

# The Afterlife of Object Theory

## *Towards a Logic of Spirits*

BRUCE ROSENSTOCK

---

Bruce Rosenstock is professor of philosophy of religion and Jewish philosophy at the University of Illinois.

brsnstck@illinois.edu

---

Two of the most influential theories to emerge in German thought before the First World War were the object theory (*Gegenstandstheorie*) of Alexius Meinong (1853–1920) and the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl (1859–1938). Both theories descend from the work of their teacher, the Austrian psychologist and philosopher Franz Brentano (1838–1917). In this essay I focus on object theory, although a similar story can be told about the development of phenomenology.<sup>1</sup> I will explore the way that Meinong’s object theory provided the foundation for a realist account of the afterlife as a form of personal conscious existence in a realm of transcendental intentional objects. The philosophers who develop this account of the afterlife are Ernst Mally (1879–1944) and John Niemeyer Findlay (1903–1987), Mally’s student. Mally provides the theoretical groundwork for a theory of the afterlife, and Findlay gives the theory its full-fledged exposition. Both philosophers base their work on Meinong’s intensional logic, the heart of object theory. My presentation of their views is intended to provide a glimpse into a relatively unstudied aspect of modern philosophy, what could be called the logic of the afterlife.

---

1. The work of Husserl’s student Hedwig Conrad-Martius (1888–1966) presents an example of a theory of the afterlife like the one I am exploring in this essay. See James G. Hart, *Hedwig Conrad-Martius’ Ontological Phenomenology*, vol. 2, University of Chicago Divinity School PhD thesis, 1972, 1298.

Object theory and phenomenology have been aptly described by the philosopher John Passmore (1914–2004) as representing twentieth-century philosophy’s “movement towards objectivity”. This movement, Passmore explains, runs counter to the entire temper of nineteenth-century philosophy, whose central thesis he sums up in the following terms: “If there were no mind there would be no facts.”<sup>2</sup> The nineteenth century, Passmore explains, is the century where the question of objective truth was superseded by the question of the origin of our belief in the truth, in large part due to the influence of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831). The movement towards objectivity seeks to restore the rights of objects and facts as having a reality independently of the mind. Rather than putting a premium on the progressive narrative underlying the nineteenth century’s emphasis on the historical nature of truth, the movement towards objectivity placed its emphasis on an “originary” experience of objects themselves in their truth or *Wirklichkeit* (actuality). This emphasis on the independent, objective reality of what the mind holds in its grasp led to a conception of the mind as itself capable of independent reality, apart from any intentional content whatsoever. This contentless mind is not some kind of blank slate or Nirvana state. Rather, it is the powerfully active condition of the mind as it stretches itself outward into reality, seeking new kinds of contents. This active mind is motivated by different modes of yearning for what is not presently available to it as a content. The valuing mind seeks for an “ought” content that it hopes will be actual at some time. In Meinong’s picture of actuality, then, there are things that do in fact exist and can become the object of the perceiving mind, and there are things that do not in fact exist but are possible objects of the mind’s power to have many different kinds of content, things like values that the mind desires.

The step from this conception of the active mind seeking or yearning for nonexistent but real objects to a belief in the afterlife is not too difficult to imagine. The mind is seeking objects that are real but not in the here and now of the existing world. It is the nature of the mind to be actively in search of what is transcendently real. The realm of the transcendently real is infinite, including all possible values in ever more complete form, of greater and greater scope and inclusiveness. The highest value that the mind seeks is *seeking itself*. The universe is so constituted that the mind’s nature and reality are correlated: infinite seeking is the root reality of both the mind and the values after which it strives. The root reality of the universe expresses itself in the infinite life of each mind and in the infinite diversity of

---

2. John Passmore, *A Hundred Years of Philosophy*, 2nd ed., Harmondsworth 1968, 174–202. Quotation from p. 174.

the possible forms in which the mind's content can be found. Since there is a fundamental distinction between what exists in space and time and what the mind's active yearning looks for beyond what exists, the mind stretches between its material embodiment and its transcendental disembodiment, but there is no fixed boundary between these two forms of the mind. The afterlife is also the afterdeath. Forms of the mind's disembodiment may include transitional states that we call "ghosts" or even repeated incarnations with more or less recollection of past lives.

The broad-stroke picture of how the phenomenological "movement towards objectivity" can lead to the thesis that the mind is deathless now needs to be fleshed out in its logical and metaphysical specificity. I will devote the following section to the foundational work of Ernst Mally and, in the second section, I will describe the theory of the afterlife developed in the work of John Niemeyer Findlay. Mally is one of the most important theoreticians of object theory, and Findlay is the thinker who first introduced object theory to the English-speaking world. The point that I want to make is that we have before us a chapter in modern post-Hegelian philosophy that reveals linkages to religious and mystical traditions even as it expresses itself in the language of Gottlob Frege (1848–1925) and Bertrand Russell (1872–1970), the language of propositional logic and existential quantifiers. Modern philosophy after Hegel has not altogether severed itself from its deep roots in the imaginative sources of religious experience, one of whose primary expressions is the belief in the power of the individual to survive death. This fact is not proof of the existence of ghosts or the immortality of the soul. It is, however, a proof of the irrepressible need to think beyond the limits of the given, even to imagine the possibility of the impossible.

