

# Solving the paradox of non-existence in ontology, a naturalist social ontology

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📍 Room 14

⌚ 14:00-14:30

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# Introduction

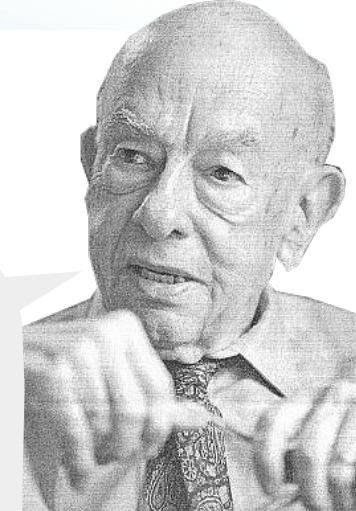
## What is Ontology ?

A curious thing about the ontological problem is its simplicity.  
It can be put in three Anglo-Saxon monosyllables:  
“What is there?”

It can be answered, moreover, in a word : “**Everything**”

and everyone will accept this answer as true. However, this is merely to say that there is what there is.

There remains room for **disagreement over cases**; and so the issue has stayed alive down the centuries



**Quine**, “On what there is”, Review of Metaphysics (1948)

# Introduction

## What is Meta-Ontology ?

### Meta-Ontological Questions

“What are we asking when we ask “what is there?” “

Van Inwagen, “Meta-ontology” (1998)

+ What do we presuppose when we use the concept of “existence” ? (my question)

### An Epistemology of Ontology

Are there criteria to distinguish existence from non-existence ?

If  $x$  doesn't exist, then why can we mention it ?

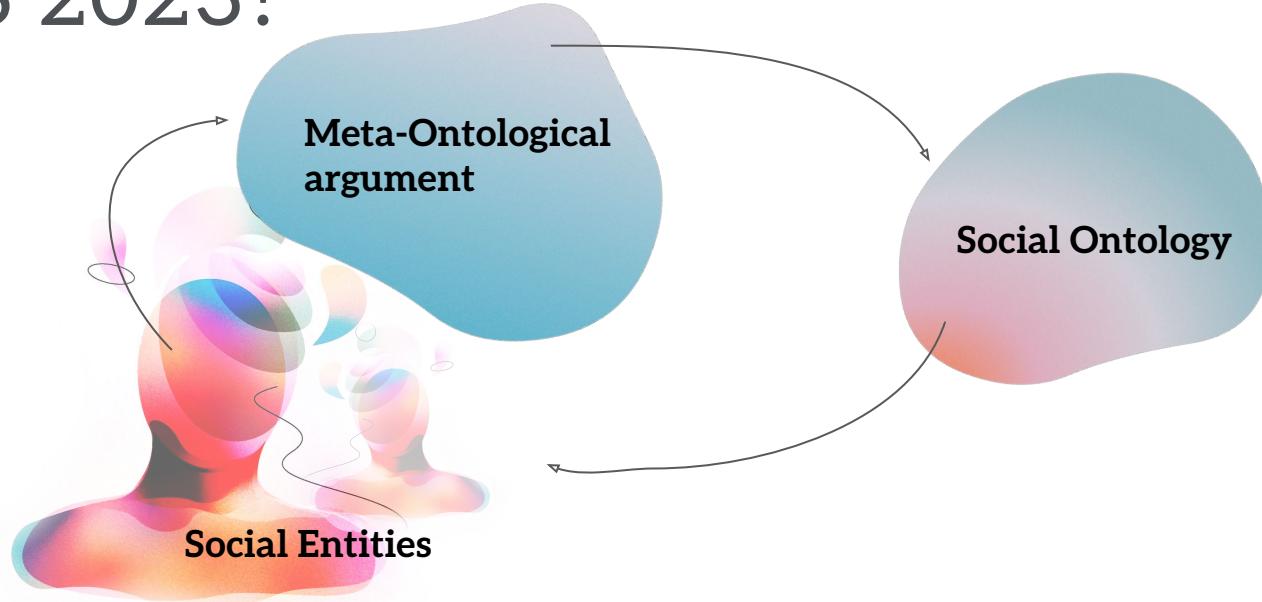
### Social Ontology

Includes basic entities and properties studied by social sciences

Example: do Phlogiston, Genders and Races exist ? If so, What are they ?

