I should say at the beginning that my acquaintance with Meinong’s work is very slight and superficial. What is more, by far the greatest part of my knowledge of Meinong has been gained very recently. It was only a few months before writing this paper that I read J.N. Findlay’s book Meinong’s Theory of Objects, a book that brought Meinong alive for me. It made me realize what a fine philosopher he was, and how much he had to offer analytical philosophers in the field of ontology. I found Findlay’s comparison of Meinong’s way of proceeding with the philosophical technique of G.E. Moore particularly apt and illuminating.

Although Meinong’s inclinations were entirely Realist, he began, as perhaps it was inevitable that he should begin in a past era when epistemology had primacy over ontology, from the mind’s experience of things, from its thinking of things, from its judging of things, rather than from the things themselves. But he drew the vital distinction within these mental acts (I take it that the influence of his teacher Brentano was central here) between the experiencing and what is experienced, the thinking and what is thought, the judging and what is judged. He distinguished between the mental act and its object. How far Brentano and he were ahead of the English-speaking tradition here! The English tradition’s ideas were, officially at least, mere things in the mind that failed to point beyond the mind. That way lay ruin.

But there is another way to ruin: the objects without the mental acts. Consider the very un-English theory of belief that Russell held in 1912. According to this theory, when Othello believes that Desdemona loves Cassio, then Othello stands in a complex relation to
the objects Desdemona, Cassio and the somewhat more mysterious object, the relation of loving. A thoroughly Realist, object-oriented, theory of belief. (Was Russell influenced by Meinong here?) But has not this theory left something vital out? What about Othello’s mind? Must it not contain something, what Meinong called a content, a content that in some way represents Desdemona, Cassio and loving, and, indeed, represents Desdemona loving Cassio?

Why must Othello’s mind contain such a content? Well, Othello’s belief goes a long way to explain his subsequent actions. If he hadn’t had that belief instilled into him by Iago, he would not have behaved in the disastrous way that he did. And this, we think, is because the belief caused him to act in a certain way. And the cause must surely have lain within his mind, within his brain even, if we identify mind with brain. It was a belief about Desdemona and Cassio and about loving. That one can certainly say. But the belief itself lies within.

The argument that I have just put forward for a case of belief seems to hold for all mental states, events and processes, or at least for all that have intentional objects. (I am strongly drawn to Brentano’s view that intentionality is the mark of the mental. If that is correct, then the argument applies to all mental entities.) In perception we perceive physical states, events and processes. In favourable cases we Direct Realists maintain that we perceive them directly, without inference. (This does not mean that we perceive these things without the risk of error.) The perception is of the object before one, but the perception must have a content within, a registering of the object in a veridical or an illusory manner. How otherwise does the perception enable one to act in relation to the object? Meinong thought about the round square. The result of his thinking is still influencing us today. But the round square itself does not exist (or subsist) as Meinong himself insisted, and so is not influencing us today. Nor did it have any influence on Meinong. So we need something in Meinong’s mind, and in our minds, some content in his thinking and our thinking, that somehow or other represents the round square.

For this reason, Meinong’s insistence on contents appears to me to be a most valuable and secure part of his position. The mental contents intend objects and objectives, just as he maintained. But, in the cases where the objects or objectives do not exist or subsist, it is permissible to doubt, pace Meinong, whether there really is a