



# The Meaning and Significance of Dispute on Objectless Presentations

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## ABSTRACT

This paper considers the evolution of understanding and the status of objectless presentations in the works of the three main authors of this tradition: “The Theory of Science” by B. Bolzano, “On Content and Object of Presentations” by K. Twardowski and “Intentional Objects” by E. Husserl. A critical analysis of these positions on objectless presentations is interesting, because here in one point, in one discussion, we have several very important philosophical theories that have had an impact on the philosophical debates in the twentieth century, particularly on the discussion Alexius Meinong and Bertrand Russell at the beginning of XX century. We want to show, how this Meinong’s conception has made significant contribution into the problem of nonexistent objects that still remains one of the most debated in contemporary philosophy. Here author aims to show how theory of objects as such came into being and how its main ideas were discussed and criticized in subsequent philosophical thought. This dispute pushes us to think that we deal here with fundamental ideological differences between these conceptions. Therefore, it allowed to consider another important philosophical and methodological problem - the problem of incommunicability between logical and psychological conceptions.

**Key Words:** Bolzano, Twardowski, Theory of Objects, Phenomenology, Objectless Presentations, Intentionality

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## The Problem

The problem of so-called objectless presentations was extensively discussed within Austrian philosophy of 19th century. My analysis is concentrated on the evolution of understanding and the status of objectless presentations in the works of the three main authors of this tradition: “The Theory of Science” by B. Bolzano, “On Content and Object of Presentations” by K. Twardowski and “Intentional Objects” by E. Husserl.

All the authors offered distinct theories of objectless presentations (within the framework of their conceptions). Twardowski and Husserl became founders of two influential philosophical trends: Phenomenology and the Lvov-Warsaw School. Bolzano also had a profound influence on the development of philosophical thought. Today

he is often called a precursor of analytic philosophy. The understanding of objectless presentations is the center piece in—the development of the philosophy of each of these important figures. For example, Twardowski in his work “On the Content and Object of presentations” laid the foundations of a new philosophical method involving logic, which later became a distinctive feature of Polish philosophers and logicians of the Lvov-Warsaw School. For Husserl this meant a transition from the psychology of Brentano to a strictly logical and scientific thinking, which became one of the main principles of his phenomenology.

Twardowski and Husserl were both students of Brentano and had common philosophical roots, but they entered into a serious and principled dispute over objectless presentations. Husserl—greatly

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changed his philosophical position, moving away from psychology, Twardowski, developing the ideas of Brentano, also came to depart from traditional psychology to create his own unique theory of objects.

A critical analysis of these positions on objectless presentations is very interesting, because here in one point, in one discussion, we have several very important philosophical theories that have had an impact on the philosophical debates in the twentieth century. We will try to analyze the main arguments of the authors to understand their point of view, and also to determine whether in principle this dispute could have been resolved.

### *Bolzano and his Wissenschaftslehre*

Bernard Bolzano offered, perhaps, the first theory of objectless presentations. He gave precise characteristics to those objects, which do not correspond to any type of presentation.

In his "Theory of Science" (Bolzano, 1837) Bolzano deals with two types of presentations (or ideas): subjective and objective ones. Subjective presentations are mental phenomena – they require a corresponding subject. At the same time objective ideas are independent from any subject, thought. There is also an object, related to both of them.

As a scientist, Bolzano is more interested in objective presentations. He describes their structure types and properties in great detail. In the section devoted to the definition of the presentation's extension, Bolzano introduces the term that denotes presentations that have objects (*Gegenstandsvorstellungen*). Only such presentations also have extension. In contrast, presentations that have no object (presentations that are *gegenstandlos*) also don't have an extension. As an example he takes the idea of "nothing". It should be noted, that the analysis of this concept became a fundamental point in the tradition of the logical interpretation of the problem of objectless presentations. For Bolzano it is absurd to assume the existence an object of the presentation *nothing*, because an object itself is something. According to him, such absurd accounts confuse the actual presence of an objective presentation of (the concept) *nothing* with the existence of an object. The same could be said about the other types of objectless presentations, such as round quadrangle, green virtue or golden mountain. From his point of view, when we talk about such things we deal with only subjective or

objective presentations and the latter contain all of the properties.

### **"On Content and Object of Presentations"**

In this work (Twardowski, 1977) Twardowski resurrected some of the Bolzano's ideas. The logical and psychological study of the latter was mainly based on his interpretation of Brentano's views and particularly on his own understanding of intentionality. In his investigations, Twardowski wrote about the necessity for a special differentiation between the content of presentation and an immanent object, where the latter was considered as intentional and real. (This is quite similar to Frege's distinction between "Sinn" and "Bedeutung").

Leaving aside the problem of the notion "content of presentation" and its origin, it is clear that it is similar to Bolzano's "objective presentation". According to Twardowski Bolzano's work was one of the first treatises in which we can find the distinction between content and object.

