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► **To cite this version:**

Ivory Pribram-Day. Meinong's Multifarious Being and Russell's Ontological Variable: Being in Two Object Theories across Traditions at the Turn of the 20th Century. *Open Philosophy*, 2018, 1 (1), pp.310 - 326. 10.1515/opphil-2018-0023 . hal-03873152

**HAL Id: hal-03873152**

**<https://paris1.hal.science/hal-03873152>**

Submitted on 26 Nov 2022

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# Meinong's Multifarious Being and Russell's Ontological Variable: Being in Two Object Theories across Traditions at the Turn of the 20th Century

<https://doi.org/10.1515/opphil-2018-0023>

Received May 25, 2018; accepted September 30, 2018

**Abstract:** This paper discusses the problems of an ontological value of the variable in Russell's philosophy. The variable is essential in Russell's theory of denotation, which among other things, purports to prove Meinongian being outside of subsistence and existence to be logically unnecessary. I argue that neither Russell's epistemology nor his ontology can account for the ontological value of the variable without running into qualities of Meinongian being that Russell disputed. The problem is that the variable cannot be logically grounded by Russell's theory of denotation. As such, in so far as being is concerned, Meinong and Russell's theories are much closer than is typically thought. The arguments are supported with concerns raised by Russell, Frege, and Moore regarding the ontological value of the variable. The problem can be summarised as follows: the variable is the fundamental denoting-position of a formal theory that is meant to explain the structure of the ontological. If such a formal theory is meant to ground the ontological, then the formal must also represent the actual structure of the ontological. Yet the variable, the fundamental symbol of denotation in a theory that defines objects, is ontologically indefinable.

**Keywords:** Object Theory; Philosophy of Language; History of Analytic Philosophy; Logic; Theory of Denotation

With the publication of Bertrand Russell's "On Denoting", the year 1905<sup>1</sup> marked a crucial turning point of his thought, and arguably Anglophone philosophy; that of the referential theory of objects based on classical logic and the 'ontological assumption'<sup>2</sup> that most often comes with it.<sup>3</sup> In Russell's referential theory he used canonical notation to express what he believed to be the logical structure of the ontological and consequently the accurate expression of objects. One of the several purported advantages of this theory was that it proved the multifarious beings found in certain ontological theories to be logically unnecessary. Alexius Meinong's objects of nonbeing and many objects of subsistence as explained in his "Über Gegenstandstheorie" were among them.<sup>4</sup>

In Russell's canonical notation, the variable is the fundamental denoting-term of the fundamental type formula as well as of the fundamental type-instance formula, which I will explain later. Yet, the use of the variable poses problems for Russell's theory of denotation. Specifically, the variable as the fundamental

1 This year is noteworthy as it is typically considered to mark Russell's break with Frege's theory of sense and reference and with Meinong's theory of objects.

2 The Ontological assumption will be explained later.

3 See Routley and Routley, "Rehabilitating Meinong's Theory", 227; Albertazzi, Jacquette and Poli, "Meinong", 23-24; Griffin, "Russell's Critique of Meinong", 379.

4 The others being Frege's sense-reference distinction and Russell's ontology pre 1905.

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denoting-term in Russell's canonical notation cannot be ontologically reconciled neither with the epistemology nor the ontological theory it is meant to logically support.

Timothy Smiley highlights the problem in relation to Russell's epistemology as discussed by Russell and G.E. Moore. In his discussion of how the variable is meant to be understood ontologically in the Russellian framework, Smiley notes that "the nature of the variable remains a mystery."<sup>5</sup> Smiley concludes that because of this, Russell had as much reason to reject his own theory of denotation as he did the others it was meant to prove unnecessary.<sup>6</sup> In this essay we go even further with the claim. Not only is the variable of Russell's theory of denotation a mystery in relation to his theory of knowledge of objects, but, precisely because of it, both in his strict ontology and his ontology as seen through his theory of knowledge, Russell also failed to evade the multifarious beings of Meinong's theory of objects. Qualities reminiscent of these beings, which Russell sought to cast as logically unnecessary, were hidden within the variable of his type-instance formula. The being of the variable shows that Russell was much less successful in removing his ontology from Meinong's realm of multifarious being than is typically thought.

Russell himself admits that he only reduced the problem of denoting to the problem of the variable. The issues the variable poses internally to his philosophy were discussed by him and two other founders of analytic philosophy around the time the theory emerged: Gottlob Frege and G.E. Moore. It is curious then that the question of the ontological value of the variable and their exchanges pertaining to it, with the notable exception of Smiley, has by and large gone unaddressed within the history of analytic philosophy. In order to bring this conversation to light, our critique will be premised on the issues raised by Russell, Moore and Frege concerning the variable, alongside providing the technical explanations of Russell's theory that are required for understanding those issues.

For the most part, the long noted inaccuracies in Russell's interpretation of Meinong, most notably in "On Denoting", will not be a focus of the paper.<sup>7</sup> How Russell came to his inaccurate interpretation will also not be discussed.<sup>8</sup> It is not here the intention to reiterate this longstanding discussion. Nor is the purpose to engage in a debate on how to avoid the accusation that Meinong's theory violates the law of non-contradiction and of excluded middle (a debate particularly interesting for the development and use of non-classical logics).<sup>9</sup> Finally, the question will also go unasked as to whether such consistency should be

<sup>5</sup> Smiley, "Theory of Description", 142.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> See, among others, Findlay, *Meinong's Theory of Objects*; Grossmann, *Meinong*; Suter "Russell's Refutation"; Parsens, *Nonexistent Objects*; Routley and Routley, "Rehabilitating Meinong"; Smith, "Russell-Meinong Debate"; Albertazzi and Jacqueline and Poli, *School of Alexius Meinong*; Benoist and Gabriel, talk 2018. An almost uniform conclusion among anglophone Meinongian philosophers is that Russell failed to understand many subtle yet crucial distinctions in Meinong's theory of objects, and found certain conclusions drawn by Meinong intolerable. These include, firstly, that objects that neither exist nor subsist nonetheless *are* in some way. Secondly, that for all true propositions about objects that neither exist nor subsist, the negative correlate of those propositions are also true. In other words, Russell saw this as a violation of the laws of excluded middle and of non-contradiction. And perhaps most crucially, Russell didn't understand Meinong's distinction between Existence and Being, and the independence of *Sosein* from *Sein*, which will be explained in the next section. Although important, these subtleties and Russell's failure to grasp them aren't directly relevant to the ontological status of the variable which is our present focus.

<sup>8</sup> Many, such as Chisholm, "Meinong"; Suter, "Russell's Refutation of Meinong in 'On Denoting'"; and Findlay, "Meinong's Theory of Objects", have argued that Russell's reading of Meinong was a 'travesty' due to negligence. Thanks to texts more recently made available, Smith, "The Russell-Meinong Debate" and Griffin in "Russell's Critique of Meinong", have argued that early Russell was an avid admirer of Meinong and had read and considered his writings in detail. Russell's letter of 1904 seems to testify to this (Smith, "The Russell-Meinong Debate", 347). Another common view is that Russell rebuked Meinong's theory due to his realism, supported by his later comment that 'the desire to avoid Meinong's unduly populous realm of being led me to the theory of descriptions' (Russell, "General Theory of Classes", 13). In contrast to this, Smith and Griffin hold that Russell's interpretation and disagreement with Meinong's theory was primarily because of logic rather than a philosophical disagreement per se.