### **Ernst Mally**

Before I turn to Ernst Mally, a word about his teacher Alexius Meinong is in order. Meinong was a prolific Austrian philosopher of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As I have mentioned, Meinong, in parallel with the closely related work of Edmund Husserl, carried forward the fundamental insight of his and Husserl's teacher Franz Brentano. Brentano argued that the distinguishing mark of the psychical in contrast with the non-psychical is its "auf etwas Gerichtetsein", its "being-directed towards something". This "something" towards which the psychical is directed is, according to Brentano, immanent to or "in" consciousness (this is known, somewhat confusingly, as Brentano's "inexistence" thesis, which is not a denial of the existence of these immanent objects), although it is not a merely mental phenomenon. Just exactly what the ontological status of

the “in-existent” intentional object is, Brentano wrestled with throughout his career. Meinong for his part simply dropped Brentano’s immanence or “in-existence” thesis about the intentional object, while retaining Brentano’s thesis about the “directedness towards something” of every psychical act. Of course, a “representation” (*Vorstellung*) or “presentation” (*Präsentation*) is part of every psychical armature, but nothing “in” the mind is the “goal-object” (*Zielgegenstand*) of the mind’s directedness (except in the act of introspection when consciousness considers its own content or activity as its “object-goal”). For Meinong, the “something” towards which psychical acts are directed is a mind-independent object, and object theory is devoted to examining the nature of the “Gegenstand als solcher”, the “object as such”, in all of its expressions and modalities, from abstract ideas, propositions, imaginary entities, objects of desire, or ethical valuation, to the tree outside my window. John Niemeyer Findlay, in the first full-length study of Meinong in English, puts it nicely when he writes that “the world we live in does not phenomenologically consist simply of existent things, but includes states of affairs, absences, possibilities, risks, and dangers, things half-formed and things vaguely universal, and also obviously many accents of value and exigency which we certainly do not *seem* to have imposed upon it”.<sup>3</sup>

Despite object theory’s historical connection with Brentano’s studies in “empirical psychology”, Meinong denied that his theory was merely concerned with psychological phenomena. Meinong insists that while psychology may very well provide us with knowledge about the ways that psychical acts are directed towards objects, it is really not interested in the objects as such. But that is exactly what Meinong says his object theory is interested in: whatever can possibly be targeted by a psychical act. He compares the relationship between psychology and object theory to that between classical philology and classical history: the philologist is interested in reconstructing the documents that the historian will then use to reconstruct the realia of the ancient world.<sup>4</sup> Object theory is an ontological enterprise whose goal is to map all the possible kinds of objects that can “exist” (in empirical space-time) or “subsist” (as transempirical, *überdingliche* entities), and even impossible objects like the round square.

Before turning to Mally, I need to make one last point about Meinong’s object theory. Meinong’s ontology includes many kinds of entities that we might normally characterize as purely mental or fictional. But an entity’s fictionality does not mean that it is mind-dependent. In line with his radical rejection of any kind of correlationism, Meinong embraces the reality of

3. John Niemeyer Findlay, *Meinong’s Theory of Objects and Values*, 2nd ed., Oxford 1963, 22.

4. Alexius Meinong, *Untersuchungen zur Gegenstandstheorie und Psychologie*, Leipzig 1904, 15.

fictional entities even if they are not the object of any conscious intentional act. The embrace of mind-independent fictional entities leads Meinong to develop a novel propositional logic. Meinong's propositional logic is not extensional but rather intensional, meaning that an object's *Sosein* (so-being, the being of a property that is predicable of something) is enough by itself to anchor a well-formed proposition about the object. The being (*Sein*) or the non-being (*Nichtsein*) of the object is not relevant to the object as such, whose neutral ontic status is what Meinong calls *Außersein* (extra-being). As the contemporary Meinongian logician Dale Jacquette (1953–2016) puts it: “Meinong holds that an intended object has the properties predicated of it regardless of its ontological status. An object's *Sosein* is logically independent of its *Sein* or *Nichtsein*. The objects themselves enter into the Meinongian semantic domain as whatever can be thought of, whatever can be intended by thought.”<sup>5</sup> Meinong argued that the description “the present King of France” refers to an object with “extra-being” but without *Sein*. Bertrand Russell, the most important advocate of extensional logic in the twentieth century, would have none of it. Russell argued against Meinong that if the present King of France is an object with extra-being, so also is the “round square”, an object whose properties are such that there cannot be such an object. Meinong accepted this consequence. Extra-being is the baseline being of the “pure object”. As the mid-twentieth century American philosopher Roderick M. Chisholm (1916–1999), along with Dale Jacquette one of the handful of analytic philosophers willing to do battle with Russell's extensional logic, puts it: “An object may have a set of characteristics whether or not it exists and whether or not it has any other kind of being.”<sup>6</sup> Of course, besides extra-being, an object may also have being, which includes subsisting and existing objects. Importantly, as I have already mentioned, among objects with being are objects that are only possible, such as griffins, ghosts, and Sherlock Holmes. Again, as Chisholm puts it: “To say of an object that it is only a possible object is *not* to say that it is only possibly an object. For possible objects, as well as impossible objects, *are* objects.”<sup>7</sup>

I hope from this very brief sketch of Meinong's object theory that it has become clear why its extraordinary ontological capaciousness in regard to objects traditionally consigned to the domain of subjective fantasy or even delusion provided such a fertile ground for the emergence of a philosophical theory of the afterlife. Husserl's phenomenology, a very close cousin of Meinong's object theory, also lends itself to this development, although

5. Dale Jacquette, *Alexius Meinong, the Shepherd of Non-Being*, Cham 2016, 373.

6. Roderick M. Chisholm, “Beyond Being and Nonbeing”, *Philosophical Studies* 24 (1973), 245.

7. Chisholm, “Beyond Being and Nonbeing”, 247.

Husserl himself did his best to warn his students away from what he deemed to be “mysticism”. Neither Husserl nor Meinong were able to keep the philosophical paths that they opened “towards the things themselves” directed only towards “scientific” goals; the pressure to find a basis for mythic imagination in the “things themselves” was, it seems, just too powerful. Ernst Mally is an instructive case in point.

Ernst Mally was a gifted mathematical logician and philosopher, credited with having been the first to construct a formal system of deontic logic.<sup>8</sup> He also published a logical formalization of object theory and proposed some of its most important theoretical insights.<sup>9</sup> It is certainly remarkable that such an otherwise sober thinker would teach several university seminars on myth and magic (*Zauber*) in the early 1930s and soon thereafter publish a book that he would refer to as his *Zauberbuch*.<sup>10</sup> Mally’s *Zauberbuch* is actually titled *Erlebnis und Wirklichkeit: Einleitung zur Philosophie der natürlichen Weltauffassung*. The title captures the seriousness of the task that the book sets itself: to provide the philosophical foundation for a naturalistic understanding of reality and the lived experience in which it comes to expression. At its heart is an exposition of myth and magic as the original domains in which reality had been grasped.

