

MCGINN ON NON-EXISTENT OBJECTS AND REDUCING MODALITY

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In the preface to *Logical Properties*, McGinn writes: “The general theme of the book is a kind of realist anti-naturalism about logical properties. My tendency is to take logical notions at face value, rather than trying to reduce them to something else.” (p. vi) The five notions discussed in the book, each with its own chapter, are identity, existence, predication, necessity, and truth. McGinn’s anti-reductionism seems to me right for identity, existence, and predication. The case of truth, I think, is more complicated than McGinn allows because there are different notions of truth depending on what the truthmakers are taken to be, and how they are individuated; I won’t be discussing truth here. The case of necessity is where I have my sharpest disagreement with McGinn. I do not believe that necessity *de re*, which for McGinn is the central case, should be classified as logical at all: it is far too parochial and context-dependent for that. Necessity *de dicto*, on my view, may properly be classified as logical, but *contra* McGinn it is reducible to more fundamental logical notions.

I devote the second half of this article to McGinn’s argument that reductive analyses of necessity, and modal notions generally, are either inadequate or circular. In the first half, I raise some questions for McGinn’s positive account of existence, which countenances non-existent, intentional objects.

In the chapter on existence, McGinn disputes the once orthodox Russellian view that, as it used to be put, “existence is not a predicate.” McGinn characterizes the Russellian view thus:

“... when you say that Bill Clinton exists, you do not attribute to a certain *object* the property of existence, since there is no such property; what you do is say that some *property* is instantiated ... Instead of attributing a property to an object you attribute a property to a property—the second-order property of having an instance.” (p. 17)

For the Russellian, ordinary proper names such as ‘Bill Clinton’ are associated with uniquely identifying properties; to say that Bill Clinton exists is to say that the associated property has instances. It is the second-order property of having instances—formally expressed by the “existential quantifier”—that is the logically basic notion. Statements asserting existence, if meaningful at all, are to be analyzed in terms of this second-order property.

McGinn marshals an impressive array of arguments, both ontological and semantic, against the Russellian view. Most telling, perhaps, is that the second-order property of “having instances” must, if the Russellian analysis is to be materially correct, be taken to mean “having instances that exist”; existence as a first-order property has not been done away with. The point is clearest if one accepts, with McGinn, that there are non-existent objects such as Holmes that instantiate ordinary properties such as being a man. Then, unless “having instances” means “having instances that exist,” the analysis will wrongly entail that Holmes exists. But in any case, surely, the second-order property of *having* instances depends upon what entities there are to *be* instances, not *vice versa*.

Existentially quantified facts are not basic facts; they supervene on what objects and properties exist, and on what instantiates what.

So far, so good. But now ask: if existence is a property, what sort of property is it? One could reject the Russellian view and yet hold, simply, that existence is a blanket property, like self-identity, universally applying to all objects. McGinn takes a philosophically harder line, but one more in accord with the appearances, with how we think and talk. We say, truly, that Clinton exists, whereas Holmes does not; that Venus exists, whereas Vulcan does not. Respecting appearances, McGinn treats these as ordinary subject-predicate assertions, or their denials. Clinton and Venus are objects with the property of existence; Holmes and Vulcan are objects that lack the property of existence. McGinn calls these “intentional objects”, representation- and mind-dependent, but no less objects for that. What makes McGinn’s rejection of the Russellian view interesting and difficult is not that he holds that existence is a property, but rather that he holds that existence is a property that some things have and other things lack.

McGinn’s view divides into related semantic and ontological components. On the semantic side, McGinn boldly asserts that “every occurrence of the word ‘exists’ is logically predicative ... existential statements can be analyzed by means of this predicate.” (p. 30) For McGinn, ‘exists’ is nowise ambiguous. In particular, ‘exists’ has the same predicative function in singular and general existence statements. Thus, ‘Bill Clinton exists’ ascribes the property of existence to Bill Clinton, just as surface grammar suggests. ‘Tigers exist’, however, is logically less perspicuous. According to McGinn, it is to be analyzed as ‘for some x , x is a tiger and x exists’. The quantifier, ‘for some x ’, includes in its range intentional objects and so lacks existential import, standard nomenclature notwithstanding. The existential import is supplied, here and always, by the predicate ‘exists’. McGinn argues convincingly that this analysis gives a satisfying

explanation of the entailment relations between singular and general existential statements.

