Colin McGinn’s recent book *Logical Properties: Identity, Existence, Predication, Necessity, Truth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 114 pages. All quotations are from this book – unless otherwise indicated – is a collection of five essays on the topics mentioned in the title. Since McGinn is providing a brief summary of the book, there is no need for me to recap. What I find so interesting about the book is that while I agree with what I take to be the main conclusion of each chapter, I find myself at odds with some of the arguments presented for those conclusions and at odds with some of the details McGinn presents along the way.

The main conclusion in each chapter, as I understand McGinn, is a kind of anti-reductionist claim concerning the subject of the chapter. While there are a number of philosophers who will disagree with McGinn for his realism about these matters, I am not one of them. Since space is limited, I will not spend a great deal of time noting where I agree with McGinn and will instead focus my comments on those views of his that seem to me to warrant further consideration. This means that I shall focus my comments on his chapters on existence and necessity.

Even though McGinn rejects Russell’s inference from the claim that if there were such a property as existence, it would be a universal property to the claim there is no such property, he also rejects the premise that existence is a universal property. Since I am inclined to think that existence is a universal property – everything that there is has it – I was interested in McGinn’s reasons for thinking otherwise. As far as I can tell, the reason McGinn thinks that existence is not a universal property is that there are true negative existential claims. As he presents it:

Not everything that we refer to exists.: Venus does, Vulcan doesn’t; horses do, unicorns don’t. There are merely fictional entities as well as things that really exist. To exist is to have a property that only some of the things we refer to have.
those that exist are opposed to those that are merely fictional. Thus existence is a property that is universal to entities that exist, unlike (say) the property of being blue (which is, however, universal to entities that are blue) ... The ontological status of existence as a property of objects has its semantic counterpart in the grammar of statements of existence: ‘exists’ is a predicate. It is a predicate that singles out the existent entities we talk about from those that are merely ‘intentional’ – fictitious, wrongly reified, hallucinatory, dreamed up, mistakenly posited. (pp. 16–17)

McGinn’s argument, if I understand him correctly, has the following general form: we ordinarily engage in certain linguistic behavior; we talk in such and such ways. On the surface this linguistic behavior appears to ontologically commit us to there being certain entities (in this case to there being non-existential objects). Therefore, there are such entities.

If this is McGinn’s argument, and its not completely clear that it is, then it seems to me to be seriously lacking for a number of reasons including that it seems to assume what we are suppose to conclude. McGinn assumes that we refer to Vulcan as well as referring to Venus, Mars and the other planets. I would agree that we talk as if we can refer to Vulcan, but the relation expressed by ‘x refers to y’ is an extensional relation and I would argue that all such relations require relata in order to obtain. Hence, in claiming that we refer to Vulcan, McGinn must assume that there is something to refer to. Now in a footnote McGinn says “If we are discussing planets and I say, ‘Venus exists but Vulcan does not,’ this can be informative to you precisely because you do not know which of ‘Venus’ and ‘Vulcan’ is the empty term” (pp. 31–32, note 18). The implication here is that ‘Vulcan’ is an empty term – which means that the term ‘Vulcan’ fails to designate anything. Indeed, I would agree with McGinn that one use of the predicate ‘exists’ is to inform one’s audience about whether or not the singular or general term in question is empty. But it is surprising for McGinn to say this given that his argument in favor of entities such as Vulcan is just that we refer to them.

Perhaps his use of the phrase ‘empty term’ was just a casual way of saying that Vulcan does not exist. Still, there are purely empty terms. Let ‘Charley’ designate the unique non-existent object. Both McGinn and I agree there is no unique non-existent object (I, because there are no non-existent objects and McGinn, because