Mally’s fundamental principle in his *Zauberbuch* is captured in the following statement: “In every intentionality, actuality is experienced [*erlebt*] as a striving towards sense.”<sup>11</sup> If we put this in terms of the distinction between sense and the goal-object of intentionality, we could say that every possible object to which one might direct an intentional act – this table, an absent friend, the dream one had last night – becomes an object of an intentional act in so far as it has a meaning or sense in someone’s lived experience (*Erlebnis*). If I bump into the table, the table is meaningful for me as the cause of my pain; if I use the table to write on, the table is meaningful for me as a support for my laptop. If I come across a picture of a friend I have not seen for some time and have forgotten, the absent friend again becomes meaningful for me because of the memories elicited by the photograph. If I awake from a dream that has disturbed my sleep, the dream is meaningful for me as a source of discomfort. In each case, an object has entered into my lived experience in so far as it has a sense or meaning for me. To be sure,

---

8. Ernst Mally, *Logische Schriften: Grosses Logikfragment – Grundgesetze des Sollens*, Dordrecht 1971.

9. Ernst Mally, *Gegenstandstheoretische Grundlagen der Logik und Logistik*, Leipzig 1912.

10. Markus Roschitz, *Zauberbuch und Zauberkolleg: Ernst Mallys dynamische Wirklichkeitsphilosophie*, Graz 2016.

11. Ernst Mally, *Erlebnis und Wirklichkeit: Einleitung zur Philosophie der natürlichen Weltauffassung*, Leipzig 1935, 69. All translations from German are mine.

the goal-object has entered into my lived experience through a certain conscious presentation (*Vorstellung*) of it – pain, solidity, a visual image, a vague sense of unease upon waking. But the conscious presentation is not the goal-object of the intentional act. A table, another human, a dream, exist as objects independently of any conscious presentation, but they have no sense or meaning until they enter into someone’s lived experience as goal-objects of intentionality. Meaning or sense [*Sinn*] mediates actuality’s “striving”, connecting a mind-independent object with a subject’s lived experience.

It seems as if Mally were personifying actuality (*Wirklichkeit*), describing it as a “striving” to express itself in some way, to convey a “sense” about itself to someone, to make someone aware of some significance lying as a possibility within itself. It is as if actuality strives to be brought to life (*erlebt*) and expresses this striving by making sense out of itself. And since one and the same object can be lived through by many different subjects’ intentionalities, the striving on the part of actuality, taken in its totality, is not merely for a single “fulfillment”, but for the most complete of all possible fulfillments, a *complete* sense inclusive of an infinite number of lived experiences. And this is just what Mally goes on to say, that actuality is, taken in its totality, a striving to be *completely* brought to life and to make *complete* sense out of itself. But this is a process that has no end point. Mally insists that there are no “things” in actuality that are the “complete” expressions of a set of “incomplete” properties (a *So-Sein*). In making this claim, Mally is reworking a distinction that had been central to Meinong and his own object theory. As Dale Jacquette explains, according to traditional Meinongian ontology, Sherlock Holmes is an “incomplete” object because it makes no sense to ask how many hairs are on his head, but a living human being is “complete” because such factual states of affairs exist in relation to them. But Mally in the *Zauberbuch* denies completeness to any object whatsoever, and he argues that this comports with the latest scientific theories of space-time and quantum physics.<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, this blurring of the line between incomplete and complete objects in relation especially to quantum physics is exactly the direction that Jacquette himself takes Meinongian ontology.<sup>13</sup> For Mally, the fact that actuality never contains complete objects means that any view of the world that is based upon the positing of complete elementary “things” (*Verdinglichung*) is a falsification of the essential nature of actuality.

What then *is* the underlying “substance” behind actuality’s endless striving for sense? Mally argues that there is nothing that is striving for completeness of sense except the striving of actuality itself, whose entire sense is this

---

12. Mally, *Erlebnis und Wirklichkeit*, 100.

13. Jacquette, *Alexius Meinong*, 360–362.

striving. Striving to make sense, actuality makes sense out of itself by being experienced. Striving is therefore its own sense. Striving “grounds” itself, it is its own meaning. This self-grounding striving Mally calls “the absolute spirit”. Here is the full passage following the sentence I have been trying to unpack, whose point, I believe, is that actuality is, at its deepest level, the impulse of “the absolute spirit” to make sense of itself, to be experienced, to be brought to life:

In every intention, actuality is lived through as a striving towards sense. It itself is endowed with sense [*sinnhaft*] and it presages [*vorausnimmt*] in its goal-directedness [*zieml ufig*] a complete fulfillment of sense [*vollkommene Sinnerf llung*] as its final goal. Sense requires out of itself the totality of complete sense. But sense can only be fulfilled completely if it both grounds itself and also grounds its fulfillment. In fact, one may recognize in the first place that the demand [*Forderung*] to ground sense presupposes the sense of that which grounds it and the demand is itself endowed with sense. And second: that we live through [*erleben*] a demand for sense when we live through it most deeply and earnestly, as a demand *for* it, directed towards it, and also a demand *of* it, arising out of it. We experience this demand in its effectivity prior to every sensory-psychical actuality. The demand springs from the effectivity of the complete sense. That is the absolute spirit. It is the source of all the striving for sense on the part of actuality and therefore of actuality itself, which is nothing other than a striving for sense. Also as a striving in its sensory-intuitive form, this striving is always endowed with sense; there is no senseless [*sinnfreie*] perception or sensory quality. There is no senseless materiality, and if one looks at striving as striving apart from its sense, one looks at something that is not actual. Actuality has arisen from the effective nature [*Wirkwesen*] of sense, from the spirit, and every actuality is directed to the totality of fulfilled sense within the encompassing spirit, which is the source and goal of all actuality and is that which is formative in it. In all actuality therefore it is possible to experience [*erfahren*] the divinity of the spirit; in every intention divinity can be lived through [*erlebt*].<sup>14</sup>

