McGINN ON EXISTENCE

By Peter van Inwagen

I compare the theory of existence and being (and of non-existence and non-being) presented in Colin McGinn's 'Logical Properties' with those of well known predecessors such as Quine, Frege and Meinong. More recently, neo-Meinongians have held that being and existence are different concepts, and that although nothing lacks being, there are things which do not exist; possibilists have held that there are mere possibilia, things which possibly exist but do not actually exist. I examine a thesis advanced by McGinn which these two positions have also endorsed, namely, that there are things which do not exist. I survey the function of 'existential quantification', and finally contend that the predicate 'does not exist' has at least three meanings, meanings which are determined by the context in which the predicate occurs and which are importantly different from one another.

I ask you to consider two oppositions: being and non-being; existence and non-existence.

Before I had read the chapter on existence in Colin McGinn's book *Logical Properties*,[1] I should have said that there were five philosophical theories about the relation between these two oppositions. More exactly, I should have said that there were five such theories which were both germane to the issues addressed in McGinn's chapter and could be formulated in terms of which analytical philosophers could make some sort of sense. I have left out of the count those theories – the theories of Aristotle and Ryle, for example – according to which 'is' and 'exists' mean different things when they are applied to objects in different metaphysical or logical categories. I have left them out because the question whether 'is' and 'exist' are univocal is not very closely connected with the problems and questions with which McGinn is primarily concerned (although some of his incidental remarks show that he regards these words as univocal). I have also left out of my count certain theories of being and existence which cannot be translated into language acceptable to philosophers likely to be reading this paper. (In my view, various ancient and mediaeval theories have this feature; it is certainly a feature of the theories of Heidegger and Sartre.)

[1] C. McGinn, *Logical Properties: Identity, Existence, Predication, Necessary Truth* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000).

I should have said that there were five theories about the two oppositions, but now I must say that there are six. I shall begin by laying out briefly each of the five 'pre-McGinn' theories, with the warning that my statements of them are far from complete. These statements concentrate on the way in which each theory treats the 'two oppositions', and they leave out many theses and qualifications which the proponents of the theories would regard as essential to them. (I should say, too, that the count 'five' is mushy: some of the theories overlap others to a significant extent, and it is possible to doubt whether the first two of the five statements I am about to give express theories which differ in any philosophically important way.) When I have finished my brief tour of the theories with which McGinn's theory is in competition, I shall go on to discuss his theory.

1. There is the theory of *Quine*, according to which the two oppositions are not two but one. Existence and being are the same. Existence or being is what is expressed by phrases like 'there is', 'there are', and 'something is'. Similarly, non-existence or non-being is what is expressed by phrases like 'there is no', 'there are no', and 'nothing is'. Thus 'Universals exist' means neither more nor less than 'There are universals', and the same goes for the pairs 'Carnivorous cows do not exist'/'Nothing is both carnivorous and a cow' and 'The planet Venus exists'/'Something is the planet Venus'. (What I have just said constitutes the essence of Quine's philosophy of being and existence. Some have mistakenly supposed that the backwards-E quantifier plays a central role in his ontological views. But this symbol is, as Quine sees the matter, only a formal replacement for the ordinary phrases 'there is', 'there are' and 'something is'; its only superiority to 'there is' *et al.* is technical rather than philosophical. This lies in the fact that the syntax of '∃' has been so contrived that the symbol explicitly interacts with variables – with third-person singular pronouns – in a way that makes unambiguous cross-reference possible in structurally complex sentences.)

2. There is the older theory of *Kant* and *Frege* and *Russell*, a theory which also treats the two oppositions as one. According to this theory, statements which appear to ascribe being or existence either to a particular object, thing, entity or item, or to objects of a kind (the kind being specified in the statement), are in reality statements which ascribe some relational feature to an abstract object: a concept, it may be, or a propositional function, or a property. (Similarly for statements which appear to deny existence or being to some object or to the members of some kind.) Thus 'Mermaids exist' and 'There are mermaids' mean the same thing, and what they mean is something along the lines of 'Something falls under the concept "mermaid"', or 'The propositional function "*x* is a mermaid" has instances', or 'Mermaidenhood is exemplified'.

No doubt theory (1) and theory (2) are at least very similar. (Obviously, they are in *some* sense different theories: there is obviously *some* difference between the predicate 'falls under the concept "mermaid"'' and the predicate 'is a mermaid'.) McGinn calls (2) the 'orthodox' theory of existence, and says 'Nowadays, this Russellian position [by which he means, more or less, theory (2)] is routinely expressed by saying that existence is what is expressed by the existential quantifier'; and in saying this he comes close to identifying the two theories. Other philosophers maintain that (1) and (2) are sufficiently different to force their proponents to adopt importantly different analyses of 'singular negative existentials', i.e., sentences like 'The planet Vulcan does not exist', a defensible but debatable thesis. Moreover, there is this point to consider: theory (2) is at least *prima facie* inconsistent with nominalism, but theory (1) is not. Finally, the two theories might seem to suggest, or even to imply, different answers to the vexed question whether existence is a property. Theory (2) was believed by its inventors to demonstrate that the idea that existence is a property was fallacious. But the Quinean who does not share the Master's distaste for properties, properties of any description, could very well say something like this: 'Well, you can say that existence is a property if you want to. No harm in it. If existence is a property, it is the property something has if and only if it exists, if and only if there *is* such a thing as it. That is, just as wisdom is the property that corresponds to the open sentence "*x* is wise", existence is the property that corresponds to the open sentence "*x* exists", and that open sentence is logically equivalent to this one: "There is something that is *x*". If you want to talk in that way, however, you should keep it firmly in mind that existence, so conceived, is a wholly uninteresting property. This is why: "For every *x*, there is something that is *x*" is a theorem of first-order logic with identity.' Some will think that the theses 'It is logically fallacious to think that existence is a property of any sort' and 'Existence can be thought of as a property, but only as a property which, for trivial, logical reasons, belongs to everything' are importantly different theses. Some will not.

I am not going to say anything more about the question whether there is any significant difference between these first two theories. But the third theory is certainly different, vastly different, from them both.

