

Is Meinongianism about non-obtaining states of affairs a non-starter?

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Abstract

Jago has argued that Meinongianism about non-obtaining states of affairs is a “non-starter.” In this paper: I reconstruct Jago’s argument, identify its questionable premises, argue that two of them are false; and demonstrate that Jago’s arguments in support of those two premises are unsound. Even if Meinongianism is false, it is not false for the reasons Jago gives.

Keywords: states of affairs; propositions; truthmakers; truth; Meinong

1 Jago’s Main Argument

This paper concerns the following proposition:

Meinongianism about non-obtaining states of affairs.

There is at least one non-obtaining state of affairs.

I shall call it ‘Meinongianism’ for short.¹ Jago has argued against Meinongianism ([2, p. 300–301]; [3, p. 264]; [5, p. 241]), calling it a “non-starter” ([2, p. 301]; [3, p. 264]).

¹Jago uses both ‘obtain’ and ‘exist’ in contradistinction to ‘be’ in writing about Meinongianism [3, p. 261, 263–264], using them interchangeably when speaking of states of affairs. Jago presumably thinks that the obtaining of a state of affairs is identical to its existence. If this were so, then Meinongianism would entail that there is at least one thing which does not exist. I think it would, for this reason, be deserving of the name ‘Meinongianism’. That said, I use the name ‘Meinongianism’ primarily because Jago himself used it, e.g. see [3, p. 264]. One can assess Jago’s argument against there being non-obtaining states of affairs without taking a stand on the issue of whether the obtaining of a state of affairs is identical to its existence. In an attempt to remain neutral, I use only ‘obtain’ when speaking of states of affairs.

Meinong himself wrote (in German) of *subsisting* states of affairs (*objectives*), and thought that states of affairs could not *exist* ([7, p. 51]; [6, §5.3.2]). But Meinong thought that existence implied subsistence ([7, p. 51]; [6, §5.3.2]), so either Meinong was wrong about this or subsistence is not obtaining, given that a doughnut, to use Marek’s example, can exist but surely cannot obtain. For Meinong’s own views, see [7] and [6]. For a discussion and analysis of words like ‘exist’ and ‘obtain’, see [8].

His argument was as follows:²³

α

1. If a state of affairs makes Meinongianism true, it is a non-obtaining state of affairs.
[See §2]
2. Even if there is at least one non-obtaining state of affairs, it is the case that if a state of affairs makes a proposition true, it is an obtaining state of affairs.
[See §3]
3. Even if there is at least one non-obtaining state of affairs, no state of affairs make Meinongianism true.
[1 & 2]
4. If no state of affairs makes Meinongianism true, then nothing makes Meinongianism true.
[Assumption]
5. Even if there is at least one non-obtaining state of affairs, nothing makes Meinongianism true.
[3 & 4]
6. If a proposition is true, then something makes it true.
[[3, §§3.4-3.5]; [4]]; Truthmaker Maximalism]
7. Even if there is at least one non-obtaining state of affairs, Meinongianism is not true.
[5 & 6]

There are no non-obtaining states of affairs.
[7]

The argument is valid. The conclusion is the negation of Meinongianism. Hence if the premises are true, Meinongianism is false. Are the premises true? The questionable premises are Premise 1, Premise 2, Premise 4, and Premise 6. I will not dispute the truth of Premise 4. Premise 6, being Truthmaker Maximalism, is the subject of much dispute ([9, §4]; [11, ch. 3–6]; [3, ch. 3]; [4]; [10]), however I will not dispute its truth. Jago provides arguments in support of Premise 1 and Premise 2. These arguments will be assessed in §2 and §3 respectively: I argue that both Premise 1 and Premise 2 are false and I demonstrate that Jago’s arguments in support of them are unsound.⁴

²³A note on notation: ‘ $\langle\varphi\rangle$ ’ is an abbreviation of ‘the proposition that φ ’, ‘ $|\varphi|$ ’ is an abbreviation of ‘the state of affairs that φ ’; and ‘[’ and ‘]’ are used for editing or supplementing text. Meinongianism is $\langle$ there is at least one non-obtaining state of affairs $\rangle$; hence Premise 1 is $\langle$ if a state of affairs makes $\langle$ there is at least one non-obtaining state of affairs $\rangle$ true, it is a non-obtaining state of affairs $\rangle$.

³‘Supposition’ is used in (in §3) to describe an assumption which will be discharged via conditional introduction. ‘Assumption for reduction’ is used (in §3) standardly. ‘Assumption’ simpliciter is used to describe unargued for premises.

⁴As the reviewer correctly points out, Jago’s main argument against Meinongianism and his supporting arguments have analogues relating to the proposition that there is at least one non-actual world. An analogue of Premise 1 of α is the proposition that if a world makes $\langle$ there is at least one non-actual world $\rangle$ true, it is a non-actual world. I shall not attempt to assess the analogous arguments here.

