A CRITIQUE ON MCGINN COUNTERARGUMENTS ON RUSSELL'S THEORY OF EXISTENCE

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The aim of this paper is to present a critique of McGinn's arguments against the Russellian approach of existence. According to McGinn, existence should be considered a proper predicate. In this case, formally it cannot be equated with the existential quantifier. For a better understanding of the orthodox view (*i.e.* Russell's approach), a short presentation of it is needed. Hence, I am going to briefly present Russell's main ideas about existence. If McGinn rejects that existence can and should be expressed using the existential quantifier, Russell argues for the opposite. The next step consists in a brief presentation of the counterarguments McGinn provides for the orthodox approach. In the last section of the paper I am going to present some critiques for some of the counterarguments McGinn provides. Some of them seem to be quite strong, but others fail to reach their aim.

However, I should add that I do not agree at all with the equivalence between existence and the existential quantifier. But, if one wants to reject such an account it has to have pretty strong counterarguments. McGinn's ones do not seem to be as strong as he wished them to be.

I. A short presentation of the orthodox approach[1]

McGinn (McGinn, 2000) is arguing for a theory that takes existence as a property of objects; thus, existence is considered a predicate.

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[1]   In this presentation I followed McGinn's one (McGinn, 2000, pp. 17-21) Russell's presentation can be found in (Russell, 2010, pp. 61-76, 110-115)

His approach is coming against the one that finds existence rather a second-order property; this means, a property of a property. The rival view is supported by Russell.

According to Russell's account, existence is not attributed to certain objects, because it is not a property of objects. Existence suggests that some specific property is instantiated. In this situation, if someone says 'Lions exist', he means that the property of being a lion (lionhood) is instantiated. Hence, if something exists, is not understood as an attribution of a specific property (*i.e.* existence) to a specific object. It is rather understood that a certain property has an instance.

It can be understood that an existing object means nothing more or less that a specific property has instances. The concept of existence is linked to the one of instance and possibility. Thus, saying that 'Lions exist' means that the sentence 'x is a lion' is possible.

McGinn identifies three main sub-theses in the Russellian argument (McGinn, 2000, p. 19). There is an ontological thesis, a semantic or logical one and a definitional one. The first of them has both a negative and a positive part. The negative part is that existence is not a property that individuals instantiate. On the other hand, the positive one is that for something to exist means for some property to have instances. The semantic part consists in the fact that statements of existence are higher-order statements involving reference to a specific property, predicate or propositional function. Finally, the third sub-thesis defines existence through terms as 'propositional function' (or 'property instantiation') and 'sometimes true' (or 'possible'). This definition is meant to be non-circular. According to this last claim, McGinn considers that:

> 'In a perfect language the word *(i.e. existence)* need never occur, its job always being done by 'sometimes true' and its adjuncts.' (McGinn, 2000, p. 20)

This orthodox approach – as McGinn is calling it – puts an identity between the existential quantifier and existence. In other words, the existential quantifier has ontological import. There is

no need of a different predicate in order to express existence; the already mentioned quantifier does the entire job. Thus, 'existence' means 'there is an x such that'. This interpretation seems easy to use, especially in a formalized language. On the other hand, it also seems to have its limitations and some weak points.

II. McGinn counterarguments

McGinn offers some harsh critiques on this view. There are four main counter arguments presented by the author. The first of them regards the concept of instantiations. Existence is defined through the phrase that a predicate 'has instantiations'. This can be understood in an objectual or substitutional sense. Taking into consideration the first sense, it means that in order for something to exist there have to be objects that are instances for some certain predicate (McGinn, 2000, p. 21). Let us take an example. Returning to the one already used: 'Lions exist'. According to the objectual analysis, there have to be some objects that instantiate the property of lionhood. This means that these objects exist, in order to be considered instances for lionhood. In this situation, how should the second occurrence of 'exist' be understood? McGinn considers this occurrence to be presupposed, without a proper explanation. In his words:

> 'The notion of existence is presupposed in the analysis, so the analysis does not settle what kind of notion is. (…) The instances have to be existent objects, so we are presupposing the notion of an existent object in our account of what an instance of a predicate is.' (McGinn, 2000, p. 21)

Thus, the instantiation of a property seems to presuppose the concept of existence. In order for an instance to be considered, it must already exist. Only existing objects can be proper instantiations. In this situation, if the orthodox view understands the idea that a property has instantiation in an objectual sense, it seems to be

doomed to circularity. As the author concludes, this interpretation cannot be considered to prove that existence is not a predicate.