3. According to *Meinong's* infamous theory, there are two modes of being, existence and subsistence. Concrete objects that have being *exist*, and abstract objects that have being *subsist*. Concrete objects that do *not* exist have no sort of being whatever, and abstract objects that do *not* subsist have no sort of being whatever. The Cheshire Cat does not exist, and, cats being concrete objects, there is no Cheshire Cat. The operation 'division by 0' does not subsist (unlike the operation 'division by 2', which does subsist), and

therefore although there is such a thing as division by 2, there is no such thing as division by 0. Nevertheless, the phrases 'the Cheshire Cat' and 'division by 0' have referents, and we can think about these referents and say true things about them, things like 'The Cheshire Cat has a tail' and 'Division by 0 plays a hidden role in several well known fallacious proofs'. These true things are true for this straightforward reason: each ascribes to an object a property the object has. The Cheshire Cat counts having a tail among its properties, and 'playing a hidden role in several well known fallacious proofs' is one of the properties of division by 0. (A note on terminology: in this exposition of Meinong, I have, anachronistically, used the terms 'concrete' and 'abstract'. I am willing to defend the anachronism if anyone wants to go into the matter.[2])

I shall not discuss Meinong's theory beyond the present remark. I confess I find it bizarre. For one thing, I do not like the idea of 'two modes of being'. But Meinong's theory has a rather more important defect than its incorporation of the idea of modes of being, and that is that it is self-contradictory – *obviously* self-contradictory. Here is one way of bringing out the contradiction in the theory: Meinongianism entails that there are things that participate in *neither* mode of being, things that have no being of any sort; but if there *are* such things, they obviously have being. For a thing to have *being* is for there to *be* such a thing as it; what else could being be?[3] This defect in Meinong's theory, its being obviously self-contradictory, is avoided by certain recent theories whose proponents describe themselves as Meinongians. (I am thinking of Terence Parsons and Richard Routley, among others.) I call these people *neo*-Meinongians, since, although their theories incorporate many Meinongian elements, they reject a component of Meinong's theory of objects which I consider essential to it, the doctrine of *Aussersein*, a doctrine an immediate consequence of which is the self-contradiction I have just mentioned, that there are things of which it is true that there are no such things. Neo-Meinongianism is the fourth theory in my list.

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[2] This statement of Meinongianism concentrates on the way Meinong's theory treats the 'two oppositions'. I am particularly concerned with the fact that according to Meinong, there are things that participate in neither of the two modes of being. Meinong also endorses a very strong, or very 'liberal', principle concerning *what* objects there are that participate in neither mode of being. (The principle is so liberal as to countenance impossible objects, like the round square. These cannot *be*, for possibility is an essential characteristic of any being, but they are nevertheless somehow 'there'.) I shall not discuss this principle. I am interested only in the fact that he maintains that there are *some* objects that fall outside the realm of being.

[3] The following sentence which occurred in my statement of Meinong's theory, 'The phrases "the Cheshire Cat" and "division by 0" have referents', is obviously equivalent to the sentence 'There is something that is the referent of "the Cheshire Cat" and there is something that is the referent of "division by 0"'.

4. For the *neo-Meinongians*, as for Meinong, the two oppositions are indeed two. Unlike Meinong, however, neo-Meinongians happily apply the term 'exists' to abstract things, and they (fortunately) do not maintain that there are things that fall outside the realm of being. Their position is, rather, that the things that exist are only some of the things that are (the things that are being simply 'the things', full stop; everything that is is everything *tout court*). That is to say, the neo-Meinongians contend that there are things that do not exist.[4]

5. There is the view of the *possibilists*. (Here I am not going to name any names. A lot of philosophers hold, or have held, this view, however. Take my word for it.) Possibilism has its roots in philosophical reflection on the standard Kripke-style semantics for quantified modal logic. Possibilism divides things, divides the things that are, into two exclusive classes: the things that actually exist, and the things that do not actually exist, that is, the things that might exist but do not. The possibilists' use of the word 'actual' to mark this distinction can be traced to the occurrence of this word in the phrase 'the actual world': actually existent things are the things that exist in the actual world, and merely possible things (things that might exist but do not) are the things that exist only in non-actual or merely possible worlds. But it is clear that whatever may have been the possibilists' reasons for using the word 'actually' in this context, the word is redundant, for things that do not actually exist are just things that do not exist, full stop – just as things that are not actually red are things that are not red, full stop. (Or I can put the point in this way: it is an easy logical step from '*x* might exist & *x* does not exist' to '*x* does not exist'.) There are important points of disagreement between the neo-Meinongians and the possibilists. Perhaps the most important is that the neo-Meinongians think that the realm of the non-existent contains impossible things (for example, things that, for some property, have both that property and its negation), and the possibilists do not. But neo-Meinongians and possibilists agree on this point at least, that there are things that do not exist. (I should mention that David Lewis was a Quinean, not a possibilist, despite the fact that some people take him to have been not

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[4] What I said about Meinongianism I must now say about neo-Meinongianism, *mutatis mutandis*. The statement of neo-Meinongianism in the text concentrates on the way in which the theory treats the 'two oppositions'. I am particularly concerned with the fact that according to the neo-Meinongians, there are things that do not exist. But the neo-Meinongians do not simply say that there are things that do not exist. Each of them also endorses a very liberal principle (not in every case the same one) concerning *what* objects there are that do not exist. All these principles are sufficiently liberal to imply that there are impossible objects – objects whose properties are logically inconsistent with one another. For the neo-Meinongians, impossible objects cannot exist, but can nevertheless *be*. I shall not discuss any of these principles. I am interested only in the fact that all neo-Meinongians maintain that there are *some* objects that do not exist.

only a possibilist but *the* possibilist.[5] Lewis was, in fact, the author of one of the most important polemics against the thesis that there are things that do not exist, the paper 'Noneism or Allism?'.[6]

In the rest of this paper, I am going to use the term 'neo-Meinongianism' to mean simply the thesis that there are things (entities, objects, items – call them what you will) that do not exist. That is, I am not going to call a philosopher a neo-Meinongian only if that philosopher accepts *all* the theses held in common by paradigmatic neo-Meinongians like Terence Parsons and Richard Routley. In particular, I am not going to call a philosopher a neo-Meinongian only if he accepts some explicit 'object comprehension principle', some explicit principle which asserts that if *s* is a set of properties which satisfies certain specified conditions, then there is an object whose properties are exactly the members of *s* – and asserts this without reference to the question whether that object exists. (It is obviously possible to believe that there are non-existent objects without accepting any particular thesis about *what* non-existent objects there are or about which sets of properties that belong to no existent object are none the less properties of an object.) In this loose sense, the possibilists are neo-Meinongians, as is Colin McGinn.

McGinn's theory of existence and being, the treatment he presents in ch. 2 of *Logical Properties* of the two oppositions which I began by asking you to consider, is importantly different from that of any other philosopher who has held that there are things that do not exist. (This is why I said that there are now six theories about the two oppositions.) The following three theses are, I believe, unique to McGinn's theory:

1. Non-existent things are, one and all, man-made (or perhaps, to avoid accusations of both human chauvinism and male chauvinism, I should say 'mind-made')
2. Non-existent things are, one and all, necessarily or essentially non-existent, even those, and there are such, whose properties are logically consistent
3. There are things that exist, but which nevertheless do not *actually* exist.

