

# Three letters to Meinong

## a translation

In the years 1899 to 1907 Russell reviewed in *Mind* six articles and books by the Austrian psychologist and philosopher Alexius Meinong, Professor at Graz University. Some of the reviews (including the lengthy 1904 article "Meinong's Theory of Complexes and Assumptions") are re-printed in my collection of Russell's papers called *Essays in Analysis* (Allen & Unwin, 1973). Russell's comments on Meinong through these years reflect his own philosophical development, which to a certain extent was influenced by his critique of Meinong.

Russell's three letters to Meinong are in response to articles that Meinong sent him (Meinong's covering letters themselves are not of philosophical interest). The letters were written in German, and the originals are in the Meinong papers in the library of Graz University; photocopies are available in the Russell Archives. The letters were first published in 1965 in *Philosophenbriefe aus der wissenschaftliche Korrespondenz von Alexius Meinong*, edited by Rudolf Kindinger (Graz: Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt). The printed text, the Russell Archivist assures me, is, except for two grammatical corrections, faithful to what Russell wrote, though the punctuation has been made more Germanic.

The revolution in Russell's views effected by his discovery of the theory of descriptions in Spring, 1905, is vividly illustrated in the letters, whose first English translation follows. I am indebted to Professor James Lawson of the McMaster University Department of German and to Dr. Michael Radner for correcting my translation.

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Douglas Lackey

*Letter I*

Ivy Lodge, Tilford, Farnham.

15 . XII . 1904.

My dear sir,

Many thanks for your friendly letter, and for the treatise "On the Theory of Objects". I have read this treatise, as well as Parts 2-7 of Dr. Ameseder's<sup>1</sup>, with the greatest interest. I find myself in complete sympathy with its general standpoint, and the problems which it treats are such as seem to me important. I am accustomed to using the word "logic" for what you call "the theory of objects"; and the reasons which you present against this use, on pp. 20 ff., seem to me hardly decisive. But this is unimportant, and I concede that a new standpoint should be given a new name.

I have always believed until now that every object must in some sense have *being*,<sup>2</sup> and I find it difficult to admit unreal objects. In such a case as that of the golden mountain or the round square one must distinguish between *sense* and *reference* (to use Frege's terms): the sense is an object, and has being; the reference, however, is not an object. The difference between sense and reference is best illustrated by mathematical examples: "the square root of 4" is a complex sense, the reference of which is the number 2.<sup>3</sup>

The opinion that mathematics is a theory of objects I agree with completely; it is one of the principal theses of my *Principles [of Mathematics]*. If you don't have this book, I'll be glad to send it to your address. Its entire first part is explicitly concerned with questions relating to the theory of objects. Of course there are many discussions whose purpose is purely formal, i.e. they serve only to lead up to the technical mathematical treatment; but the non-technical questions are the most important that are dealt with in it.

In connection with what you say on p. 40 about metaphysics, although I am inclined towards your general view, I feel a certain difficulty: concerning *everything* that exists, empiricism cannot instruct us; consequently, if there is metaphysics, it must be *a priori*.

I hope that your philosophical views will be rapidly circulated, and it will be a pleasure for me to contribute to this as much as possible.

Yours respectfully,  
Bertrand Russell.

Letter II

Bagley Wood, Oxford.  
5 . XI . 1906.

My dear sir,

Many thanks for your friendly letter, and for your interesting article "On the Place of the Theory of Objects in the System of Sciences".<sup>4</sup> I too am of the opinion that the differences between us are unimportant. In general I find myself sharing the same standpoint as you do. I agree especially when you assert that mathematics is an "existence-free science" and belongs properly to the theory of objects.

With regard to impossible objects, I am in no way deterred by the consequence that, according to my view, the golden mountain should be put into the same class as the round square. Accordingly I have in my article "On Denoting" used the King of France as an example. As you know, there is for me no fundamental concept of necessity: consequently I cannot distinguish between impossible and non-existent objects. Moreover, I cannot see how one can distinguish between 'to exist' and 'to be existent'.<sup>5</sup> That sentences, true [as well as] false, can be formed in which impossible objects appear as grammatical subjects, of course I do not deny; but I

believe that these sentences must be interpreted in the manner I have indicated in my article "On Denoting".

