

Existence in Meinongianism and Necessitism: A Merely Verbal Dispute

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Abstract. On the one hand, according to a standard interpretation of Alexius Meinong, there are two main types of objects: those that exist and those that do not (which subsist). Moreover, among the objects that subsist, there is a special class of entities that are ‘beyond being’ (*Nichtsein*), such as impossible objects and fictional objects. On the other hand, according to necessitism, there are two main types of objects: those that *S-exist* and those that *L-exist*. Furthermore, there is a third category of objects that do not *L-exist*, as their intended terms fail to refer—such as impossible objects and fictional objects. In this paper, I will argue that the dispute between the Meinongianist and the Necessitist regarding the significance of *existence* is merely verbal and that both frameworks ultimately endorse a three-category ontology.

Keywords: existence; meinongianism; necessitism; merely verbal dispute.

ES La existencia en el meinongianismo y el necesitismo: una disputa meramente verbal

Resumen. De acuerdo con la interpretación estándar de Alexius Meinong, hay dos tipos de objetos: aquellos que existen y aquellos que no (que subsisten). Además, entre los objetos que subsisten, podemos identificar una clase especial de entidades que están “más allá del ser” (*Nichtsein*), tales como los objetos imposibles y los objetos de ficción. Por otro lado, de acuerdo con el necesitismo, hay dos tipos principales de objetos: aquellos que *S-existen* y aquellos que *L-existen*. Asimismo, hay una tercera categoría de objetos que ni siquiera *L-existen*, pues sus términos asociados no refieren—estos son los objetos imposibles y los objetos de ficción—. En este artículo, argumento que la disputa entre el Meinongiano y el Necesitista en relación con el significado de “existencia” es meramente verbal y que ambos marcos, en última instancia, asumen una ontología que consta de tres categorías.

Palabras claves: existencia; meinongianismo; necesitismo; disputa meramente verbal.

Summary: 1. Intentionality and non-existent objects; 2. Meinongianism and necessitism: a *merely* verbal dispute; 3. Conclusion; 4. References.

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Imagine a scenario in which a group of mean-spirited teenagers conveys to a young child the claim that ‘Father Christmas does not exist.’ It appears that this statement causes a change in the child’s belief system, even though she continues to hold an intentional state directed toward Father Christmas. As Crane (2013) observes, while the term ‘Father Christmas’ may lack a referent, it is evident that we can still form intentional states about Father Christmas (Crane, 2013). We can believe in him, search for him, or even harbor feelings of dislike toward him due to his purported nonexistence. Does this imply that intentional states can be directed toward nonexistent objects?¹ This question has remained a central and recurrent issue within contemporary metaphysics.

Certain scholars contend that intentionality does not constitute a real relation (see Reicher, 2022). In contrast, others, such as Meinong (1904/1960), maintain that every intentional state necessarily involves an object—be it an existent one or a nonexistent one. According to Meinongianism,² objects are divided into two main categories: existent objects and nonexistent objects. The former encompasses those entities situated within space and time, i.e., concrete objects, while the latter refers to entities devoid of spatiotemporal coordinates. Nevertheless, Meinong introduces an additional layer of classification concerning nonexistent objects, which has often been overlooked in the literature. Among nonexistent entities, Meinong distinguishes between those said to ‘subsist’ and those entirely devoid of being (*Nichtsein*) (Meinong, 1904/1960; Chisholm, 1973; Priest, 2005).

In another vein, Timothy Williamson (2013) advances necessitism, the view that everything exists necessarily, albeit in different senses (Williamson, 2000). On the one hand, an object is said to exist substantively (*S-exist*) when it is concrete, while on the other hand, objects are said to exist logically (*L-exist*) by virtue of their identity and inclusion within the domain of an unrestricted quantifier.

The first section of this discussion will analyze the relationship between intentionality and nonexistent objects, as it has been traditionally framed in the philosophical literature. In the second section, I will argue that Williamson’s logical conception of existence (*L-existence*) is compatible with the Meinongian notion of ‘subsistence,’ as it encompasses both abstract objects and contingently non-concrete entities. By contrast, the concept of substantive existence (*S-existence*) can be equated with the classical, intuitive understanding of existence, as well as with the Meinongian notion of existence (Meinong, 1904/1960). Furthermore, I will propose that, for the Meinongian, those entities which lack any form of being (*Nichtsein*) correspond to the objects that, in Williamson’s necessitist framework, fail to L-exist (i.e., objects to which terms do not refer). For this purpose, I will base my analysis on the translation framework proposed by Woodward (2013) and subsequently refined by Schoonen and Berto (2017), which explores the relationship between noneism—a variant of Meinongianism that categorizes objects into two distinct classes: those that exist and those that do not exist *simpliciter*—and allism—the ontological position asserting that everything exists.