<sup>9</sup> Most if not all of the aforementioned philosophers have, in their own way, shown how to avoid the accusations Russell made against Meinong's theory. Most have argued that Russell's criticism misses its target so thoroughly that it is consequently irrelevant (see Findlay, "Meinong's Theory of Objects"; Suter, "Russell's Refutation of Meinong in 'On Denoting'"; Albertazzi, Jacqueline and Poli, "Meinong in His and Our Times," 27). Meinong's theory has alternatively been explained using alternative logics (see William J. Rapaport "Meinongian Theories and a Russellian Paradox"; Karel Lambert's *Meinong and the Principle of Independence*; Terence Parson's "Are There Nonexistent Objects?"; Routley's *Meinong's Jungle* and "Rehabilitating Meinong's Theory of Objects"; Jacek Pasniczek "The Logic of Intentional Objects" – Peter Simons interestingly notes that 'it is something

sought for contradictory objects or their propositions, although I myself am partisan to think it should not, in line with Meinong himself.<sup>10</sup> These discussions, although illuminating and important, are not directly relevant to this paper. Regardless of how Russell went wrong with Meinong, and of whether Meinong's theory is interpreted in a Meinongian framework or in a Russellian framework, the qualities the variable holds in Russell's theory of denotation remain a problem for it. More specifically, whether the qualities of the variable are interpreted through Meinong's ontology or Russell's, either way they pose a problem for the theory of denotation.<sup>11</sup>

We will premise the conversation of the variable with an explanation of Meinong's theory of objects, or at least what is needed to explain Russell's objections and, when relevant, misconceptions. We will then explain Russell's ontology, epistemology, and theory of denotation. Understanding Russell's views on these matters is essential to both understanding his use of the variable, and the issues which arise for the variable. We will compare his ontology to Meinong's throughout and show where and how his theory of objects differs to Meinong's theory of objects. This will also call for comparison of similarities between the two.

Having done so, we will be in a position to understand Frege, Russell, and Moore's ontological concerns about the variable. We will proceed to explain the problems of the variable in relation to Russell's ontology itself and in relation to his theory of knowledge of objects. This will be done firstly by showing where the problem lies. Secondly, it will be shown how qualities reminiscent of Meinongian multifarious being are hidden therein. We will conclude that due to the being of the variable of the type-instance formula of Russell's theory of denotation, his ontology reveals itself to still contain qualities of being akin to those of Meinong's theory of objects that it was meant to negate. This is true both of the ontology as seen through his theory of knowledge of objects and of his strict ontology. However, we will argue the latter to be most detrimental to his theory. We will end by explaining how Meinong and Russell's theories are thereby much closer than is typically thought, in so far as being is concerned.

A few notes before we start. As Russell's philosophy changed often and as he was a prolific publisher it is hard to peg down his exact ontological commitments when referencing his published work. What we want is to find the ontological commitments he would have held at the time he developed his theory of denotation. Therefore we will limit ourselves as much as possible to an analysis of his philosophy as expressed from the period of 1905 to 1911.<sup>12</sup> Neither his prior beliefs, namely those held in *Principles of Mathematics* (1903) nor those from 1913 are of concern here. Although there were no doubt mild fluctuations in Russell's ontological views between 1905 and 1911, it is generally held that the important shifts in his logic and ontology were in 1905 with his theory of denotation (which in part was a rejection of his earlier views), followed by another less drastic change around 1913-1914 when he abandoned the substance-existence distinction.<sup>13</sup>

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of a paradox that Brentano's student Alexius Meinong, who, for all his expertise in many areas of philosophy, was no logician, should have made such a significant contribution to the development of various areas of non-classical logic. Meinong wrote no work, not even an essay, not even a part of a book, on logic' (Simons, "Logic in the Brentano School", 314). Others have opted instead to discredit the theory of reference that Russell assumed, demonstrating where the theory lacks in possible explanation of intentional, possible, and impossible objects (Routley and Routley, "Rehabilitating Meinong's theory of objects", Griffin, "Russell's Critique of Meinong's Theory of Objects". Finally there are others of the mainstream analytic tradition who have discredited Russell's critique in other ways, famously P.F. Strawson's "On Referring". Although important to note in any discussion of Russell and Meinong, we can see that these issues don't directly touch on the issues of the variable.

**10** Griffin, for instance, questions whether it is not better to maintain that an inconsistent object should have inconsistent propositions true of it (Griffin, "Russell's Critique of Meinong's Theory of Objects", 394). Russell critiqued Meinong's theory showing that for all true propositions with a non-existent object as its referent, its opposite false proposition is also true of it, making it a theory that violated the law of non-contradiction. To this Meinong stated that the law of no contradiction only applies to existing objects, and that the law therefore does not apply to the objects to which Russell referred (*ibid.*, 390).

**11** However, it will be seen that within the diverse axes of the discussion, we could best align ourselves with the research of Smith, "The Russell-Meinong Debate", in which she concludes that the discrepancies between Russell and Meinong's views are at bottom logical with their logics being the rationales on which their respective object theories are based. This sets it apart from other views, on which the disagreement stems primarily from Russell's commitment to ontological realism.

**12** We will ignore his substitutional theory from the time period as both attempts to make it work were abandoned by Russell, and not assimilated to his ontology. (See Hylton, "Russell's Substitutional Theory".)

**13** See Russell, "On the Nature of Acquaintance". Regardless, I see no changes in Russell's thought after 1905 that would disqualify the argument of this paper.

## 1 Meinong's object theory

Meinong's theory is closely tied to logic. Despite his stylistic writing that on occasion tends to almost paradoxical phrasing, Meinong sought to avoid inconsistency and paradox within his philosophy.<sup>14</sup> He abided by the law of excluded middle and of non-contradiction, albeit he did not conform to these laws within classical logic. Indeed his philosophy has been very influential to non-classical logics.<sup>15</sup> Be that as it may unlike Russell, Meinong's logic is solely implicit within the reasoning of his theory of objects. Meinong was not a logician, and never wrote on formal logic.

Russell's interpretation of Meinong's theory of objects is what we are concerned with. As such, rather than providing a thorough account of Meinong's theory we will focus only on those parts pertinent to Russell's interpretation and ensuing critique of it. Short explanations of other aspects of the theory will be touched on to clarify the subtle distinctions of Meinong's theory that Russell misinterpreted. This will only be done where relevant to our critique.

To explain Meinong's classificatory system of objects, we will refer principally to his 1904 "Über Gegenstandstheorie" as that essay demonstrates the state of Meinong's theory that culminated in Russell's rejection of it in "On Denoting".

Meinong's theory of objects was meant to be the ground work of a grand theory of metaphysics that accounts for all objects of knowledge, which is to say all Objects. This is so as all objects can be cognised, although have not been necessarily. These include objects of the empirical sciences as well as ideal objects such as those of mathematics, the content of psychological presentations, and objects that are not. Thus the word 'Object' in Meinong's theory takes on a very broad sense. Meinong's theory of objects distinguishes between a theory of knowledge strictly speaking (how objects are known and the known objects), psychology (all mental rapports to objects and their objects) and a theory of objects encompassing all Objects.

We are only focusing on those objects necessary to explain being for Meinong and even these objects are only explained in so far as their being is concerned. In order to do so, on occasion, objects will be explained in relation to their psychological rapports. The rapports however, will not be explained as this is a question of psychology for Meinong.<sup>16</sup>

Although objects, for Meinong, are given to consciousness and so most are not reliant on the mind, Meinong very often seeks recourse to the mental to explain them. This is seen even early on and did not change by 1904. In 1899, 1902 and 1904 Meinong maintained that any psychological act that occurs is about *something*. This most often introduced Meinong's claim that everything that can be thought, assumed, judged, presented (*vorstellen*), is in some way.

<sup>14</sup> See Meinong, "The Theory of Objects," 83-84.

<sup>15</sup> See footnote 9.