I shall say something about each of these three theses.

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[5] Lewis, of course, believed in things he called 'merely possible objects' and 'things that do not actually exist'. But these things are not things that do not exist: they exist, all right – it is just that they are spatiotemporally unrelated to us. If we say, for example, 'Flying pigs do not exist', what we say is true only in this sense: pragmatic considerations often restrict our domain of quantification to things spatiotemporally related to us, and there are (or there exist – Lewis does not distinguish 'there are' from 'there exist') no flying pigs in that domain. When I said above 'They exist, all right', no such pragmatic restriction on my domain of quantification was in force.

[6] D.K. Lewis, 'Noneism or Allism?', *Mind*, 99 (1990), pp. 23–31, repr. in his *Papers in Metaphysics and Epistemology* (Cambridge UP, 1999), pp. 152–63.

Thesis 1

Creatures with minds are capable of telling stories about things that do not exist – stories from various *genres*: myth, legend, fable, parable, fiction in the modern literary sense, and that very important *genre*, the outright lie.

When people tell such stories, they create (that is, bring into being) things that lack the property of existence. (For existence *is* a property, and not a property like self-identity that necessarily belongs to everything: existence is a property that belongs to some things and not to others.) Conan Doyle, for example, brought Sherlock Holmes into being by performing certain mental acts (that he also put pen to paper, and that as a result other people came to know about Holmes, were not logically essential to this act of creation[7]). Holmes has many properties which existent human beings have, just the properties of this sort that everyone supposes him to have: he *is* a detective and he *does* play the violin. (Paganini and Holmes are, in exactly the same sense, members of the extension of the property 'plays the violin'.) But no existent person has the combination of properties that Holmes has; he is, therefore, non-existent. In fact, his non-existence *consists* simply in this, that he was brought into being by a mental act. That is what it is to be non-existent: to have been brought into being by a mental act. (Or, more cautiously, by a mental act of the sort by which Conan Doyle brought Holmes into being. Theists may want to say that one being, God, brings things into *existence* by mental acts. If that is true, however, those mental acts must be of a very different character from those by which human beings bring fictional characters into being. No doubt God, if there is a God, is as capable as we are of performing mental acts of the Conan Doyle sort – he can tell parables, for example – and if he does, he thereby brings certain things into being without bringing those things into existence.)

Telling stories about what does not exist is not the only way for creatures with minds to bring non-existent things into being. Creatures with minds can make *mistakes* about what exists, and making mistakes about what exists, like telling stories about what does not exist, can bring non-existent things into being. For example, certain events in the mental lives of certain astronomers, events which constituted their coming to have the mistaken belief that there was (that is, that there existed) a planet inside the orbit of Mercury, caused the non-existent planet Vulcan to be.

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[7] I note in passing that Shakespeare, whose credentials for pronouncing on this subject are impeccable, assigns a more important role to the pen: ' ... as imagination bodies forth/The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen/Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing/A local habitation and a name'.

Thesis 2

Holmes and Vulcan, then, do not exist. But *might* they have existed? (Holmes' properties are, I believe, logically inconsistent, but that is due only to Conan Doyle's carelessness. He might not have been careless about whether the set of properties he conferred on Holmes was logically consistent. I shall pretend, in order to avoid introducing an unnecessary complication into the example, that the properties he gave to his creation were logically consistent, and that the astronomers who brought Vulcan into being did not inadvertently confer an inconsistent set of properties on Vulcan.) No, says McGinn, Holmes and Vulcan could not possibly have existed, and for just the reasons Kripke has called our attention to. In other possible worlds, there are existent objects (existent in those worlds at least) that have all the properties Holmes has (more exactly, they have all those properties of Holmes that an existent human being might have; they will not, of course, have such properties as being non-existent or having been brought into being by Conan Doyle), and similarly for Vulcan. But as Kripke has pointed out, there are *many* such objects. There are in other possible worlds *vast numbers* of existent objects that have just the sets of properties that Holmes and Vulcan have (given the appropriate restriction on properties). If Holmes or Vulcan might have existed, if they exist in other possible worlds, they must be two among those vastly many objects. But which two would they be? An object, Holmes or Vulcan or any object whatever, is, after all, one object, not two objects or many objects, and all those other-worldly objects are equally good candidates for one or the other of the offices 'being Holmes' and 'being Vulcan'. Therefore Holmes and Vulcan cannot be *any* of them, and therefore neither Holmes nor Vulcan exists in any possible world. It follows that it is false of each of them that it *might* have existed. Each is necessarily or essentially non-existent. If something is, like Holmes and Vulcan, brought into being by certain mental acts, nothing could possibly bring it into *existence*.

Another argument for this conclusion would be as follows: if something is brought into being by mental activity, this is a part of its essence (a version of Kripke's essentiality-of-origins thesis); it is brought into being by mental activity in every world in which it comes to be, and the property 'being brought into being by mental activity' is just the property non-existence; Holmes and Vulcan, by the essentiality-of-origins thesis, are non-existent in every world in which there are such objects as they.

Here is still another argument for this conclusion: if those properties Holmes has which an existent human being might have are consistent, then the whole set of his properties is consistent. He is in that sense 'possible'. But

some of his properties (the most obvious example is non-existence) are in-consistent with *existence*, and these properties are essential to him. That is why, despite his having a consistent set of properties, he cannot possibly exist.

Thesis 3

But what about things that might exist but do not? What about *possibilia*? What about the younger sister McGinn might have had, or the possible fat man in the doorway? (*The* possible sister? *The* possible fat man? A multitude of descriptively identical Holmes/Vulcan-candidates – *possibilia* all – figured in my discussion of the previous thesis. If there are any younger sisters McGinn might have had, or any possible fat men in the doorway, must not there be lots of such sisters and such men? That is a good question, but I shall not try to answer it. In the sequel, I shall assume that there is at most one possible sister and at most one possible fat man in the doorway, or assume at any rate that the arguments I shall be looking at do not depend in any essential way on how one counts *possibilia*.)

McGinn does not deny that there are mere *possibilia*. In his view, if I understand him, there being such a thing as the younger sister he might have had is guaranteed by the fact that it is not impossible that he should have had a younger sister. (A similar modal fact ensures that there is such a thing as the merely possible fat man in the doorway.) He recognizes, however, that the thesis that there are mere *possibilia* is in *prima facie* conflict with his analysis of non-existence, for it would have been possible for him to have a younger sister (and it would have been possible for there to be a fat man in the doorway) no matter what mental acts anyone had performed: the modal status of a proposition is a mind-independent thing. But the sister and the fat man do not exist. Thus there are non-existent things, mere *poss-ibilia*, whose being does *not* depend on anyone's mental acts.