The self-grounding of the demand for sense is the absolute spirit, divinity, and the living through [*Erlebnis*] of this demand is, according to Mally, first expressed in myth in the history of the human species. The demand for meaning in myth is felt as a demand for the complete fulfillment of sense,

---

14. Mally, *Erlebnis und Wirklichkeit*, 69.



and therefore myth requires a community for its expression: “Only a community [*Gemeinschaft*] can express religion in the form of cult and myth”.<sup>15</sup> Because myth is the originary expression of the demand for complete sense and because this demand is its own ground and goal, the theme of myth is always the origin of the world of the community’s experience, and this origin is always experienced as meaning-full, as addressing one collectivity of lived intentionalities from another such collectivity, the “gods” or, as Mally puts it, the “powers” [*Mächte*]:

Just as a human countenance meets us with expressiveness, in just this way the original perception perceives everything. Countenance [*Gesicht*] in its double meaning [countenance, something seen] is what everything seen is, voice is what everything heard is, feeling is what every touching is; whatever is to any degree worthy of being noted, is experienced [*erlebt*] in this way.<sup>16</sup>

Mally insists that this mythic form of experience is not a projection of human traits out on to a reality that is, when viewed “objectively”, impersonal. What is expressed in the encounter with lived experience is actuality itself in its striving towards expressivity (we might say, towards *semiosis*):

In each perspective of experience the dynamic, value-based arrangement [*Fügung*] of the spatiotemporal world is experienced by humans, fully and directly and not first “outwardly projected” and then introjected into one’s “subjectivity”. The arrangement is experienced before an Ego is constructed, long before the human being is conscious of his Ego and his lived experience. We experience the dynamic value-laden orientations of up and down, before and behind, right and left, not only in our body but in the world. The way these orientations are coloured with values is barely felt by us, but they were strongly felt by the magical human [*dem magischen Menschen stark fühlbar*].<sup>17</sup>

Every human community ultimately loses touch with the mythic-magical actuality. Religious communities fix lived experience in words and rituals. Expressivity becomes fixed as “things” (*verdinglicht*) rather than experienced as the absolute spirit’s striving towards sense. But the divine cannot be encompassed within any set of properties (*Bestimmungen*) since these always

---

15. Mally, *Erlebnis und Wirklichkeit*, 71.

16. Mally, *Erlebnis und Wirklichkeit*, 12.

17. Mally, *Erlebnis und Wirklichkeit*, 23.

pick out a particular object that is the intentional goal-object of a particular judgment or feeling or wish, but the divine is the *striving* that expresses itself in every goal-directed act of intentionality towards a *completeness* of sense. No set of properties could possibly suffice as the completeness of the divine, since its essential property is to strive to be lived through, which requires, for this striving to be actualized, that there be an infinite number of properties, and also that each property be denied as the final or last one:

There cannot be any pause; we must always be on the way to the totally-other. [...] The properties of the divine are always raised to the infinite, the unconditioned: to the all-good, all-loving, all-powerful, to the fullness of life, to the absolute darkness and emptiness, to the death of the soul. But these are more than properties. From out of them leads the path of negation [*via negationis*]. Every property, even if it is raised to the Unconditioned, is denied.<sup>18</sup>

The expression of the divine within religion is not the only realm where infinite striving stands in permanent conflict with the tendency to reification (*Verdinglichung*). All the fixed forms within every cultural sphere – morality, art, poetry, science, and philosophy – struggle against actuality’s “powers” and will ultimately be overturned. “It is part of the meaning [*Sinn*] of our lives that it does not lie stretched out before us in easy grasp from the outset; we must seek after it endlessly, each time it is found it must be transcended; we can never be content with any single meaning, but in searching for it we are always nonetheless inside meaning [*im Sinn*].”<sup>19</sup> To be “inside meaning” is to be open to that which remains constant within the changing forms of experience, namely the “ur-mythic” event of the direct eruption of sense, the original breakthrough of sense itself into lived experience. This breakthrough is not able to be reduced to this or that particular judgment or feeling or wish or moral obligation or religious idea. It is the breakthrough of the world as such, of space and time as providing the value-laden orientation of all lived experience. “There is nothing that in the strictest sense could be called the space or time of actuality. There is only an effective spatio-temporality which is a manifold of – experienceable [*erlebbare*] – strivings in spatiotemporal forms.”<sup>20</sup> In a section devoted to the cultural sphere of science, Mally, as I have already noted, argues that the most recent discoveries in physics show how science is finally approaching actuality in its

---

18. Mally, *Erlebnis und Wirklichkeit*, 72.

19. Mally, *Erlebnis und Wirklichkeit*, 77.

20. Mally, *Erlebnis und Wirklichkeit*, 97.

dynamic value-laden striving. But only biology can provide an account of how electromagnetic force-fields in space-time are shaped into real unities: “The actual unity is the unity found in the intentionality directed towards an experienced unity of a holistic striving that gathers an amalgam of strivings into a singularity. A spatiotemporal extension is an amalgam [*Gefüge*], but wholeness [*Gestalt*] and unity are only found as the expression and unfolding of a striving-amalgam [*Strebnungsgefüges*].”<sup>21</sup> The “striving-amalgam” unity is *alive* and can only be an object of cognition to the degree that it is *lived through* (*erlebt*) as an expression of the absolute spirit’s striving. “Physics leads us sooner or later to metaphysics.”<sup>22</sup>

