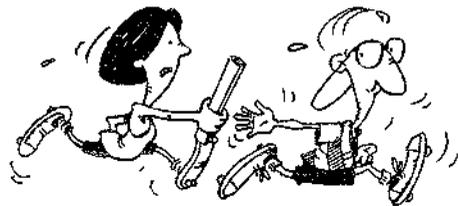


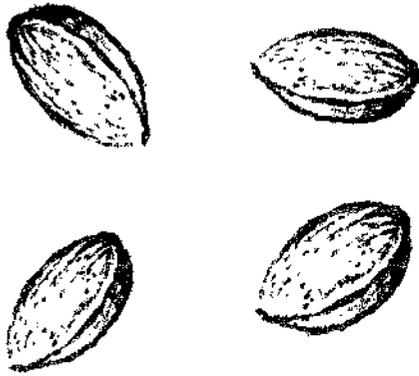
Chapter 8



Higher order objects

According to Meinong, higher order perceptual objects or superiora are formed on the basis of lower order objects or inferiora. This claim is open to criticism if the perceptual data are carefully studied. The phenomenal description is primary and has to be separated from the physical description.

Paolo Bozzi



Meinong's famous 'four nuts' example

The famous four nuts thrown on the table, which quickly fall down one after the other, form a quadrilateral. Its form depends on the position of the nuts; by moving just one of them a little, more than one property of the quadrilateral changes. That quadrilateral is non-independent of the position of the nuts. But at the same time it is independent of the colour of the tablecloth, of the size of the table, on which the nuts have been thrown, of the — natural or artificial — light illuminating the room, of the noise caused by the two children playing with other nuts, and — beware — of the philosophical opinions of the one who is observing the nuts, and of any eventually believed theory of perception. The quadrilateral is a higher order object, the four nuts are its 'inferiora'; the 'superiora' depend on the 'inferiora'. There is an asymmetric relationship between 'superiora' and 'inferiora': a 'superius' without 'inferiora' is not possible, but not vice versa. "What is now bearer of an object of superior order may appear then without it" (Meinong 1899, p. 3). A nut might be found in a drawer, another one in the shopping-bag.

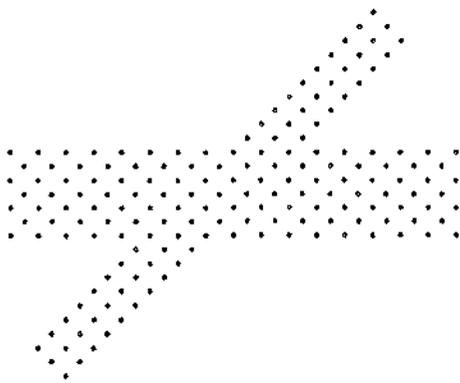


Fig. 1

A critical view: the "proliferation of nuts"

Without devoting our time to the analysis of a real and complex object like a pipe or six bars of a sonata for piano by any composer, let's try to discuss an example that is in its way still simpler, obtained by multiplying Meinong's nuts. (Fig. 1)

The spots, which are in a distinct, very simple relationships (the repetition of an identical spatial relation), form, in each of these two pictures, two rectangular bodies. One thinner than the other, the thinner one is placed crosswise. In the picture on the left the thinner rectangle is over the bigger one, in that on the right it is under. Why do some points at the intersection of the two bodies in the first picture seem to belong to the thinner body and in the second to the bigger body? In other



words, what shall we change in the pictures so that it doesn't happen?

We can take away, for example, all overlapping spots from the bigger, horizontal body in the picture on the left; (Fig. 2) it is trivial. But this triviality compels us to say that the relationships among the overlapping spots we suppose we have rubbed out are fundamental in comparison with the belonging of the visible spots in the central part (in the intersection, as it were, between the two bodies): they form two superiora that are inferiora along with those other spots — which surely are the constitutive inferiora, through spatial relationships, of the central part of the transverse bar. But the transverse bar remains *over* the body that is rectangular but horizontal, and forms in its turn homogeneously distributed spots. It also means that the spots in question belong to it and form an unique body with the projecting appendices to the north-east and to the south-west. But they belong to it — we have seen — because it has these appendices. So: *does the bar act as the appendices, or do the appendices act as the foundation for the bar?*