McGinn avoids the threatened inconsistency by grasping the nettle with his fist: the sister and the fat man *do* exist. What they do not do, he says, is *actually* exist. They are merely possible, yes. They are non-actual, yes. But they do exist. McGinn, in fact, comes close to saying that even *impossible* objects, round squares and so on, exist, although he stops short of affirming this thesis without reservation. (It should be noted in this connection that although Sherlock Holmes and a round square can both be described as impossible objects, they are not impossible objects in the same sense. If there are indeed round squares, they are *existent* objects which because of their inconsistent properties could not possibly be *actually* existent. Holmes is a *non-existent* object which despite the consistency of its properties could not possibly be *existent*.) If McGinn is right about *possibilia*, if it is indeed true that

there are possible things that exist but do not actually exist, there must be a mistake in an argument that occurred in my presentation of possibilism, the argument whose conclusion was that if something does not actually exist, it follows that it does not exist, full stop. Here is the argument again:

> ... things that do not actually exist are just things that do not exist, full stop – just as things that are not actually red are things that are not red, full stop. (Or I can put the point in this way: it is an easy logical step from 'x might exist & x does not exist' to 'x does not exist'.)

Perhaps I was wrong to suppose that there is just one 'point' here. Perhaps there are two. If there are two, the first of them might be put more fully in this way:

> All uses of 'actual' can be explained or paraphrased using only the adverb 'actually'. With the exception of certain of its occurrences in modal contexts,[8] an exception that need not detain us, 'actually' makes no semantic contribution to the sentences in which it occurs. Its function belongs to pragmatics, not semantics. Outside modal contexts, 'actually' behaves rather like 'it is true that': the result of prefixing 'actually' to a sentence is a sentence logically equivalent to the original. If 'actually' is inserted *into* a sentence, if it is placed before the main verb of the sentence, it makes no contribution to the truth-conditions of the sentence in that position either. (Using 'actually' in this way is analogous to using 'now' or 'at present' to modify a present-tense verb.) 'Aristotle actually wrote the *Nicomachean Ethics*/actually died in 322 BC/actually existed' are equivalent to 'Aristotle wrote the *Nicomachean Ethics*/died in 322 BC/existed'. A thing that does not actually exist, therefore, is simply a thing that does not exist.

If there were indeed two points in the original statement of the argument, here is the second, the one in the parenthesis:

> The open sentences 'x does not actually exist', 'x is non-actual', 'x is a merely possible object', and 'x is a mere *possibile*' are logically equivalent to one another *and* to 'x might exist & x does not exist'. Each of the sentences 'x does not actually exist', 'x is non-actual', 'x is a merely possible object', and 'x is a mere *possibile*', therefore, entails the sentence 'x does not exist'.

McGinn will obviously want to reject the salient premise of each of these

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[8] For example, 'Although it is true in one sense that no yacht can be longer than it is, it is certainly possible for a yacht to be longer than it *actually* is'; 'In no possible world does anything travel faster than light (*sc.* faster than light travels in that world), but in some worlds there are things that travel faster than light *actually* travels'.

two arguments – (a) that (outside modal contexts) 'actually' makes no semantic contribution to the sentences in which it occurs; (b) that '*x* does not actually exist' and the other open sentences mentioned in the argument which contain possibilist terms of art are all equivalent to '*x* might exist & *x* does not exist'. (McGinn will want to reject these premises, but the philosophers I have called possibilists will not: they will be happy to identify non-actual objects with objects that might exist but do not.)

If I am right about this, if McGinn does reject these two premises, I can only say that I do not know what he means by the words and phrases I have called 'possibilist terms of art' – 'actually', 'actual', 'non-actual', 'merely possible', and so on. I have no objection to his meaning by these words and phrases anything he likes. I have no proprietary interest in the definitions that occur in my argument. But I should like to see *his* definitions. In the absence of explicit definitions of 'actually' *et al.*, I do not really understand the third thesis.

I do not, I say, *really* understand it. Nevertheless, I do have a kind of formal understanding of it, an understanding of how the concepts it employs are formally related to one another, and I think my partial, formal grasp of the thesis is sufficient to enable me to see that McGinn has made, on one special point, a minor mistake in applying his own theory, a mistake which leads him to see a difficulty for that theory where there is no difficulty. Towards the end of the chapter, he affirms the following thesis: existent things, or at least many of them, things like Venus (the planet, not the goddess) and Clinton (the former president, not the goddess) have the property existence only contingently, in contrast with non-existent things like Holmes, which, one and all, have the property non-existence essentially. McGinn concludes that this fact shows that existence and its negation are related in a way different from the way in which paradigmatic properties and their negations are related. The difference is that the following generalization holds for *typical* properties: if they can be had contingently, their negations can also be had contingently. I myself would say that if it is indeed true that McGinn's theory implies both that existence can be had contingently and that its negation must be had essentially, he is in real trouble, for it is *demonstrable* that if a property, any property whatever, can be had contingently, its negation can be had contingently.[9] But fortunately for

[9] More exactly, this is demonstrable given the premise that the accessibility relation is symmetrical. The demonstration would be a generalization of the following argument. If Solomon is contingently wise (or accidentally wise), he is non-wise in some (accessible) possible world *w*. But he must be non-wise only contingently in *w*, for he is wise (non-non-wise) in a world accessible from *w*, to wit, the actual world. The symmetry of the accessibility relation comes in at the last step: since *w* is accessible from the actual world, the actual world is (given symmetry) accessible from *w*.

McGinn's theory, it does not really imply this. If McGinn's theory is right (I would argue) in no case does an existent thing have the property existence contingently. It follows from McGinn's theory that existent things are, one and all, essentially existent – in fact, *necessarily* existent. Bill Clinton, for example, exists in every possible world. He is not, as one might suppose, non-existent in those possible worlds in which he was never conceived. Given that the actual world is possible relative to those worlds (given that the accessibility relation is symmetrical), he exists in those worlds, if McGinn's theory is right, as a mere *possibile*, since, in those worlds, it is possible for him to be actual. If mere *possibilia* really *exist*, as McGinn says they do (and if the accessibility relation is symmetrical), then Clinton exists in every world (or at least in every world accessible from the actual world) in which he puts in any sort of appearance whatever, in every world in which there *is* such a thing as Bill Clinton. That is to say, Clinton has the property of existence essentially (even necessarily). What he has contingently or accidentally is the property *actual* existence or *actuality*. In the worlds in which he does not actually exist, he has the complement or negation of this property (non-actuality) contingently. McGinn's theory does not, therefore, imply that there are counter-examples to the thesis that if a property can be had contingently its negation can also be had contingently. (An incidental remark: if McGinn's theory is right, the property 'being necessarily existent' is not one of the perfections that supposedly belong to the divine nature: the perfection would be 'being necessarily *actually* existent'.)

