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Towards Graham Priest. Editorial.

**Articles**

- Graham Priest  
*Three Heresies in Logic and Metaphysics* 9
- Joanna Odrowąż-Sypniewska  
*Paraconsistent vs. Contextual Solutions to Sorites* 21
- Anna Pietryga  
*Graham Priest and his P-Scheme* 37
- Adriana Schetz, Katarzyna Szymańska  
*“Is This a Dagger which I See before Me?” On Objects  
and Contents of Contradictory Perceptions* 53
- Maciej Sendlak  
*Modal Meinongianism, Russell’s Paradox, and the  
Language/Metalanguage Distinction* 63
- Piotr Warzozszczak  
*Remarks on Graham Priest’s Views on Transworld  
Identity* 79
- Graham Priest  
*Replies* 93

## **Discussion**

Adam R Thompson  
*Debt relief: On Haji's Reason's Debt to Freedom* 111

Ishtiyaque Haji  
*No Debt Relief in Sight: Reply to Thompson* 131

## **Book Reviews**

Wade L. Robison, David B. Suits (eds.), *New Essays on Adam Smith's Moral Philosophy* by Robert Fudge 145

Anna Brożek, Bartosz Brożek, Jerzy Stelmach, *The Phenomenon of Normativity [Fenomen normatywności]* by Leopold Hess 149

## Modal Meinongianism, Russell's Paradox, and the Language/Metalanguage Distinction

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**Abstract.** The subject of my article is the principle of characterization—the most controversial principle of Meinong's Theory of Objects. The aim of this text is twofold. First of all, I would like to show that Russell's well-known objection to Meinong's Theory of Objects can be reformulated against a new modal interpretation of Meinongianism that is presented mostly by Graham Priest. Secondly, I would like to propose a strategy which gives uncontroversial restriction to the principle of characterization and which makes it possible to avoid Russell's argument. The strategy is based on the distinction between object language and metalanguage, and it applies to modal Meinongianism as well as to other so-called Meinongian theories.

Every so-called Meinongian theory has to face a well-known argument which was presented by Bertrand Russell in "On Denoting" (Russell, 1956).<sup>1</sup> The aim of this critique was to point out that Meinong's Theory of Objects is inconsistent, false, and worthless from a theoretical point of view. This is so—Russell argued—because one of the fundamental assumptions of this theory (the principle of characterization) leads to a consequence which is ridiculous from an ontological perspective. Although nowadays over a hundred years have passed since Russell first published his classic paper in 1905, and thereafter many philosophers have tried to reply to it, Russell's criticism is still regarded as a serious challenge. Among the plentitude of theories inspired by Meinong's views, Graham Priest's theory (called "Noneism" or "modal Meinongianism") is the newest one. Because of this one can expect it to deliver an interesting reply to Russell's argument. Moreover, Priest assures us that, in fact, it does. In this

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Arkadiusz Chrudzinski, Graham Priest and Janine Reinert for their comments which helped to improve a previous version of the paper presented here.

article I would like to put this claim to the test.

Nonetheless, the conclusion of my paper is rather positive—Priest's theory is immune to Russell's critique and, in fact, older Meinongian theories are as well. This is so because the above-mentioned argument might be taken to be based on a methodological misunderstanding, and its reformulation in terms of Priest's theory will help me to show why it is invalid. I believe that showing what is wrong with a Russell-style argument against Noneism will allow me to show that this argument was invalid in the first place, i.e. when it was used against Meinong's original theory.

In order to present my thesis I will start with a brief sketch of the main assumptions and claims of the original Theory of Objects and I will show how it was criticized by Bertrand Russell. Further, I will recall how various advocates of Meinong's theory (especially Priest) have been trying to defend "non-existence" against Russell's critique. At the end I will sketch a proposal for solving the puzzle of the principle of characterization.

## 1. Theory of Objects and the Principle of Characterization

According to the main and well-known thesis of Meinong's theory, "there are objects concerning which it is the case that there are no such objects" (Meinong, 1960). This controversial claim seems to be paradoxical, but in fact it expresses a simple idea according to which there are objects which we consider to be non-existent ones. Popular examples of such objects are: 1) fictional objects such as Sherlock Holmes or Bilbo Baggins, 2) merely possible objects like a golden mountain, and 3) impossible ones like a round square. In some sense it is true to say that each of these objects does not exist. On the other hand, it seems that we truly ascribe some properties to them, e.g.: "Sherlock Holmes is a detective," "The golden mountain is not green," "The round square is round and square." Because of that the so-called Meinongian claim is sometimes presented in a less paradoxical formulation, i.e. as a claim according to which there are non-existent objects or that not every object exists.