<sup>16</sup> Here is a brief overview for further clarification: The content of a mental act is different to the objects external to it that it relates to. Intellectual acts have mental content which they are about (Schubert's translation "Object of Higher Order and Their Relationship to Internal Perception", 141). It is this content that is the object of an intellectual act. Said content exists in a certain way, although not in the same way as purely empirical objects. The rapport of the mental to its object differs depending on the mental act. Firstly there is knowledge. This is to know, to recognise, or cognise depending on the translation one prefers. To discuss knowledge is to discuss a particular rapport between the mind and what is known. In knowing there is a double fact (*Doppeltatsache*) (Meinong, "Über Gegenstandstheorie", 4). To know something is for the mind to be directed to that known object i.e., for the object to be *presented* to the mind, but also for that mind to grasp the object *in itself* in some way. It should be distinguished to the rapports that other psychological acts have to their objects such as judging (*urteilen*), assuming (*annehmen*), having an idea (*vorstellen*), feeling, etc. For instance, the act of having an idea (*vorstellen*) results in an idea/presentation (*Vorstellung*) which is directed toward an object. It consequently has an object of presentation, which is synonymous with its content. But here an object in itself, aside from mental content, isn't necessarily grasped. Interestingly, the object of presentation is preliminary to other intellectual acts. This is because other intellectual acts have Objectives as their content which are mentally assembled states of affairs (*Zusammenhängen*) of objects of presentations. Thus a *Vorstellung* must have occurred for other mental acts to assemble objects of presentation, which result in an Objective. This is the case for assumptions, judgements, etc. which have Objectives of assumption, judgement, etc., as their object. It is noteworthy that these Objectives can be either of *Sein* and *Nichtsein* (being or nonbeing). Assumptions exceptionally are exclusively about *Soseinobjektiven*; how an object is, not the object itself nor its being. All of these are the mental content of psychological rapports to Objects in the broad sense (see Marek's Stanford Encyclopedia entry on Meinong for a tabular classification of these objects and Meinong's *Über Annahmen* for a thorough explanation).

There are two principle kinds of being: being and non-being. Objects with being are either objects that exist (*existieren*) and subsist or objects that only subsist (*bestehen*). The former are objects that are in space-time and of which it can be said are real and actual. These are objects that exist empirically such as a person.

Then there are subsistent objects, ideal objects, typically speaking, being a large part of them. For example, difference and identity are considered subsistent objects as they are not in the empirical realm. Past objects that no longer exist and future objects are also within this category as they are no longer actual but cannot be said to *not be*.

Another that sometimes fits the category of subsistent objects are Objectives. Objectives are the objective state of affairs (*Zusammenhang*) that pertain to an object of any kind of being. Meinong's text uses the word 'Objective', but it is essentially the same as what Russell called a proposition<sup>17</sup> (although both consider the being of propositions quite differently). Objectives are whole objects in themselves and are anything to which a truth-value can be ascribed. However, the only Objectives that subsist are the ones with a positive truth-value. For instance '2+2=4' is an Objective that is true and so subsists. However, '2+2=5' is false and as such is an Objective that neither exists nor subsists. This we will come back to shortly.

That being said, the objects implied by an Objective need not *be* in the same way as the Objective itself. For instance the current president of France is an existent object that an Objective can imply. To judge that there is a state of affairs of the current president of France is to judge something true or false of him/her. If true then it is a state of affairs that is real. It is an Objective that subsists.

Next we have objects that are not. Although several kinds of objects fit within this category, Meinong often using a favourite of his, the round square, as an example. He explains that to judge that *the round square does not exist*, we nonetheless grasp the object being judged.<sup>18</sup> Thus that object has to *be* in some way. But the round square cannot *be* in the same ontological realm neither as existing objects nor as subsisting objects. So its particular being is found in that it is *not*. This is nonbeing, or *Nichtsein*. Contradictory objects are of *Nichtsein*, as well as complete and incomplete objects that are known to neither exist nor subsist. Fictitious objects being an example of the first of the latter cases, and a fictitious object incompletely defined being a case of the second.

An object of non-being (*nichtseiendes Gegenstand*), can also be implied in both Objectives of nonbeing and of subsistence. Per the latter, if a judgement about the objective state of affairs concerning an object of non-being is true, then that Objective is said to subsist. The object it implies however is nonetheless of nonbeing. To use an example of Meinong's, "those who like paradoxical modes of expression could very well say: There are objects of which it is true that there are no such objects."<sup>19</sup> However, if the judgement can be said to be false then the Objective is of nonbeing. It follows that Meinong's theory allows for objective falsehoods.

Meinong meant the above example as a turn of phrase, one which no doubt simplifies his notion of being. However Russell took Meinong's theory of objects with its multifarious beings to be very well paradoxical.<sup>20</sup> That objects do not exist but nonetheless have some kind of ontological value is what irked Russell. This is what Russell meant to show to be logically unnecessary and consequently disposable in his theory of denotation.<sup>21</sup>

To return, in addition to non-being there is another form of being that expands past subsistence and existence. This is *Außersein* or outside-of-being, which is a kind of quasi-being. All objects have *Außersein*, and it is prior to their determination as a kind of being. Meinong explains *Außersein*, as is his fashion, through the mental. For a mind to grasp an object in any sense, it does so before grasping the *being* of

<sup>17</sup> See Russell, "Meinong's Theory of Complexes and Assumptions".

<sup>18</sup> In "On Denoting" Russell arguably conflates this example which was meant to elaborate Meinong's point of view with justification of Meinong's thesis. Russell argues that such a view is logically unnecessary to hold and so the justification for such a view is logically lacking. Although Meinong did value logic, it is questionable that to logically disprove the necessity of an explanatory note in Meinong's theory amounts to the same as logically disproving the justification of his theory.

<sup>19</sup> Meinong, "Über Gegenstandstheorie", 83.

<sup>20</sup> For an English elaboration on Meinong's response to Russell's claim that his theory is paradoxical see Marek, "Alexius Meinong".

<sup>21</sup> Russell, "On Denoting", 483.

the object. Thus a kind of being is assumed, as an object must be, but without being determined as being or non-being. This is a quasi-being of all Objects; a preliminary to their being or non-being.<sup>22</sup> It is also something that Russell conflated with *Nichtsein*.

Finally, there is *Sosein*. *Sosein* is how objects are, more commonly translated as being-so. *Sosein* is essential (*wesentlich*) to objects and is fundamentally distinct to their being (*Sein*) and their *Außersein*, which are only circumstantial to objects. Again, this is the case because to grasp an object, for Meinong, what we grasp is *how* it is before we grasp that it is or is not i.e., whether it is (exists or subsists) or is of nonbeing.<sup>23</sup> This although highly complex will not be further explained. It was only to point out that this is an aspect of Meinong's theory that is commonly seen to be a subtlety that Russell did not grasp.

All in all objects, for Meinong, *are* in a myriad of ways. This is a general outlook of Meinong's theory of objects circa 1904, the year before the publication of "On Denoting". Although Russell agreed with large parts of the theory and was highly influenced by it at the time, the objects of *Nichtsein*, including all those beyond subsistence and existence that Russell conflated with *Nichtsein*, are what Russell intended to logically disqualify with his new theory of denotation. However, to see how he does so we will have to wait until the end of a rather long detour which discusses Russell's ontology, epistemology, and theory of denotation.

## 2 Russell's ontology

In examining the issues of the variable we will be primarily concerned with how Russell ascribed ontological values to objects as well as how he explains we come to know said objects (both formally and not). This is because both the ontological and epistemic sides of Russell's objects conflict with the ontological value of the variable. We will first explain the ontological. We will then proceed to analyse Russell's epistemology as it relates to his ontology.