2 Jago's argument in support of Premise 1 of α

Recall that Premise 1 of α is

1. If a state of affairs makes Meinongianism true, it is a non-obtaining state of affairs.

Recall also that Meinongianism is $\langle$ there is at least one non-obtaining state of affairs $\rangle$. Jago's argument in support of Premise 1 of α is as follows ([3, 264]):⁵

β

1. If something makes an existential generalisation true, it is a witness of it.
[Assumption]
2. Meinongianism is an existential generalisation.
[Assumption]
3. If a state of affairs makes Meinongianism true, it is a witness of Meinongianism.
[1 & 2]
4. If something is a witness of Meinongianism, it is a non-obtaining state of affairs.
[Assumption]

If a state of affairs make Meinongianism true, it is a non-obtaining state of affairs.

[3 & 4]

The argument is valid but unsound. I accept Premise 2 and Premise 4 of β . But Premise 1 is false.

Let us distinguish between *witnesses* and *instances* of an existential generalisation. Sydney is a witness of but not an instance of $\langle$ there is at least one city $\rangle$. [Sydney is a city] is an instance of $\langle$ there is at least one city $\rangle$ but it is not a witness of that proposition because it is not a city. Hugh Jackman is a witness of but not an instance of $\langle$ there is at least one man taller than 6 ft $\rangle$. [Hugh Jackman is a man taller than 6 ft] is an instance of $\langle$ there is at least one man taller than 6 ft $\rangle$ but it is not a witness of that proposition because it is not a man taller than 6 ft. Russell Crowe is neither a witness of nor an instance of $\langle$ there is at least one man who was born in Australia $\rangle$ because (respectively) he is neither a man who was born in Australia nor is he a state of affairs of some particular man being a man who was born in Australia. [Sydney is a city] is neither an instance of nor a witness of $\langle$ there is at least one man taller than 6 ft $\rangle$ because it is (respectively) neither a state of affairs of some particular man being a man who is taller than 6 ft nor is it a man who is taller than 6 ft.⁶

⁵See also [2, p. 301] and [5, p. 241]. Here is the passage from [3]: "In general, the truthmakers for such propositions [i.e. existential generalisations] are their instances. So the only candidate truthmakers for [Meinongianism] are states of affairs that do not [obtain]." In that passage, Jago calls those things which I have called 'witnesses' 'instances'. I do not take issue with Jago's use of 'instance'; however, I shall use the word 'instance' differently from Jago: [the Sydney Opera House is a building] is an *instance* of $\langle$ something is a building $\rangle$ and the Sydney Opera House itself is a *witness* (not an instance) of $\langle$ something is a building $\rangle$. (Elsewhere, Jago's usage is like my own [3, p. 73, 251–252].)

⁶The reviewer asks for a more explicit or formal characterisation of witnesses and instances. Roughly: for any F and any y , y is a *witness* of $\langle\exists xFx\rangle$ iff $(Fy \wedge \exists z(z = \langle\exists xFx\rangle))$; and for any F and any y , $|Fy|$ is an *instance* of $\langle\exists xFx\rangle$ iff $(Fy \wedge \exists z(z = \langle\exists xFx\rangle) \wedge \exists v(v = |Fy|))$. A broader characterisation of instances could be given, but it is sufficient for the falsity of premise 1 of β that an (actual) instance (so characterised) of an existential generalisation not be a witness of it and yet make it true.

Jago would think that Sydney makes $\langle \text{there is at least one city} \rangle$ true. But surely, given the assumptions common to both Jago and I in this dispute (that true propositions are made true, that there are states of affairs, that states of affairs can make propositions true, etc.), $[\text{Sydney is a city}]$ also makes $\langle \text{there is at least one city} \rangle$ true, even though it is not a witness of that proposition. Indeed, it is clear that Jago himself would agree with this. To see this, one must understand that Jago thinks that a proposition is a set of (possible) truthmakers. So when he writes the following in an introduction to his theory of propositions:

The proposition *that someone is sitting* is the set containing all possible states of affairs of the form *that x is sitting*.

([5, p. 231])

we should understand that Jago would think that $[\text{I am sitting}]$ makes $\langle \text{someone is sitting} \rangle$ true. But it is obvious that $[\text{I am sitting}]$ is an instance which is not also a witness of $\langle \text{someone is sitting} \rangle$. So, not only is it extremely plausible (given the common assumptions of the dispute) that an existential generalisation can be made true by an instance of it which is not a witness of it, Jago himself seems to accept this.

I conclude that Premise 1 of β is false, and hence that Jago's argument in support of Premise 1 of α is unsound. But let us look at Premise 1 of α and assess it directly. It is false: $[\text{Sydney is the capital of Australia}]$ is a non-obtaining state of affairs is an *obtaining* state of affairs which makes Meinongianism true (note that it is an instance of but not a witness of Meinongianism).⁷

So Premise 1 of α is false. But even if it were true, α would still be unsound, as I now demonstrate.

3 Jago's argument in support of Premise 2 of α

Recall Premise 2 of α :

2. Even if there is at least one non-obtaining state of affairs, it is the case that if a state of affairs makes a proposition true, it is an obtaining state of affairs.