On the other hand, the substitutional one seems to be the one that Russell preferred. In this situation, instances are propositions or sentences, rather than objects. But, according to McGinn, this interpretation suffers from the same weakness. The propositions or sentences that represent instances for the existing property have to be true. In order for a truth-bearer to be true, there must be at least an existing object referred to by the name used in the truth-bearer and the specific object has to satisfy the predicate it is attached to.

It seems that, in every case, an instance of a property means nothing more than at least one existing object that instantiates that specific property. In this situation, it seems that the definition of existence through instantiations of a property and possibility is circular.

The second objection considers the generality of the orthodox approach. According to McGinn the theory is not able to analyze the application of existence to the properties. The author claims that properties or propositional functions exist in the same way as other things, even if they are abstract objects.[2] In order to analyze that the property of being a lion exists, one should refer to some further property. It is obvious that the needed property cannot be the property itself, because lionhood is not itself a lion. In this situation, a new property that represents a description of the first one is introduced. Hence, the second property needs an instance. From here, there is a requirement for another existing object.

The real problem, thus, arises because for every existing property another one is needed. Starting from an existing property, another one is needed, and so on. But the one that represents an instance for the first property also has to exist. Hence, we are forced to accept that:

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[2]   This implies the acceptance of a strong realism. I am going to return to this later on in the paper.

'(…) we are now launched on a vicious infinite regress (…) The problem, evidently, is that to analyze the existence of a property we need another property that the first one instantiates, and so on *ad infinitum*. Not only is it doubtful that there always *are* there further properties, but also we will not succeed in getting any of them to exist without the existence of further ones that raise the same question.' (McGinn, 2000, p. 24)

This requires that existence could not be used for properties. In this situation, the orthodox approach is not able to cover the whole range of the utilizations for existence. Because of this weakness, McGinn considers this approach 'ill-formed and meaningless' (McGinn, 2000, p. 25). The author does not accept to take as primitive the existence of properties. If the existence of properties would be accepted for granted, there would be no need for an analysis like the one already presented. In such a situation, the theory would have no problem regarding the existence for properties. However, McGinn considers that a proper theory of existence should be able to explain all the uses of the concept it is supposed to define. Thus, the approach proposed by Russell is not able to prove that properties exist. If this is the case, then it also fails in explaining that objects exist. In order for an object – x – to exist, there must be some existing property – P – such that x instantiates P.

The third critique follows the same line as the one already presented. It underlines some sentences that cannot be analyzed using the orthodox approach. It seems that singular attributions of existence are quite hard to be analyzed by the orthodox approach. For example, sentences as 'Natalia exists' seem to appeal, in order to be analyzed, to a description theory of reference and such a theory was heavily criticized. The other possible option is to accept that there are two interpretations of 'exist'. Thus, there is a predicative interpretation, as in the example presented above – in the case of singular sentences – and for general sentences as 'Lions exist' it is not taken predicative. This solution seems even more unattractive than the first one.