On the ontological side, there is the thesis that, for example, ‘Holmes’ and ‘Vulcan’ genuinely refer to non-existent objects that instantiate ordinary properties such as being a man or being a planet. There is also the ontological thesis that existence is a property; but that thesis is hard to evaluate for lack of any clear indication what notion of property we are working with. McGinn has this to say: “Perhaps all we need to say, for present purposes, is that a property, in the intended sense, is what is instantiated by an object in a way analogous to the way in which (say) redness is instantiated by an object; that is, choose a paradigm property and declare a property to be anything that resembles this paradigm.” (pp. 15-6) I doubt that existence should be counted a property by this test; as I will claim below, if existence is a property that some things lack, then it is a logically peculiar property, quite unlike the paradigm cases. McGinn is at pains to embrace a “naïve” view according to which existence is a property much like others; but I do not think such naiveté survives philosophical reflection.

McGinn writes: “Why has [the property view of existence] been so consistently rejected? It is surprisingly difficult to find worked-out objections to it, despite the suspicions it arouses.” (p. 30) But there are a number of familiar objections that any view like McGinn’s must address. I will here mention three. First, consider McGinn’s example of an intensional non-existent object, Vulcan. The name ‘Vulcan’ was introduced by way of a description such as: “the planet between Mercury and the Sun that” According to McGinn, Vulcan is a planet: that follows, I suppose, from the sense associated with the name ‘Vulcan’. But, of course, Vulcan does not exist because

there does not exist a planet between Mercury and the Sun. Now suppose instead that the name ‘Vulcan*’ had been introduced by way of the following description: “the planet *that exists* between Mercury and the Sun that□.□’ Again, ‘Vulcan* is a planet’ follows from the sense associated with the name ‘Vulcan*’; but now so too does ‘Vulcan* exists’. But, of course, Vulcan* does not exist, because no planet exists between Mercury and the Sun. Contradiction.¹

There are many ways out, but all appear to give up something that McGinn holds dear. Thus, McGinn could say that ‘exists’ is ambiguous between its use in fixing the sense of ‘Vulcan*’ and its use in ‘Vulcan* exists’. That would allow ‘exists’ to be logically redundant in the former but not in the latter, as seems to be the case. Or McGinn could say that the logic of the predicate ‘exists’ somehow differs from the logic of a predicate like ‘red’: ‘planet that is red’ must refer, if it does at all, to an object that is red, but ‘planet that exists’ can refer to an object that does not exist. Or, more likely, McGinn would say that the introduction of the name ‘Vulcan*’ was somehow illegitimate. But then the property of existence cannot freely be combined with other properties in the way that paradigm properties can be combined. For if existence is a property like paradigm cases such as red, why can’t we freely postulate a planet that exists between Mercury and the Sun just we can freely postulate a planet that is red and between Mercury and the Sun? The notion of existence, it seems, either bifurcates into distinct notions between which ‘exists’ is ambiguous, or is unlike paradigm properties in logically significant ways, or both.

For a second familiar problem, consider McGinn’s example of a fictional non-existent object, Holmes. On McGinn’s view, ‘Holmes’ does not refer to some (abstract)

representation of a man; rather, ‘Holmes’ refers to the object represented, an object that literally *is* a man just as, say, Clinton is a man. And presumably Holmes, being a man, has other properties that men typically have, including mental properties such as having beliefs. For example, Holmes believes that Watson is a man; and Holmes is right in this belief because Watson is a man. But also Holmes believes that Watson exists.