This parallel offers the basis for a conceptual mapping between Meinongianism and necessitism, allowing me to demonstrate that their apparent disagreement regarding the meaning of the predicate ‘existence’ is merely verbal. Ultimately, both frameworks presuppose a shared three-tiered ontology.

1. Intentionality and non-existent objects

Intentionality is a concept that is fundamentally philosophical in nature. It was introduced by Franz Brentano in 1874 and refers to a series of attitudes that a subject can have toward an object. Examples of intentional attitudes include *believing in*, *loving*, *searching for*, *worshipping*, and so on.³ One can also refer to *intentional objects*, which are ‘those things in the world that we think about; or those things that we take, pretend, or otherwise represent as existing in the world; or which we merely represent in thought’ (Crane, 2013: 4). A straightforward question that arises is: Toward which objects do we direct our intentionality? Or, put differently, what constitutes an intentional object? It is crucial, however, to distinguish these questions from the question of which terms refer to actual entities, as it is possible to have an intentional state directed at an

¹ I understand the term ‘object’ as referring to anything that can be substituted in first-order quantification, allowing quantification over non-existent objects. Furthermore, an object is something to which existence can be predicated, whereas other categories, such as events, do not *exist* but rather *occur*.

² From now on, I will use the term “Meinongianism” and related terms such as “Meinongian” to refer to one of the ways in which analytic philosophy has received Meinong’s philosophy, and not to a technical reading of that author.

³ These attitudes are typically associated with intentionality. However, according to Meinong, intentionality—which is very close to what he calls *assumption (Annahmen)*—is not limited to such attitudes; it can also be ascribed to lower-level cognitive acts, such as seeing, hearing, or representational states like imagining: “Es giebt Annahmen, die als integrierende Bestandstücke fundamentaler intellektueller Operationen vielfach die wichtigsten einfacheren und zusammengesetzteren Bethätigungen unseres Geisteslebens mit constituieren helfen; es giebt Annahmen, deren Leistung zunächst darin gelegen ist, eine psychologische Voraussetzung für ausserintellektuelle Bethätigungen abzugeben; es giebt schliesslich Annahmen, die sozusagen für sich und um ihrer selbst willen da sind [There are assumptions that, as integral components of fundamental intellectual operations, often help to constitute the most important simpler and more complex activities of our mental life; there are assumptions whose function initially lies in providing a psychological precondition for non-intellectual activities; and finally, there are assumptions that, so to speak, exist for their own sake and for the sake of themselves]” (Meinong, 1902 :267 [my translation]).

object whose corresponding term does not refer to anything in the world. For example, one can admire Pegasus, and furthermore, one can believe in it (since it is possible to believe in mythical creatures). The distinction that Crane makes between *reference* and *aboutness* is particularly useful here, as, according to the philosopher, it is possible to have non-referring terms and still maintain intentional objects:

Along with most philosophers, I take reference to be a real relation, and accordingly I distinguish between aboutness and reference. A thought can be about something non-existent, but such a thought fails to refer. 'Reference' in this sense is a technical term for the relation between a word, or a thought, and an existing thing. 'Aboutness' is the mere representation of something in words or thought, whether or not it exists. So although my word 'Pegasus' does not refer to the mythological winged horse Pegasus—'Pegasus' is after all, commonly called a 'non-referring term'—I can talk or think about Pegasus (Crane, 2013: 9)

However, this solution entails a commitment to the inclusion of non-existent objects in our ontology.⁴ This does not pose a problem for those who subscribe to Meinongianism. According to Meinongianism, there are two main categories of objects: existent objects and non-existent objects. Furthermore, for the Meinongian, there exists a subclass of non-existent objects, namely those that are not said to exist at all (*Nichtsein*), such as impossible objects or fictional entities.⁵