The Theory of Objects is based on three principles:

- 1) The Principle of Intentionality, according to which every intentional act has its object. This principle applies to all objects—no matter whether this object exists or does not. According to this principle it is argued that we can think, worship, or be afraid of, for example, George Bush as well as Sherlock Holmes or Bilbo Baggins.
- 2) The Principle of Independence states that the nature (*Sosein*) of an object is independent of its ontological status (*Sein*). In other words,

objects have the properties they are characterized by, no matter what their ontological status is. In some sense it is true to say that Sherlock Holmes is a detective, a pipe smoker, and a citizen of London, regardless of whether he exists or not.

- 3) The Principle of Characterization assumes that every non-empty set of properties corresponds to an object which has exactly the same properties that are contained in this set. There are objects which correspond to sets, such as: {being round, being square}, {being golden, being a mountain}, {being a detective, being a pipe smoker, being a citizen of London}, etc. Ontological correlates of these sets are, respectively, the round square, the golden mountain, and Sherlock Holmes.

Since the beginning of the 20th century the Theory of Objects has been severely criticized by Anglo-Saxon philosophers such as Bertrand Russell, Willard van Orman Quine or Peter van Inwagen. They have tried to demonstrate that postulating non-existent objects leads to unwelcome consequences which are in contradiction with our knowledge about the empirical world, common sense, and the laws of classical logic.

The most important (and for many philosophers still valid) argument is the one that was presented by Bertrand Russell in “On Denoting.” In his argumentation, Russell focused on the principle of characterization and tried to show that accepting it leads to a paradox. This is said to be so because if one claims that *every set* of properties corresponds to an object then we should ask what kind of object corresponds to a set such as: {being golden, being a mountain, existing}.

If the principle of characterization is true, one should admit that the above-mentioned set corresponds to an object which possesses these properties—namely to an existing golden mountain. Thanks to our empirical knowledge about the world we know that there is no such entity, so Meinong’s theory postulates a controversial and paradoxical object about which it is true to say that it exists, but which in fact does not exist.

Critics of the Theory of Objects might modify the above example and ask what kind of object corresponds to the set containing such properties as {being round, being square, existing}. In this case Meinong’s theory becomes even more ridiculous because it requires that one agree that there exists an impossible object. It is needless to say that this consequence is highly unwelcome. If Russell’s argument is valid then it seems that the principle of characterization indeed leads to a paradox—it forces us to accept the existence of objects which are impossible to exist. Because of that, Russell concludes, we should try to find a better theory (Russell, 1956, p. 45).

## 2. Defending the Theory of Objects

Meinong and the advocates of his theory tried to reply to this argument, but their responses were considered mostly unsatisfactory. Nowadays one can distinguish four strategies of replies. The first strategy was presented by Meinong himself. After Russell's critique he tried to argue that the set {being golden, being a mountain, existing} corresponds to an object which is golden, which is a mountain and which is existing, but which does not exist. This response requires a distinction between the meanings of the phrases "is existing" and "exists," which is unclear and seems to be highly artificial and even more controversial than the principle of characterization itself. For this reason, this kind of response has been considered unsatisfactory.

The second (and probably the most popular) way of dealing with this paradox is to show that the principle of characterization is restricted to specific types of properties. This solution was originally pointed out by Meinong's pupil, Ernst Mally, was later accepted by Meinong himself, and is nowadays developed by neo-Meinongians such as Terence Parsons (Parsons, 1980), Richard Routley (Routley, 1980) and Dale Jacquette (Jacquette, 1996). Despite the nuances between the theories of the above-mentioned philosophers we can say that according to this proposal one should distinguish two types of properties—nuclear (*konstitutorische*) and extranuclear (*außerkonstitutorische*). Nuclear properties determine the nature of an object—these are properties which might be truly predicated on an object regardless of its ontological status; for example: being old, being golden, being blue, being a detective, being round, etc. Extranuclear properties, on the other hand, are beyond the nature of an object. Examples include: being possible, being impossible, being existent, being non-existent, or being fictional. Distinguishing these two sets of properties also has to do with the above-mentioned principle of independence.