Of course, Twardowski did not accept all Bolzano's ideas and, indeed, he rejected Bolzano's thesis about objectless presentations. He gives important arguments against such presentations.

From his point of view, the object itself is necessary element of presentation. That is why the object for him is everything that can be presented or judged. There are different types of objects (real, unreal, possible, impossible), and all these objects are (or can be) objects of our mental acts. So, he was probably the first who suggested that the problem of objects must be considered independently of the problem of existence.

His analysis of the notion *nothing* is quite interesting. This notion was originally brought into the discussion by Bolzano, who used it as an example of objectless presentation. In answer to this, Twardowski presented the logical analysis of *nothing* and offered a proof that it (in terms of Mill's logic) is not a name. In other words, it is not a categorematic expression formed by infinitation, by an attachment of particle "no" to a name to form a name ("non-ens", "non-Greek", "non-smoker", etc..

According to Twardowski, the infinitation of an expression makes sense when (so to say) the expression, formed by infinitation, retains the status of a name. However, this only happens when the pair, consisting of a name and a result of infinitation has a more general kind. So the word "something"



has nothing higher, because if it were, it would still be something. That is why for Twardowski “nothing” is not a name, it is not categorematic, but syncategorematic expression. So “nothing is eternal” really means “there is not something which is eternal” (Twardowski, 1977).

Jan Woleński suggests a logical analysis of this argument (Wolenski, 1989). He translates it into the language of modern logic – so he interprets Twardowski as holding that “nothing” expresses the negation of the existential quantifier, and when “nothing” is regarded as a name, it is only a result of confusion of syntactic categories.

Existence is understood in two senses. The first - is the actual existence of an object, its presence here and now. The second one, according to Twardowski, is often overlooked. This is the notion of “being presented” (*Vorgestelltwerden*). Thus from Twardowski’s point of view, the idea of objectless presentations is based on a mistake that is clear, the nonexistence of an object is always confused with its nonbeing presented. When we add to the notion of existence “as an object of presentation” we thus modify its meaning.

### **Husserl’s “Intentional objects”**

“Intentional objects” (Husserl, 1994) was the first work in which Husserl wrote in a way that is not in the tradition of Brentano’s descriptive psychology. Husserl’s essay in some way finishes this discussion. Here we should pay attention to the context of the writing of this work. Under the influence of Frege and Bolzano, Husserl becomes a strident critic of psychologism.

In this work we can find several ideas, which later formed the basis of Husserl’s theory of meaning (as it was presented in “Logical investigations”). Particularly essential distinctions between meaning and object, meaning and content of psychical act were carried out here. Also we can find Husserl making a fundamental distinction between dependent and independent meanings.

In the essay, Husserl uses mostly Bolzano’s terminology. He also makes a distinction between subjective and objective representations. It seems that the analysis of objective presentations was quite important for him. The problem of objectless presentations is considered in an entire chapter devoted to objective presentations.

“Presentation” in this case, can be understood as “meaning”. It is used in just the way Frege and Husserl used logical semantics to study the problem of objectless presentations. Particularly he wanted to understand in what way we can use in science (e.g. mathematics) the notions denoting possible or unreal objects.

Husserl criticized Twardowski’s conception of the existence of some spiritual image of an object. From his point of view, Twardowski has made an unwarranted conclusion that every presentation corresponds to its object by some spiritual image (*Abbild*).

He points out that in our act of presentation we have some kind of image, but still deal with an external object. Content only represents some qualities of an object, but our judgments and emotions are connected with the object itself.

Husserl also criticized Twardowski’s blurred notion of existence. He could not agree with the fact that presentation can render round squares just like other objects.

To clarify his point of view, Husserl compares the distinction between real and intentional of objects with a distinction between definite (“this lion”) and indefinite (“any lion”) objects. The classification into definite and indefinite objects differs from the classification, for example, of lions into African and Asian. Finally no matter how these objects differ, we can talk about them only when they really exist.

The assumption of the existence of such essences as contents of presentation was ridiculed by him. Accordingly, when he took up the position of logicism he criticized various attempts to assume the real existence of those things which are logically impossible.

To sum up, Husserl main objections against Twardowski are these: a) psychologism, b) the twofoldness of acts of presentations that leads to the erroneous theory of two objects of intentional acts, c) the mirror theory of cognition.

### **Conclusion: A New Phase of The Debate**

The problem of objectless presentations still echoes in discussions in contemporary philosophy. The theory of objects, originally elaborated by Twardowski and then maintained and developed in a new way by Alexius Meinong, is a specific “Austrian” product and it was an object of many serious debates in the twentieth century.



The first discussion of the twentieth century on the problem of nonexistent objects namely between Meinong and Russell. At first, Russell was intently interested in Meinong's ideas. At that time, Russell had assumed that logic embraces an ontology of propositions and their constituents and thus he regarded Meinong's theory of objects as relevant to logic.