Russell's logicism is central to his philosophy. He believed the foundations of the ontological to be logical, and that formal logic would clarify the reality of the ontological. For Russell, any accurate ontology must be provable in formal logic to be sustained. Russell was a realist and a firm believer in Occam's razor in accordance with the laws of classical logic. Because of this he felt able to discard other theories provided his theory gave a simpler accord with the laws of existential quantificational logic. Within classical logic, as many have noted, the ontological assumption is present as far back as in Plato. And it is arguably always present in standard traditional and modern logical theories.<sup>24</sup> Russell is not an exception. The assumption was stated by Russell as a law of logic in *Principles of Mathematics*: "there are no true propositions about objects which neither exist nor subsist"<sup>25</sup> In other words one cannot make true statements about what does not exist. Neither can the referent of a true proposition be a non-entity.<sup>26</sup> This rule was maintained throughout the entirety of Russell's philosophy. Evidently enough, it is not a rule that Meinong held.

It should be noted that the kind of logic in Russell's theory as well as its place therein are fundamentally different to those found in Meinong's. Where Meinong's theory of objects implies non-classical logic and can be seen as the foundational content for a formalisation of it, Russell's theory of denotation is a theory of classical logic that formalises its content.<sup>27</sup>

Around 1905, and in accordance with Meinong, Russell held a distinction between subsistence and existence. At this point things, for Russell, either exist or subsist and exist. Crucially, existence Russell held

<sup>22</sup> Within the years in question he fluctuated between this being an actual kind of being or not. Quasi-being was most typical however.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 8-9.

<sup>24</sup> Routley and Routley "Rehabilitating Meinong's theory of objects", 227; Griffin, "Russell's Critique of Meinong's Theory of Objects", 379; Smith, "The Russell-Meinong Debate", 315.

<sup>25</sup> Russell, *Principles of Mathematics*, 3, 43.

<sup>26</sup> Routley and Routley, "Rehabilitating Meinong's theory of objects".

<sup>27</sup> See footnote 9.

to be synonymous with being.<sup>28</sup> The difference between existence and subsistence being that exclusively existent objects are actual and existing-subsisting objects are additionally ideal. Anything not fitting within these categories simply is not anything. This contrasts with Meinong's greater pluralism about kinds of being.

Russell believed there to be two kinds of objects: particulars and universals. Particulars are defined as, the only objects that occupy a particular point of space-time, and indeed that occupy time at all.<sup>29</sup> Then there are universals of quality and universals of relation. There are no universals that occupy time. Universals of quality do occupy space, though not at a particular space so they are not in time. However, *instances* of universals of quality do occupy a point of space-time when they are qualities that a particular object has, but not when they are objects in themselves. For instance 'redness' is a universal object of quality but we could hardly say it exists at a particular point in space-time. Yet an instance of it as a property of a particular object does exist with that object at a particular point in space-time.

Finally, there are universals of relation which occupy neither space nor time.<sup>30</sup> Examples include difference, identity, etc.<sup>31</sup>

All in all we have particulars, universals of quality, and universals of relation. As Russell states, entities can be got down in this schemata to two kinds: Particulars and universals.<sup>32</sup> All particulars exist whereas universals subsist, unless acting as a property of a particular. Evidently, Russell's ontology is much more reductionist than Meinong's both in kinds of objects and their being.

Although kinds of objects in Russell and Meinong's theories do not translate cleanly into analogous sets, it is useful to compare them. This is largely because Meinong's theory of objects highly influenced Russell and said influence can be seen roughly as follows: Russell, like Meinong, grants objects that exist in space and time. For both these are existing objects. For Meinong they additionally subsist. Russell holds that universals exist in space but not in time. Meinong would say these do not exist in space either and are objects that subsist (*bestehen*). Russell's universal objects that are neither in space nor time subsist, and can be analogized for the most part to Meinong's objects that exclusively subsist (*bestehen*). Both Meinong and Russell at this time make an ontological divide between existing and subsisting objects based on how they relate to space and time, albeit it different ways.<sup>33</sup>

Since, for Russell, logical relations are the fundamental values of objects his theory is purported to logically reduce all objects to these kinds and render unnecessary all other objects with which Meinong granted other kinds of being.<sup>34</sup> To see how he does so, we will have to wait until we get to his theory of denotation.

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<sup>28</sup> In 1903 Russell held that all conceivable terms have logical-being. At this point he maintained a distinction between being and existing. Being, being that which belongs to every conceivable term and existence being that which belongs exclusively to the actual, the existential (*Principles of Mathematics*, 43, 71, 449). Russell abandoned both views by 1905 (see Smith, "The Russell-Meinong Debate", 313). His 1904 letter to Meinong seems to indicate that Meinong's acknowledgement of the non-existent deeply concerned him and influenced this change. Although not directly relevant to the time period of our focus, it should be noted that by 1914 in order to get rid of the profound existential gap between existence and subsistence, Russell claimed that space and time are merely contingent properties of objects that do not determine their ontological value. As such, only existence need be granted and subsistence can be excluded as a different kind of being. By requalifying relations of space and time as contingent properties that do not determine kinds of being Russell gets rid of any distinctions in kind of being.

<sup>29</sup> At times Russell said that particulars could also be simples, which would make a particular also in this case a precept of sense-data. This would render simple particulars entities rather than objects as objects are complex. I do not know whether a simple would work within the theory of denotation.

<sup>30</sup> Within universals of relation are excluded relations of space and time as these are exclusively particulars. See Russell, "On the Relations of Universals and Particulars" for an explanation as to why.

<sup>31</sup> See Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, chapter 9.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Meinong also claims that being and so, space and time, are contingent to the essence (*Wesen*) of objects so this difference is less a logical refutation of Meinong's distinction of being than an alternative view point of what the value of being is.

<sup>34</sup> See Russell "On Fundamentals", "Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description", and "On the Relations of Universals and Particulars".



### 3 Russell's epistemology

Now that we have seen what entities Russell takes to exist, we need to consider how Russell thinks we know about them. Once we have done this, we will discuss the variable in the next section.

Russell believed there to be no fundamental ontological difference in objects and our perceptions of them. It is how we mentally assemble their constituents that changes. Indeed much of this view he adopted from Meinong. As seen, Russell maintained that all objects are either particulars or universals. They are known through two fundamental relations of knowledge: knowledge by acquaintance and knowledge by description.<sup>35</sup> Acquaintance is the immediate and fundamental relation of knowledge between a mind and an object and particulars of acquaintance are the first known objects. That is, particulars of acquaintance are percepts that are immediately perceived by a subject. They are either constituted by one particular (a simple) or a complex of particulars.<sup>36</sup> For instance, one person perceives another person through complexes of sense-data particulars that the latter causes, and so knows those complexes. Yet the latter person as a whole object and mind is not directly known because these things are not percepts directly perceived by the other. They are gotten at indirectly, through description, which we will come to shortly.<sup>37</sup>

Secondly, there are universal objects of acquaintance which are known conceptually, or rather are knowledge of concepts, as Russell termed them. All universal concepts of acquaintance are necessarily abstracted from precepts with which we are directly acquainted. For instance, if one sees that certain particulars of acquaintance differ, one perceives a particular difference and once this has happened enough, one eventually develops the concept of the universal object of acquaintance *difference*. Or, if one sees complex particulars where the colour red is a constituent, one eventually develops the concept which is the universal object of acquaintance *redness*.