As Hofweber (2000) observes, the existence of non-existent objects might be regarded as a trivial inference, since one could begin with the intuitive claim that Father Christmas does not exist and subsequently conclude that Father Christmas is not an existent object. This tension could be addressed by interpreting such inferences as 'easy inferences,' as Thomasson (2015) characterizes them. Thus, there appear to be at least two distinct methods for deriving the conclusion that non-existent objects should be accounted for. The first involves treating them as objects of intuition. The second consists in considering the intuitive claims regarding them and 'making use of our conceptual competence, reasoning skills, and empirical information' (Thomasson, 2015: 113) to infer claims about their non-existence. Regardless of the approach taken, both paths lead to the conclusion that non-existent objects must be acknowledged. Yet, this raises the question of the problem of identity for such objects. One potential response to this issue can be found in the work of Adams (2021):

A further important point is that the identity of any nonexistent object to which we can refer must be understood as determined, not by whatever properties it actually has, but by its existence-related essence—that is, by the properties it is definitively represented as having, which it would have to have if it were to exist (Adams, 2021: 40)

Assume that the issue of identity for nonexistent objects is addressed in the manner proposed by Adams (see above). A further question that arises is whether it is possible to quantify over such objects. It seems plausible to argue that we can quantify over nonexistent entities or, at the very least, replace bound variables with terms that may lack referents. The philosophical reservations of McX, as articulated by Quine (1948), regarding nonexistent entities are well known. Nevertheless, it can be contended, following Crane, that quantifying over nonexistent objects merely entails including such objects within the universe of discourse, even if the terms associated with them fail to refer.

What does it mean, then, to quantify over non-existent objects? It is to have non-existent objects of thought in the universe of discourse, where a universe of discourse is a specific generalization of the idea of an object of thought: viz. all the things relevant to what we are talking about [...] These things can be 'values' of the variables bound by the quantifiers, just in the sense that things can be true or false of these objects of thought. So, when evaluation 'some biblical characters did not exist' we look for something in the domain (biblical characters) of which we can predicate non-existence. And lo! We find one: Abraham. Abraham is, then, a value of the variable (Crane, 2013: 40).

⁴ One could also say that it is possible to refer to non-existent objects in a *sui generis* sense of 'to refer' (see Honoré, 1971).

⁵ It is important, however, to introduce the concept of the *pure object* as understood by Meinong (1904/1960). A pure object is an object considered in its status of *outside-being* (*Aussersein*). This status applies to everything, since everything can be regarded as an object, and every object, in turn, possesses this mode of outside-being (Marek, 2024). This could therefore be interpreted as a *fourth mode of being*. However, it is *sui generis* for while other modes of being may or may not be instantiated, the status of outside-being must be attributed to every object. As Velarde-Mayol puts it: Lo interesante de estos cuatro estados del objeto es que hay cierta jerarquía entre ellos. Todo objeto (*Objekt*) que existe tiene que subsistir y tener el estado de allende el ser, pero no al revés. Todo objeto (*Objekt*) que subsiste tiene que tener el estado de allende el ser, pero no viceversa. Y todo objeto (*Objekt*) que ni existe ni subsiste—como los imposibles—tienen al menos el estado de allende el ser (*aussersein*). Este estado es el estado del objeto puro, el objeto *qua* objeto, en su estado puro de allende el ser, que es un estado siempre presente en todo objeto, ya tenga el ser como existencia, ya lo tenga como subsistencia, o simplemente no tenga ningún tipo de ser. Todo objeto, por el mero hecho de ser objeto, tiene *aussersein* [What's interesting about these four states of the object is that there is a certain hierarchy among them. Every object (*Objekt*) that exists must subsist and have the state of being outside-being, but not the other way around. Every object (*Objekt*) that subsists must have the state of being outside-being, but not vice versa. And every object (*Objekt*) that neither exists nor subsists—such as impossibles—has at least the state of being-outside-being (*aussersein*). This state is the state of the pure object, the object *qua* object, in its pure state of being outside-being, which is a state always present in every object, whether it has being as existence, being as subsistence, or simply has no kind of being at all. Every object, by the mere fact of being an object, has *aussersein*] (Velarde-Mayol, 2007 [my translation]).

Given this perspective, it seems reasonable to commit ourselves to certain nonexistent objects—those over which it is possible to quantify, even if the terms associated with them lack referents. Admittedly, one might argue, following Quine, that quantification⁶ over nonexistent entities is inherently absurd. Nevertheless, there is an additional reason to commit ourselves to such objects: as previously discussed, they are the objects of intentionality.