What you say about Frege on p. 51 pleases me greatly. Because of his extraordinary difficulty he is very little read, but he is, in my opinion, worthy of the highest recognition.

Yours most respectfully,  
Bertrand Russell.

Letter III

Bagley Wood, Oxford.  
5 . II . 1907.

My dear sir,

Many thanks for sending your second article "On the Place of the Theory of Objects in the System of Sciences", which I find very interesting. I have read carefully what you have written about the concept of necessity, and I believe that the difference of opinion between us is not so great as it first seemed. I fully acknowledge an *epistemic* distinction between *a priori* and empirical knowledge; but it seems to me that the related distinction of the appropriate Objectives<sup>6</sup> consists fully in this, that *a priori* knowledge is always existence-free, while empirical knowledge is always existential. The word *necessary* is ambiguous in ordinary speech, and only a rather long discussion could elucidate all the possible senses of this word.

With what you write concerning non-Euclidean Geometry I am unfortunately not in sympathy. My own opinions I have often defended in the *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* against Poincaré;<sup>7</sup> also in *Principles of Mathematics*, Part VI, and briefly in *Mind*, July 1905, pp. 414-5. Non-Euclidean Geometry does not assert that two parallels can intersect; it questions whether there are parallels. I am also of the opinion that Geometry is an existence-free science, insofar as Geometry is pure mathematics. As pure mathematics all geometries are equally true; they merely assert what follows from certain premisses - they are all equally hypothetical. But there is also *one* space that exists, or at least so pertains to existence, that can be called the space of the real physical world. Whether this space is an example of Euclidean or non-Euclidean Geometry can, in my opinion, only be decided empirically. That two parallels cannot intersect is indubitable; but it has to be asked whether the real world admits of parallels or not.<sup>8</sup>

In order to be able to assert the possibility of empirical knowledge of spatial relations, it must of course be admitted that real relations can be given empirically. Then it must be asked: Are the perceived spatial relations (or those derived from perception) Euclidean or non-Euclidean? Mathematics shows that any class that through relations generates a Euclidean space, at the same time, through other subsisting

relations, also generates all non-Euclidean spaces. Out of all these systems of relations there is, however, in the actual world, only one system of which it can in a certain sense be said that the relations of which it consists *exist*.<sup>9</sup> In your discussion I find nothing, so far as I can see, which refutes this view.

By and large I concur with your writings, and so it is useful to discuss details. With friendly wishes I remain,

Yours sincerely  
Bertrand Russell.

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<sup>1</sup>The essay "On the Theory of Objects" ("Über Gegenstandstheorie") is the first chapter of *Untersuchungen zur Gegenstandstheorie und Psychologie* (Leipzig, 1904), which contains essays by Meinong and his associates. Apparently Meinong enclosed a copy of R. Ameseder's chapter, "Beiträge zur Grundlegung der Gegenstandstheorie" as well as his own essay.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. *Principles of Mathematics*, Sec. 47.

<sup>3</sup>This is the closest Russell comes in all of his writings to adopting Frege's theory of sense and reference. For further comment on Frege see Appendix B of the *Principles of Mathematics* and the criticisms in "On Denoting".

<sup>4</sup>Meinong's enclosure was apparently the first part of what became *Über die Stellung der Gegenstandstheorie im System der Wissenschaften* (Leipzig, 1907).

<sup>5</sup>Translating "existieren" as "to exist" and "existierend sein" as "to be existent". Meinong had argued that 'the existent round square' is *existent*, but does not *exist*.

<sup>6</sup>"Objective" is a Meinongian term best translated as "state of affairs". Russell in his writings translates it as "proposition".

<sup>7</sup>See "Les axiomes propres à Euclide, sont-ils empiriques?" in *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 6: Nov. 1898, 759-76. In *Mind*: whilst reviewing Poincaré's *Science et Hypothèse*.

<sup>8</sup>Meinong's argument was: In non-Euclidean Geometry parallels intersect; in the real world this is impossible, so the real world necessarily has Euclidean space. As Russell points out, in *no* geometry do parallels intersect.

<sup>9</sup>Russell discusses this topic at greater length in "Non-Euclidean Geometry" in *The Athenaeum*, no. 4018: 29 Oct. 1904, 592-3 (esp. 593, col.2).