Next, there is knowledge by description. This relation allows for knowledge of denoted objects which are also either universals or particulars.<sup>38</sup> In these cases, one is acquainted, not with that which the description describes, but with the concepts of acquaintance of the proposition that describes them.<sup>39</sup> In simpler terms one is acquainted with the universals that are said to be its qualities. For example, if someone tells us that she/he owns a house in Vienna we would know that there is an object in Vienna which has the property of being owned by said person and also has all the properties of a house. We know of all of these properties either through acquaintance or description, and so can have knowledge of the object which they describe because we understand the necessary and sufficient properties for said object to have in order for it to be the object described. Thus we can know the denoted object through description of its properties without being acquainted with it. Additionally, objects of knowledge by description are exclusively known through propositions with denoting-phrases. Examples include: all men, some men, a man, the man.

In summary, Russell argued that all objects are learned through percepts of particulars – which exist – which is to have acquaintance with said particulars. Universals of acquaintance that either subsist or exist are, epistemologically speaking, concepts that were abstracted from precepts and so, can be brought down to abstractions of particulars of acquaintance. Both universals and particulars that either subsist or exist and are not directly perceived or conceived are known by describing the universal objects of acquaintance that are their properties. This brings us to the logical side of this epistemological theory.

<sup>35</sup> Russell, "Knowledge by Acquaintance and Description", 155.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. Russell never seemed to be able to give an example of a simple.

<sup>37</sup> Although by 1910-11 Russell maintained that acquaintance is always acquaintance of sense-data. I am not sure whether Russell held sense-data, and not the constituents of physical objects themselves, to be objects of acquaintance when he formulated his theory of denotation in 1905.

<sup>38</sup> I do not think that simples could be understood through description as description is the use of signs to attribute universals to a denotation, which necessitate a complex, which simples are not. Additionally it is questionable whether they could be designated even as a proper name. See Russell, "On the Nature of Acquaintance. II. Neutral Monism".

<sup>39</sup> Russell, "On the Nature of Acquaintance. II. Neutral Monism", 154.

## 4 The Theory of Denotation

The theory of denotation is the logical structure of objects and as such how they should be accurately referred to, (aside from simples perhaps) according to Russell. In other words it is meant to be both how objects are and how to accurately talk of them. The theory holds that anything that can be said to exist (to be) can be defined i.e., referred to, through predication of a referent quantified over existentially. Nothing else is in any way. Although Russell's essay "On Denoting" is more reputed, we will look primarily at the theory through the more exhaustive logical proof found in "On Fundamentals" – the unpublished manuscript written slightly before "On Denoting" in the same year.

The theory deals with meaning-complexes which express the logical structures of propositions. So to qualify as a meaning-complex, a truth-value must be assignable. *Ipsa facto*, information about something must be given. A particular meaning-complex is true when it corresponds to a real state of affairs. It is helpful to think of assertable content with Russell's meaning-complex. To assert 'the sheep', is nonsense so not a meaning-complex. But one can assert that 'the sheep is white', which is a meaning-complex as a truth-value is assignable to it. If the denoted sheep is in fact white, a positive truth-value is ascribed because the meaning-complex does accurately represent a state of affairs in the world.

A standard meaning-complex is formally written as  $C(x)$ .  $C$  is meaning-position, where a constant meaning-constituent which gives information *about* the denoted objects is placed. This is what is typically called predication. It is always constant. ' $x$ ' is entity-position where the variable is the denotation of entities. The denotation is a variable until actual predication in meaning-position is given at which point the variable is replaceable by a constant. In other words, the denoted object has been described, and so determined.

There is the fundamental complex-type and the fundamental complex-type-instance. The theory takes the complex-type  $C(^x)$  to be fundamental to all subsets of it:  $C(^x)$  is true is "ultimate and undefinable, and all others are defined by means of it." (Russell, "On Denoting", 480). Subsets are determined by predication that restrains the values of the variable, as seen above. An example of an element of a subset of the fundamental-type formula is the meaning-complex-type ' $x$  is red', where 'is red' is constant predication given in meaning-position that restricts values of  $x$  to all and only red objects.

The fundamental type-instance is of concern. It symbolises any *singular* instance of denotation. In other words, any instance of the complex-type where the value of the variable is restrained to one. This is the type-formula of definite denotation represented as  $C('x)$ . Actually, when fully analysed, any constant type-instance is got down to predication and variable, with a few exceptions concerning fully analysed proper nouns. This is written either as an identity statement between two variables with identical predication or between a fully analysed proper noun and a variable with identical predication. Their identity is proven by all and only the predication ascribable to the value of  $x$  being ascribable to the value of  $y$  or the constant. For instance, the definitely denoted object 'the red ball', can be fully analysed as follows: "it is not always false of  $x$  that  $x$  is a ball and  $x$  is red and  $x$  is... and that 'if  $y$  is a ball and  $y$  is red and  $y$  is... then  $y$  is identical to  $x$ ' is always true of  $y$ ." As objects are determined by predication, and their predication is identical, this shows that they determine the same object. Since there is only one value of  $x$  and  $y$ , the determined object is singular.<sup>40</sup> This is the reference theory, a theory of objects that states any and all objects that are purported to *be* – either existent or subsistent objects – can be got down to the range of values of a variable or constant quantified existentially with predication of them fully expressing their qualities. To reiterate, the theory holds that anything that can be said to exist (to be) can be defined i.e., referred to, through predication of a referent quantified over existentially.

Before continuing a few things should be mentioned. The logic shows how Russell's view differs to Meinong's. Where Meinong holds propositions (Objectives) to be whole singular objects that exclusively subsist, Russell holds them to be states of affairs or logically speaking, meaning complexes that have not been properly analysed into constituents. So secondly, a meaning-complex need only be said to actually represent a state of affairs when the relations of properties to object/s expressed in the meaning-complex correspond to an actual state of affairs. Otherwise the representation corresponds to nothing that exists nor subsists and is simply a false meaning-complex.

<sup>40</sup> Russell, "Meinong's Theory of Complexes and Assumptions", 482.

Russell's logical theory at this point is claimed to render Objectives logically unnecessary to hold. This is because no ontological value need be ascribed to the proposition itself as it is not a whole object in itself but is rather the objective assembly of various existent constituents. It needs no special ontological value beyond its being an assembly of existing constituents. And as seen, all these constituents solely exist or subsist.

With Russell's ontology, epistemology, and theory of denotation in place, we can examine Russell's interpretation of the round square of nonbeing. In doing so we will see how Russell attempted to avoid the Meinongian qualities which, we will argue, resurface as reminiscent qualities in the variable. Russell interprets Meinong as having initially granted the round square some kind of being because to state 'the round square does not exist' is, nonetheless, to say that *something* does not exist.<sup>41</sup> This is a problem when the meaning-complex 'the round square exists' is considered fully analysed. Russell states instead that we can logically analyse it further to predication and denotation constituents. Once this is done we can deny that the constituents of the predication standing in such a relation refer to an actual object. So we attribute no values to *x*. In other words, the class of *x* is null. This denial is fully analysed as follows: "it is always false that "x is square and x is round and that 'if y is square and y is round, y is identical to x' is always true of y"". <sup>42</sup> When we deny the relation of properties we no longer deny a whole object so no being need be granted to an object. Objects of *Nichtsein* in Russell's ontology are not logically necessary as they are considered to be denoting-phrases that have not been fully analysed. Once fully analysed the relations of properties that purport to define an object are deemed false. Essentially, any object Meinong granted *Nichtsein* to, Russell says, when properly analysed, is a complex with a null class of referents.

Russell's theory of denotation logically grounds his theory of knowledge of objects and his ontology. It expresses the alleged logical structure of the ontological and so how to properly talk of any and all objects. Existent and subsistent universals in general can be denoted and instances of them can be attributed to a denoted object as its property through predication. Particulars however are exclusively existent objects and so formally they are only denoted in the theory.