Apparently, Holmes is wrong in this belief because Watson does not exist. But, surely, we also need some sense in which Holmes is right in his belief that Watson exists. For suppose that the Holmes stories make reference to a mythical detective named Notson. Holmes believes that Notson does not exist, and he is right in this belief in a way he wouldn’t be right were he to believe that Watson did not exist. We need some way of capturing the distinction in (ontological?) status between Watson and Notson.

Again, there are many ways out, but they all either treat existence as logically special, or bifurcate the notion of existence, or both. Thus, McGinn could introduce a “story-operator” to capture the distinction between Watson and Notson: in the Holmes stories, Watson exists, but Notson does not. Although such “story operators” are often employed as a way of avoiding ontological commitment to fictional objects, they are compatible with such commitment. The problem for McGinn, however, is that story-operators interact with existence differently than with other, paradigm properties: ‘in the Holmes stories, Holmes is a man’ entails ‘Holmes is a man’; but ‘in the Holmes stories, Holmes exists’ does not entail ‘Holmes exists’. Why the difference? Alternatively, McGinn could introduce a relative notion of existence alongside the absolute notion. Neither Watson nor Notson exist in the absolute sense. Also, neither Watson nor Notson exist relative to us. But Watson and Notson differ in that whereas Notson does not exist

relative to Watson (or to Holmes), Watson exists relative to himself (and to Holmes). (Indeed, everything exists relative to itself.) That accounts for the various distinctions that need to be made; but such a bifurcation in the notion of existence would be anathema to McGinn.

The first two problems, I have suggested, could be handled by making the property view less simple and naïve. The third familiar problem, I think, cuts deeper. It arises again because the non-existent objects are not representations, but the objects represented. Holmes, for example, is literally flesh and blood, just like you or I. Some philosophers already find this incredible, no less so than David Lewis's flesh and blood *possibilia*. But that is not my concern, so put it to one side. The problem I have in mind comes up when one considers Holmes' beliefs, in particular, Holmes' belief that he exists. Holmes doesn't exist, so he is wrong in his belief. I believe that I exist, and (presumably) I am right. But whatever sort of evidence, whatever sort of reason I have for believing that I exist, Holmes, it seems, could have as well. How then can I *know* that I exist? Why can't the evidence or reasons I have for believing I exist be deceiving me just as they are deceiving poor non-existent Holmes?

Perhaps if Holmes and other non-existent objects were abstract representations—say, sets of properties or sets of predicates—then my knowledge that I exist could be derived from my knowledge that I am not an abstract representation. (And how do I know that?—Never mind.) But that way out is not available to McGinn. Try this. Holmes and other non-existent objects are *incomplete*, or *indeterminate*: for some properties, it is neither true nor false that they instantiate the property. For example, it is neither true nor false that Holmes has a freckle on his left shoulder. Then, perhaps my

knowledge that I exist could be derived from my knowledge that I am fully determinate. (And how do I know that? Never mind.) But this way out would implausibly base my knowledge of my existence on the contingent fact that non-existent entities are impoverished. For, surely, there is no reason in principle why a fictional object could not be fully determinate. My knowledge does not depend on the contingent limitations of actual authors.

How, then, do we know that we are not some non-existent fictional character dependent for our being on the mind of some unknown author? Of course, such skepticism is absurd. The problem, however, is to explain why it is absurd. If existence is a blanket property, or an indexical property, the explanation is immediate. But if existence is an absolute property that some objects have and other, qualitatively similar objects lack, providing the requisite explanation is, I think, a deep and challenging problem.²

I turn now from existence to necessity. McGinn begins the chapter on necessity by attacking the standard analysis of modal notions such as possibility and necessity in terms of quantification over possible worlds. I am not entirely sure I have understood McGinn's argument, or just who its intended target is. But, as best I can tell, extant theories of modality that accept the quantificational analysis have nothing to fear.