Later, after changing his attitude to non-existent objects, Russell wrote that Meinong lacks a "robust sense of reality" (Russell, 1993), because he ignores the basic laws of logic (non-contradiction, excluded middle), and embraces both existing and non-existent things. Russell held that his theory of definite descriptions undermines any argument to the effect that non-existent objects are indispensable in logic.

Russell could not accept Meinong's thesis (postulated in the manner of Twardowski) of the polysemy of the term "existence". That is why extra-being of nonexistent things for him is still a violation of the law of non-contradiction. He wrote that he saw "no difference between existing and being existent" and beyond this he had "no more to say on this head" (Russell, 1907).

In "On denoting" Russell also criticized Meinong for his "intolerable" violation of this law by postulating the existence and non-existence of the object (Russell, 1905).

Meinong responds that this law applies only to actual and possible objects, not impossible ones (Meinong, 1907).

Russell also criticized Meinong for the violation of the law of the excluded middle. From Meinong's point of view, negation (in particular with respect to existence or nonexistence) has both a broad and a narrow sense. There are two types of negation: *internal*, predicative ("~"), and an *external*, propositional ("¬") (Meinong, 1915). Negation of the predicate in the statement "Socrates is wise" is obtained by adding "not" before "wise". Similarly, the propositional negation "It is not true that Socrates is wise". The law of the excluded middle is formulated using the internal negation. According to Terence Parsons, from Meinong's point of view, the following two statements cannot be true at the same time: "The round square is round" and "It is not true that the round square is round". We cannot go to statements "round square is round" and "It is not true that the

round square is round" from the statement "round square is round and non-round" (Parsons, 1980).

This discussion, as well as the previous one, pushes us to think that we deal here with fundamental ideological differences between these conceptions. Russell states that the postulation of non-existent objects means a lack of "sense of reality", which is provided by logic. Meinong believes that "prejudice in favor of the real" in phenomenology and empirical psychology limits our field of view only to real things, while there are many other types of things which have extra-being that have to be taken into account.

This debate is quite similar to those disputes which were subsequently held between Meinong's successors and their opponents. In fact, the discussion of Meinong's ideas was an important catalyst for Russell's development of his theory of descriptions, and, perhaps, it influenced the entire corpus of analytical philosophy.

As a result, we can make a conclusion that approaches of all authors were completely different. Bolzano and Husserl tried to develop the strictly scientific knowledge, based on logical investigations. Twardowski, Brentano and Meinong relied on research in the field of descriptive psychology. So, given the difference in approaches, we can say that this dispute could hardly be resolved.

Discussion between Kerry and Frege is Another example of that problem. a discussion. Kerry raised a number of objections regarding Frege's work "Foundations of Arithmetic" (1884) concerning the word «concept». Then Frege in his work "On Concept and Object" (1892) just points out that this discussion is futile, because they understand this word in a completely different way. «The word 'concept' is used in various ways; its sense is sometimes psychological, sometimes logical, and sometimes perhaps a confused mixture of both. Since this licence exists, it is natural to restrict it by requiring that when once a usage is adopted it shall be maintained. What I decided was to keep strictly to a purely logical use. The question whether this or that use is more appropriate is one that I should like to leave on one side, as of minor importance. Agreement about the mode of expression will easily be reached when once it is recognized that there is something that deserves a special term» (Frege, 1980).

The dispute on objectless presentations allowed to identify one of the fundamental





philosophical and methodological problems - the problem of incommunicability between logical and psychological conceptions. The modern Italian researcher R. Poli analysed the relationship between logic and psychology and emphasized the importance of logical-psychological discourse for development of science. «One of the principal effects of the shift from metaphysics to ontology has been the situation of incommunicability that has arisen between logic and psychology. An incommunicability which, at various levels, has characterized the evolution of the entire twentieth century and which only now, owing to the impact of new research into artificial intelligence and cognitive psychology, is beginning to dissolve. Considering that cognitive sciences and artificial intelligence research are new fields of inquiry, in rapid and tumultuous growth, which have not yet been given systematic categorial structuration, they may have something to learn from the ideas developed by Brentano and his pupils» (Poli, 1998).

Ryle's infamous comment that Meinong's theory is "dead, buried and not going to be resurrected" (Ryle, 1973) will long be remembered. But it has not come to pass. Nevertheless, the ideas of Twardowski and Meinong have formed the basis of many contemporary studies which have formulated theories of nonexistent objects. They form the basis of the theories of Edward Zalta (Zalta, 1999), Terence Parsons (Parsons, 1980), Richard Routley (Routley, 1980) and other authors. Meinong's (and Twardowski's) arguments concerning the existential status of nonexistents are still used in modern discussions on the problem of fictional and nonexistent objects.

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