This completes my exposition of McGinn's theory. Some of my criticisms of the theory were mixed in with my exposition because it seemed best to me to present these criticisms while the points to which they were addressed were still fresh in the reader's mind. I turn now to a more general critical task. What I shall say in the remainder of this paper is directed at the idea of there being things that do not exist, at the thesis I have called neo-Meinongianism. I am, I confess, a follower of Quine in this and in most related matters. My criticism of neo-Meinongianism will be in every respect a Quinean criticism. But it will not, or so I hope, be a typical Quinean criticism of neo-Meinongianism.

The *typical* Quinean critic of neo-Meinongianism opens his animadversions (as Quine might have called them) on neo-Meinongianism with some variant on the following confession: 'I do not see any difference, any difference at all, between "Unicorns do not exist" and "There are no unicorns"'. The neo-Meinongian generally ignores whatever follows this confession, and says something along the lines of 'Thank you for sharing. I am terribly sorry to learn that you are ontologically challenged. But, whether you see it or not, there *is* such a distinction. It even exists.' If the

neo-Meinongian goes in for psychoanalysis, he may add 'You do see the distinction between being and existence on some level, but you refuse to admit to yourself that you see it. You have somehow managed to convince yourself, at least when you are in the philosophy room, that "there is" means "there exists". But the particular quantifier – the currency of the phrase "the existential quantifier" testifies to the success of a century-long anti-Meinongian propaganda campaign initiated by Russell – and "there is" and "*il y a*" and "*es gibt*" have a meaning more general than that of "there exists": "There exists an F" entails "There is an F", but not *vice versa*.'

Impasse. I am going to try to break the *impasse.* I shall make my case against neo-Meinongianism in such a way as not to provide any occasion for yet another unseemly dogfight over the usual bones of contention, the meaning of the backwards-E quantifier and the meaning of the ordinary-language phrase 'there is'. (It is mainly in this respect that the argument I am going to present differs from the argument of Lewis' 'Noneism or Allism?'. In that paper, Lewis made a certain point about the relation between the neo-Meinongian's use of 'exist' and the backwards-E quantifier. I am going to make a point which is similar to Lewis', but my point will be about the relation between the neo-Meinongian's use of 'exist' and the negation of the universal quantifier.)

I begin with the idea of unrestricted universal quantification. It is a commonplace of the philosophy of language that when one uses the idiom of universal quantification, one often, perhaps usually, has some restriction in mind. 'We have sold everything', says the sales clerk after a particularly busy day behind the counter, and we who hear this assertion do not protest that the number 510, the Taj Mahal, and the counter – a concrete object right there in the shop – remain unsold. We all, I believe, understand the uses we make of universal quantification in everyday life, and, even if the universal quantifications we assert in everyday discourse are mostly restricted, tacitly or explicitly, it does not require much philosophical instruction for us to pass from an understanding of the everyday uses of the universal quantifier to an understanding of the idea of *unrestricted* universal quantification. It seems to me that this idea, the idea of unrestricted universal quantification, is a pellucid and wholly unambiguous idea. It is the idea of 'everything without qualification'. It is the idea we require if we wish to say that everything, absolutely everything, everything without qualification, is self-identical or conforms to the laws of logic or is either abstract or concrete.

I concede parenthetically that it has been denied that there is any such thing as what I am calling unrestricted universal quantification. Dummett has maintained that there cannot be such a thing because quantification

presupposes a *domain* of quantification and there is no universal domain. If you want a long refutation of this position, see Timothy Williamson's 'Everything'.[10] Here is a shorter one: we can say, we just *can*, that every-thing, absolutely everything, everything without qualification, is self-identical or conforms to the laws of logic or is either abstract or concrete. But if Dummett's argument were sound, we should not be able to say these things. Thus I refute Dummett.

It seems to me that everyone, everyone including Quine and Kripke and Plantinga and Lewis and me (on the one hand) and McGinn and Parsons and Routley and Castañeda (on the other), means the same thing by the phrase 'unrestricted universal quantification', and everyone means the same thing by the unrestricted universal quantifier – that is, by the operator 'Everything, absolutely everything, everything without qualification', although ordinary folk (on the one hand) and the neo-Meinongians (on the other) will certainly disagree about which sentences containing unrestricted universal quantifiers are *true*. When I say that everything exists and the neo-Meinongian denies that everything exists, we are not talking past each another – not, at any rate, because we mean different things by 'everything'. It is precisely *because* the neo-Meinongian knows that I mean just what he does by 'everything' that he indignantly rises to dispute my contention that everything exists. Although the neo-Meinongian may suspect that Quineans are guilty of tendentious fiddling with the meaning of 'there is', I do not think he will be tempted to entertain the corresponding suspicion as regards 'all'.

I shall use the symbol '∀' to express absolutely unrestricted universal quantification (in other words, I shall use this symbol in its usual sense). I say this:

$(\forall x) \sim (x \text{ is a unicorn})$.

The neo-Meinongian says *this*:

$\sim (\forall x) \sim (x \text{ is a unicorn})$.

What am I to say to this? I shall begin sneaking up on what I want to say by laying out a *faux naïf* reaction to the assertion that not everything is a unicorn. (By which I mean: this reaction would be my reaction if I did not know from experience what the neo-Meinongian would say in reply.)

I do not see how what you say could be true. That not everything is a non-unicorn seems to me to be inconsistent with what I know about the world. If it is indeed false that everything is a non-unicorn, then, if I

were made free of all space and all time, I ought to be able to find, encounter or observe a unicorn. A unicorn, after all, must occupy a certain region of space-time. If anything is a unicorn, then, necessarily, that thing occupies a region of space-time. But, or so I believe, every region of space-time is such that it contains no unicorn: no magic carpet or starship or time machine can take me to a place where there is a unicorn. In other words, everything is a non-unicorn.

I have spent enough time arguing with neo-Meinongians to know that few of them will respond to this argument by saying, 'Golly, I never thought of that. I stand refuted.' A neo-Meinongian is rather more likely to respond to it by saying something like this:

I know of course that the concept of a unicorn is the concept of a thing that has a location in space and time. I also know that neither you nor I can find or observe or discover a unicorn, and that we should be unable to do so even if we could open a wormhole that would take us to any point in space and time. I am aware that unicorns are not, so to speak, 'findable'. But the truth of '~$(\forall x)$~(x is a unicorn)' does not entail that unicorns are findable. Not everything is a non-unicorn (provided that this 'everything' is indeed an absolutely unrestricted 'everything'), and yet unicorns cannot be found. (Not by *us*, at any rate: not by existent people.) Even if super-science were to provide us with a starship or a time machine or a wormhole-opener, there are lots of places where even those things could not take us. They could not take us to Middle-Earth, for example, or even to Barchester. In a word, they could not take us to *non-existent* places or *non-existent* times. Unicorns, being non-existent creatures, tend to be in non-existent places at non-existent times, although no doubt some of them are in existent places at existent times. But even if we go to one of the existent places at which there is a unicorn, and go there when the unicorn is there, we shall not see it, for it is non-existent and of course one cannot see non-existent things.