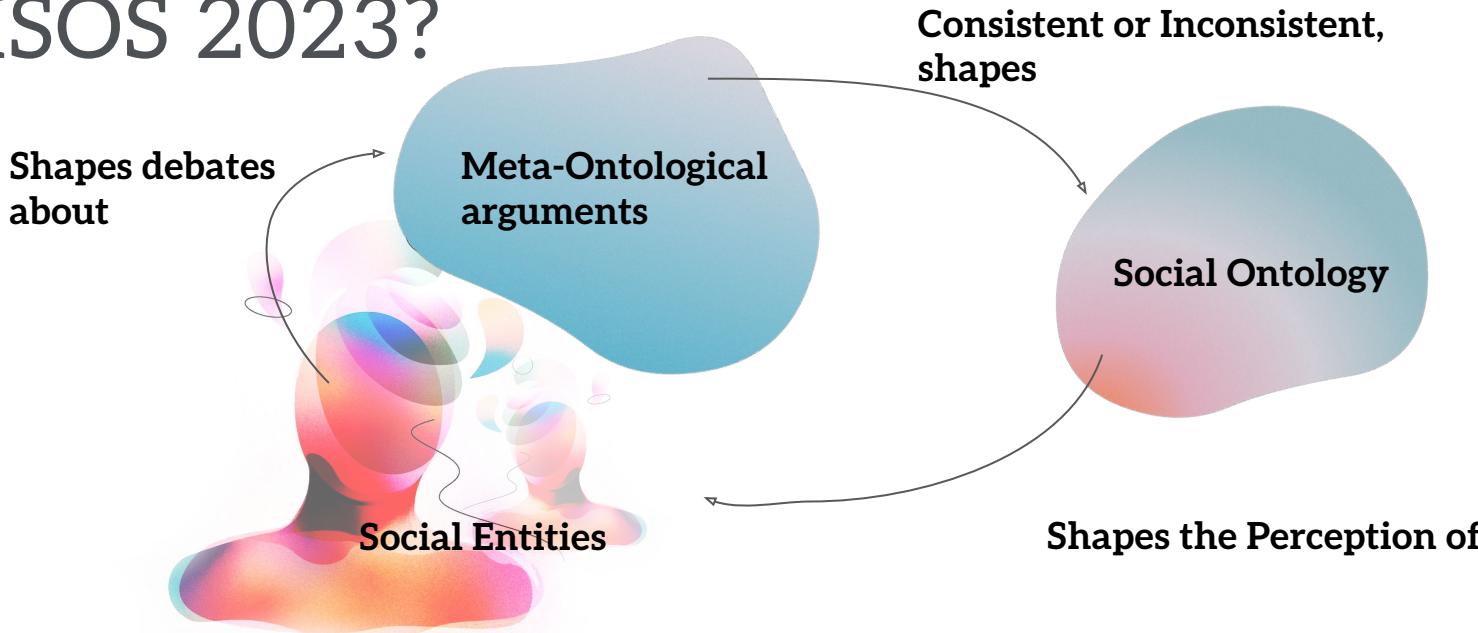
# Introduction

## Why Meta-Ontology is interesting here at ISOS 2023?



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**Self Reference** : referring to oneself or one's own attributes, characteristics, or actions.

**Self-Referentially Consistent** : Non-contradiction when something refers back to itself.

**Self-Referentially Inconsistent** : contradiction when something refers back to itself.

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## Goals

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Develop a meta-ontological argument  
about “non-existent beings”, which solves ontology

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Review consequences of both  
on some social artifacts  
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WHY ?