Meinong's proposition as a whole singular object is avoided by bringing it down to complexes with constituents. When logically analysed, they are said to be merely denoting-phrases that attribute properties incorrectly to an object. The rest of Meinong's categorisation of being are not addressed by Russell. This is likely because Russell conflated them, as he tended to do, with objects of *Nichtsein*. He maintains in "On Denoting" that with the theory of denotation he had done away with Meinongian objects that exceed his own ontology. As such, we can only assume he thought the rest of the Meinongian objects were considered disqualifiable in a similar fashion, whether they were originally objects of *Nichtsein* or not.

We have come to the end of the admittedly long and perhaps tedious outline of Meinong's theory of objects, Russell's ontology, epistemology, logical grounding for both and his refutation of Meinong's multifarious beings. We can finally address the ontological value of the variable in Russell's epistemology and ontology. As the argument I had promised we would address was detailed so long ago I will recall the conclusion now: the use of the variable as fundamental denoting-position of the type-instance formula in Russell's logical grounding of his ontology and epistemology poses a problem for his attempt to refute Meinong's theory of objects of multifarious being insofar as qualities reminiscent of them resurface within the variable.

## 5 Frege and the strict ontological value of the variable

To recall, the unrestrained variable in a type is fundamental while all constrained variables rely on it. Our concern is the variable in the instance type-formula.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>41</sup> For the logical problem see Russell, "On Denoting".

<sup>42</sup> Russell, "On Denoting", 482.

<sup>43</sup> I have not included Russell's 1906 letter to Jourdain concerning substitution theory where he discusses the variable. This is because the comment is irrelevant to our current inquiry. It states that within the substitution of constants, he failed to distinguish earlier on the variable as that which stands for various objects, and the substitutability of one constant for another

With Frege we will firstly address its ambiguous function in Russell's theory. The variable, when not replaceable by a constant, is sometimes addressed as an ambiguous symbol that denotes an unknown yet determinate object, and sometimes as denoting an indeterminate entity in itself. We bypassed the matter in our discussion of the theory of denotation because the variable seems to typically contain this ambiguity and for the sake of exposition we left it in its original state. Admittedly, this was largely done because I think it improbable, per Russell's use of the variable, to successfully make a clear distinction between the two functions at all times. An attempt to do so leads to confused and unnecessary elaborations in a brief summary of the theory, or at least I was unable to avoid them.

But now the dual function can be addressed. Frege clearly elaborates the problem by referencing one of Russell's few attempts to define it. It should be noted that Frege also addresses the problem taking both classical logic and the ontological assumption to be fundamental. The definition, written in 1908, is as follows: "a variable is a symbol which is to have one of a certain set of values, without its being decided which one. It does not have first one value of a set and then another, it has at all times *some* value of the set, where, so long as we do not replace the variable by a constant, the 'some' remains unspecified."<sup>44</sup> Note that 'some' here means 'any' one value. Frege's 1910 critique succinctly highlights the issue:

Russell's definition immediately raises the question what it means to say that 'a symbol has a value.' Is the relation of a sign to its significatum meant by this? In that case, however, we must insist that the sign be univocal, and the meaning (value) that the sign is to have must be determinate; then the variable would be a sign. But for him who does not subscribe to a formal theory a variable will not be a sign [...]. If now we write 'A variable is represented by a symbol that is to represent one of a certain set of values', [...] but what is the case then? The symbol represents, first, the variable, and second, a value taken from a certain supply without its being determined which. Accordingly, it seems better to leave the word 'symbol' out of the definition. The question as to what the variable is has to be answered independently of the question as to which symbol is to represent the variable".<sup>45</sup>

Frege's quote essentially shows that when Russell tried to define the ontological value of the variable he did so through its use as a symbol that stands for an object in two ways. Firstly as standing for something that is assumed determinate but unknown and secondly for the variable that is itself indeterminate. These results come from the fact that the variable in Russell's symbolic logic functions to denote objects that are assumed determinate yet unknown until predication is attributed to them and as a type-instance that represents all singular indeterminate denotation. When Russell tries to define it he does so both with reference to the symbol denoting the variable itself, and as its use when replaceable by a constant.

Once the ambiguity caused by defining it through its symbolic use is made clear, Frege explains that what needs to be sought is a solely ontological definition of the variable, not a definition of its symbolic use. An attempt to define the variable ontologically then should be made by seeing it as all other ontological entities in Russell's theory of denotation are: as a denoted value.

Frege then explains there remains a problem in what would be a definition of the variable. He does so through paraphrase of Russell's original ontological definition of it: "a variable is one of a certain set of values, without its being decided which one". The problem he highlights is that to be the value of a set is a characteristic of each and every object denoted in Russell's theory.<sup>46</sup> This merely states of the variable that it fits the basic requirement to speak of anything in Russell's theory of denotation. To use one of Russell's common turns of phrase, as a definition this cannot be considered a happy effort. Essentially, we are back to the same problem: we assume the variable has an ontological value without being any nearer to an ontological definition. This is why Frege then states he did not want to abide by a theory that grants the variable fundamental denoting-status.

The problem can be summarised as follows: the variable is the fundamental denoting-position of a formal theory that is meant to explain the structure of the ontological. If such a formal theory is meant

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(see Ivor Grattan-Guinness, "Bertrand Russell on his "Paradox," 107). As this is a logical not ontological issue of the variable it was left out. Also it was in a reference to a theory that he never fully developed and discarded before the time in question.

<sup>44</sup> Footnote by Jourdain, *Frege and Gödel*, 10.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

to ground the ontological, then the formal cannot solely be symbolic but must also represent the actual structure of the ontological. Yet the variable, the fundamental formal denoted object, thus far seems ontologically indefinable in any useful way. This problem seems detrimental for a referential theory of classical logic that assumes that existential quantification of a referent and predication suffice to account for all objects and their qualities. Already and in line with Smiley, we can question why Russell would opt for this theory as opposed to the alternatives to it.

But, as we noted, we additionally hold that qualities reminiscent of Meinong's multifarious beings, which Russell sought to cast as logically unnecessary, were hidden within the variable of his type-instance formula. In order to make this argument clear, it will now have to be explained which qualities we are referring to and what is meant by 'reminiscent'.

The qualities are both the kinds of being resulting from the plentiful classifications and distinctions of objects in Meinong's original theory as well as the qualities Russell attributed to Meinongian being that spans beyond subsistence and existence. In other words, whether reading Meinong's theory as Meinong himself wrote it, or through Russell's interpretation, the variable contains qualities of being reminiscent of Meinong's multifarious beings.

The word 'reminiscent' is here fundamental, as it means specifically that when the variable is explained in the Russellian framework the existential limits of that very framework are surpassed. The variable *implies* a realm of extra-existential being, and as such is reminiscent of it. Extra-existential is meant in the Russellian sense, where 'to exist' is synonymous with 'to be'. This is a realm of being beyond existence and subsistence. In other words, Meinong's realm of being beyond that of existence and subsistence is called to mind when trying to place the ontological value of the variable within Russell's framework.

