

Commentary

Realism. A Critique of Brentano and Meinong

Gustav Bergmann

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In the Preface to *Realism. A critique of Brentano and Meinong* (Bergmann, 1967), Gustav Bergmann (1906–1987) stated that that was «the sort of book a man writes only once in his life» (p. VII). In fact, *Realism* is a formidable work, which combines different purposes. The first half of the book mainly consists in a presentation of Bergmann’s mature views, as they have developed through the years, from the strictly positivistic beginnings, in the footsteps of Carnap and the Vienna Circle, to the rich ontology of the 60s¹. Bergmann’s aim is that of firmly establishing a realistic view, in two different senses of the word ‘realism’: realism₁, the view according to which universals exist (in opposition to nominalism); and realism₂, the view according to which – roughly speaking – the “world” is independent of minds (in opposition to idealism). It is Bergmann’s considered view that a failure to secure a solidly realistic₁ ontology almost inevitably leads to some form of idealism (Bonino, 2009). The book can also be read as a sustained criticism of three main stumbling blocks on the way to realism₂: nominalism, reism, and representationalism. Nominalism is of course the view according to which there are no universals. Reism can be preliminary characterized as the view according to which all entities are things (in a sense of ‘thing’ that will be specified later). Representationalism is the view that there are intermediaries of some sort between mental entities (subjects, minds, or whatever) and their intentions; such intermediaries (typical examples of which are the *ideas* of the empiricist tradition) inhabit what Bergmann calls the Third (world), whereas the First is the properly mental world and the Second is the physical one (the so-called “external world”).

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¹ For two brief presentations of Bergmann’s philosophy, cf. (Addis, 1971), (Tegtmeier, 1999). For broader examinations of his work, cf. (Hochberg, 2001), (Bonino & Torrenge, 2004), (Bonino, 2009).

Realism₂ can thus be reformulated as the view that the Second is independent of the First. The Third, according to Bergmann, does not exist, and its introduction almost inevitably leads – through more or less tortuous routes – to idealism. One of the main aims of *Realism* is to expose such tortuous routes. And that also accounts for the second half of the book, in which the philosophies of two significant members of the representationalist tradition are analysed and criticized: the philosophies of Brentano and Meinong. Brentano and Meinong are not typical exponents of unreconstructed representationalism. In fact, their views are very sophisticated, and both of them, at least in their intentions, aim at overcoming representationalism in order to attain a realistic₂ position. Yet it is Bergmann's contention that both of them fail, though in different ways and for different reasons. And also the degree of their failure is different. Whereas Brentano ended up for Bergmann in overt idealism, Meinong came very close to success. That is why Bergmann's whole book is dedicated "to the glorious memory of Alexius Meinong".

It must be made clear from the beginning that Bergmann's examination of Meinong's philosophy – as happens with all his analyses of other philosophers – does not belong to what Bergmann calls "factual history", but rather to "structural history", that is something very close to what is usually known as "rational reconstruction". Such a reconstruction is conducted by means of a constant comparison with the "foil", which is a schematized version of Bergmann's own ontological views. That makes the whole undertaking a rather complicated matter, in which one must always "translate" from Bergmann's notions to Meinong's ones and vice versa. This is one of the reasons that makes Bergmann's interpretation of Meinong's philosophy somewhat "violent" (Raspa, 2008, pp. 202–204); another reason is the highly selective character of Bergmann's reading of Meinong, which deliberately focuses mainly on the problems and issues that are interesting *from Bergmann's point of view*. Now, in order to understand at least something of Bergmann's analysis, a brief sketch of the foil is required.