In all of actuality’s strivings on the part of incomplete objects for completeness, an agential, creative force comes into appearance. This force sometimes bears the form of a human person, sometimes it bears the form of a non-human personhood that addresses itself to the human. Since language is a feature of a human community and not of a single individual, Mally further argues, a human community also must bear the form of a striving with the character of personal agency. Each language is the expression of a particular human community, and each community gives shape to itself in its language and its myths. In its language, a community sees itself as a “person”. Like a species, a “person” is not an object that can be completely described in a set of propositions:

The essential meaning of personhood [*Persönlichkeit*] is not to be an object [*Gegenstand*] of judgments; judgments are not correct if they are ascribed to personhood in its unmediated and authentic form. [...] Personhood is not something that one is required to establish firmly in its place; rather, it is something one must experience and bring to fulfillment. [...] Personhood is spirit that fulfills itself in the body-soul of the person, in strivings and developments of itself, according to a rule, but giving itself (or choosing for itself) its own rule, always giving itself a new origin and a new decision, even if it seems already to have achieved success.<sup>23</sup>

Personhood is the kind of object that reveals the self-shaping character of actuality’s striving for completeness. What is important for our purposes is to note that personhood, for Mally, transcends the “body-soul of the person”, and thus he implies that personhood is capable of a continuing form

---

21. Mally, *Erlebnis und Wirklichkeit*, 120.

22. Mally, *Erlebnis und Wirklichkeit*, 117.

23. Mally, *Erlebnis und Wirklichkeit*, 104.

of subsistence even beyond the “fulfillment” (this is a technical term for Mally’s intensional logic, referring to a variable that instantiates a function). Mally does not in fact pursue the possibility of afterlife “fulfillments” of an individual’s personhood in his *Zauberbuch*, but it is explicitly pursued in the work of Findlay, as I will presently explain.

### John Niemeyer Findlay

In 1932 a twenty-nine year old South African of British and German descent named John Niemeyer Findlay travelled to Graz to study under Ernst Mally and complete a book, for which Findlay received his doctorate in philosophy from Graz in 1934, on Meinong’s philosophy. Findlay’s book was published under the title *Meinong’s Theory of Objects and Values*.<sup>24</sup> Findlay’s book remains an essential part of any Meinong bibliography even today. The Meinongian philosopher Dale Jacquette describes Findlay’s book as a “remarkable commentary”.<sup>25</sup> Findlay went on to produce a number of important scholarly monographs on Plato (c. 428–c. 348 BCE) and Hegel and quite a few independent works of philosophy, his two most well-known being *The Discipline of the Cave* and *The Transcendence of the Cave*,<sup>26</sup> the Gifford Lectures at the University of St. Andrews for the winter term of 1964–1965 and 1965–1966. Like Mally, Findlay is credited with creating a subbranch of logic, in Findlay’s case “tense logic”, the logic of temporal propositions. After teaching in New Zealand and Natal, South Africa, Findlay taught at the University of London from 1951 to 1966, after which he came to the United States and taught at the University of Texas at Austin for one year and then finished his career as the Clark Professor of Moral Philosophy and Metaphysics at Yale University. Besides his independent work as a philosopher and historian of philosophy, Findlay was an able translator, giving us the English version of Husserl’s two-volume masterwork, *Logical Investigations*.<sup>27</sup>

The second volume of his Gifford Lectures offers a full-fledged “mystical geography” in a chapter titled “The Life of God”. To a large degree, Findlay is expanding upon Mally’s *Zauberbuch*. Mally himself fell into disrepute after the Second World War because, from at least 1933 when Findlay was studying with him in Graz, he had begun to display an interest in the *völkisch* “Weltauffassung” that was gaining ground in German-speaking lands at that time. Mally did finally embrace Nazi race concepts, joining

---

24. Findlay, *Meinong’s Theory of Objects and Values*.

25. Jacquette, *Alexius Meinong*, 370.

26. John Niemeyer Findlay, *The Discipline of the Cave*, London 1966; John Niemeyer Findlay, *The Transcendence of the Cave*, London 1967.

27. Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, London 1970.

the National Socialist German Workers' Party in 1938 and soon thereafter writing a proposal for a revision of the university curriculum with a decided focus on race.<sup>28</sup> Findlay, I would speculate, associates his ideas with those of Meinong rather than Mally in order to distance himself from his teacher's political views. Finally, in his later works, Findlay allows himself to draw explicitly from a variety of sources, ranging from Plotinus (c. 205–270) to Sanskrit scriptures.

In a short book, *Psyche and Cerebrum*, that was delivered as the Thomas Aquinas Lecture at Marquette University, Findlay makes a point that is at the centre of his book *The Transcendence of the Cave*. He writes: "Of all the riddles of the world, those which attend our involvement with brains are among the most intractable."<sup>29</sup> Findlay goes on to argue, briefly but quite convincingly, that the "psyche" is irreducible to the cerebellum and the cortex, however marvelously intricate may be their structure. His argument rests primarily on the capacity of the psyche to improvise new ways of thinking about the world. "The German idealists", Findlay explains, "attributed properties which they called 'infinity' and 'absolute negativity' to the conscious person: such a person could never be committed to anything wholly definite or finite, but could always revise itself further."<sup>30</sup> This is exactly what Mally says about "personhood", although he does not pursue his point about the relation with infinity that Findlay will, namely towards a theory of the afterlife. Findlay, in his short lecture, compares the reductionist view of conscious life, the one that claims a perfect isomorphism and dependence between consciousness and neuronal activity, a "philosophy of the cerebrum in more senses than one". What he means is that reductionism is itself the product of our attempt to adapt ourselves to the vast complexity of the world, a product of our attempt to simplify experience so that we seem to live "in a world of remote objects, all fully interpreted, which stand over against our subjectivity without needing to give us the sensations in which subject and object meet, and in which both what is in us and what transcends us are felt as in unity and not separated by a gulf". The philosophy of the cerebrum is a philosophy that attends only to the remote objects presented before consciousness for its ease of response and its adaptative success in a threatening world. Such a view of the world is what Findlay likens to Plato's cave: "On the whole it is arguable that if we live in a cave, seeing only broken and puzzling reflections of being, that cave is the cerebrum."<sup>31</sup>

---

28. Werner Sauer, "Mally als NS-Philosoph", in Alexander Hieke (ed.), *Ernst Mally: Versuch Einer Neubewertung*, Sankt Augustin 1998, 167–191.