2. Meinongianism and necessitism: a merely verbal dispute

To the question ‘What is there?’, the North American philosopher Willard van Orman Quine provided a simple yet powerful answer: ‘Everything’ (Quine, 1948: 21). This response strikes me as accurate; in fact, I contend that there is no other possible answer to this question, as it is impossible to address it by appealing to a restricted domain—there will always be something outside that domain. However, one might then ask: ‘What does it mean to be part of ‘everything’?’ Quine elaborated his answer with his famous slogan: ‘To be is to be the value of a variable’ (Quine, 1948: 32). As Salmon clarifies, this slogan can be interpreted as the claim that ‘to be (or to exist) at a time t in a possible world w is to be the value of a variable under some assignment of values to variables with respect to t and w ’ (Salmon, 1987: 52).

Timothy Williamson adopts a similar perspective to Quine’s. He defends the thesis known as *necessitism*, which asserts that necessarily, everything is necessarily something (Williamson, 2013). In this claim, *everything* should be understood as unrestricted, and, as with Quine, for Williamson existence is tied to the quantifier, making it a universal property of individuals (see Nelson, 2022, for a discussion on this view). This perspective could be regarded as unorthodox, since Frege and Russell—following Kant’s considerations—argued that *existence* is a second-order predicate. That is, to assert that *something exists* is simply to claim that some property is instantiated.

Williamson distinguishes between two modes of existence: *logical existence* (L-existence) and *substantive existence* (S-existence). For something to S-exist is to be concrete—that is, to occupy space and time—whereas to L-exist is not to be in space and time, but rather to have the *possibility* of being in space and time (Williamson, 1998: 266). However, statements involving L-existence need not be trivial, as the terms they involve may lack reference altogether.

The objects that L-exist for the necessitist include those that are not contingently concrete, such as contingently non-concrete objects (or *mere possibilia*) and abstract objects. Upon closer examination, it becomes evident that these objects are the same as those that *subsist* for the Meinongianist. For the Meinongianist, such objects simply do not *exist* but can be said to *subsist* in some sense. However, there are objects that, even for the Meinongianist, cannot be said to subsist—this category includes impossible objects, such as ‘the largest prime number’, and fictional objects, such as Father Christmas. For the necessitist, these objects do not L-exist, as any L-existence claim about them would be nonsensical, given that the intended terms lack referents.

I argue that there is no substantive difference between the ontologies of the Meinongianist and the necessitist. Instead, the dispute is merely verbal, revolving around how the predicate *existence* should be understood. But first, when is a dispute merely verbal? Following Sider, I will adopt the following definition of a merely verbal dispute:⁷

To say that a dispute over sentence F is merely verbal is to say that disputants do not mean the same thing by F , and that what one says in uttering F is consistent with what the other says by uttering $\neg F$ (Sider, 2006: 76).

To properly demonstrate that this dispute is merely verbal, I will attempt to show that both theories are theoretically equivalent. For this purpose, I will draw upon the translation framework proposed by Woodward (2013) for noneism and allism, a framework subsequently refined by Schoonen and Berto (2017). Following Schoonen and Berto, I will adopt their definition of theoretically equivalent theories:

Definition 1. Theoretical Equivalence

Let there be a phenomenon that needs to be explained, i.e., an explanandum, , and two theories, 1 and 2, that are put forth as explanantia. Then these two theories are theoretically equivalent, with respect to , if the respective models purportedly doing the explaining are structurally the same, i.e., there is an isomorphism from one to the other (Schoonen & Berto, 2017).

My thesis is that Meinongianism—at least as originally characterized by Meinong—and necessitism are theoretically equivalent with respect to the kinds of objects that exist.

Williamson, however, argues that Meinongianism and necessitism share very little in common. His reasoning is that necessitism does not endorse the characterization schema, whereas Meinongianism does. The characterization schema takes the form ‘The F is an F .’ According to Williamson, necessitism

⁶ Quantification is understood in this context *à la* Quine.

⁷ For a criticism of Sider definition of ‘merely verbal dispute,’ see Jenkins, 2014.

does not entail even the modal version of this schema, namely: 'The merely possible F is a merely possible F' (see Williamson, 2013: §1.5). This is because, under standard theories of definite descriptions, such a schema typically presupposes the uniqueness of the referent—that is, that there is only one F. However, Williamson maintains that necessitism allows for a plurality of merely possible Fs (for instance, there may be more than one merely possible mountain).