Combine it with a metaphysical view  
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Accept that all perceptions  
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## Goals

1

Solve the problem of existence and being

**WHY ?**

2

Accept that all perceptions  
(including abstractions) belong to  
nature

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Analyze the consequences  
on social concepts

# The paradox of non-existence in ontology

## Contents

1. Ontology, the Meinong-Russell controversy
2. A Naturalist argument against Meinong and Russell's view
3. Consequences for social ontology

# 1. The Meinong-Russell controversy

# The Meinong-Russell controversy

Led to

Emergence of Modal Metaphysics  
to avoid Self-Referential Inconsistency



influenced

B. Russell  
R. Chisholm  
G. Priest  
R. Routley  
E. Zalta  
  
...

L. Wittgenstein  
R. Carnap  
W. Quine  
K. Gödel  
S. Kripke  
H. Putnam, ...

influenced

**Self Referentiality :** referring to oneself or one's own attributes, characteristics, or actions.  
**Self-Referential Consistency :** Non-contradiction when something refers back to itself.

# The Meinong-Russell controversy

## The Theory of Objects by Meinong

	Pure Object (Außersein)					
Logic	Non Contradictory				Contradictory	
Type	Complete		Incomplete			
Status	Being				Non-existence	
Sub-Status	Exists	Subsists				
Kinds of Objects	Concrete	Abstract	Ideal	Possible	Fictional	Impossible
Examples	This red apple with a diameter of 5 centimeters, weighs 200 grams from a specific region.	The concept of an apple.	The biggest apple in the world.	A possible apple of unknown color	The golden mountain of apples	An existent and non-existent apple

# The Meinong-Russell controversy

Meinong's doesn't apply constraints on existence, so he can **describe everything we can think about** : "Pegasus" is, but doesn't exist.



He was hostile to the Prejudice in favor of reality :

The prejudice in favor of reality that I have repeatedly called to attention leads here to a dilemma which seems to be quite illuminating and which is, nevertheless, basically very singular. [...] : either the Object to which cognition is directed exists in reality or it exists solely "in my idea" (more briefly, it "pseudo-exists").



**Meinong, *The Theory of Objects*, 1904 (p. 96)**

# The Meinong-Russell controversy

Russell applies constraints on existence, so he can distinguish **entities in language, referring to facts from non-referring entities** : “Pegasus” doesn’t exist in reality as it doesn’t refer to a fact.

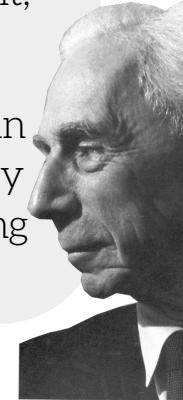
**He was hostile to the existence of false propositions :**

There seems to me something about the fact that “Today is Tuesday” on a different level of reality from the supposition “That to Truth and falsehood are thus no longer treated as indefinitely simple properties of propositions.

Instead they are understood as properties of judgments, definable in terms of the correspondence of such items with facts: a judgment is true, if there is a fact corresponding to it, and false in the absence of a corresponding fact day is Wednesday”.

When I speak of the proposition “That today is Wednesday” I do not mean the occurrence in future of a state of mind in which you think it is Wednesday, but I am talking about the theory that there is something quite logical, something not involving mind in any way; and such a thing as that **I do not think you can take a false proposition to be**.

**Russell, Philosophy of Logical Atomism, 1918 (p. 196)**



# The Meinong-Russell controversy

Russell's 3 conditions for something to exist + ontological nihilism about fictions:

Russell's Examples	1. Existence	2. Uniqueness	3. Predication	Proposition :
The Capital of Sweden is pretty	T	T	T	T
The Capital of England is pretty	T	T	F	F
The Capital of Holland is pretty	T	F	T	F
<b>The Capital of Lilliput is pretty</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>T</b>	<b>T</b>	<b>F</b>

# The Meinong-Russell controversy



Meinong treated non-real cognitive entities as subsistent or non-existent beings:  
They are, but lack Existence.