29. John Niemeyer Findlay, *Psyche and Cerebrum*, Milwaukee, MN 1972, 4–5.

30. Findlay, *Psyche and Cerebrum*, 29.

31. Findlay, *Psyche and Cerebrum*, 32–33.

This takes us directly to the theory of the afterlife as it is developed in Findlay's major philosophical work, *The Transcendence of the Cave*. But, before turning to this theory, let me present a foretaste of Findlay's theory in this summation of it provided in *Psyche and Cerebrum*:

To what do these reflections finally tend? To the suggestion that there may be forms of conscious being-in-the-world [...] which do not require mediation by all those infinitely elaborate mechanisms found in the cerebrum and characteristic of "our present state". They will be forms of conscious being in which we do not have to strike a compromise with the scrofulous tenantry who now make up our bodies. [...] Bodies we shall have, no doubt, having some of the features of our present bodies, and in them and through them we shall show ourselves to other beings similarly embodied, and act and be acted on by them and by an environment which will serve as a common background to us all, but these bodies and their common environment will have some traits of the imaginary as well as the compulsively real. [...] But as we progress up the scale, corporeality will be attenuated to a mere reminiscence, to the *commensurationes* with body which, according to Thomas [Aquinas, c. 1225–1274], attend upon and lend individuality to even the most disembodied spirituality.<sup>32</sup>

This is a pretty remarkable affirmation of life after death for a rather sober-minded Yale professor of philosophy who bases his affirmation on a Meinongian realism about the nature of consciousness and its objects.

In *Transcendence of the Cave* Findlay begins with five lectures that cover the most generous possible theorization of what human conscious life is able to attain within the limits of the assumption that conscious life is tied to the embodied existence as we know it in "our present state". This theorization unfolds the Kantian conception of a universe in which the world's messy contingencies are able to be accommodated within the intelligible bounds of rational order, a rational order that is fundamentally attuned with the conditions of possibility of our consciousness. This Kantian rationalism is hardly the same thing as the "philosophy of the cerebrum" that Findlay dismisses in *Psyche and Cerebrum*, but it bears a deep family resemblance with it. The way that the cerebrum presents consciousness with already interpreted sensory input parallels Immanuel Kant's (1724–1804) notion about how the forms of space and time and the categories of the understanding give rational order to the intuitions presented by the senses. Findlay argues that

---

32. Findlay, *Psyche and Cerebrum*, 36–37.

the world as we experience it in our waking lives does, in fact, make sense and is intelligible to us. The mind has a capacity for bringing order to the welter of sensory data, organizing it into higher and higher order levels of abstraction. Being a (moderate) Meinongian, Findlay argues that intentional objects of higher order levels of abstraction “enjoy a bracketed, intentional inexistence”.<sup>33</sup> In a nicely worded summary Findlay writes:

The common life of the mind consists, therefore, in seeing the particularities of personal and environmental existence in lights that are universal and common as among objects, and likewise universal and common as among thinking persons, and it consists, further, in the use of these lights, by way of the words which give them a seeming thinghood, for the setting up, the hypostasis, of an endless hierarchy of abstractions, which preside, like a panel of magistrates, in their public majesty, even when what falls under their jurisdiction is variable and altogether lacking.<sup>34</sup>

Modern philosophy of mind has largely concerned itself, whether in the Anglo-American or Continental traditions, with providing a taxonomy of the “endless hierarchy of abstractions” that lay down the law to our unruly and untidy encounters with the world, attempting to ascertain their origins and the scope of their rights. Because Findlay is essentially Meinongian in his philosophical predilections, he is quite generous when it comes to granting to all of the mind’s creations a claim to some legitimacy, even if they are objects with no possible toehold in the spatiotemporal world. In all of the mind’s intentionalities Findlay finds a common root: “The basic endeavor of the mind to burst the springs of its merely personal subjectivity, and to achieve understandings with its fellows concerning the common world which compulsively confronts them all.” This endeavour, Findlay claims, “is nothing other than the thinking mind itself”. We may certainly hear echoes of Ernst Mally’s claim that the striving for meaning is itself “the absolute spirit”. As Findlay puts it, “the eternal life of thought is its own end”.<sup>35</sup>

The book I am discussing is titled *The Transcendence of the Cave*. Everything that I have so far said about the life of the mind, its creative power of intentionality to be directed towards objects of greater and greater abstraction or, when fused with our emotional being, to relate itself to valuations of higher and higher degree (freedom, love, happiness, and so on), all of

---

33. Findlay, *The Transcendence of the Cave*, 46.

34. Findlay, *The Transcendence of the Cave*, 46.

35. Findlay, *The Transcendence of the Cave*, 55.

this represents the mind's operations within the cave. Findlay argues that religion reveals the endeavour of the mind to finally "burst the springs of its merely personal subjectivity" and reach beyond the cave to an object that is no longer merely "common" to a number of personal minds, but is the point where the distinction between personal and common disappears. The object of religious veneration, properly understood, is just what would once and for all dissolve the differences between personal subjectivities, precisely because it answers to what every distinct subjectivity as a thinking being is seeking in every one of its intentional objects: reality, permanence, excellence, in the highest possible degree. No object within the cave can be a point where thinking stops, where everything else within the cave is fully grasped, every detail given its place and meaning, and every moment in time its direction and fulfillment. Rather than take this as an argument in favour of the groundlessness of existence, Findlay affirms the possibility that the life of the mind within the cave is not the final form of the life of the mind.