Aside from the clarification of the words 'qualities' and 'reminiscent' here used, a more explicit definition of the variable cannot be given for two reasons. Firstly, the essential purpose of the paper is to show that the variable is not amenable to explicit description within Russell's framework. To define it in a more precise way would require translating it into another ontological framework, thus losing its status as an object abiding by a Russellian ontology. For instance, if it were attempted to define Russell's variable in a Meinongian framework, although possible, this would be to place it within a logical setup different to its own, within a theory with differing views on what an object is.<sup>47</sup>

Secondly, it is noted that the variable is not explicitly definable because it is both evasive and vague within Russell's possible explanations of it. But it is not the purpose of this paper to discredit these as viable qualities of objects, nor as how to qualify them. In Russell's framework these qualities are indeed intolerable specifically because objects are meant to be all and only those things that are definable through a referential theory that has, on one side, a purported referent quantified over existentially, and, on the other predication as that which defines the referent/s apart from all other objects. Ontologically speaking, everything should be explicable as such or be discarded. If this is not the case for all objects given in Russell's theory, however, then the theory fails to do what it purports to do. As such the lack of explicit definition of the variable poses a problem. A referential theory of the kind, however, is not a philosophical view this paper need hold.<sup>48</sup> As such, a more classical definition of the variable is not necessarily what should be able to be given for the purposes of this paper.

For all of these reasons, I have said that the *qualities* of Russell's variable are *reminiscent* of Meinong's multifarious being, and no more specific definition should be given. Be that as it may, the word 'reminiscent' does not imply a weak version of another thesis that would otherwise directly contain Meinongian objects. Reminiscent qualities are in themselves poignant and closely connect objects across theories.

That the variable cannot be traditionally defined more accurately however, does not mean it cannot be explained in depth. It will still be shown how these qualities lay hidden within the variable and as such, how they reveal Meinong and Russell's ontologies to be closer than is normally thought. We will start with the conflicts arising in the theory of objects of Russell's theory of knowledge of objects. This could be considered

<sup>47</sup> See Smith, "The Russell-Meinong Debate".

<sup>48</sup> See Routley, "Preface and Acknowledgements" in *Meinong's Jungle* for a thorough criticism that such a referential theory could account for all objects and their qualities.

the weak version of the thesis. We will then proceed to those arising in his pure ontology, or the strong version.

## 6 Moore, Russell, and the ontological value of the variable in Russell's theory of knowledge

In line with Frege in 1908, in his "On Fundamentals" of 1905 Russell opted to talk of the variable in the solely ontological sense and to avoid definition of it through its use as a symbol. He decided to speak of it as an indeterminate entity in itself. He explained the variable should not be considered an unknown object that is assumed able to be determined. This would make the variable the fore-thought of a hidden constant, not a variable in itself. The variable itself is *anything*, where anything is necessarily singular and undetermined.<sup>49</sup> This is the ontological definition that need be sought.

But this specification does not allow the variable to escape the problems Frege addressed. Rather the variable as such finds itself in just as messy a position. In 1905 in correspondence, Moore asks Russell whether the variable is meant to be considered an object or something other than object in accordance with his theory of knowledge of objects, to which Russell responds:

I admit that the question you raise about the variable is puzzling, as are all questions about it. The view I usually incline to is that we have immediate acquaintance with the variable, but it is not an entity. Then at other times I think it is an entity, but an indeterminate one [...] I only profess to reduce the problem of denoting to the problem of the variable. This latter is horribly difficult, and there seem equally strong objections to all the views I have been able to think of.<sup>50</sup>

Smiley quips, "could there be a more candid admission that he had as much reason to reject the Theory of Descriptions as he did to reject the alternatives to it?"<sup>51</sup> Essentially the problem Russell notes is that, in accordance with the restraints of the theory of knowledge of objects, the variable would either have to be something of acquaintance that is not an object or an indeterminate object of description. Yet there are problems with both options. Unfortunately, I have been unable to find any more detailed explanations of the reasons for these two options nor the problems Russell had with each. As such, what follows is my understanding of the issues that arise with both attempts to define the variable in Russell's epistemological framework.

Let's first look at the variable if it is considered to be something of acquaintance. If the variable is something of acquaintance, it cannot be an object as an object of acquaintance is necessarily determinate and the variable is necessarily indeterminate. Yet, considering the restrictions Russell put on what things of knowledge are, the variable, as something of acquaintance, cannot be classified as anything other than an object. Firstly because, apart from simples and relations, whether ontological or psychological, Russell states that everything of acquaintance is an object: either a particular object or a universal object.<sup>52</sup> Yet the variable, if we are acquainted with it, it cannot be either.

Already the problem that arises when conceiving of the variable as something of acquaintance that is not an object is that, if there is an explanation of it to be found, it is not within the framework of Russell's theory of knowledge of objects. Be that as it may, it still needs to be present; to *be* in some way. What is more, this being needs to be known to us, yet how this is so remains a mystery. In this way it falls back onto qualities reminiscent of Meinong's system insofar as an epistemological definition of it is not within the grasp of Russell's realist ontology founded on classical logic. Already in order to explain the variable, Meinong's multifarious being comes to mind.

To return to the beginning, if an ambiguous object the variable could not be of acquaintance, unless

<sup>49</sup> Russell, "On Fundamentals", 387, 393-394.

<sup>50</sup> Quoted by Alasdair Urquhart, *Foundations of Logic*, intro xxxv.

<sup>51</sup> Russell, "On Fundamentals", 142.

<sup>52</sup> That being said, Routley's is hardly a novel notion. It should hardly need be mentioned due to its sheer banality that outside mainstream analytic philosophy such a way of defining the ontological has rarely been brought up in modern European philosophy.

it falls back onto paradoxical qualities. That is, of being an indeterminate yet determinate object. To recall 'paradoxical' is how Russell termed Meinong's multifarious being. How such a paradoxical quality connects the two theories, will be elaborated on in the next section. Although this next section refers specifically to Russell's ontology, the same results apply to both cases.

But the situation is not resolved if the variable is considered an object but not of acquaintance. If we aren't acquainted with the variable, it, as logically and so ontologically fundamental to Russell's theory of denotation, poses a problem for Russell's epistemological distinction between acquaintance and description. We can only entertain a proposition in his epistemology if we are acquainted with the denoted object or with the constituents that describe the denoted object.<sup>53</sup> As the variable is a fundamental constituent in the fundamental formula of his canonical notation that grounds this theory, it should be something of acquaintance. But this brings us back to the initial problem: objects of acquaintance are always determinate. Yet, as fundamental to the formula that describes each and every object we can refer to, including those of acquaintance, to claim the variable is not something of acquaintance is a difficult position to reconcile.

At this point one may try to discard Russell's theory of knowledge in order to salvage the claim that Russell's theory of objects avoids Meinongian being. It might be thought that if his theory of denotation founded solely his theory of objects, and not the theory of objects within his theory of knowledge of objects, Russell's ontology might be saved to the detriment of his theory of knowledge of objects. At any rate the problems specifically brought up by Russell himself could be argued to be avoided in this way. This would seem to make the theory salvageable, at least insofar as its refutation of Meinong's multifarious beings is concerned. This is because what directly relates to the refutation of Meinong's multifarious beings is the logical grounding of Russell's ontology. And this, it could be argued does not rely on the theory of knowledge of objects.

## 7 The ontological value of the variable when applied to the theory of denotation

Although this last argument is true, to discard Russell's theory of knowledge of objects does not, however, prevent the variable from having qualities beyond those Russell wanted to maintain. This is because there are fundamental ontological problems of the variable that arise before it is applied to Russell's epistemology. Ontologically the variable is nonetheless paradoxical and its being, due to lack of logical grounding, is not logically reduced to existence and subsistence. Its paradoxical quality will firstly be addressed followed by the issue of the logical grounding.

The ontological variable, logically speak, has to be considered something which is symbolised in entity-position of a meaning complex, as per the logic of the theory of denotation. This is because of the logical use of the variable; it is the fundamental singular *denotation* in a meaning-complex. It follows from its logical placement that ontologically it cannot be anything other than an object, or at least an entity. That is, it cannot be a particular relation as it functions necessarily as *denoted* object in Russell's canonical notation, not predication. There is no sense in speaking of the variable as ontologically similar to what is symbolised in meaning-position as what is in meaning-position is necessarily constant and at least one thing that must be held of the variable is that it is not ontologically analogous to a constant.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Russell, "Knowledge by Acquaintance and Description", 161.