Because of this distinction—the neo-Meinongians claim—we should restrict the principle of characterization to nuclear properties. So, according to a neo-Meinongian's interpretation of the principle of characterization it states that for every non-empty set of *nuclear properties* there is an item that is characterized by those properties. This restriction shows that Russell's objection is misleading because the set {being round, being square, existing} contains an extranuclear property, namely "existing", and this is not allowed. Thus Russell's objection is invalid because it assumes that existing is a nuclear property, which is plainly false.

The restriction may help avoid Russell's critique, but nonetheless it is not fully satisfactory. Although different philosophers have been trying to

give a proper definition and to draw exhaustive distinctions between nuclear and extranuclear properties, most of these attempts are considered to be unclear or seem to be *ad hoc* (Jacquette, 2001, pp. 404-9; Griffin, 2009, pp. 204-32). Because of that, it has been suggested that it would be better to either give up the principle of characterization or to propose a different version of it.

The third solution to the problem of an existing golden mountain has been presented by philosophers who might be called quasi-Meinongians. These are philosophers who accept a claim made by Ernst Mally which, contrary to the previously mentioned one, was not accepted by Meinong. Contemporary proponents of this theory, such as Hector-Neri Castañeda (Castañeda, 1974), William Rapaport (Rapaport, 1978) and Edward Zalta (Zalta, 1983), accept most of the original theses on non-existent objects, but they present a different solution to the issues concerning predication. In order to avoid Russell's critique, quasi-Meinongians call for a distinction between two types of predication (internal and external) instead of two types of properties.<sup>2</sup>

External predication is predication in which properties are ascribed to an object from our world's point of view. Therefore, in the external sense it is true to say that Sherlock Holmes does not exist and that he is just a fictional character that was created by A.C. Doyle. This is so because in our world there is no man who could be identified with Doyle's description of Holmes. It is also true that a round square is an impossible object and that a golden mountain is a merely possible one.

Regardless of whether these objects are existent or not, they have other properties, such as being a detective, being round or being golden. But those properties are ascribed to them in a different, internal way. Internal predication is defined as predication in which some properties are ascribed to an object in a context that is different from the literal context. It is true to say that Sherlock Holmes is in some (internal) sense a detective who lives on Baker Street and who likes to smoke a pipe. In the internal sense it is also true that he exists. After all, this is the way he has been described by A.C. Doyle. The internal context (which applies only to objects which are considered to be non-existent) is a context in which non-existent objects

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<sup>2</sup> The distinction between "internal" and "external" predication came from Castañeda's works. Rapaport calls it, respectively, "constituency" and "exemplification," while Zalta distinguishes between "encoding" and "exemplification." Although the names for these types of predication are different, the core idea is very similar.



may be treated as if they were existent ones. They are described from the point of view of the *stories* which they are parts of. In such a quasi-Meinongian theory, non-existent objects are considered to be abstract objects (Zalta), M-objects—representations of non-actual objects (Rapaport) or so-called guises (Castañeda), which are in some respects similar to Frege's senses.<sup>3</sup>

According to quasi-Meinongians, the copula "is" in claims such as "Sherlock Holmes *is* a pipe smoker" and "Sherlock Holmes *is* not existing" is ambiguous—in some cases it appears as internal and in others as external predication. While non-existent objects can be described in internal as well as in external contexts, objects which are existing do not possess any property internally. In order to avoid these problems with Russell's objection, and while keeping the theoretical benefits of the analysis of non-existence, the principle of characterization has been restricted by quasi-Meinongians to properties which are ascribed only in an internal way. Therefore, an object which corresponds to the set {being round, being square, existing} is an existing round square, but all of these properties are ascribed to it in the internal context. From an external point of view it is a non-existent and an impossible object. Just like according to "A Study of Scarlet," Sherlock Holmes is a detective who exists and lives in London, even though from the external point of view he is a non-existent object.

Although quasi-Meinongianism seems to avoid Russell's objection, the distinction between internal and external predication leads to a problem that was pointed out by Romane Clark. According to Clark, if one accepts the unrestricted principle of characterization and postulates two types of predication, then the risk of the "barber paradox" arises. Clark considers guises which possess the same property internally as well as externally. These kinds of guises are called *self-displaying*. Now, if one takes a guise which is internally non-self-displaying, then on the basis of Castañeda's axioms one can conclude that this kind of guise is in fact self-displaying. This shows that also theories based on two types of predication lead to a contradiction (Clark, 1978, pp. 184-86).