The main ontological categories recognized by Bergmann in *Realism* are the following:

(A) things	(1) particulars
	(2) universals (i) properties
	(ii) relations
(B) facts	
(C) subsistents	(3) nexus
	(4) other kinds of subsistents

Roughly, the subsistents are the referents of the logical constants of the ideal language², with the addition of some other kindred entities. Intuitively, they are responsible for what Wittgenstein would have called the “form” or the “structure” of the world. By contrast, things correspond to its “content” (they are the referents of the descriptive constants of the ideal language). The category of things is further divided into two subcategories, that of particulars (referred to by individual constants), and that of universals (referred to by predicates). Particulars are to be understood as *mere* particulars, i.e., as devoid of any *nature*. All things are simple entities. Unlike things, facts are complex entities. Their complexity consists in their having constituents, which are “in” facts; such constituents are particulars and universals. Yet also subsistents are involved in facts. With reference to facts, the most significant subsistent is the nexus of exemplification, which ties together the particular(s) and the universal that make up the fact. Nexus are in fact those subsistents that “connect” other entities into more complex ones. Exemplification does not need a further nexus to tie it to what it ties, otherwise an endless regress would arise, as Bradley has showed. Here lies an important difference between things and subsistents, a difference which has to do with the “dependence” or “independence” of these entities. There is a sense in which facts may be regarded as independent, whereas things must be regarded as dependent. Such a dependence of things is spelled out by the *principle of exemplification*, according to which no universal that is not exemplified by at least one particular exists, as well as no particular that does not exemplify at least one universal exists. Bergmann claims that in this sense both particulars and universals are dependent₂, whereas facts are independent₂. But while they are dependent₂, there is also a sense in which things are independent. A particular, for instance, must indeed exemplify a universal, but it must not exemplify a

² It is here impossible to explain Bergmann’s “ideal language method”. For a thorough presentation cf. (Bonino, 2009), chap. II.

certain specific one: the mere presence of a particular and the universal *red* does not make up the fact that that particular is red. In order for some things to make up a fact, a connection is required, and such a connection is provided for Bergmann by a subsistent, i.e. the nexus of exemplification. This nexus, being a subsistent, does not need another connection in order to be connected to the other constituents of the fact, otherwise it would not be a subsistent but rather a thing, and an endless regress would arise. In this sense things may be said to be independent₁, whereas subsistents are dependent₁. It must also be noticed that ordinary objects, such as chairs, are not to be conceived of as things in the foil, but rather as facts, or as conjunctions of facts. To take a simpler example, a red round spot might presumably be analysed as a particular exemplifying two universals, i.e., redness and roundness, and therefore as a fact or a conjunction of facts.

Coming to Meinong, Bergmann's general assessment of his philosophy with respect to the three errors of nominalism, reism and representationalism is worth quoting at length:

Meinong's *nominalism*, though as refined as it could possibly be, is extreme. In one of the struggles he thus remained in the rear. His *reism*, curiously and characteristically mitigated as it is, stretched to the utmost, as it were, does yet not stretch far enough. He remained a reist of a very special kind. That kept him out of the front ranks of another struggle. In the third, however, against *representationalism*, he led, and, had he also been in the forefront of the other two, might have conquered, might have arrived at an ontology not only realistic₂ and no longer representationalist but also adequate in all other respects. The one at which he did arrive is not. Yet, at the price of much bizarreness, he came agonizingly close. That makes him the most memorable Don Quixote of a great cause (Bergmann, 1967, p. 340).

Bergmann's detailed and painstaking analyses of Meinong's philosophy do not lend themselves to easy summarizing. What perhaps can be usefully done here is giving a sort of reasoned explanation of these curt pronouncements, with some more in-depth probings concerning few selected questions.