Russell was nihilist about fictions, non-existents, and reductionist about cognitive entities in his logical atomism.

They did not really have a view on social entities.

What if cognitive entities and social entities exist ?

# 2. A Naturalist argument against Meinong and Russell's view

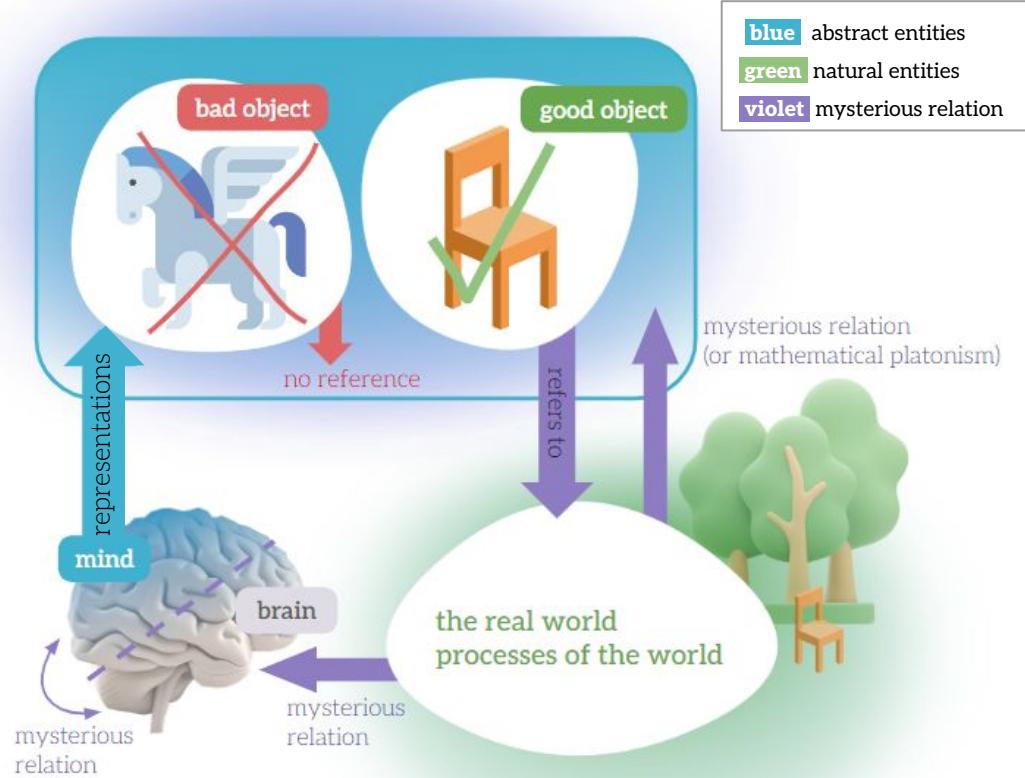
# A Naturalist argument against Meinong and Russell's view

The best of both worlds:  
Describe **any entity** and have  
**constraints**

From Realisms to Naturalism :  
**Realism**



(Meinong)