This, I maintain, is almost certainly what the neo-Meinongian will say in response to the naïve argument – this or something very like it. If the neo-Meinongian says this, however, I must protest that either he contradicts himself or I do not understand him. (If I were advising him on how to conduct his case, I would recommend that he respond to this protest as Roderick Chisholm once responded to a similar protest: 'I accept the disjunction'.) In the following sequence of statements, as the above reply to the naïve argument shows (not that this needs much showing), the neo-Meinongian accepts the first statement in the sequence. In my view, on my

understanding of existence, each statement (after the first) in the sequence is a consequence of, and is in fact equivalent to, the preceding statement in the sequence:

> Every unicorn is non-existent
> Every unicorn is such that everything [an unrestricted 'everything'] is not it
> $(\forall x)[(x \text{ is a unicorn}) \rightarrow (\forall y)\sim(y = x)]$
> $(\forall x)\sim(x \text{ is a unicorn})$.

The second sentence follows from the first (in my view) because (in my view) 'x is non-existent' means 'everything is not x'. (If it means anything. I do not see what *else* it could mean.) Or, at any rate, the relation between the two sentences is something very *like* a meaning-equivalence. Do the two sentences 'x is a circle' and 'x is a figure that, for some point y, comprises those and only those points that are equidistant from y' mean the same? Who can say? Perhaps the concept of sameness of meaning is not sufficiently well defined for this question to have an answer. However this may be, when I say that 'x is non-existent' means 'everything is not x', I mean no more than that the meanings of these two sentences are at least as intimately related as the meanings of the 'circle' sentence and the 'circle analysis' sentence.

If the phrase 'is non-existent' means what I say it means, the neo-Meinongian's allegiance to 'All unicorns are non-existent' commits him to the thesis that everything is a non-unicorn. As I have said, he contends that it is false that everything is a non-unicorn. It therefore seems that since the neo-Meinongian obviously does not mean to embrace a straightforward formal contradiction, he must think that 'is non-existent' means something different from what I say the phrase means. But what *does* he think 'is non-existent' means? We would know how to answer that question if we knew how to answer the question what he thinks 'exists' means, so I shall ask it: what *does* he think 'exists' means? I do not know. I say 'x exists' means '$\sim(\forall y)\sim(y = x)$'; the neo-Meinongian denies this. Apparently, he takes 'exists' to be a primitive, an indefinable term, whereas I think that 'exists' can be defined in terms of 'all' and 'not' and 'is identical with'.[11] (I take definability in terms of 'all' and 'not' and 'is identical with' to be important, because the neo-Meinongian and I are in agreement about the meanings of 'all' and 'not' and 'is identical with' – and thus he understands what *I* say is what 'exists' means, and he is therefore an authority on the question whether

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[11] I thank Patricia Blanchette for pointing out to me that 'is identical with' belongs in this list. I note, however, that if my view of existence is correct, many existence statements, those involving only general terms, can be paraphrased without the use of the identity-sign. For example, 'Dogs exist' is, in my view, logically equivalent to 'Not everything is not a dog'.

what I say 'exists' means is the same as what he says is what 'exists' means.)
Since the neo-Meinongian believes that 'exists' has a meaning which cannot
be explained in terms of unrestricted universal quantification and negation,
he therefore believes in two kinds of quantification where I believe in one. I
have two quantifiers, '∀' and '~∀~'. (I shall call these the unrestricted quan-
tifiers.) Of course, I do not usually write the second one in that way, and I
usually call it something that starts with 'e' and rhymes with 'potential'. For
subtle dialectical reasons, however, I shall not, for the duration of this
argument, write the second unrestricted quantifier in the way I usually do,
and I shall not call it what I usually call it. The neo-Meinongian has four
quantifiers: the two unrestricted quantifiers and two restricted quantifiers,
'A' and 'E'. The two restricted quantifiers (the 'existentially loaded' quanti-
fiers) may be defined as follows:

$$(Ax)(Fx) \ =_{df} \ (\forall x)(x \text{ exists} \rightarrow Fx)$$
$$(Ex)(Fx) \ =_{df} \ \sim(\forall x)\sim(x \text{ exists \& } Fx).$$

(I should perhaps mention that one neo-Meinongian, Terence Parsons, has
told me that he does not like to be described as someone who 'has' two and
only two restricted quantifiers. He thinks that it would be as accurate to say
that he 'has' quantifiers restricted to existent and non-existent cows as it
would be to say that he 'has' the existentially loaded quantifiers, that is,
quantifiers restricted to bovine and non-bovine existents.[12] But I think that
most neo-Meinongians, including McGinn, will be happy enough to say
that they recognize four quantifiers, two of them unrestricted and two of
them existentially loaded.)

When I say that this is how the existentially loaded quantifiers may be
defined, I mean that this is how they may be defined for the benefit of
someone who knows what 'exists' means according to the neo-Meinongian.
But not for *my* benefit, for, as I have said, I do not know what 'exists' means
according to the neo-Meinongian.

Although I do not know what 'exists' means according to the neo-
Meinongian, and therefore do not know what the existentially loaded quan-
tifiers are supposed to mean, I am at least in a position to dispute, as regards
my own case, one accusation which neo-Meinongians frequently direct at
Quineans like me (McGinn is one of the neo-Meinongians who have made
this accusation): that the Quineans have somehow convinced themselves
that the only quantifiers are the existentially loaded ones. I say that, in my
case at least, the charge is wrongly framed. I say that the charge the neo-
Meinongians should bring against *me* is the following one: that I have

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[12] Parsons has recently told me that he does not recall having said this to me, although he
regards the statement as something he might well have said.

somehow convinced myself that the only quantifiers are the *unrestricted* ones; that I have somehow talked myself into accepting the false thesis that the only meaning 'exists' can have, and the only meaning our use of the word requires it to have, is 'not-all-not'. I do not agree that the charge is accurate, of course, but it is the right way for those with their views to frame the charge they want to bring against me. My own description of our disagreement is this: the neo-Meinongians and I mean the same thing by the unrestricted quantifiers; I think 'exists' means something they understand and mistakenly think is *not* what 'exists' means; they say that 'exists' has another meaning, but they have never said what this other meaning is, or at any rate I have not been able to understand their attempts to say what it is.