Let us start with representationalism, whose virtual overcoming is according to Bergmann the major reason for Meinong's glory³. Though originally belonging to the representationalist tradition, his craving for realism₂ led Meinong, in his mature philosophy, to free himself almost

³ On Meinong and representationalism according to Bergmann cf. (Egidi, 2005).

completely of the shackles of representationalism. His ontology does not contain a Third: there are no intermediaries between the mental acts (which are in the First) and their intentions (which are in the Second). Mental acts, or better, their *cores*, i.e., their contents (which are simple entities) are directly connected with their intentions. That is exactly the same analysis proposed by Bergmann, who therefore cannot but recognize that – structurally at least – Meinong has genuinely attained a realistic₂ position. Yet such an attainment is marred by several troubles.⁴

These troubles are mainly due to Meinong's nominalism and reism. As to the former, Bergmann claims that Meinong remained a strict nominalist throughout the whole of his career. That means that he did not admit either universals or bare particulars; both are replaced by what Bergmann calls *perfect particulars* (in more usual terminology, *tropes*), i.e., particularized properties and relations. Bergmann held that nominalism is in itself inadequate, but that is just an extrinsic criticism. What is worse is that nominalism fosters reism. For a realist₁ like Bergmann an ordinary object is to be analysed as a fact, i.e., the exemplification of universals by particulars. For a nominalist it is rather analysed as a bundle of perfect particulars. Let us take a red round spot. According to Bergmann's view, it must be assayed as ' $v_1(a, A_1, A_2)$ ', where ' a ' stands for the particular that individuates the spot, ' A_1 ' for the universal *red*, ' A_2 ' for the universal *round*, ' v_1 ' for the nexus of exemplification. The nominalist scheme for the same spot is ' $v_2(a_1, a_2)$ ', where ' a_1 ' stands for the perfect particular grounding the redness of the spot, ' a_2 ' for the perfect particular grounding its roundness, and ' v_2 ' for a nexus different from v_1 in that it connects entities belonging to the same ontological category. Now let us put ourselves in the situation of someone who has not yet decided about the ontological category to which the entities referred to by ' $v_1(a, A_1, A_2)$ ' and ' $v_2(a_1, a_2)$ ' belong. The advocate of the first assay acknowledges – up to this moment – subsistents, bare particulars and universals; the advocate of the second assay acknowledges subsistents and perfect particulars. Neither of them is likely to regard the new entity as a subsistent. The former can

⁴ In Bergmann's view, Meinong's overcoming of representationalism should be considered all the more praiseworthy when taking into account his strict nominalism. Representationalism, indeed, arose – among other things – also as a means to solve some of the problems posed by nominalism; more specifically, to find some substitutes for universals: ideas, according to Bergmann, are nothing but “universals in exile from reality” (Bergmann, 1967, p. 135). On the other hand, Meinong's nominalism and reism are the sources of what Bergmann regards as the radical inadequacies of his philosophy.

contemplate the possibility of considering the new entity either as a bare particular or as a universal, but both alternatives seem unattractive. In fact the new entity neither seems to be “bare”, nor can plausibly be regarded as a universal which has a particular “within” itself. Thus he is almost forced to recognize a new category, i.e., that of facts. By contrast, the nominalist may easily be tempted to regard the new entity as belonging to the same category of the perfect particulars; in that case the only difference between a_1 and a_2 on the one hand and the new entity on the other would be that the former are “simple”, the latter “complex”. In this case the distinction between things and facts collapses. Yet, in a sense, in the philosophical tradition the entities envisaged in such a world have usually been considered more nearly like things than like facts. But now a new temptation arises to simplify the schema further, by dropping also the nexus (subsistents), which – by the way – fully make sense only in a world in which there are both things and facts. Now we are in a position to characterize reism more exactly, as that view according to which: (i) there are no facts; (ii) all entities are things, either simple or “complex”⁵; (iii) subsistents are ignored or at least downplayed.

And this is, according to Bergmann, Meinong’s view. Now, charging Meinong with reism may seem quite odd, if one considers that one of the reasons for which Meinong is famous is his acknowledgment of *Objektive*, and that *Objektive*, in so far as they can subsist or not subsist, seem to side with the sort of entities that are usually called ‘facts’, or ‘states of affairs’, which have such a “twofold” nature, rather than with things. One can just think of Wittgenstein’s distinction, in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, between objects on the one hand and facts and states of affairs on the other⁶; a distinction that is reflected, on a linguistic level, by the difference between names (which are like points) and sentences (which are like arrows, i.e., twofold, or bipolar). Yet Bergmann tries to prove that *Objektive* cannot be regarded as genuinely complex in the sense in which his own facts are complex. But *Objektive* are not the only kind of entities which, in Meinong’s ontology, may be somehow made to correspond to Bergmann’s facts: in addition to them there are also *Komplexe*. In fact Meinong explicitly identifies ordinary objects not with *Objektive*, but rather with *Komplexe*. Therefore, if he wants to show