McGinn presents his argument as follows:

“According to possible worlds semantics, we can replace any occurrence of a modal word with a suitable quantificational translation. ... the objection I want to make to this is that such a translation is either circular or inadequate; specifically, we need to use the modal notion being translated in order to get the translation to come out

right. ... So let us consider some proposition of the form ‘possibly p ’: this is meant to go over into ‘there is a world in which p ’ or ‘for some world w , p in w ’. Now the question I want to ask is: does the notion of ‘world’ here invoked include or exclude *impossible* worlds?” (p. 70)

McGinn then argues that if the notion of ‘world’ includes impossible worlds, the analysis is inadequate: it will wrongly make truth in an impossible world sufficient for being possible. But if the notion of ‘world’ excludes impossible worlds, then the analysis will be circular: ‘possibly p ’ will be equivalent to ‘in some *possible* world, p ’.³ “But this now,” McGinn concludes, “contains an explicit use of the word ‘possible’, which we claimed to be reducing to a quantifier over worlds. ... No analysis has been given of the force of the modal notion concerned.” (p. 71)

Now, there is no doubt that the defender of standard analyses of the modal operators will choose the second horn of McGinn’s dilemma: possibility and necessity are quantifiers over *possible* worlds. Those modal metaphysicians who say simply that modal operators are quantifiers over worlds have abbreviated ‘possible world’ as ‘world’—harmlessly, since, on their view, there are no impossible worlds. So, a defender of the standard analyses will want to rebut McGinn’s charge of circularity. Let us try, then, to get clearer on just what that charge is.

Surprisingly, McGinn appears to be claiming that *any* possible worlds analysis of *any* modal notion is circular. He says in the quote above, for any purported analysis: “we need to use the modal notion being translated in order to get the translation to come out right.” That is too strong. When necessity is analyzed as truth in all possible worlds, the notion of necessity is analyzed in terms of the notion of a possible world; and, surely, these notions are not the same.

All McGinn needs, however, to make his case is the claim that the possible worlds theorist is committed to *some* analysis being circular. And this, indeed, does follow from McGinn's stated premise, that "according to possible worlds semantics, we can replace any occurrence of a modal word with a suitable quantificational translation."⁴ For, given that premise, McGinn's circularity argument can be formulated as follows: the possible worlds theorist claims that every modal notion is to be analyzed in terms of quantification over possible worlds; but the notion of a possible world is itself a modal notion which cannot, on pain of circularity, be analyzed in terms of quantification over possible worlds; therefore, the possible worlds theorist's claim must be rejected.

First off—perhaps a bit of a side issue—I do not understand McGinn's exclusive focus on "quantificational translation." No possible worlds theorist should accept the claim that every modal notion is to be analyzed by introducing a quantifier over possible worlds (or possible individuals). Perhaps McGinn is implicitly restricting his argument to modal notions expressed by 'possibly' and 'necessarily' (and modal notions interdefinable with these). Such modal notions, indeed, are given quantificational analyses by the possible worlds theorist. But there is more to our modal talk than can be expressed using 'possibly' and 'necessarily' (and their ilk). Consider, for example, sentences that according to the possible worlds theorist involve cross-world comparisons, such as the much discussed: "a red thing could resemble an orange thing more closely than a red thing could resemble a blue thing." On the most natural possible worlds analysis, the modal 'could' functions to unrestricted quantifiers, turning actualist quantifiers into possibilist quantifiers; it does not introduce a quantifier not appearing on the surface.⁵

More relevant to the present case is the adjective ‘possible’. A semantic analysis of ‘possible’ within the possible worlds framework need not introduce a quantifier over possible worlds or possible individuals. Consider, for example, ‘possible person’. In traditional possible worlds semantics, ‘person’ has an extension and an intension, as does ‘possible person’, and the question is how the extension and intension of the latter depend on the extension and intension of the former. It is simply this: the extension of ‘possible person’ is the intension of ‘person’; the intension and extension of ‘possible person’ are the same.⁶ Similarly, whereas the extension of ‘world’ (in ordinary usage) is a unit class, the extension of ‘possible world’ is the intension of ‘world’, which is the class of possible worlds. Thus, the semantic analysis of ‘possible’ applied to ‘world’ does not introduce a quantifier over possible worlds. Of course, one can truly say that x is a possible person iff x is a person in some possible world, or w is a possible world iff w is a world in some possible world. But since these equivalences are not *analyses*, no vicious regress or circularity results.

