Erfahrungsanteil”, E, 8), and it comprises only judgments of necessity, all of them qualitative (E, 9). Experience can play only an external role in such cognition, furnishing the materials