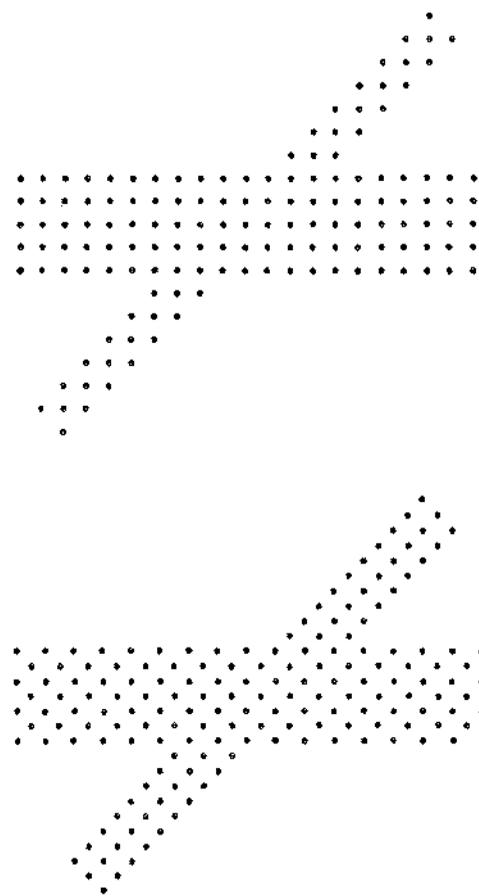


Fig. 2

The principle of amodality

The horizontal body, in addition, passes behind the bar: the bar is based on it; it doesn't interrupt it, and for this reason we say that it stays underneath. Also the horizontal body is made of spots at the intersection, but they are not visible because the transverse bar covers them. Everyone of these spots stays exactly behind a certain spot which constitutes the transverse bar. The occluded part is present 'behind' with that typical form of presence which characterizes all partially occluded objects (amodal presence).

The horizontal band is partially occluded. The occluded part consists of the same material as the visible parts, i.e. it is made of spots which are disposed like the knots of a square-mesh net. But none of its spots, in that zone, is visible, because it is exactly hidden by a spot of the transverse bar. So, we don't see there the inferiora but even so the

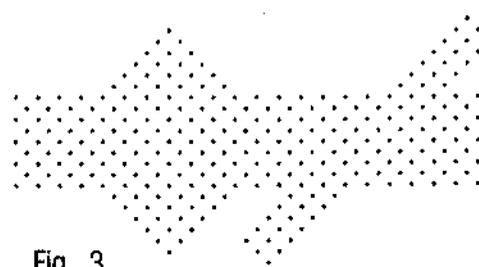


Fig. 3

tissue isn't interrupted and thus those spots exist amodally. They — far from forming a basis, inferiora — form a superius that is based on the visible parts of the horizontal bar, which, in Meinong's logic, should find everywhere its inferior made of spots, but there it doesn't find it: because it is a superius. Now: *do the visible spots provide a basis for the horizontal band, or does the horizontal band provide a basis for its spots there where they are not visible?*

The reasoning can equally be applied to the picture on the right, and repeating it will be a very good exercise of analysis for the reader. It will be still more amusing if applied to two more pictures (Fig. 3) which are a little more complicated. In one a square has two opposing angles immersed in the square-mesh net. We would like to understand how such angles are formed by the close spots, and if it is not the square that forms the basis for the specific appearance of angles do two of these spots — that is an excessively simplified conception — contribute to the formation of the picture in its totality.

Meinong's 'operational mistake'

It is obvious that the forming of the picture, its material realisation on the sheet, uses just spots and spatial relations, i.e. a ruler and a pair of compasses. Here is Meinong's mistake (this is also the mistake of many other interpreters with little familiarity with experimental investigation): to believe that the ingredients of the complex structures can be reduced to what is used in the operations of formation. We could call this the 'operational mistake'. It doesn't permit us to see that the final perceptive result, apart from a certain complexity which is not substantial anyway, depends on a subtle dialectic between factors and components and components and factors of such components, irreducible to the simple material spots and to their positional relationships.