It is a simple matter, however, to reformulate McGinn’s circularity argument without requiring the possible worlds theorist to provide quantificational analyses, as follows: the possible worlds theorist claims that every modal notion is to be analyzed in terms of possible worlds; but the notion of a possible world is itself a modal notion which cannot, on pain of circularity, be analyzed in terms of possible worlds; therefore, the possible worlds theorist’s claim must be rejected.

But no possible worlds theorist need accept both that every modal notion is to be analyzed in terms of possible worlds and that the notion of a possible world is a modal notion. There are two sorts of possible worlds theorists to consider: those who accept

some modal notions as primitive, and thus do not attempt to reduce all modal notions to non-modal notions; and those who do attempt a full reduction of modality by providing an analysis of the notion of possible world in non-modal terms. Theorists of the first sort, for example, may simply take the notion of a possible world as a primitive modal notion. Or instead they may construct possible worlds from sentences, or propositions, or properties, or states of affairs using explicitly modal notions in the construction.⁷ No circularity ensues because there is no claim to analyze the modal notions that are taken as primitive: with these notions analysis ends. The theoretical benefits that accrue from the possible worlds framework do not depend upon there being a full analysis of the modal in terms of the non-modal. The possible worlds framework provides a systematization of our modal concepts, thereby explaining their logical interrelationships and accounting for ordinary patterns of modal reasoning.

It is not clear whether possible worlds theorists of this first sort are among McGinn's intended targets. On the one hand, he claims that his argument is directed only against the "semantic claim ... that modal expressions can be successfully paraphrased by means of a quantifier over worlds." (p. 70) Certainly, these theorists do accept the paraphrase of modal operators in terms of quantifiers over worlds, whether worlds are posited as primitive or are constructed. Indeed, one of the chief motivations for positing or constructing possible worlds is to be able to indulge without guilt in possible worlds semantics for modal logic. To forgo possible worlds would be to return to the dark days when modal logical entailments were a mystery, syntax in search of semantics. On the other hand, McGinn's remarks often suggest that his target is only those theorists who claim to reduce all modal notions to non-modal notions. For example, he writes, "my

point here is not that this treatment takes modality as primitive and that this is objectionable *per se*; my point is that the quantificational approach *claims* not to be taking modal words as primitive and yet in the end it has to.” (p. 73) If McGinn is targeting views that claim not to be taking modal notions as primitive, then the possible worlds theorists of the first sort are excluded from his attack.

Possible worlds theorists of the second sort have as one of their goals a reductive analysis of modality. For them, it is not enough to simply “take possible worlds as primitive.” They must provide an analysis of the notion of possible world in non-modal terms. To illustrate how such an analysis might be carried out, consider David Lewis’s modal realism according to which possible worlds are big “concrete” universes, ontologically on a par with our actual universe. In analyzing the notion of possible world, I suppose Lewis can help himself to unrestricted quantifiers, to the distinction between an individual and a class (or whatever other abstract entities there are), to mereological relations such as being an aggregate of, and to spatiotemporal relations such as being such-and-such a distance from. None of these notions are modal, so if the notion of possible world is defined in terms of these notions, it has been given a non-modal analysis. Now, Lewis’s analysis of possible world is this: a *possible world* is a maximal spatiotemporally interrelated aggregate of individuals, where individuals are spatiotemporally related if (almost) every part of one stands in some direct spatiotemporal relation to (almost) every part of the other. A *possible* individual is an individual that is part of some possible world. Two possible individuals are *worldmates* iff they are spatiotemporally related to one another.⁸

By my lights, this account of possible worlds is too narrow: it leaves out possible worlds in which some inhabitants are not themselves spatiotemporally related, but are connected by a chain of spatiotemporally related individuals; and it leaves out possible worlds whose inhabitants are related, not by spatiotemporal relations, but by other external relations.⁹ But, what is relevant here is that it is not susceptible to McGinn's charge of circularity. For Lewis, modal notions are all to be analyzed in terms of possible worlds (and possible individuals); but the notion of possible world (and possible individual) has turned out on analysis not itself to be modal. So nothing need be analyzed in terms of itself. Of course, whether or not on Lewis's analysis there exists a plurality of possible worlds is open to legitimate debate. But that is here beside the point. McGinn's argument is intended to apply to *any* attempt to analyze possible world in non-modal terms.