Nevertheless, in ordinary language and under certain more flexible semantic frameworks, expressions like 'the merely possible golden mountain' can be interpreted as referring to a representative member of a class, rather than to a uniquely determined individual. Thus, the use of the definite article does not necessarily entail ontological commitment to a single merely possible object. Furthermore, the existence of multiple possible entities does not preclude reference: even if there are many merely possible golden mountains, this does not prevent us from referring to one of them via a definite description, provided the context renders the reference sufficiently determinate.

Therefore, it can be argued that expressions such as 'the merely possible golden mountain is a merely possible golden mountain' are admissible within a necessitist framework, as long as the definite article is understood epistemically or contextually. On this interpretation, necessitism may be seen as compatible with a version of the characterization schema construed in these terms.

The central question here is to unravel how the Meinongian uses the term *exist* and to identify a distinction within necessitism that could correspond to the Meinongian understanding of existence. I believe this is possible if we examine the distinction made by the necessitist between objects that L-exist and those that S-exist. When the Meinongianist claims that something exists, the necessitist interprets this as an assertion that something exists concretely—that is, substantively. Conversely, when the Meinongianist asserts that something does not exist, the necessitist would argue that it exists, but only logically. This reconstruction could be carried out following the framework proposed by Woodward (2013).

The Meinongianist, like the noneist, distinguishes between two types of quantifiers: neutral quantifiers and loaded quantifiers. The domain of neutral quantifiers is the universal domain, which includes both existent and non-existent objects. In contrast, the domain of loaded quantifiers is a restricted domain comprising only existent objects. As Woodward notes: 'Lewis's interpretation makes noneism intelligible to Quineans by taking the noneist's neutral quantifiers to be the Quinean's quantifiers' (Woodward, 2013: 186). However, we must take this one step further and extrapolate the noneist's distinction between existent and non-existent objects into the Quinean framework.

As Woodward suggests, one possible approach is to equate this distinction to the Quinean distinction between abstract objects and concrete objects. Nevertheless, as Priest points out, this interpretation breaks down in modal contexts:

Consider the claim that Holmes does not exist, but could have done so. This is a claim to which the noneist will assent. The [interpretation] is that Holmes is not concrete, but could have been. This hardly seems to be true. If Holmes is not a concrete object, what is he? He is not a set, number, property, or any other sort of abstract object. And if he is, since abstract objects necessarily possess their modal status, it would not be possible for him to become a concrete object (Priest, 2005: 154).

However, this issue does not arise in the Meinongianism-Necessitism translation, as the interpretation does not analyze existent and non-existent objects in terms of concrete and abstract entities, but rather in terms of objects that S-exist and L-exist. Furthermore, for the Meinongian, there are non-existent objects, such as Sherlock Holmes, that do not even subsist⁸, so they are 'beyond being' (*Nichtsein*), and for the necessitist, these objects do not L-exist, as the intended reference is absent.

It may be argued, however, that the objects which exist for the Meinongian are the same as those that S-exist for the necessitist: concrete entities that are physical and temporal. Their role is similarly consistent, namely, to explain our experience in reality in a narrow sense. Yet, what is the theoretical role of subsistent objects? Furthermore, can it be asserted that objects that L-exist for necessitism fulfill the same theoretical function? Subsistent objects include entities such as numbers, which neither exist physically nor temporally (being abstract), but are indispensable for the structure of reasoning and knowledge. Although, to my knowledge, Meinong does not explicitly address contingently non-concrete objects, one could argue that such objects subsist insofar as they are relevant to the framework of modal reasoning and modal knowledge. Numbers and mere possibilia L-exist for the necessitist, and their role aligns with that of the Meinongian: to capture the complexity of human thought, that is, to explain mathematical and logical theories, to explain modality, etc.

⁸ For an exhaustive classification of objects according to their mode of being as per Meinong, see Marek, 2024.

3. Conclusion

As previously indicated, the necessitist's conception of S-existence may be equated with the Meinongian's notion of existence, insofar as both are associated with concrete entities. Conversely, the notion of L-existence is more inappropriately linked to objects that do not exist for the Meinongian but nonetheless subsist, such as abstract objects or mere possibilities. Finally, there are objects that, for the Meinongian, lie beyond the realm of existence, which, according to Williamson, are considered objects of intentionality whose terms fail to refer. In this respect, the ontologies of the necessitist and the Meinongian appear to be largely aligned, with the primary difference being a verbal disagreement over the interpretation of *existence*. Both ontologies categorize the same objects, partitioning them into three distinct, yet extensionally equivalent, classes.

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