There is one thing that it is important to realize about these two descriptions of the disagreement. You will misunderstand what I have been saying if you take me to have been saying that neo-Meinongians (on the one hand) and I (on the other) mean two different things by 'exist'. The neo-Meinongians and I have different *theories* about what 'exist' means (they understand mine and say it is false; I do not understand theirs, or at least I claim not to). We have two different theories about what the English word 'exists' means. (The fact that the two theories are theories about the meaning of a word does not mean that our disagreement is about a trivial matter. After all, it is a philosophically very important word.) But the English word means *something*, and one of the parties in this debate has (or both parties have) got it wrong. If I have got it wrong, I have a mistaken theory about what 'exists' means, and I am just as wrong about what I mean by the word as I am about what anyone else means by the word. (Compare: at one time, A.J. Ayer held a mistaken theory about the meaning of 'knows that ...', to wit, that this phrase meant 'believes that ... and is right in so believing and is justified in so believing'; since Ayer was a competent speaker of English, he was wrong not only about what other people meant by 'knows that' but also about what *he* meant by 'knows that'.) Of course, if I have got it right, something like 'not-all-not' is what the neo-Meinongians mean by 'exists'. When they use the English word 'exist', they mean by it what it means, and if that happens to be, as I say it is, 'not-all-not', *they* mean 'not-all-not' by 'exist' – although, according to their mistaken theory about the meaning of 'exists', that is not what they mean by it.

What might the neo-Meinongian say in response? Whatever other neo-Meinongians may say, I would expect McGinn to say something like the following.

Some terms have to go undefined, and it would not be surprising if a discourse-pervading term like 'exists' were one of them. I cannot give

a formal definition of 'exists', just as *you* cannot give a formal definition of 'all' or of 'not'. (That is to say: I cannot give a formal definition of 'exists' that is independent of my theory of existence, a point to which I shall return.) Nevertheless, I can make the meaning of 'exists' clear. All I have to do to make the meaning of 'exists' clear to anyone who has not embraced a false theory about its meaning (there is not much point in trying to help people who have embraced a false theory about the meaning of 'exists' to get clear about its real meaning: they do not *want* help) is to ask that person to consider any sentence like 'The planet Venus exists and the planet Vulcan does not exist'. The unprejudiced will see immediately that when we utter sentences like this one, we are predicating a certain property, existence, of a certain object, the referent of one of the terms we have used, 'Venus', and predicating its complement or negation, non-existence, of another object, the referent of the other term we have used, 'Vulcan'. This exercise enables one to bring the properties existence and non-existence clearly before one's mind by providing one with a perfectly clear case in which something that exemplifies each of these properties is contrasted with an otherwise similar object that exemplifies the other. Once one has done this, one will be in a position to consider my proposal about what property non-existence *is*, to wit, the property of having been brought into being by mental activity.

So speaks McGinn, at least in my imagination. If you find this imaginary speech convincing, I do not think I have much more to say to you. You and I have reached fundamental, ground-floor philosophical disagreement. It seems as evident to me that the ideas on display in the speech are fundamentally wrong as it does to McGinn that the Quinean identification of '*x* exists' and 'something is *x*' is fundamentally wrong. I do not dispute *this*: that someone who said (imagine we know of an actual, historical occasion on which someone said these words in appropriate and felicitous circumstances) 'Gentlemen, it is time to be honest with ourselves and admit that we have been chasing a will-o'-the-wisp: Vulcan does not exist' would, in uttering the sentence 'Vulcan does not exist', have said something true. But it does not look to me as if, when the speaker said this, he referred to a planet or to an object of any sort or as if he had said anything of any description about any particular thing. That is not how the case *feels* to me. McGinn can ascribe my reaction to this use of 'Vulcan does not exist' to prejudice if he likes, but ascribing to prejudice someone else's failure to see things the way you see them has all the advantages of – well, you know the phrase.

What I have just said is not and is not meant to be a refutation of the argument I have ascribed to McGinn. It is no more than a record of one philosopher's failure to be convinced by that argument. But what I have said bears looking at because it shows that I am committed to a thesis of which McGinn is suspicious on grounds of philosophical methodology, and I shall conclude with a discussion of this thesis. I am committed to saying that our use of the grammatical predicate 'does not exist' is a complicated, messy, gerrymandered affair.

I have conceded that sentences like 'Vulcan does not exist', sentences formed by prefixing a term (a proper name or definite description, i.e., a noun or noun-phrase that represents itself as denoting a particular object) to the predicate 'does not exist', can be used to say true things. Let 'N does not exist' be any true sentence of this form.[13] For McGinn, the truth of 'N does not exist' is a straightforward matter: the name 'N' denotes an object, and that object has the property expressed by the predicate 'does not exist'. The proper semantic analysis of this sentence, according to McGinn, is of exactly the sort that most philosophers would say was right for paradigmatic subject–predicate sentences like 'The Taj Mahal is white' and 'Bill Clinton was once the governor of Arkansas'. But this straightforward semantic analysis is not available to a philosopher like me – that is, to a Quinean who concedes that 'N does not exist' is true. It is not available to my philosophical allies and me for two reasons.

1. As my allies and I see the matter, the name 'N' is without a referent, and the analysis implies that 'N does not exist' is true only if 'N' has a referent

2. If the predicate 'does not exist' expresses a property, this property is, of course, the complement of the property existence. As my allies and I see the matter, existence is the property identity-with-something (or, simply, self-identity: a thing that is identical with something is identical with itself, and a thing that is identical with itself is identical with something). But the complement of the property identity-with-something (or

[13] I concede that it is difficult to say what a true sentence is. One might say 'A sentence that expresses a true proposition', but some may find that proposal unhelpful, since it presupposes the perhaps problematic concepts 'proposition' and 'expresses'. (Anyone who does adopt this definition should note that McGinn and I agree that, e.g., 'Vulcan does not exist' expresses a true proposition, although we disagree about what proposition it is that the sentence expresses.) Another possibility is 'A sentence such that, if one uttered it in appropriate and felicitous circumstances, one would thereby say something true'. Proposals of that sort, however, face well known problems, problems created by the fact that if a sentence is in fact not uttered, various actual truths will be falsehoods in the closest worlds in which it is uttered. For example, the sentence 'No one is speaking' ought, intuitively, to be true when no one is speaking, but it never has the property 'is such that, if one uttered it in appropriate and felicitous circumstances, one would thereby say something true'.

self-identity) is the property identity-with-nothing (or non-self-identity or self-non-identity). This property is, of course, an impossible property, and if a property is impossible, nothing has it. The straightforward analysis implies that the sentence 'N does not exist' is true only if a certain object has the property expressed by 'does not exist', and there-fore implies that 'N does not exist' is false if the property expressed by 'does not exist' is a property nothing has.