<sup>54</sup> The last thing it may be able to be is a simple of acquaintance. To qualify the variable as a simple does at first glance seem appealing because this would make the variable an atomic entity, a building block of the ontological. This however is an artificial option. The simple in Russell's theory was never able to be defined and was consequently later abandoned by Russell. Yet the variable was not. Assuming moderate consistency throughout Russell's years as a philosopher, it would seem that Russell did not consider the variable to be a simple. However, those particularly fastidious readers might remark that the simple was not yet abandoned by Russell within the time period in question and it is only this specific time period that concerns us. Although true, the problem maintains. Even within the time period in question the simple was not defined in any way Russell found adequate. The simple had analogous problems as the variable in Russell's theory: it cannot be defined consistently nor

As such the variable has to be an object. At the very least, it has to be a denotable entity, whatever that entity may be. As a denotable entity then, information about it should be able to be given within the framework of Russell's theory of denotation. But there is a problem that arises when trying to give predication to the variable as a singular denoted entity. This is essentially a more detailed version of the problem raised by Frege, but specifically within the framework of Russell's theory of denotation.

To recall, for Russell the variable is not sometimes this value and sometimes that. The ontological variable is fundamentally *indeterminate*. And to recall, in the notation, once predication is given, the denoted object is determined. Logically this means that once predication is given the variable as symbol cannot denote a definite singular object without necessarily being replaceable by a constant. That is, it denotes a determinate object. But if the denoted object is the ontological variable itself, and assuming predication can be given for it, then this would mean that an indeterminate object had been determined. Nothing of the variable can be said in Russell's theory of denotation without it losing its fundamental indeterminacy.

This means that an attempt to make the variable work within the theory of denotation leads to a paradoxical quality. This is essentially the same problem as the paradoxical object that emerged when trying to explain the variable as an object of acquaintance: it becomes a fundamentally indeterminate object that must be determined. Such contradictory qualities within a singular object is a principle characteristic of Meinong's theory of objects that Russell explicitly meant to avoid. To recall, Russell termed certain objects of said theory paradoxical because it is said that objects of *Nichtsein* do not exist, but nonetheless are.

In Russell's framework that abides by the law of non-contradiction the variable is paradoxical because it contains two contradictory properties yet both were arrived at by following the reasoning latent in Russell's ontology and logic. If both Russell and Meinong's theory of objects hold paradoxical objects, per Russell's standards, Russell has not managed to remove those Meinongian qualities of being found in objects of *Nichtsein* from his variable.

The above arguments, concerning Russell's ontology and his theory of knowledge of objects reveal qualities reminiscent of Meinong's theory of objects to lie hidden within the variable of the type-instance formula. The epistemological and strictly ontological qualities prove problematic enough for Russell's purported refutation of Meinong's multifarious being. The variable is either paradoxical or entirely inexplicable, which is no better. But all these qualities can be traced to a fundamental ontological-logical problem for the variable.

The problem is the same as the one that allowed us to conclude that Russell's variable is paradoxical, but can now be stated more generally. To put it briefly, when the variable was applied to Russell's theory of denotation, the theory of denotation was seen to *not work*. The variable was not describable within it. The theory that is meant to logically ground the claim that all objects solely exist or subsist, and that this can be logically proven by assuming that all objects are definable through existential quantification and predication alone cannot logically ground the ontological value of the variable.

As such the claim that all being can be reduced to subsistence and existence is not logically necessitated per Russell's standards. And as we have seen, for Russell lack of logical necessity is reason enough to discard an ontological theory. We can at least discard it for the variable. And although only one object, it is the fundamental object of Russell's logical foundation of the ontological. At least that of individual objects.

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satisfactorily by Russell, nor can an example of it be given. An attempt to define the variable as a simple is to push the problem of the definition of the variable onto a definition of the simple, at which point nothing can be said. One last argument might be given. It could be argued that the simple at this time period was most often claimed by Russell to be a precept of sense datum. Although this as an argument validating the simple in Russell's ontology at the time period might be justifiable, this would nonetheless explain simples as immediate existents that form to make complex definite objects. A variable could hardly be considered an immediate precept or a piece of sense-data. So although this may justify simples, it would exclude the variable as a simple and would get us no further with an ontological definition of the variable, which is what we want. Recourse to the psychological relation would also be unhelpful, evidenced by the fact that it was not mentioned as an option neither by Russell, Frege, nor Moore. Granted a psychological relation is something with which we have acquaintance, such as knowledge by acquaintance and description. But the variable cannot be considered psychological. It is fundamental to the logical placement of objects in a complex and the logic of the complex is not, for Russell, different to what it ontologically structures. To say the variable is a psychological existent would be to fall back onto idealism to justify Russell's theory, consequently trivialising the logicism in Russell's theory of denotation.



Without logical grounding, which is necessary per Russell's logicism, Russell's ontology logically remains closely connected to the realm of multifarious being of Meinong's theory of objects. The presumed ontological divide between Russell's reduced ontology and the multifarious being of Meinong's theory of objects, seen as such, falls away.

But crucially, within Russell's ontology, the variable, as has been seen, holds qualities that span beyond those associated with existence and subsistence. This or the variable cannot be qualitatively defined in any sense within the realm of being in Russell's ontology, which amounts to the same. This is because within Russell's ontology, existence and subsistence must abide by the laws of classical logic and specifically, the ontological assumption. The variable in Russell's theory of knowledge of objects and his strict ontology proved itself to either be at odds with the logical grounding of Russell's theory or to create a contradiction within it in any way it is ontologically defined. As such it seems to fit Russell's theory much better to attribute to the variable a kind of being beyond those of existence and subsistence. In so doing it no longer proves problematic for the rest of Russell's ontology. But now, the variable in Russell's theory quite directly recalls the multifarious being of Meinong's theory of objects.

## 8 Conclusion

We have looked at the problems concerning the variable raised by Frege, Russell and Moore. I have attempted to outline the specifics of these problems. The primary problem is that there is no ontological and logical reconciliation of the variable. This was seen in conjunction to qualities of the variable that surpass those of Russell's framework, both ontological and epistemological.

In line with Frege's critique, we looked at the variable both as a symbol and as an entity in itself and concluded it is wholly indefinable. In line with Moore and Russell's correspondence, we looked at the variable as an object of Russell's epistemological theory. Any way conceived, the variable was either paradoxical or wholly inexplicable within the Russellian framework. We then concluded that, regardless of his epistemology, the variable has to be a denotable entity in Russell's framework. We tried to make it work in the theory of denotation. In trying to define the being of the variable we found it to be reminiscent of the paradoxical quality of being Russell attributed to Meinong's theory of objects. Finally, we concluded that, most detrimentally to Russell's theory, the variable as an ontological existent is itself not logically grounded by the theory of denotation.

From this we concluded the following: logically, there is no necessary ground on which to reduce the variable to existence or subsistence. Additionally, the variable reveals itself to either have qualities beyond those attributed to existence and subsistence in Russell's ontology or at very least to not be qualitatively definable through such notions of existence and subsistence. As such, the variable is more aptly defined within Russell's ontology as being beyond existence and subsistence. In that sense the being of Russell's variable has always been close to that of the multifarious being found in Meinong's theory of objects. Both theories contain ontological qualities much more similar than typically thought, insofar as both contain objects (in Russell's case, one fundamental object to his logic) that are neither logically nor qualitatively reducible to an ontological realm exclusively of existence and subsistence.

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