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15 Assumptions

ROBERTO POLI

Introduction

In the theory of assumptions Meinong's addresses the problem of signs and their characteristics.

Meinong developed his theory of assumptions within a broader theoretical context which comprised his theory of mental acts, the 'map' of which can be plotted as follows. The main distinction among mental acts is that between intellectual and emotional experiences. Intellectual experiences are then distinguished between presentations and thoughts. Presentations in their turn divide between perceptive and reproductive presentations, and thoughts between judgements and associations. Assumptions are therefore intellectual experiences belonging to the class of thoughts. The first step in understanding assumptions, therefore, is to distinguish them from judgements.

In this regard, Meinong states that assumptions are judgements without conviction. We may therefore say that thoughts can be distinguished into judgements characterized by the presence of an element of conviction (judgements in the strict sense) and judgements characterized by its absence (assumptions).

For Meinong, judgements are dependent acts which arise on the basis of (or require the presence of) acts of another kind, namely presentations: 'Presentation has long been recognized as the prerequisite of anything that occurs in the realm of thought' (Meinong (1983), p. 9, slightly modified transl.).

Judgements in the strict sense differ from presentations in two fundamental ways: (a) 'A person who judges believes something, or is convinced in something;' (b) 'Furthermore, every judgement... occupies a definite position within the antithesis of yes and no, of affirmation and negation' (Meinong (1983), p. 10).

Meinong emphasizes that

In everything that is entitled to be called a judgement, I find, ... without exception, the two factors mentioned above, the element of conviction and the position within the antithesis of yes and no... For a long time, though, I regarded the two of them as

being simply one; or at least, I regarded the second as a sort of determination of the first (Meinong (1983), pp. 10-11).

Assumptions differ from judgements in that they lack the element of conviction typical of judgements in the strict sense. Consequently, assumptions occupy an 'intermediate,' so to speak, position between the level of representations and that of judgements proper:

In what follows, the word 'assumption' will be used as a technical term for all those experiences which... belong to the previously mentioned intermediate domain, the domain between representation and judgement (Meinong (1983), p. 12).

In other words, an assumption is a contemplative experience in which we address out attention to objects and observe them, but without having any serious conviction concerning them (Findlay (1933), p. 107).

Objecta and Objectives

For Meinong, the object of a presentation is always an objectum, where the object of a judgement is always an objective: 'Then it is unmistakably apparent in the nature of assuming that it, too, has the objective as object' (Meinong (1983), p. 98). He continues, 'this same fact can then be expressed from the standpoint of the objective: Objectives can be apprehended not only by means of judgements, but also by means of assumptions' (Meinong (1983), p. 98). Moreover, 'like judgements, assumptions are affirmative or negative according to whether they apprehend positive or negative objectives.' Meinong himself summarizes his position with the following words:

I can summarize my present knowledge of this matter in the following proposition. Objectives can doubtless be apprehended by means of assumptions, too, as well as by means of judgements; but not also by means of presentations, and for the apprehension of objectives there are no further means available to us (Meinong (1983), p. 106, slightly modified transl.).

The Semiotic Context

Meinong's theory of assumptions elaborates a semiotic of signs which displays important similarities with the semiotic theories developed by some of his contemporaries. As Dölling (1998) has pointed out, in the two

years prior to publication of *Über Annahmen*, at least three other works came out—written independently of Meinong and which he could not have known about—that bear interesting resemblances to his theory. I refer to the first of Husserl's logical investigations (1900), entitled 'Ausdruck und Bedeutung,' and to Gättschenberger (1901) and Martinak (1901). Besides these more general connections, Meinong's specific arguments regarding the difference between assumptions and judgements had already been compared, by Russell (1904), to Frege's similar proposals. Finally, Rollinger (1996) has recently documented the relationships between the analyses set out in *Über Annahmen* and the fifth of Husserl's *Logische Untersuchungen*.

Meinong identifies numerous types of assumptions, some of which are grouped here under the section headings 'Assumptions in language,' 'Assumptions and inferences,' 'Assumptions in lies, play and art,' and 'Non-intuitive apprehensions.' Before analysing these various forms of assumption, I must specify an aspect of great importance for Meinong's theory as a whole: the problem of negative presentations.

Against Negative Presentations

Like judgements, assumptions may be negative. For Meinong, however, all *negativa* are higher-order objects constructed on the basis of *infima* which are not negative (for further details see Poli, in this book). Consequently a negative assumption, too, requires a positive apprehension as its ultimate foundation. If this assertion is questioned, the entire edifice constructed by Meinong must be radically revised. And in this regard, Rollinger notes, 'Meinong painstakingly argues against the possibility of negative presentations' (Rollinger (1996), p. 91).