Sentences as 'Something exists' are even more problematic for the orthodox approach. This sentence is clearly meaningful and true, but it cannot be properly expressed without a predicate for existence. If it would be expressed symbolizing existence with the existential quantifier, then it will be something of the form '$(\exists x)$' with no predicate added. Thus, such a sentence might be considered only meaningless from the orthodox point of view. The problem is that it follows from sentences as 'Lions exist', being a logical consequence of any sentence of that form. Therefore, the author considers that;

> '(…) the orthodox view does not have the generality we should expect of a theory of existence.' (McGinn, 2000, p. 28)

Finally, the fourth counterargument focuses on the fact that nothing that failed to fall under some property could exist. In other words, whatever exists must have at least one property.[3] Thus, the orthodox approach rejects 'bare existence'. According to McGinn bare existence might be metaphysically impossible, but it does not seem to be a logical impossibility. But the orthodox view makes it impossible not only metaphysically, but also impossible to be expressed.

> 'I think the idea of an object[4] that has *only* the property of existence is not intrinsically self-defeating, but it would have to be if existence simply considered in property instantiations.' (McGinn, 2000, p. 29)

The problem seems to be not only that the orthodox approach requires a specific property instantiated in order for something to exist, but it also requires that property to be unique to that object. The instantiation of that property has to be sufficient

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3   A property that is different from the one that implies existence.
4   The formulation McGinn uses seems contradictory. I am going to return to this in the next section.

for the object to exist, but not for the existence of other objects as well. McGinn considers that there might be an object that differs in no respect from a numerically distinct object. But this seems impossible if one adopts the orthodox view.

In conclusion, the already mentioned approach seems to be able to solve only a limited number of cases and leaves outside many others. Even more, it tends to consider impossible to express, either ill-formed, or impossible some perfectly meaningful and sometimes true sentences. In other words:

> '(…) the theory cannot deal with property existence, it cannot handle the full range of existential statements, and it links the possibility of existence too intimately to the idea of (uniquely) instantiating a property.' (McGinn, 2000, p. 30)

If those critiques would stand, then the orthodox approach would have no chance. Thus, according to McGinn, a theory of existence has to consider 'exist' a predicate in order to have the explanatory power such a theory needs. However, the Russellian view may be saved if some of those counterarguments would fail.

III. A critique on McGinn's counterarguments

Those arguments are strong enough to destroy the orthodox view. The main issue is that some of them seem to be quite implausible. The first argument is the one that stands. I do not see a way out for the advocate of the criticized approach. This might be the main issue for Russell's theory. The fact that the definition he provides is circular may be considered the weakest point of the theory. However, there are some advocates of the circular definitions.[5]

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[5] Gupta and Belnap consider that truth might be defined appealing to a circular definition and that this does not destroy the coherence of a truth theory. This might also be extended to other notions, maybe existence. But for the aim of this paper, I will consider the first counterargument provided by McGinn to stand. For more information about the revision

Even if this is the case, one should accept circular definitions in order to escape this critique and I do not think that Russell would do so. In this situation, the argument stands.

For the second counterargument, the orthodox approach has an easy way out. Russell could avoid it by claiming that properties cannot exist in the same way as other objects do. He could also claim that his notion of existence is a strong one, one that implies the property of concreteness. In this situation, indeed, the existence of properties or other abstract objects would not be possible. Another escape of this would be to claim that an object exists only if it does so mind-independent. Thus, lions exist because they would exist even if no rational mind would observe their existence. However, one might claim that this is not the case for properties. This is strongly linked with the metaphysical view one has. In this situation, this second argument is not as strong as the author intended it to be. If an advocate of the orthodox approach adopts realism about properties and other abstract entities, then he must face this critique. If not, he has more than one possibility to escape it.

The third objection is not as simple to escape as the previous one. However, there might be some solutions, at least from a part of the counterargument. The critique implies that if existence is to be taken as equivalent with the existential quantifier and being defined as an instantiation of a property, then singular claims about existence cannot be handled by such a theory. McGinn argues that the possible escape from this is to accept a theory about reference that uses definite descriptions and such a theory is problematic. This is right, an approach of definite description is quite hard to support. On the other hand, Kripke's theory of rigid designators might work. Returning to the example from the presentation of the critique – 'Natalia exists' – the name that occurs in the sentence could be understood as a rigid designator. In this case it could be treated not as a constant, but rather as a predicate

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theory of truth see: (Gupta, 1982, 1989) and (Belnap, 1982) and also (Belnap and Gupta, 1993).

that is satisfied by only one object. Formally this sentence could be '$(\exists x)Nx$'. This seems to fulfill all the claims imposed by the orthodox approach. However, if one does not want to treat names as predicates, the other possibility – also following Kripke's theory – could be to reach for the essential property, as origin. But this would complicate the solution. These being said, I strongly believe that singular claims can be handled by the orthodox approach.