One way of dealing with this paradox is to restrict the principle of characterization by excluding properties which might be predicated both in an external and in an internal way about the same object. Among the quasi-Meinongian theories, Zalta's is the only one which postulates this kind of restriction (Zalta, 1988, p.19). Nonetheless, some philosophers have argued

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<sup>3</sup> Although there are differences between the concepts of Castañeda's guise and Frege's sense, they are not important for our purposes. See Castañeda, 1975.

that the distinction between two types of predication looks strongly *ad hoc*. Moreover, in the case of Zalta's version of quasi-Meinongianism, one is forced to admit that in the external sense every abstract (non-spatiotemporal) object is non-existing. True enough, every theory of non-existing objects has to draw the line between those objects and objects which do exist, and sometimes this may be arbitrary, but in this case it seems controversial to claim that every abstract object is non-existent by definition.

To sum up, on the one hand, the unrestricted version of the principle of characterization leads to the paradox pointed out by Russell, on the other hand, the restricted version of this principle seems to be unclear and, in some cases, it leads to another paradox. To protect the Meinongian theory one has to either formulate an unrestricted version of the principle of characterization which avoids the above-mentioned issues, or deliver a satisfactory restriction of the principle.

### 3. Modal Meinongianism

One of the recent revivers of Meinongianism has been Graham Priest with his theory that was inspired by Richard Routley's Noneism (Priest, 2005). Priest's interpretation of the Theory of Objects is given in terms of world semantics, thus it is justifiable to call this type of theory "modal Meinongianism." It is worth emphasizing that Priest's theory has recently been developed by Francesco Berto (Berto, 2011, 2013).

The aim of modal Meinongianism is to deliver an interpretation of the principle of characterization which would be, on the one hand, unrestricted and, on the other hand, immune to Russell's argument and would thus avoid the troubles of the neo- or quasi-Meinongians. According to this version of contemporary Meinongianism, every set of properties corresponds to an object which possesses these properties, but these so-defined objects do not have to belong to the actual world. For example, Russell's set {being golden, being a mountain, existing} corresponds to an object which is an existing golden mountain, and it possesses these properties in one of the possible worlds. Now, besides the merely possible objects the Meinongian ontology also postulates objects which are impossible, such as the already mentioned round square. But this is not a problem for modal Meinongianism either, because besides possible worlds it also postulates a plentitude of *impossible* worlds, i.e. worlds where what is impossible (necessarily false) in the actual world is in fact true. Under this assumption the set {being round, being square, existing} corresponds to an existing round square which, because of being an impossible object, is to be found

only in some impossible worlds.

It seems that if one has no qualms about accepting commitments to impossible worlds, then modal Meinongianism might be taken as an attractive theory—it avoids Russell's critique and preserves the main theoretical advantages of Meinong's theory—at least that is how it seems.

#### 4. "Russell" Against Modal Meinongianism

Although modal Meinongianism looks like a promising theory of non-existing objects, it is worth asking the question whether it can live up to its promise—does modal Meinongianism solve Russell's puzzle of an existing golden mountain? In order to answer this question one should first look closer at the main claims of different Meinongian theories and compare them.

As we have already noticed, the main thesis of the original Theory of Objects is that there are objects which do not exist. Because of this the universe in Meinong's ontology is divided into two sets. One of them includes objects which do exist, and the second—those which do not exist. In other words, every entity possesses a trivial property of being (or being an object) and some of them also possess the property of existing (which is not trivial at all). In contrast, in modal Meinongianism every object exists, but not every object exists in the actual world. To paraphrase Meinong's claim in terms of this later approach we can say that "there exist objects which are non-actual" or "every object exists, but only few of them exist in the actual world." Those which are merely possible (like golden mountains) exist in possible worlds and those which are impossible, like round squares—in impossible worlds.