In short, (1) negative judgements require positive assumptions; (2) negative assumptions require positive assumptions or presentations (Meinong (1983), p. 169).

Assumptions in Language

Language is possibly the field in which assumptions are most important. Language forms the framework within which different types of *Annahmen* can be studied (Dölling (1998), p. 206). 'It is the expression and understanding of sentences which, according to Meinong, cannot be accounted for unless we adopt the theory of assumptions' (Rollinger (1996), p. 93).

The first step, obviously, is to verify the presence of some sort of connection between sign and meaning. In this regard, the main form of dependence is existential dependence:

If I can infer, from the occurrence of *A*, that of *B*, then *A* is a sign of *B*, and *B*—more strictly speaking, the being, primarily the existence of *B*—is the meaning of the sign (Meinong (1983), p. 21).

The particular semiotic interpretation employed by Meinong, however, induces him to try to specify the characteristics of the correlation between sign and meaning:

it is not sufficient only to state that sign and meaning are correlated. Rather... it should be allowed for that, between the two, there holds the relationship of *basis* and *result* of cognition (see Meinong (1983), p. 22, emphasis added).

Probably the most elementary case is the one that arises in formal languages when one starts from the statements like 'Let there be a right triangle, one of whose sides is half the length of the other' (Meinong (1983), p. 81). In these cases, the first concern is to understand what derives from the *assumption* of an object constituted in this particular way.

I draw a further critical observation from Rollinger (1996). Meinong acknowledges that an objective may be an element in another objective, so that there may consequently be compound objectives. Nevertheless he does not recognize the importance of the procedures of nominalization, and in particular overlooks the fact that the object of an objective may be another nominalized objective (see Rollinger (1996), pp. 97-8).

Assumptions and inferences

The connection between assumptions and inferences was pointed out by Russell in his critical notice of *Über Annahmen*, which, as mentioned, suggested a possible connection between Meinong's theory and Frege's.

The point can be summed up by noting that an inference can be formally valid without accepting the validity of the premises or the conclusion. To assert the inference is one thing, to assert its premises or conclusions is something different. In substance, this is the difference between rules of implication and derivation.

Assumptions in lies, play and art

Chapter Four of *Über Annahmen* is devoted in its entirety to analysis of fundamental types of *Annahmen*, those involved 'in certain kinds of *communicative* behaviour such as a lie, play or art' (Dölling (1998), p. 200, emphasis added). The essential feature of these communicative situations is that neither the person who expresses a mental state nor those that understand it need necessarily believe in that mental state. Only in this way is it possible to account for phenomena like play, lying and theatrical performance.

Meinong distinguishes the assumptions utilized in communicative behaviour between assumptions held by the active subject and assumptions that are 'evoked by suggestions' in the other subjects involved in the communicative context (Meinong (1983), p. 94).

From the point of view of the communicating subject, let us consider assumptions in play, in lying, and in art in general.

As to play, Meinong writes that:

play presents us with experiences that are at all events quite similar to those by which we were first able to persuade ourselves of the existence of assumptions (Meinong (1983), p. 84).

For convenience, I distinguish play from recitation. Without going into details, the basic mechanisms of childish play are universally known. They concern the invention of roles and fantastic situations which are taken very seriously. The essential point, however, is 'the sureness with which children even at an early age know how to distinguish between play and earnest' (Meinong (1983), p. 83). In other words, 'The intellectual attitude of the child at play is less than judgement, but it is more than representation; which is to say, it is an attitude of assuming' (Meinong (1983), p. 84).

Whereupon Meinong adds

With this, we move quite naturally from the play activities of children to various play activities of more or less adult people and to playlike activities that are of an altogether 'serious' nature, insofar as they are intended as training for a 'time of emergency,' a training which allows one to 'feign' this emergency. From the war-games of military school and the practice drills of town fire departments on Sunday to the great maneuvers of whole armies, there is a series of more or less complicated and systematically devised happenings which, though they cannot be reckoned as play activities, are like the latter in that each of them is based on a more or less complicated system of assumptions (Meinong (1983), pp. 84-85).

Before discussing assumptions in art, I shall briefly consider assumptions in situations of deceit. The main feature of a liar's behaviour is obviously 'the attempt to deceive.' Meinong notes that:

A person who wants to deceive has, at any event, a different opinion that the one he pretends to have, and he consequently does not himself make the judgement that he wants to bring about in the other person.
All that one is really justified in asserting is that the liar says something other than what he believes (Meinong (1983), p. 87).

In this case, too, we find confirmation of the primary characteristic of assumptions, namely that they are non-believed assertions.