⁵ The double quotation marks indicate that, from Bergmann’s point of view, this is not genuine complexity, which can only be attributed to facts, but just an illusion thereof.

⁶ We can here disregard the further difference between facts (*Tatsachen*) and states of affairs (*Sachverhalte*). It will be disregarded in what follows as well.

that in Meinong's ontology there are no entities that are complex in the sense in which his facts are, Bergmann must address the case of *Komplexe* as well.

Thus Bergmann offers a "proof" that Meinong's *Objektive* are really things (not facts). In order to do so, he must independently prove that they are (i) particular (so that they cannot be categorized as universals), (ii) independent₁ (so that they cannot be categorized as subsistents), and (iii) simple (so that they cannot be categorized as facts). The proof, which concerns not only *Objektive*, but also another kind of Meinong's *Gegenstände höherer Ordnung*, i.e., *Relationen*, is long and tangled, and cannot be examined here in any detail⁷.

What is most relevant is Bergmann's interpretation – which is a result of his proof – of the way in which *Relationen* and *Objektive*, as *Gegenstände höherer Ordnung*, are related to their foundations. According to Bergmann, *Relationen* and *Objektive* must not be thought of as complexes made up of their foundations (in the way in which in the foil facts are made up of their constituents); rather, they should be conceived of as the values of functions, of which the foundations are the arguments. Contrary to what happens with a fact and its constituents, the value of a function is not a complex entity *made up of* its arguments (i.e., it is not really a fact); rather it is a (simple) thing *coordinated* with them. In other words, Meinong's ontology – at least with respect to objects of higher order – is not a *complex ontology*, like Bergmann's, but a *function ontology*, though Meinong himself does not seem to be aware of that.

As to *Komplexe*, Bergmann does away with them by stating that they are literally nothing. According to his reconstruction, a *Komplex* is simply the collection of the things which in the foil would play the roles of the constituents of a fact; but – as Bradley showed – a collection of constituents is not a fact, since it lacks the required unity. Meinong is awake to the problem, and to face it he introduces a further constituent, under the guise of a *reale Relation*, which is supposed to provide such a unity; but since he does not recognize the category of subsistents (nexus), the further constituent is just another thing, which, in order to be connected with the other constituents would need another connection. Therefore we are left once again with a mere collection, which is nothing in addition to its constituents (and *a fortiori* it is not a genuine fact).

⁷ See (Bonino, 2006) for a more accurate examination.

Therefore, if one accepts Bergmann's interpretation, neither *Objektive* nor *Komplexe* can be regarded as facts; the latter are just a delusion, the former are really things. It is thus clear in what sense Bergmann can accuse Meinong of reism. But it is also clear that Meinong's reism is extraordinarily sophisticated or, as Bergmann says, «stretched to the utmost». In fact Meinong recognized the need for connections (*Relationen*) and for complexes (*Objektive*), even if he did not know how to satisfy this need in an effective way. The same can be seen in connection with the notion of *Komplex*: even if the gambit based on the addition of a constituent cannot work, at least Meinong clearly acknowledged the need to secure unity to the collection.