We can conclude that what Meinong takes as a non-existent object, Priest accepts as an existent but non-actual object, i.e. an object which exists in a non-actual world. But if this analogy is proper, then it seems that the classical Russellian objection can be perfectly restated in terms of modal Meinongianism. A contemporary philosopher who sympathizes with Russell's critique might say:

"It is clear what (according to modal Meinongianism) corresponds to the set {being golden, being a mountain, existing}. But if the principle of characterization is really unrestricted, then we can as well ask what corresponds to the set {being golden, being a mountain, being actual} or to the set {being round, being square, being impossible, being actual}. It seems that in both cases the acceptance of an unrestricted principle of characterization leads to problematic entities. In the first case we have to admit that in the actual world there is an existing golden mountain, and in the second—that there is an

object which is actual and at the same time impossible.”

Both consequences are no less problematic for modal Meinongianism than was the existence of a golden mountain or a round square to the original Theory of Objects. It thus seems that the Russellian argument against the original Theory of Objects can be easily reformulated so that it would also apply to Priest's theory. The problem of an existing golden mountain comes to modal Meinongianism through the back door.<sup>4</sup>

## 5. Modal Meinongianism and Actuality

Priest's response to this objection is twofold. His solution of the problem of actually existing impossible objects is different from his treatment of actually existing merely possible ones. To avoid the first difficulty Priest argues that if one postulates impossible worlds, then one has to give an unusual meaning to some modal phrases, such as, in particular, “it is necessary that *p*.” In standard possible world semantics we take this formulation as a claim that *p* is true in every world or, in other words, that there is no world where *p* is false. But if one introduces impossible worlds into the metaphysics of modality, then not all of the worlds are possible, and necessary truths are true only in all *possible* worlds. For example, from the actual world's point of view it is necessary that there be no round squares. That means that there is no possible world where round squares exist. This is so because a round square is an impossible object and as such it is a part of an impossible world. The modal phrase “it is necessary that...” should be taken as restricted to only possible worlds. Just because we take “there exists no round square” as necessarily true does not mean that it is also true in impossible worlds. After all, it is necessarily true because it is *impossible* to be false, and this can be taken to imply that there is an impossible world where a round square exists. A similar restriction should be put on the term “actual,” because whatever is actual has to be possible, thus this term should be applied only to possible objects.

So let us assume that the above understanding of modal terms might be taken as a justification for putting a restriction on the predicate “being actual,” which rules out the possibility of applying it to impossible objects. Nonetheless, the problem of an actually existing golden mountain remains. After all, a golden mountain is a possible object and as such it might be an actual one. In this case the meaning of “being actual” is univocal. To solve

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<sup>4</sup> A similar objection was presented by J.C. Beall (Beall, 2006).

this problem Priest claims: "If the truth condition for *A* ("being actual"—M.S.) allowed information to bleed back from an arbitrary world to the actual world, then we would be able to infer that *B* (any other description—M.S.) is actually true. Clearly this is not kosher: one can never move from the contents of one's imaginings to the real world—nice as this would be" (Priest, 2011, p. 250).

Surely it is not kosher. Nevertheless, this is the consequence of accepting an *unrestricted* principle of characterization. To say that although we can characterize an object by a set of properties {being golden, being a mountain, existing, being actual} while in fact it possesses only a few of them is unsatisfactory. It is worth noticing that the same problem was the starting point for the restrictions presented by Parsons. Moreover, if one accepts the second part of Priest's reply, then there is no need to postulate the first one, according to which the meaning of modal terms is different when it comes to impossibilities. After all, if we avoid the problematic consequences of actually existing merely possible objects by claiming that "one can never move from the contents of one's imaginings to the real world," then we can say exactly the same thing about objects described as actually existing impossible objects. This is regardless of the actual meaning of "being an actual object."

It seems that the core of Priest's replies (both for impossible and possible objects) might be reduced to the claim that although one can describe an object by a set of properties that also contains "being actual," it does not mean that there is an object satisfying this description. It is tempting to compare Priest's replies with Meinong's response to Russell's objection. Meinong tried to refute Russell's critique by claiming that although one can postulate an object characterized as possessing properties such as being golden, being a mountain and existing, the object is in fact *non-existent*. It seems that both replies (Priest's as well as Meinong's) are the same in their core. Their apparent differences flow from the different frameworks within which they have been formulated. So, at the end of the day Priest's Noneism, although shedding much light on the controversial and problematic issues of intentionality and non-existent objects, still has to face the Russellian objection.