The case of art is equally clear. I shall begin with artistic play and then briefly consider other forms of artistic activity. Meinong explicitly declares that an actor's playing obviously has to do with assumptions: 'in the actor's playing, the effective presence of assuming stands forth in an altogether unmistakable way' (Meinong (1983), p. 85). That this is effectively the situation becomes evident if we consider that the mechanism of 'putting one's self into the position of the other' is 'something that is at all events a fundamentally important and characteristic factor in the attitude of the interpreting artist' (Meinong (1983), p. 85).

The extension to the other forms of artistic expression is straightforward. Meinong writes:

it is easy to move from the actor's art, which is predominantly discursive but in any case reproductive, to the essentially discursive but productive art of the writer of poetry or fiction or drama. And with that, it becomes obvious that in the writing of his drama, the dramatist will inevitably be confronted with the task of 'placing' himself in not just one but, by turns, almost all the roles of the drama (Meinong (1983), p. 86).

He then concludes

To an appreciable degree, the 'fiction' comes into its own in all these cases; but then, fiction is just assumption.

All in all, with respect to assumptions in play and art 'we are justified in claiming that assumptions are determining and possibly even constitutive factors throughout these two areas' (Meinong (1983), p. 83).

Before dealing with assumptions 'evoked by suggestions,' Meinong also describes assumptions in questions and other desires. Here he points out that 'a questioner is not making a judgement.' In fact:

The one asking a question is in a sense presenting the one asked with an object for a judgement that has to be pronounced; the asker is himself representing this object... the object of the decision-question is... always an objective (Meinong (1983), p. 91)

And therefore 'a person who asks a decision-question is making an assumption with regard to a given objective' (Meinong, (1983), p. 92).

As for assumptions evoked by suggestions, Meinong notes

until now, we have been considering play, art, questions, etc., exclusively from the standpoint of a subject who is primarily active in these things... now, however, we are concerned with operations which... reach beyond the subject who is primarily active in them and which in a certain way encroach upon other subjects' (Meinong (1983), p. 94).

To return to the initial example, 'we know how often there are playmates in children's play,' and games-playing only works if these playmates act appropriately, making the opportune assumptions.

In the case of the arts, of fundamental importance is 'the transition from the discursive to the plastic arts.' It is important to note with respect to this transition that 'it is not only with the aid of words that assumptions can be evoked by suggestion. There are also dramatic presentations without words' (Meinong (1983), p. 96).

Further development of this topic would take us beyond the scope of the present article. Accordingly, I conclude this section by pointing out the eminently empirical nature of this preliminary classification proposed by Meinong:

I want to end my enumeration of the facts of assuming that make themselves quite plain to us in direct observation, without exactly being willing to vouch for the completeness of this enumeration (Meinong (1983), 97).

Non-intuitive Apprehensions

One particular field in which assumptions perform a role of fundamental importance is that of non-intuitive presentations. The difference between intuitive and non-intuitive presentations concerns the way in which their parts are joined together:

in nonintuitive presenting, use is made of object determinations that are strictly speaking incompatible with each other; whereas in intuitive presenting only compatible elements appear united in the complex of the intuitively represented object (Meinong (1983), p. 179, tr. modified).

The transition from mere juxtaposition of presentations to authentic non-intuitive presentation is brought about by the intervention of an assumption:

wherever one may meet with a nonintuitive presentation, an assumption always has a part in the presentation, and the latter becomes a 'nonintuitive presentation' only by means of the assumption; prior to that, we really have no more than a juxtaposition of presentations (Meinong (1983), pp. 185-6, tr. modified)

It follows that 'juxtaposition by itself does not at all suffice to connect the object of juxtaposed presentations into a complex object.' (tr. mod.) Besides juxtaposition, also required is an assumption (for further discussion of intuitive and non-intuitive assumptions see Poli (2001), this volume).

Facts and principles

Both Meinong and his commentators present the theory of assumptions from the point of view of the so-called 'unlimited freedom of assumption' principle (see the Introduction to this volume). For this reason, the theory of assumptions is often seen as a theory characterized by a prevalent apriori bias. Unfortunately, the 'unlimited freedom of assumption' principle and the 'independence of so-being from being' principle conflict each other (see for instance Grossmann's contribution to this volume). The tension between the two mentioned principles forces Meinong to ultimately admit that the unlimited freedom of assumption principle 'does indeed require a restriction' (Meinong (1915), p. 283). This unwelcomed consequence does not destroy the enormous empirical support in favour of the phenomena of assumptions collected and minutely examined by Meinong. In order to underline the wide empirical support in favour of assumptions, I have chosen to avoid reference to the debatable unlimited freedom of assumption principle and to limit my presentation to a review of the various fields in which assumptions operate. We have therefore seen that assumptions concern important aspects of the analysis of language and of inferences. Moreover, it was for the explained reason that I presented Meinong's theory of assumptions as (part of) his semiotics in the introductory section.

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