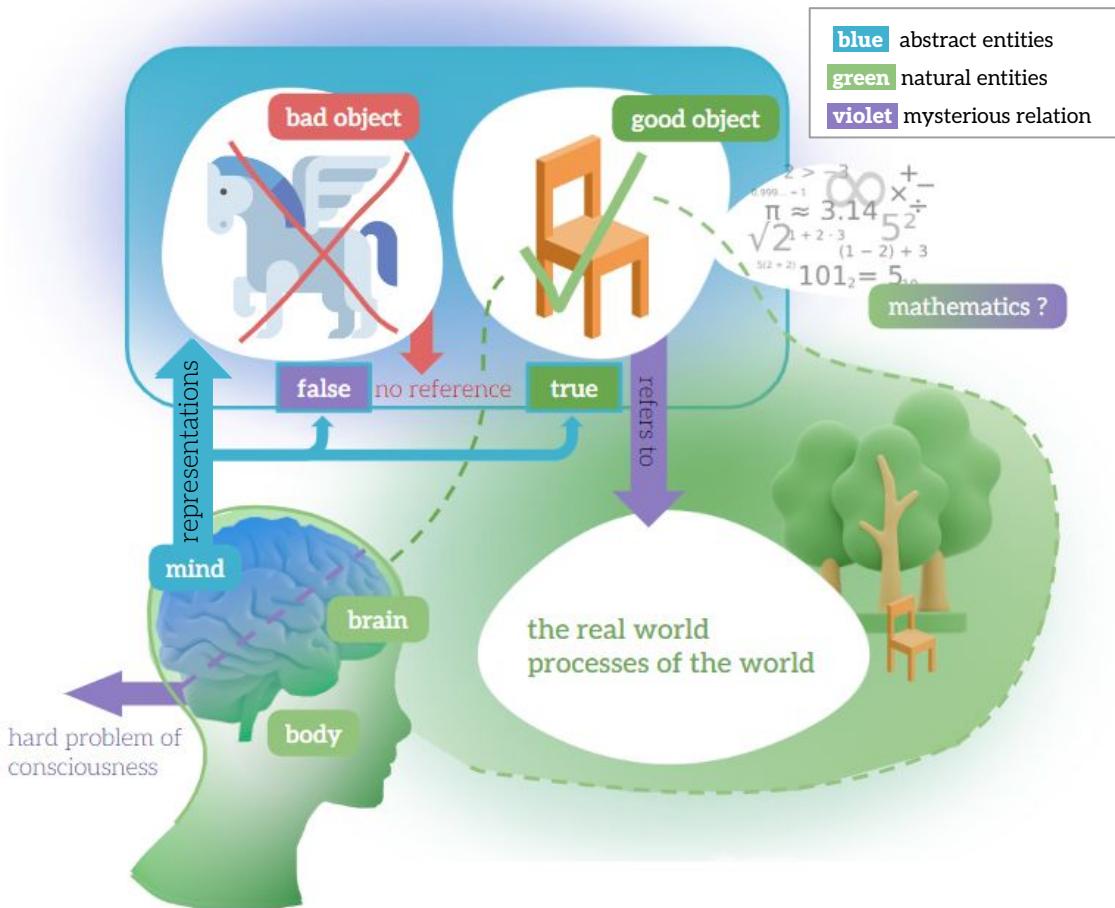
# A Naturalist argument against Meinong and Russell's view