In effect Jago's argument for that proposition is as follows ([2, p. 301]; [3, p. 264]):

γ

1. Either it is the case that every state of affairs is such that there is at least one proposition which it makes true or it is the case that if a state of affairs makes a proposition true, it is an obtaining state of affairs.
[Assumption]
2. If there is at least one non-obtaining state of affairs, then it is not the case that every state of affairs is such that there is at least one proposition which makes it true.
[See δ]

Even if there is at least one non-obtaining state of affairs, it is the case that if a state of affairs makes a proposition true, it is an obtaining state of affairs.
[1 & 2]

⁷Jago also overlooks instances in his discussion of alethic propositions and in his discussion of alethic states of affairs ([1, p. 346–348]).

I accept Premise 1 of γ . Here is Jago's argument for Premise 2 of γ ([2, p. 301]; [3, p. 264]):

δ

1. There is at least one non-obtaining state of affairs.
[Supposition; Meinongianism]
2. If there is at least one non-obtaining state of affairs, then there is at least one contradictory non-obtaining state of affairs.
[Assumption]
3. There is at least one contradictory non-obtaining state of affairs.
[1 & 2]
4. Every state of affairs is such that there is at least one proposition which it makes true.
[Assumption for reductio]
5. If there is a contradictory state of affairs which makes a proposition true, then there is at least one true contradiction.
[Assumption]
6. There is at least one true contradiction.
[3, 4 & 5]
7. It is not the case that every state of affairs is such that there is at least one proposition which it makes true.
[4-6, reductio]

If there is at least one non-obtaining state of affairs, then it is not the case that every state of affairs is such that there is at least one proposition which it makes true.

[1-7, conditional introduction]

The argument is valid, but is it sound? The questionable premises of δ are Premise 2 and Premise 5. I discuss these in turn.

Premise 2 is basically the proposition that if Meinongianism is true, then there is a non-obtaining state of affairs like S:

S

[the oldest extant constitution is that of San Marino and it is not the case that the oldest extant constitution is that of San Marino]

I can defend Meinongianism without disputing the truth of Premise 2, so I won't dispute the truth of Premise 2.⁸

What about Premise 5?

5. If there is a contradictory state of affairs which makes a proposition true, then there is at least one true contradiction.

⁸As a matter of exigetical fact, Jago does not make an assumption like Premise 2; he simply makes an additional assumption (on behalf of the Meinongian?) that there is at least one (self-)contradictory (but non-obtaining) state of affairs ([2, p. 301]; [3, p. 264]). Nevertheless it is reasonable to think that Jago thinks that something like Premise 2 is true, and given that I can defend Meinongianism without disputing the truth of Premise 2, there is no harm in attributing this assumption to Jago.

Isn't it false? Can its antecedent not be true while its consequent is false? Recall that in §2 we saw that Jago was happy with the idea of a witness of an existential generalisation making the existential generalisation true. So shouldn't he think that a contradictory non-obtaining state of affairs could be the witness of a true existential generalisation which it makes true? For example, wouldn't S, and any other state of affairs, make $\langle \text{something is identical to itself} \rangle$ true? If so, I see no reason why S's making a proposition true would necessitate there being a true contradiction.

Jago seems to mistakenly assume something which would entail, for example, that if S were to make a proposition true it would make P true:

P

$\langle \text{the oldest extant constitution is that of San Marino and it is not the case that the oldest extant constitution is that of San Marino} \rangle$

He then seems to infer from the fact that a proposition like P can't be true (and thus can't be made true) that a state of affairs like S can't make any proposition true. But the assumption which underwrites this inference seems to be false because, as stated previously, S might make $\langle \text{something is identical to itself} \rangle$ true without there being a true contradiction.

So I conclude that Premise 5 of δ is false and that δ is unsound. Jago does not provide another argument in support of Premise 2 of γ . So let us look at Premise 2 of γ again and assess it directly:

2. If there is at least one non-obtaining state of affairs, then it is not the case that every state of affairs is such that there is at least one proposition which it makes true.

It seems to be false. The reasoning is similar to that already given. If there is such a thing as S then there is at least one contradictory non-obtaining state of affairs, and S, and any other state of affairs, makes $\langle \text{something is identical to itself} \rangle$ true.

I conclude that Premise 2 of γ is false and that γ is unsound. Jago does not provide another argument in support of Premise 2 of α . So let us look at Premise 2 of α again and assess it directly:

2. If there is at least one non-obtaining state of affairs, then if a state of affairs makes a proposition true, it is an obtaining state of affairs.

It seems to be false. Again, take S and $\langle \text{something is identical to itself} \rangle$: S is a non-obtaining state of affairs which makes $\langle \text{something is identical to itself} \rangle$ true. Additionally, take S and Meinongianism: S is a non-obtaining state of affairs which makes Meinongianism true. I conclude that Premise 2 of α is false.

4 Conclusion

Jago has argued that Meinongianism about non-obtaining states of affairs is a “non-starter”. In this paper: I reconstructed Jago's argument (§1), identified its questionable premises (§1), argued that two of them are false (§§2–3); and demonstrated that Jago's arguments in support of those two premises are unsound (§§2–3). Even if Meinongianism is false, it is not false for the reasons Jago gives.

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