**“Having parts doesn’t mean being
divided into parts”:
Meinong’s correct conclusion**

We built our objects through spots (to respect the example of the four nuts and to show the inner limitations in each theory of ‘inferiora-superiora’) but it is obvious that not many objects of common experience are constructed in this way. Retrieving the inferiora in the world of common experience is a difficult project, because we are usually faced with relatively homogeneous surfaces and eventually with more or less clean cuts between homogeneous regions. In these more common conditions it is not easy to distinguish — analytically — a thing from the parts of a thing. Regarding this serious question Meinong achieves very good results. First of all, homogeneity too has parts. Let’s try to consider an uniformly coloured square: there is a part above and a part below, a part on the right and a part on the left. They are not visibly defined by borders, but we cannot deny that they exist. We may also speak of the upper left part and of the lower right one, or of the central zone. A segment is not made up of spots, as geometry demands for its purposes; but its discernible parts are certainly its extremities and the portion between them. We don’t say it only for the reason that if we tell somebody to mark a spot in the upper right part of a square he does it, or if we tell him to consider the right extremity of a horizontally placed segment he does it, or because, by looking at the different parts of homogeneously coloured forms our eyes move here and there. But because, even if we keep our eyes on a spot of the picture and we don’t say anything to anybody, and we don’t think of anything, the pictures keep on having privileged and not interfering regions, even though they are not definitely divided. Any possible division will be in some way arbitrary, but some of them will be less arbitrary than others. “Having parts doesn’t mean being divided into parts”. (Meinong 1899, p. 14)

Chromatic structures

There is a special kind of chromatic homogeneity, and it is the shading: the just perceptible and progressive passage from some chromatic parameters to others. A horizontally disposed rectangle, like a piece of ribbon, can be red at the left edge and light pink at the right one, and between these two edges the red is progressively being diluted into different lighter and lighter pink. There are parts differently coloured, even if we cannot give a definite border to any of them.

But it is interesting to notice that if in the middle of this piece of ribbon we vertically mark a clearly visible black line, the border between the right and the left part, the lighter part is unexpectedly all lighter, and the other one is all redder, as if the border line conceals a change and not a transition (the gradient is by hypothesis the same everywhere). Being defined by a border confers a sort of an autonomy on the zone, and a sort of right to the internal redistribution of colour. I don't know if this observation of Mach's was known to Meinong, but surely this effect is quite probable in the complex phenomenology of the zones of the world called 'parts'.

Temporal structures

Things further complicate when the considered structures have a temporal development.

The marking events have a beginning and an end: a single ringing of the telephone starts and then stops. *When they happen they are happening.* We can perceive them in their central part, in the memory of their beginning and in the delay before their cessation. In these circumstances we can have the exact perception of what the expression 'present-time' (that Meinong borrows from Stern, 1897) means. The physical time-presence, before being a concept, is an experience. A curious experience, even if it is a container where all real experience necessarily happens (and is also imagined, if we think of the act and not of content). Nevertheless most people spend their life

without realizing it, without considering it. It is opportune to say that listening to a melody or seeing a train passing we witness moment by moment the collapse of the world into an irretrievable 'already been' past painfully close to the becoming of an event. We can say that it is a seldom tried experience. On the other hand H. von Helmholtz found, through investigations, that almost no adult knows he has perceived after-images, provided that they invariably happen in the visual field after any prolonged observation of colours and especially lights.

The spotted objects also fall into time-presence in their completeness, and with all their characteristics, when they are a little more extended than the 'tic' produced by a pencil lightly tapped on the table. They exhibit all their observable properties (in the case of sounds: loudness, intensity, timbre, harmonic function in the melodic context, relative duration and so on) together, in a fraction of time-presence — that, beware, is not 'their' time-ce, but the time-ce of the experience in which they are included — even if sometimes, after their transformation into immediate memory some doubts about their connotations emerge. The impression that these events were too short to be well observed remains; but also this characteristic belongs to their observable properties and it is for such properties that Meinong coined the term 'transient events', which is perfectly appropriate to indicate them.

'Time-presence' problem

Time presence is hardly accepted by Meinong, and this is significant, since he has to accept it, willing or not, because the concept demonstrates it. English philosophy (after Russell) often discusses a very appropriate example: "if the universe had been created two minutes ago, with all it has inside, memories and documents of the past and illusions of history and of autobiography... what would I need in my hands to discover the divine trick?". Nobody, as far as I know, has ever tried to shorten the time between now and that supposed



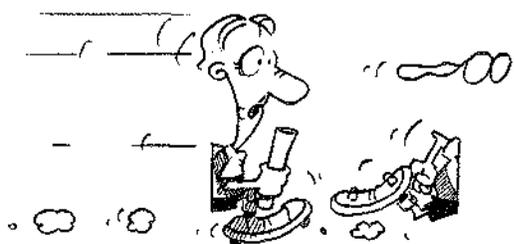
creation. A minute ago. Half a minute ago (more and more). But not four milliseconds ago! This is nonsense, because four milliseconds ago I was here, under my direct control, present and observable, an ingredient of things. The present resulting from a creation of two minutes ago cannot come out of a creation that is supposed to be part of it, that maybe divides it in the middle (if time-ce is 150 msec. long, how can you imagine its creation happened 75 msec. ago?). This subject, if Meinong had thought about it, would have persuaded him to accept Stern's time-ce with less reluctance. What probably annoyed him was that he had to surrender to the bare presence of a few simple facts.