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**Realism AND Naturalism**



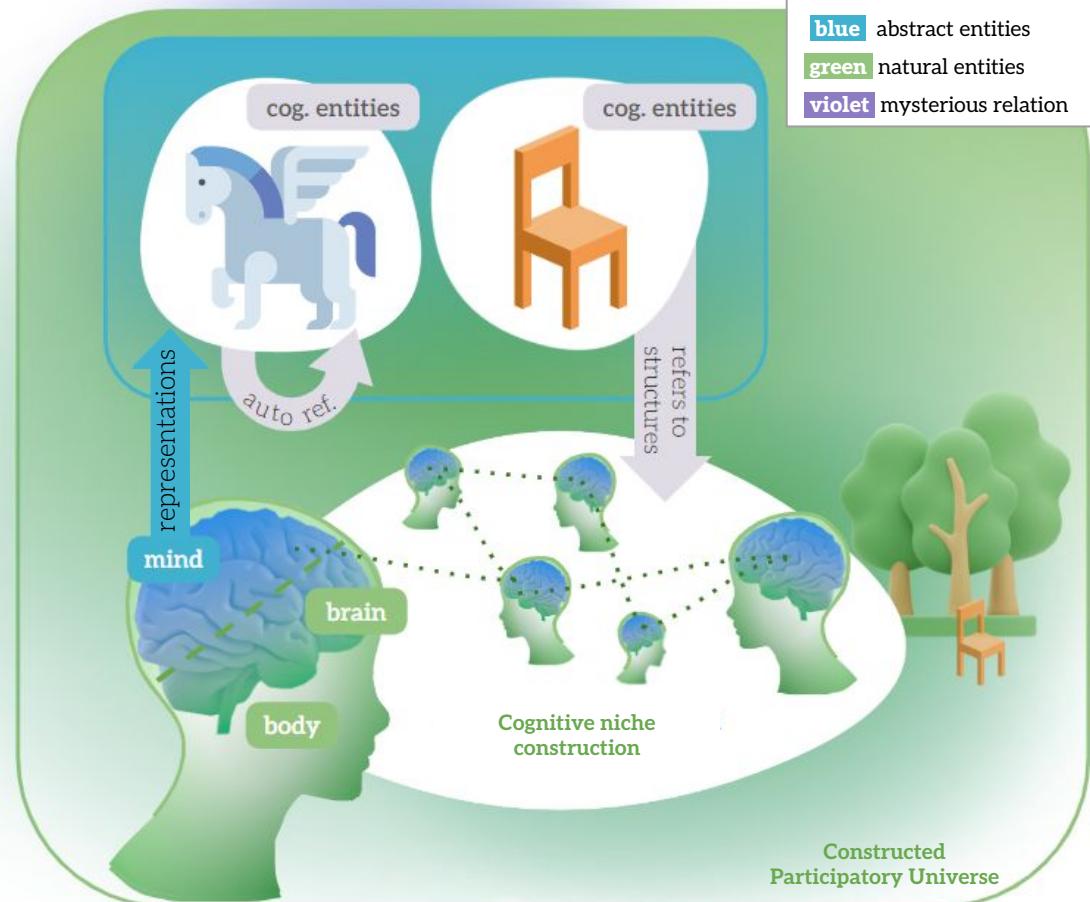
(Russell)



# A Naturalist argument against Meinong and Russell's view

The best of both worlds:  
Describe **any entity** and have  
**constraints** :  
**Participatory Universe**

From Realisms to Naturalism :  
**Naturalism**



# A Naturalist argument against Meinong and Russell's view

## Consequences

1. Existence seems “trivial” in naturalism but it may have a political impact.
2. Whatever you can think of exist. But does it do what is promises ?
3. If something exist, it doesn't mean you have to believe it.  
(Reinterpreting Quine: ~~ontological~~ axiological commitment)
4. Phlogiston, genders and races : they exist and have a social impact.

# A Naturalist argument against Meinong and Russell's view

## Consequences

1. Realism is not fundamental due to Self-Referential Inconsistency...
2. ... but Naturalism is Self-Referentially Consistent.
3. Subject/Object: not a fundamental distinction, but it exists and is useful.
4. We may think about Reality in a new way :  
Pluralist, Participatory, Processual Reality ? (work in progress)

# 3. Consequences for social ontology

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If Phlogiston, Genders and Races exist,  
why does it matter ? few examples

**Do not forget : Existence does not imply scientificity !**

# Consequences for social ontology

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why does it matter ?

Phlogiston : useful for epistemology,  
without it, no Oxygen theory

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If Phlogiston, Genders and Races exist,  
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Gender is a useful concept to describe how people  
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It is a social construct that is empirically studied.

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It is a social construct that is empirically studied.

Racialist concepts pragmatically exist as they produce  
inequalities, even though they were proved wrong by Genetics  
(no essential DNA is correlated with skin colour)

**Do not forget : Existence does not imply scientificity !**

# Conclusion

1. Existence is in all things : it is not trivial as saying that something exists has pragmatic consequences.
2. Naturalism allows existence for cognitive and social entities, thus, it allows itself as a framework.
3. We can study how these entities exist and produce new entities.
4. We can try integrating Processual, Pluralist, Participatory or even Structural Realism *inside* this Naturalism.

# Sources

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# Thank you !

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# QUESTIONS

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