On the other hand, there might be some sentences that raise some issues for this view. For example:

(1) Something exists.

(2) Nothing exists.

(3) Not everything exists.

A possible solution could be to use the predicate 'is a thing' in order to escape the problem. However, this might not be generally accepted, and it seems not to work for (3). In this situation, this part of McGinn's argument stands. This issue does not weaken only the Russellian approach. Any view about existence that considers existence to be expressed only by the existential quantifier seems to have the same problem. For example, Lewis' approach[6] takes existence in a weaker sense but faces the same issue. This does not mean that the advocate of such an approach does not have to solve the problem.

The fourth argument seems self-contradictory in its formulation. The idea of bare existence might raise some paradoxes. Bare existence is defined as an existing object that does not have any other properties than existence. It seems that the definition already presents two more properties: 'is an object' and 'does not have any other properties (than existence)'. Hence, bare existence is quite hard to be expressed without reaching for other properties and producing inconsistencies. Even more, if the second property – the property of 'not having other properties (than existence)' – is accepted to be a genuine one, then a form of paradox occurs. In other words, the object that does not have any other property, but

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[6]   For more see (Lewis, 1990).

existence, already has the property of 'not having any other property'. Thus, it has two different properties.

McGinn's argument to support the idea that bare existence is not a contradictory notion is that:

'(…) there seems no logical bar to a range of individuals existing in a world without there being a property that singles each of them out uniquely – as it might be, a collection of indiscernible red steel spheres.' (McGinn, 2000, p. 29)

I am quite sure that McGinn claims that there should not be a property that singles out a specific object, because he wants to reject the theory of definite descriptions. However, Kripke's theory – that was already mentioned – keeps the identity of an object with itself without the problems of the definite description theory. In this situation, we may accept that there might be a collection of 'indiscernible' red steel spheres, but those spheres – being a collection – differ from a single sphere. Thus, being many they must be different. Even if it is accepted that they are not different because of any physical difference – they share the same physical properties, they must differ in at least one sense. That sense, according to Kripke, is their origin. Thus, they may seem 'indiscernible', but they are different objects. It might be, then, concluded that McGinn's argument favoring the conceivability of bare existence fails.

In order for something to be existent, it seems that it must have at least one other property. These being said, I tried to offer some arguments that bare existence is not only metaphysically impossible, but also conceptually impossible. Such a concept is not coherent. In this situation, the fourth critique vanishes.

To sum up, it seems that an advocate of the orthodox approach has to face only two critiques. Firstly, he has to face the problem of circularity. Russell's definition for existence already presupposes the concept that should be defined. Secondly, the sustainer of the theory should accept or solve the fact that his theory is not as general as he wishes. There are some sentences that cannot be expressed using the theory presented. Those

sentences are meaningful and sometimes even true and logical consequences of some accepted sentence, but they seem to be ill-formed in the orthodox approach.

Conclusions

In this paper I presented McGinn's critiques on Russell's theory of existence. I also tried to argue that some of these do not stand. Thus, McGinn offers four main counterarguments for the orthodox approach. I consider that only two of them are proper counterarguments and damage the already mentioned approach. The other arguments seem to self-contradictory – as the last one – or have pretty easy ways out – as the second one and a part of the third one.

This does not mean that the orthodox approach does not have its issues. I did not try to support the orthodox approach here. My aim was to present a critical analysis of McGinn's counterarguments. I strongly believe that those arguments are enough to raise some serious problems for the orthodox approach, but this is not the aim of this current paper.

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