From an exegetical point of view, many objections could be raised against Bergmann's interpretation. Concerning *Objektive*, the first remark to be made is that Bergmann's "proof" that they are (simple) things is not really a proof, but just – as Bergmann says – a "structural" one, i.e., the gathering together of different evidences that collectively should convince the reader that the interpretation put forth is the most natural one. Another criticism is based on Bergmann's propensity to conceive of *Objektive* only on the basis of Meinong (1899), thus putting them on a par with *Relationen*, although different views are put forward in Meinong's works (Cf. Raspa, 2008; Sierszulaska, 2005). As to the accuracy of Bergmann's analysis of the notion of *Komplex*, even more objections can be raised⁸. Some doubts are also legitimate with reference to Meinong's alleged nominalism. (Raspa, 2008), for instance, points out that in later works, ignored by Bergmann, Meinong seems to establish a clear and unequivocal notion of universal.

Leaving the question of exegetical accuracy on one side, it seems to me that Bergmann's assessment of Meinong's purported reism (which is probably the most original feature of his interpretation) calls to our attention at least two interesting points, one concerning Meinong, one concerning Bergmann himself. As to the former, Bergmann warns us against too easy an identification of *Objektive* with facts or states of affairs. We have already remarked that, with reference to the distinction between objects on the one hand, and facts and states of affairs on the other, a distinction whose *locus classicus* is Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, Meinong's *Objektive* seem to side with facts. Yet it is exactly by reference to the distinction of the *Tractatus* that one can appreciate how the notion of fact or state of affairs, meant as a complex entity, which – just

⁸ (Raspa, 2008, pp. 223-225). On the notion of *Komplex* cf. also (Tegtmeier, 2000).

in so far as it is complex – can subsist or not subsist, takes on its full meaning in opposition to objects; the latter, being simple, do not possess such twofold nature. But in Meinong the twofold nature is not limited to *Objektive*; it applies to *Objekte* as well, which can exist and not exist, and that should raise some suspicions as to the genuine correspondence between *Objektive* and facts.

The point concerning Bergmann is suggested by the pair of notions *Objektiv-Komplex*, at least as interpreted by Bergmann himself. In fact the pair seems to point to a tension in Bergmann's own ontology. It is part and parcel of the conception of complex ontology that complexes (facts) be different from the collection of their constituents (as Bradley insisted); that result would no doubts be attained in a function ontology, in which the value of a function is certainly different from its arguments; and this seems to be the aspect of complexes that is made manifest by *Objektive*. But on the other hand, complexes must also be *made up of* their constituents (they are not just another thing), or – as Bergmann also says – the constituents are “in” the complexes. Of course this aspect of complexes is not taken care of by *Objektive* (that is indeed Bergmann's criticism of that notion), but rather by *Komplexe*; or better, that is the aspect of which *Komplexe* should take care, if they did not fail because of the lack of nexus in Meinong's ontology. It is as if Bergmann wanted to identify *Objektive* and *Komplexe* as the two poles of his own notion of complexes (facts). It is doubtful whether the different demands of the two poles can be accommodated by a single notion (it is, of course, the old problem of the unity of complexes): it is not difficult to find traces of a certain uneasiness about the whole question in Bergmann's writings, and probably it is not by chance that few years after *Realism* Bergmann developed a new ontology, which addresses these problems in a completely different way (Bergmann, 1992).

On the whole, it is somewhat strange that Bergmann's interpretation of Meinong's philosophy did not produce a great impact on Meinongian studies, although it took part in the general rediscovery of Meinong during the 60s of the 20th century. There are some trivial reasons for that, first of all the proverbial difficulty of Bergmann's works – to which his analysis of Meinong makes no exception –, mainly due to a highly idiosyncratic terminology. But there are certainly deeper reasons as well. (Raspa, 2008) suggests that Bergmann's interpretation failed to get in touch with the main motivations underlying the increasing interest for Meinong's philosophy, and thus ended

up being excluded from the mainstream. In particular, Bergmann is hostile to Meinong's notion of *Daseinsfreiheit*, which is central to the contemporary debate on Meinongian issues. But all that can be accounted for by the consideration already made that Bergmann was not really interested in Meinong's philosophy *per se*, and in its themes and concerns. Rather, he sought in Meinong the opportunity to raise his own philosophical agenda, which was and still is, alas, distant from the mainstream.

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