It may seem as if Findlay is merely making the existence of religious veneration of an absolutely perfect being into evidence for the possibility that the object of such veneration really exists, and then, repeating Anselm of Canterbury's (c. 1033–1109) ontological argument, concluding that such an object *must necessarily exist* since it is, as the mind necessarily conceives of it, the apex of all the mind's strivings, possessing all the perfections, including reality. In fact, Findlay spends a good deal of time defending Anselm's ontological argument for the necessary existence of an object answering to the mind's concept of perfection. It should not surprise us that a Meinongian philosopher would not wish to merely dismiss Anselm's ontological argument, since this would mean denying objective existence (mind-independent existence) to the one intentional object that includes *necessity of existence* as its salient characteristic. If this intentional object is merely a figment of the mind lacking all mind-independent reality, then no mind-independent object exists except contingently. This is a conclusion that Kant accepted, as Findlay points out. For Kant, "the idea of God, necessary existence included, is a flawless transcendental ideal in whose noumenal reality we can have good practical reasons to believe".<sup>36</sup> But the idea of God, of a necessary being who is the apex of the mind's striving for meaning and value, cannot really be the goal of the mind's striving if there is no real object to which the idea corresponds. Kant's solution, dividing phenomenal contingencies from a noumenal hoped-for necessary reality, leaves the mind's strivings trapped inside the cave. As Franz Kafka (1883–1924) is said to have quipped, "there is

---

36. Findlay, *The Transcendence of the Cave*, 85.



an infinite amount of hope, only not for us”. Findlay finds in Meinongian intensional logic the resources to counter the Kantian dilemma where what humans most specially hope for cannot possibly exist.

Findlay says that the Kantian dilemma underlies modern extensional logic, the logic of Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell, the logic that Meinong rejected. Frege and Russell argued that the predicate “exists” only holds true for an object to which a general description (“the first president of the United States”) might possibly apply. The key word is “possibly”. A general description that *must* apply to a certain object (or to no object) is either a tautology (“the pink elephant that is pink”) that is true about what it describes (“the pink elephant”) whether it exists or not, or it is a contradiction (“the pink elephant that is not pink”) which cannot be true of what it describes, whether it exists or not. Thus, “the perfect being is a being that necessarily exists” seems to be a mere tautology, asserting what is true about the perfect being whether that being exists or not. But in a Meinongian intensional logic, “the perfect being” as the object of religious veneration must have a mind-independent reality precisely because the mind necessarily strives towards it (intends it) by virtue of not finding it among the things that contingently exist (might not exist). Underlying this Meinongian logic is the assumption that there is an infinity of intentional objects (since the fact that something is an intentional object can itself be the object of an intentional act). Therefore, intentionality itself is infinite, which means that the mind’s striving towards a non-contingent perfect being can be directed towards a real object, the goal of its infinite striving. Meinongian logic begins with an object and then asks whether an intentional act can be directed towards it, and what kind of act that is. The perfect object is precisely the goal towards which the infinite striving of intentionality is directed, what Mally called “the absolute spirit”, and Findlay called more simply “the religious absolute”. It is true that the perfect object, the religious absolute, would be in some sense beyond infinity, but this is in fact how religious veneration frequently understands God, and it also has an exact analogue in the Cantorian mathematics of transfinite numbers, as Findlay explains:

Each case of some value or form of excellence may be capable of being surpassed by some other case, but something which is *not* a case of this value or form of excellence, but this very value or form of excellence itself, can very well be said to “surpass” all its cases, inasmuch as it is the general possibility and foundation of them all. [...] It surpasses them much as  $\aleph_0$ , number of the finite inductive cardinals, surpasses all those

finite inductive cardinals, among which it is not to be found, but *of* which it is none the less the number.<sup>37</sup>

Cantor himself believed that his proof of the existence of the transfinite cardinal  $\aleph_0$  was evidence that the mathematical mind's striving to grasp the nature of the infinite since the time of Zeno (c. 495–c. 430 BCE) was all along directed towards a mind-independent actual infinity. In like manner, Findlay argues that the religious mind's striving to grasp the nature of an unsurpassably perfect being combining all excellences can be viewed as evidence of the existence of such a being, so long as existence is not something we grant only to particular cases of an excellence but to the “form of excellence itself”, to use Findlay's Platonic phrasing. But such a form of existence, one that does not merely apply to a case falling under a general description, is impossible in the extensional logic of Frege and Russell (and most exponents of modern analytic philosophy). Findlay is not the only modern philosopher to defend a Meinongian intensional logic, but he is the only one to take it into the territory of the soul's post-mortem existence. Like Plato in the *Phaedo* and the *Republic*, Findlay argues that it would make no sense if the epistemic striving of the embodied mind had no hope of reaching closer to its intended objects than the particulars it encounters within the “cave” of this-worldly life:

The great inversion of Platonism, whereby characters take ontological precedence over instances, has a deep and liberating hold upon our view of the world: it substitutes [...] the lucid and the graspable for the everlastingly obscure and elusive. Individuals there may well be, and we may at times indicate them with our physical fingers or hold them in our physical hands, but all that our minds can lay hold of in them is irremediably characteristic and universal. The great inversion is, however, unacceptable unless we can carry it further, relating the characters thus distinguished to a mind that embraces them and unites them, and which employs its intentions, not so much to mediate transcendent references to instances, as to put before itself ideal objects which exactly correspond to the scope of its intentions.<sup>38</sup>

I do not have time here to do justice to the lectures in which Findlay lays out the basic structure of the “noetic cosmos” that rests upon the foundation of the Meinongian-Anselmian ontological proof of the possible existence of

---

37. Findlay, *The Transcendence of the Cave*, 92.

38. Findlay, *The Transcendence of the Cave*, 153.

a religious absolute. In these lectures Findlay, using all the resources of his training in analytic philosophy and logic, updates the metaphysics of Plato and Plotinus to provide what is probably the most coherent modern defense of this tradition that one can find or is ever likely to find, given the temper of most departments of philosophy in the world today. But a sketch of his theory of the afterlife in the lecture titled “The Life of the Soul” is in order before I conclude my essay with some final words about the overarching differences between the two works that I have been focused on, Mally’s *Zauberbuch* and Findlay’s *Transcendence of the Cave*.