Benussi's '*Zeitverschiebung*' Experiment

A fact found by Benussi, who had been Meinong's disciple for a long time, confirms the possibility of narrowing time-presence under certain limits, and therefore of moving the moments of Russell's false creation too near in the time axis of physics. In Vicario's example: make an adequately furnished electronic implant for the production of sounds that produce the following sequence: La (for 100 msec.) — white noise (for 35 msec.) — Sol (for 100 msec.). We intend that La and Sol are those placed more or less in the middle of the piano-keyboard (La 440). (Vicario, 1973).

In the presence of this brief acoustic discharge it is impossible not to hear the following sequence: La-Sol, very brief pause, noise. The noise, in the programmed emission of the scheme we had used, occupied the central place between the two notes; but the acoustic event contains two sounds in rapid succession, a very quick falling down from La to Sol, and, well separated from them, a 'crack', a very brief noise.

The matter can be explained from any theoretical point of view, but in any case the order of time in physics has not been conserved in the audible order, and in the latter the two sounds typically appear present together in the succession. They



echo even when the brief noise appears for a short time.

With Benussi's methods there wasn't much we could do, but now we can achieve that reproduced sequence in various magnitudes: for example, we can make the last two notes for six seconds and the interposed noise, proportionally, for a bit more than two. And we will distinctly hear a La, a noise, and a Sol.

We can go on shortening, always proportionally, the three phases, and many more times we will hear the sequence sound — noise — sound. Only by exceeding a certain threshold between the above we suddenly have a different order: finally the alien body (the noise) and the two sounds join together, almost as if they had chosen to do so.

It is the critical magnitude of that framework of time, internal to time-presence, that allows the inverse: a magnitude which is not null nor arbitrarily small. In it the sounding elements are so close as to allow a contiguity for elective affinity instead of following a point by point correspondence between physical time and perceptual time.

The melody and the meaning of the musical phrase

If we decide to accept that there is a time-presence where a myriad of short successive events are ordered one after the other, we should conclude, with Meinong, surprisingly, that the sense of a melody appears to us just when its last note appears (Meinong's coherence is always admirable, even when it is erroneous). In fact, if a melody is a superius in comparison with the single notes "a distributed superius would then consist in the representation of this added object appearing at the end of the succession, or in the representation first of all of the inferiora and then also of the added one, but contemporaneously with the last inferiorus". Before all the notes have been 'disengaged'/played, there is no melody: "in fact it is impossible to represent a superius if its inferiora or just a part of it is not represented" (Meinong

1899, p. 21). This would be true if melodies were notes + intervals (terms + relations).

But the development of a melodic line in time, that can only be abstractly decomposed into notes and temporal relations between notes, consists in the progressive appearance of an object in itself which is already complete, like the progressive development of a landscape seen from the window of a train. That is a landscape where again we don't see it at first, as it could reveal itself in various ways with time.

If the development of a melody consisted in establishing, note by note, relations (intervals) among notes we wouldn't have any tendency to perceive a *future* in relation to a given note, the last to arrive in chronological order (establishing a moment in the flow of listening as in a snap). On the contrary, this future exists and its phenomenological evidence remains as the basis of the meaning of the musical phrase — and, on the other hand, also of the phrases that we usually say speaking. Of course we are not magicians who are able to forecast the future; that future is an immanent aspect of time-presence, here and now, one of its constant requirements. But if it is neglected, any analysis of the developing events is upset. So the melody is a complete object even if it is only partially heard, and it is in the process of development. Like a pen that is only partially concealed by a sheet of paper, a newspaper inside the pocket of a coat, a postcard we see during the act of posting it (and of course all of them, the postcard, the pen and the newspaper could exist without the unseen part; nevertheless we would see them completed; there is a lot of experimental evidences on this).