But does this mean that Russell's critique is unavoidable? Not necessarily. I believe that the problem pointed out by Russell is not as crucial as most philosophers think. My thesis is that the Russellian paradox is wrongly formulated and the framework of modal Meinongianism will be helpful in proving my thesis. Moreover, because of the analogy between Priest's and Meinong's theories, it is reasonable to believe that a solution for the problem of Priest's actually existing golden mountain might also be

a solution for Meinong's problem of the existing golden mountain. This will be helpful when dealing with Clark's paradox as well.

Each of the Meinongian theories faces some version of Russell's paradox counter-example, and I hope to be able to give a general solution. Contrary to the solutions presented above, which were based on metaphysical considerations, my solution will rather refer to the methodology of metaphysics.

## **6. Language/Metalanguage Distinction to the Rescue**

The Theory of Objects as well as modal Meinongianism (and other Meinongian theories) were created to explain an interesting and controversial phenomenon—one that referred to objects which most would say do not exist. We can truly say that a golden mountain is golden and not green, or that Sherlock Holmes lives in London and not in Cape Town. In short, in our everyday language we often make non-trivially true statements about objects which do not exist.

The role of Meinongian theories is to deliver a philosophical explanation of this use of our language. They try to satisfy common-sense intuitions according to which we can truly say something about non-existent objects. To do so, philosophers develop theories which contain some specific claims, such as that there are non-existent objects, that there are abstract representations of non-existent objects, or that there exist non-actual objects in non-actual worlds. Generally, it seems that theoretical languages, i.e. frameworks in which the theses of these theories are expressed, can be considered as metalanguages for our folk or everyday language. It is reasonable to assume this because the former (the language of Meinongian theories) explains the use of the latter (our folk language) and clarifies the meanings of some of the folk language terms. If philosophical theories are constructed in order to explain everyday phenomena, one can assume that the language of the former should describe how the language of the latter "works." For example, the trouble-making formulation "non-existent objects" might be explained in terms of more precise phrases like "non-actual" or "abstract objects", whose meanings are explained by the theses and axioms of a given theory. Moreover, it is assumed that at the end of the day it is not our everyday language but rather this explaining theory that defines the metaphysical implications and ontological commitments of our discourse.

Let us consider modal Meinongianism. The metalanguage here is the language of the philosophical theory containing theoretical terms such as "actuality," "possible world," "impossible world," "open worlds," etc., and

the "object" language is, of course, our common-sense discourse in which we talk about "non-existent" objects such as Sherlock Holmes, Santa Claus, or round squares. If one accepts this distinction between our "loose" everyday language and the precise metalanguage of the explaining philosophical theory, then one can answer the Russell-style argument against Priest by pointing out that it mixes the terms of object language (such as "being round", "being square", "being golden", "existing") with the categories of metalanguage such as "being actual" or "being possible". It is possible that from a syntactical point of view some words are elements of both object and theoretical languages. Nonetheless, the meanings of these words are different, and because of that semantic categories should be considered as the core of metalanguage—they explain how the object language refers to the world. From the works of Alfred Tarski we know that mixing the two levels of description is very dangerous, as it can lead to paradoxes.<sup>5</sup>

What might this mean for the debate between Russell and Meinong? Because of the already-mentioned analogy between modal Meinongianism and the original Theory of Objects, and because the main claim of Meinong's theory is that there are non-existent objects, we can say that terms such as "existing objects," "non-existing objects," "being an object," "set," "incomplete object," "impossible object" and so on belong to the theoretical language of the philosophical, explanatory theory and not to the everyday object language whose semantics we want to explain. So, just like the set {being round, being square, being actual} from modal Meinongianism's point of view might be considered as improper because it mixes the terms of folk language with categories of theoretical language, similarly the set {being round, being square, existing} might be considered from Meinong's point of view as a not-well-formed characterization set.