Would McGinn claim that, even on Lewis's account, the notion of a possible world is modal because modal notions are reduced to it? That wouldn't advance his case. For one thing, it would not make the charge of circularity stick, since Lewis would say, on that understanding of 'modal', that not all modal notions are analyzable in terms of possible worlds and individuals. For another thing, it would rule out the possibility of reducing the modal to the non-modal in a trivial and uninteresting way, by a verbal maneuver.

I suspect McGinn would claim, rather, that although Lewis's purported analysis of possible world is non-modal, it is for that very reason inadequate: Lewis's analysis, in virtue of being non-modal, fails to exclude *impossible* worlds. The only way, McGinn seems to think, for an analysis to exclude impossible worlds is for it to do so explicitly, thereby bringing modality back into the analysis.¹⁰ Here, I think, is the crux of my disagreement with McGinn. I concede that it would not be enough for Lewis simply to

point out that, on his view, there are no impossible worlds. For, if the notion of an impossible world is even coherent, then in some sense it is only “by accident” that there are no impossible worlds; and Lewis’s analysis, if correct, would be correct “by accident.” But for Lewis the notion of impossible world is *incoherent*.¹¹ In that case, there is no region of conceptual space that Lewis’s analysis fails to exclude, and thus no ground for McGinn’s charge of inadequacy. Now, McGinn does not think that the notion of impossible world is incoherent.¹² But to make that an assumption of his argument would be to beg the question against Lewis, or any other realist about possible worlds who thinks that the notion of an impossible world is incoherent.

In conclusion: this is a rich and thought-provoking book, compact, well written, filled with bold positions and provocative arguments. Some readers may be disappointed by the lack of references to contemporary philosophers who have covered somewhat similar ground. But for those who enjoy thinking through issues without being sidetracked by what others have said, this book is highly recommended.

NOTES

¹ See Dummett (1981), pp. 279-80. The point can be made as well using ‘existent planet’ instead of ‘planet that exists’.

² See Williams (1962). In contemporary metaphysics, the problem has been applied to actuality rather than existence; but it is essentially the same. See Lewis (1970, 1986), and Adams (1974). In Bricker (2001) pp. 29-30, I try to blunt the force of the objection.

³ McGinn also considers and rejects the reply that ‘possibly p’ is equivalent to ‘in some world, p, and there are no impossible worlds’. I would not defend that reply, so I leave it aside.

⁴ “Possible worlds semantics” is not committed to any view about the analysis of modal notions, only that truth conditions for sentences, modal and non-modal, can be given compositionally in terms of possible worlds and possible individuals. I will call those who accept the standard analyses “possible worlds theorists”.

⁵ For discussion, see Lewis (1986), pp. 13-14.

⁶ For simplicity only, I am here assuming that the intension of a predicate is the union of its extensions at possible worlds, rather a function from possible worlds to extensions; that requires that domains of possible worlds do not overlap.

⁷ These views are contentiously labeled “ersatzist” by David Lewis because, from his point of view, the possible worlds they provide are substitutes for the genuine article. On the ersatzist programme, see Lewis (1986), pp. 136-191.

⁸ See Lewis (1986), pp. 69-71.

⁹ For the arguments, and an alternative realist analysis of possible world, see Bricker (1996). On the analysis I give, the notion of possible world is reduced to logical (and mereological) notions, assuming that the notion of an external relation counts as logical.

¹⁰ See pp. 71-72.

¹¹ See Lewis (1986), p. 7.

¹² In the chapter on existence, McGinn tentatively accepts impossible objects, even holding that they exist. See pp. 40-41.

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