Central to Findlay’s account of the afterlife is the distinction between the personal and the impersonal. This distinction is one that Meinong developed in his major work from 1917, *On Emotional Presentation*.<sup>39</sup> Findlay introduced this theory in an early lecture of *Transcendence of the Cave* (“The Realm of Values and Disvalues”), but he had also devoted two books to this topic.<sup>40</sup> The personal corresponds to the particular valuations characteristic of each individual, determined by his or her unique psychology and perspective, but the impersonal is the objective value towards which personal values can point. The life of the soul, Findlay argues, is a process of movement from the personal towards the impersonal, but not at the cost of the disappearance of subjectivity. To be sure, each personal subjectivity will cease to be divided so profoundly from the other as it is in its embodied, this-worldly existence:

This-world contingencies will dissolve as such, but the interpersonal, aesthetic, intellectual, moral and other deposit they leave behind them will become richer and richer: in the end these alone will be informed by essential zeal, and all else will be done only for them. The process is nigh inevitable, and only extraordinary accidents or deeply ingrained perversities of attitude can resist it effectively: we fall more and more out of love with this world and more and more in love with what is yonder. [...] The innumerable damned whose wills are fixed at death in drear postures of evil are happily an unwarranted fantasy.<sup>41</sup>

I should like to end my presentation of Findlay’s theory of the afterlife on this happy note. Reading Findlay’s *Transcendence of the Cave* can be a somewhat jarring experience, on the whole. He writes beautifully, and in many places his prose stands up against the best of Ralph Waldo Emerson

---

39. Alexius Meinong, *On Emotional Presentation*, Evanston 1972.

40. Findlay, *Meinong’s Theory of Objects and Values*; John Niemeyer Findlay, *Values and Intentions: A Study in Value-Theory and Philosophy of Mind*, London 1961.

41. Findlay, *The Transcendence of the Cave*, 177.

(1803–1882). But Findlay does not, like Emerson, hope to win one over to his vision by the power of language alone. There are serious arguments being advanced in *Transcendence of the Cave*, as I hope my discussion of the Meinongian reconstruction of Anselm’s ontological argument makes clear. And this is the source of the jarring impression that one gets while reading the book. The mystical has become logical. But I believe that this is Findlay’s intention. He rightly senses that the mystical element might easily come to predominate, the end result of which would be to throw a vague and nebulous shroud over the world’s imperfections and injustices. This is a danger that I fear Mally’s *Zauberbuch* falls victim to. I would like to borrow from the history of post-Hegelian thought and say that Mally and Findlay represent Right Meinongianism and Left Meinongianism respectively. Mally is convinced that the *Volk* have it within themselves to create in this world a politics of mystical ecstasy, of the loss of their separate personhoods in the larger personhood of the nation. Mally, unlike Findlay, does not imagine that this world can be so profoundly out of alignment with the transcendental world that it needs to be altogether repudiated rather than swooningly embraced. Mally could never have written these words in which Findlay roundly chastises the “Anglo-Saxon idealists” like Francis Herbert Bradley (1846–1924) or Bernard Bosanquet (1848–1923) whom Findlay otherwise holds in considerable esteem:

What we have been saying has been in a distant way said by many late nineteenth century Anglo-Saxon idealists with their belief in a single, seamless “Reality”, the subject of all judgments, all of whose nuances were “internally related”. Only, if we may so put it, they sought absolute unity where it is not truly to be found, in the phenomena of this dirempted, alienated sphere, and their absolute reality accordingly assumed the painful form of a vastly extended total system, a sort of cosmic British Empire, with members bound together by strict Victorian causal determinism, beribboned with a few superadded links of sentimental teleology.<sup>42</sup>

I would like to conclude, then, by suggesting that what I have called Findlay’s “Left Meinongianism” fits perfectly within the paradigm of a counter-biopolitics that Mårten Björk has described in his study of the theory of immortality in Germany during the first half of the twentieth century. Björk has identified a consistent refusal on the part of a number of German and German-Jewish thinkers to reduce psyche to cerebrum, as

---

42. Findlay, *The Transcendence of the Cave*, 212.

Findlay puts it. What Björk says about the view of life these thinkers held is true for Mally and Findlay as well: “Life, as something curved into itself, is a factual phenomenon that has its own survival as horizon. Life can, from this perspective, only be said to have meaning beyond survival if the human creature opens itself to the domain of being that exists outside the parameters of biological and factual existence.”<sup>43</sup> I hope that my study of Mally and Findlay has contributed another chapter to the contestation with a merely factual view of life that emerges out of Germany, this time in the context of Alexius Meinong’s heirs, Ernst Mally and John Niemeyer Findlay. By examining these two thinkers together, we can see clearly how a politics centred on a mystagogue can mold a theory of “life outside life” as Björk calls into a theory where the “cave” has become an empire (or *Reich*) unto itself. ▲

#### SUMMARY

Two of the most influential theories to emerge in German thought before the First World War were the object theory (*Gegenstandstheorie*) of Alexius Meinong and the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. Both theories descend from the work of their teacher, the Austrian psychologist and philosopher Franz Brentano. In this essay I focus on object theory, although a similar story can be told about the development of phenomenology. I will explore the way that Meinong’s object theory provided the foundation for a realist account of the afterlife as a form of personal conscious existence in a realm of transcendental intentional objects. The philosophers who develop this account of the afterlife are Ernst Mally and John Niemeyer Findlay, Mally’s student. Mally provides the theoretical groundwork for a theory of the afterlife, and Findlay gives the theory its full-fledged exposition. Both philosophers base their work on Alexius Meinong’s intensional logic, the heart of object theory. My presentation of their views is intended to provide a glimpse into a relatively unstudied aspect of modern philosophy, what could be called the logic of the afterlife.

---

43. Mårten Björk, *Life Outside Life: The Politics of Immortality, 1914–1945*, Gothenburg 2018, 376.