What, then, do I say *is* the right semantic analysis of 'N does not exist'? Alas, I must say that there *is* no right analysis – no *one* right analysis. I must say this because I believe that, as I said above, our use of the grammatical predicate 'does not exist' is a complicated, messy, gerrymandered affair. In my view, there are at least three ways, three different ways, in which 'does not exist' functions, and each of them requires a different semantic analysis.

Here are three cases in which a speaker uses the predicate 'does not exist', and uses it to say something true. (I have supplied some context for the first two; the third does not need it. '□→' is Lewis' counterfactual operator.)

> Only Sherlock Holmes could solve this case, and, unfortunately, Sher-lock Holmes doesn't exist. (Said by a frustrated police detective.)

> Lord bless you, sir, Sherlock Holmes doesn't exist and he never did. He's just a chap in a story made up by someone called Conan Doyle. (Words addressed by a classic, pre-war London bobby to a tourist who is trying to find 221 B Baker Street.)

> Colin McGinn does not exist □→ Philosophy is impoverished.

Each of these uses of 'does not exist' is, as I see the matter, different from the other two, and in none of the three cases is the predicate used to attribute to something the property of non-existence.[14] I am not going to try to explain why I think 'does not exist' has three uses.[15] I am not asking anyone to

[14] The antecedent of the counterfactual (the third sentence) is not equivalent to 'Colin McGinn has the property non-existence', at least, not as I see the matter, for as I see the matter, although there are plenty of possible worlds in which McGinn does not exist, there are no possible worlds in which he has the property (the impossible property, I say) non-existence. Here I follow Plantinga; see his *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), chs VII and VIII, and p. 151 in particular. Only in worlds in which an object exists has it any properties at all; in worlds in which an object does not exist, therefore, it does not have any properties and hence does not have the property non-existence.

[15] Enough people have expressed puzzlement about the difference between the first and second cases for me to have to say something about the matter. (I shall not defend the thesis that they differ in the way I say they do.) In the first case, the police detective is deploring the fact (which he supposes is well known to his audience; he is not *informing* anyone of anything) that a certain set of properties, the 'Holmes properties', is uninstantiated. (For McGinn, the

believe that 'does not exist' has three uses; I am simply confessing that that is what I believe. I am confessing that I subscribe to a very complex theory of how 'does not exist' functions in our language, a theory according to which the proper semantic treatment of 'does not exist' will be, so to speak, radically non-uniform. I do not mean to imply that a theory which ascribes such complexity to 'does not exist' is a logical consequence of Quineanism. I am one Quinean among many, and other Quineans may favour theories which ascribe a much simpler semantics to 'does not exist', for example, the theory that 'N does not exist' is true if and only if 'N' does not have a referent. (Good luck to them, but I think that this theory can be shown to be unsatisfactory.) But all Quineans must have a theory about how the predicate 'does not exist' works which is at least somewhat more elaborate than McGinn's. At a minimum, all Quineans (all of them who agree with me that 'Vulcan does not exist' and other sentences of the same sort are *true*) must dispute McGinn's contention that sentences like 'Vulcan does not exist' can be given a semantic analysis exactly parallel to the analysis which – almost everyone agrees – is appropriate for sentences like 'Venus does not have inhabitants' and 'Winifred does not smoke'.

McGinn regards a uniform treatment of subject–predicate sentences as a default position in philosophy: that is, he thinks that any philosopher who treats some subject–predicate sentences as requiring a semantic or philosophical analysis radically different from that of most other subject–predicate sentences is saying something that can be defended only by a very strong argument. I do not see it in this way myself. In fact, it seems to me to be very doubtful whether there can be such a thing as a *standard* semantic treatment of the subject–predicate sentences of natural language. Just one example of the kind of thing behind my scepticism is provided by the sentence 'The shadow of the elm is moving slowly across the lawn and it will reach the garden path in about an hour'. This sentence is an ordinary enough subject–predicate sentence, and one that might be used in easily imaginable circumstances to say something true. Suppose, then, that

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Holmes properties are the properties that Holmes has and which might be had by an existent human being – 'plays the violin', 'is a detective' and so on. In McGinn's view, of course, this set of properties is *not* uninstantiated. For my own views on how the Holmes properties should be identified, see my paper 'Creatures of Fiction', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 14 (1977), pp. 299–308, repr. in my *Ontology, Identity and Modality* (Cambridge UP, 2001), pp. 37–56.) In the second case, the bobby is informing the tourist of a 'Kripkean' fact, that the name 'Sherlock Holmes' has a different sort of history from the history which he, the tourist, supposes it to have – that the current use of the name has its causal roots in a work of fiction, and cannot be traced to an occasion on which that name was conferred upon someone in an 'initial act of baptism'. I do not imply, however, that either the detective or the bobby would regard the words I have used in my descriptions of 'what they were saying' as accurate paraphrases of what they said, or even that they would have any idea what I was talking about.

someone uttered this sentence and said something true. Does the truth of what this person said imply that (on that occasion) 'the shadow of the elm' denoted something and that the thing it denoted then had the property expressed by the open sentence '*x* is moving slowly across the lawn and *x* will reach the garden path in about an hour'? I certainly hope not, for I cannot bring myself to believe that there really are shadows; and I find it even harder to believe that, if I am wrong and there are shadows, one and the same shadow can be in one place at one time and in another place at another time.

Natural language and its grammar are very complicated things and they did not evolve (or they were not conferred on us by God or whatever the right story of their genesis may be) in order that the grammar of natural language might serve as a reliable guide in philosophical speculation. Maybe natural (or 'ordinary') language is, as Austin said, the first word. It is certainly (as he conceded) not the last word. I do not believe in shadows because I cannot give a coherent account of what properties shadows would have if there were any of them. That is what I want to say about non-existent objects, too: the only property I know of that it seems right to me to apply the name 'non-existence' to is an impossible property. I therefore regard the grammatical structure of sentences like 'The shadow is moving across the lawn' and 'Vulcan does not exist' as an untrustworthy guide in ontology. Even if I did believe that a 'standard' (that is, a Tarskian) semantic analysis was the default semantic analysis for natural-language subject–predicate sentences, I would say that the *prima facie* case for applying this analysis to the true sentences 'The shadow is moving across the lawn' and 'Vulcan does not exist' is overridden by what I see as the semantic facts – in the one case, the fact that 'the shadow' has no referent, and in the other, the fact that 'Vulcan' has no referent and the fact that 'does not exist' expresses a property nothing has.[16]

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