

# (Van Inwagen on) McGinn on (Kripke on) Existence

## Problèmes de Métaphysique

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### McGinn on Existence

Four objections to the view that existence is a second-degree property:

1. The second-degree property of having instances presupposes existence; if a concept has instances, these instances have to exist; if a concept has no instances, this only means it has no existing instances. BUT the second claim is implausible: it is not true that “if [Vulcan] is not [an instance of ‘planet’], then that can only be because it doesn’t exist” (McGinn 2000: 21).
2. The second-level view saddles us with a vicious infinite regress of higher-level properties, for it (explanatorily) presupposes the existence of concepts. BUT the second-level view is not committed to the claim that the existence of an  $n$ -level entity is a  $(n + 1)$ -level property. Instead we may claim that a property exists iff it has instances (not: if it is an instance).
3. The second-level view is unable to provide a satisfactory analysis of “Something exists” which McGinn analyses as “ $\exists x(x \text{ exists})$ ”. BUT the second-level view would analyse it as  $\exists \phi \exists x(\phi x)$ , relying on a principle McGinn (2000: 25, 26, 28) accepts, namely that everything exemplifies at least one property.
4. The second-level view excludes the prima facie metaphysical possibility of bare existence, i.e. the existence of something which does not have any further property. BUT In his reply to the suggestion that any  $a$  has the property of being identical to  $a$ , McGinn (2000: 27, fn. 13) confuses this property with the property of being self-identical (cf. also McGinn 2000: 29, fn. 15) and asserts that the latter is exemplified by non-existing things, thereby begging the question against the advocate of the second-level view. McGinn (2000: 31) himself also mentions the property of being an instance of some property of other and says it is universal!

Three positive theses:

1. semantical thesis: “exists” is a logical predicate, such as “is blue” or “is a man”.
2. metaphysical thesis: existence is always a property of objects.
3. ontological thesis: some objects do not exemplify the property of existence; some non-existent objects are values of “ $\exists x$ ”.

### Van Inwagen on McGinn on Existence

van Inwagen (2008: 41) ascribes to McGinn the following theses:

1. All non-existent things are man-made.
2. All non-existent things are essentially non-existent.
3. There are things that exist but do not actually exist.

van Inwagen (2008: 43) reconstrues McGinn’s and Kripke’s argument for (2) as an application of Kripke’s essentiality of origin thesis to man-made objects. But this presupposes that all man-made objects are non-existent, which is false. It also underscores the respect to which McGinn’s argument

for (1) relies on the problem of individuating non-existent things: “The notion of an entity not existing that has no individual concept associated with it is ill-defined: *what* it is, precisely, that does not exist?” (McGinn 2000: 38, fn. 24) This is the other argument van Inwagen (2008: 43) mentions, i.e. that there are many equally good candidate possibilities to counterfactually identify some non-existent object with, is a plain non-sequitur: that Holmes might be different things, does not show Holmes is none. It seems to me that this is Kripke’s argument, but I hesitate to attribute it to him.

With respect to (2), van Inwagen (2008: 46) says that McGinn should hold that not only non-existence, but also existence is an essential property.

van Inwagen (2008: 44) says that McGinn is committed to (3) because he subscribes to (1). He cannot say that the non-actually existing things are non-existing, because not all non-actually existing things are man-made. This is supposed to follow from the fact that “the modal status of a proposition is a mind-independent thing” (van Inwagen 2008: 44). But I fail to see how.

## Van Inwagen on neo-Meinongianism

1. Both the neo-Meinongian and van Inwagen mean the same by “There are things that don’t exist”. They understand the same by negation and the unrestricted universal quantifier and hence by “ $\forall \neg(x \text{ is a unicorn})$ ”.
2. Both the neo-Meinongian and van Inwagen think that every unicorn is non-existent.
3. Both the neo-Meinongian and van Inwagen mean by “every unicorn is non-existent” that  $\forall \neg(x \text{ is a unicorn})$ .
4. Hence van Inwagen is right.

BUT the neo-Meinongian and van Inwagen might agree about unicorns and still disagree about neo-Meinongianism.

## References

- van Inwagen, Peter, 2008. “McGinn on Existence”. *The Philosophical Quarterly* 58: 36–58 [1](#), [2](#)
- McGinn, Colin, 2000. *Logical Properties*. Oxford: Clarendon Press