On the basis of the above considerations we can try to formulate a version of the principle of characterization which will work for every type of Meinongianism. This will be a kind of restricted principle and its restriction will be expressed in terms of the distinction between the everyday object language and the theoretical metalanguage as outlined above. Thanks to this restriction we obtain a theory that 1) explains the use of our folk language, 2) is immune to Russell's (and Clark's) argument, and 3) is restricted in at least a less controversial way than the ways proposed

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<sup>5</sup> It should be stressed that some philosophers have doubted the success of Tarski's distinction. See Kripke, 1975.

by neo-Meinongians. This leads to the following formulation of the principle of characterization:

*Every non-empty set of properties which are expressed in terms of non-theoretical (object) language corresponds to an object which possesses these properties.*

Although this formulation might be sufficient for every type of Meinongianism, it does not mean that all of them are equally good. One may notice that statements like “Golden mountains do not exist” might be easily accepted as a formulation of our everyday language. This is problematic for the original Theory of Objects because it takes “existing” as a primitive “theoretical” property and does not explain its meaning in other terms, while within the framework of modal Meinongianism this use of “exist” is explained in terms of belonging to the actual world.

There is a problem which arises when one connects a restricted version of the principle of characterization with the already-mentioned principle of intentionality, which states that *every* intentional act has its object. One might ask: “Is the presented version of the principle of characterization sufficient enough for the purposes of Meinongian theory? After all, we can think about *objects* which are expressed in theoretical terms.” Naturally, we can, but it seems that it is better not to treat them as objects of metaphysics theories, but rather as objects of metametaphysics or metaphilosophy. Let us take for example an abstract object, such as a theory of impossible worlds, and let us say that *Y* believes that there are no impossible worlds and that modal Meinongianism is false. *Y* characterizes an object (*O*) as corresponding to a set {being modal Meinongianism, being false}. This object has to be an element of either possible or impossible worlds. It is reasonable to believe that if a given metaphysical theory of modalities is true, then (according to this theory) it is necessarily true. Because of that, if modal Meinongianism is true, then *O* cannot be an element of possible worlds—it has to be an element of an impossible world. Nonetheless, if description *O* is satisfied, i.e. if it is true in some world that modal Meinongianism is false (and it is claimed as such because one does not believe in impossible worlds), then it is also true that there are no impossible worlds. If there are no impossible worlds, but only possible ones, then there is no world where modal Meinongianism is false either. This leads to the problematic consequence—to guarantee that *every* set of properties corresponds to an object in one of the worlds, one has to admit that there is no world where one of these objects exists.

This paradoxical claim came again as a result of treating metalanguage as object language, and especially as a result of trying to express the



falseness of a given theory in its own language. This does not mean that it would be better if one could express it without such paradoxical consequences;<sup>6</sup> it only shows that when it comes to metaphysical issues, the requirement stated by the principle of intentionality should be restricted to entities expressed in object language. In this sense intentional acts in which "objects" are described in theoretical terms should be interpreted as a subject of metametaphysics or metaphilosophy. This is in accordance with the practice of philosophical debates. When philosophers debate the truth or falsity of metaphysical theories they do not argue from the point of view of their own theory, but rather from a position where believing in the necessary truth of their own theory is suspended. If this were not so, every philosophical dispute could be considered pointless and could be reduced to an argument such as: "Your metaphysics is false because it is inconsistent with mine." After all, every theory is necessarily false from an alternative theory's point of view.

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The puzzle of the principle of characterization puts Meinongians in a highly problematic situation, and its solution depends on what we expect from metaphysics. On the one hand, we can accept an unrestricted principle of characterization—it will help us to avoid a controversial distinction that is known from neo-Meinongian theories and will save the main Meinongian motivations. But as a consequence we will get a modified version of Russell's paradox that is based on modal terms, and problematic objects, such as the above-mentioned *O*.

On the other hand, we can put the above-described restrictions on the principle of characterization as well as on the principle of intentionality. Surely this will limit the use of the term "object" to only those entities that are expressed in non-theoretical terms and, as a consequence, restrict the generality of the original Theory of Objects. Nonetheless, if one construes Meinongian theories as a kind of metaphysics, then this kind of restriction seems to be reasonable—it releases Meinongianism from paradoxical objects and at the same time explains our intuitions about non-existent objects.

The purpose of this paper was to point out why we should prefer the second option. Its main advantages are that it applies to all contemporary versions of Meinongianism. Of course, this is just a preliminary sketch and requires further investigation, most importantly in search of a clearer

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<sup>6</sup> On the contrary, it would probably lead to more problems because a theory in which one can express one's own falsity allows one to doubt its theoretical utility.

criterion for distinguishing between object language and metalanguage. Nevertheless, the fact that it might deliver a universal tool to solve paradoxes which arise in various versions of Meinongianism makes it worth the effort.

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