

Vagueness and Existence

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ABSTRACT Vague existence can seem like the worst kind of vagueness in the world, or seem to be an entirely unintelligible notion. This bad reputation is based upon the rumour that if there is vague existence then there are non-existent objects. But the rumour is false: the modest brand of vague existence entailed by certain metaphysical theories of composition does not deserve its bad reputation.

I

*Introduction.*¹ Could existence be a vague matter? It is common to suppose either that existence could not be vague, or else that it is just not clear what it would *be* for existence to be vague (the combination of these views is also pretty common). In consequence, if a metaphysical theory entails that there can be vagueness in existence, so much the worse for that theory. I will argue that most objections to vagueness in existence are based on the assumption that if there is vagueness in existence then there are non-existent objects. But, as I will show, this connection holds only for an immodest brand of vague existence. It is possible to accept a more modest kind of vague existence without believing that there are non-existent objects. Moreover, many of the metaphysical theories which entail vague existence entail only this modest kind of vague existence. Vague existence is not the bogeyman it is often supposed to be.

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II

Worldly Vagueness and Linguistic Vagueness. Before proceeding, I need to clarify the distinction between vagueness in the world and vagueness in language, since it is the former which is widely considered to be objectionable. Those who are epistemicists about vagueness believe that neither the world nor our statements about the world are indeterminate.² According to them, vague statements are either true or false, and vagueness is simply a matter of our (perhaps inevitable) ignorance of truth values. Epistemicists reject both worldly and linguistic vagueness. In contrast, non-epistemicists believe that at least some vague statements are indeterminate – perhaps they have no truth-value, or have both classical truth-values, or have some non-classical truth value. The dispute amongst non-epistemicists about whether a certain instance of vagueness is ‘in the world’ or ‘in language’ is not a dispute about whether some particular statement is indeterminate, for this is agreed on both sides. Rather, it is a disagreement about what the *source* of this indeterminacy is – is the claim indeterminate because our meanings are underspecified, or because the world is in some sense ‘open’?

I have argued elsewhere that we should think of semantic or linguistic indeterminacy as that indeterminacy in statements which arises from semantic indecision – indeterminacy in exactly which elements of the world are being spoken about.³ By default, ontic or worldly indeterminacy is that indeterminacy in statements which arises even when it is determinate which elements of the world are in question. For example, suppose that it is indeterminate whether Fred is bald. This is semantic

² An exception: Williamson (1994) chapter 9 develops a very attenuated epistemicist notion of vagueness in the world.

³ Hawley (2001) chapter 4.

indeterminacy if it arises because there is indeterminacy about which property is the semantic value of the predicate ‘is bald’. In contrast, it is ontic indeterminacy if it is determinate which object is Fred, and which property is the *baldness* property.

Distinguishing semantic from ontic vagueness dissolves one possible objection to vague existence immediately. It may seem that there is just obviously no vagueness, confusion or imprecision regarding the notion of existence. It is indeed plausible that there is no semantic vagueness in the words ‘existence’ or ‘exists’, in contrast to words like ‘rich’, ‘bald’ or ‘red’. After all, it is hard to conjure up a range of alternative meanings of ‘existence’, between which we are supposed not to have decided. Even though we cannot supply an illuminating definition of ‘exists’, and even though existence is a source of philosophical puzzlement, this does not seem to be a result of prevarication or loose talk. But the precision of the words ‘existence’ and ‘exists’ does not settle the question of whether there could be *ontic* vagueness in existence, that’s to say, vagueness in matters of existence arising even where there is no indeterminacy in what objects, properties and relations are in question.

Some believe that there is no ontic indeterminacy of any kind, that if we could speak a language free from semantic indecision, then all of our statements would have unique, determinate truth values.⁴ I will not discuss that position here. Rather, I want to consider the position of someone who believes that there could be vagueness in the world – perhaps vague boundaries, vague parthood, or vagueness of colour – yet also believes that there cannot be vagueness in existence. Why does vague existence seem

⁴ Lewis (1986) pp. 212-13, Heller (1996).

particularly repugnant?⁵ In some respects, the notion of vague existence is like that of vague identity: even those who accept that there can be vagueness in the world may feel unable to accept the possibility of worldly vagueness in identity. There is a much-discussed argument, due to Gareth Evans and to Nathan Salmon, to the effect that claims of ontic indeterminacy in identity are incoherent, for special reasons which do not obviously apply to other types of ontic indeterminacy.⁶ There is apparently no such argument applying to ontic vagueness in existence. Rather, I believe, vague existence is thought especially problematic because it is taken to depend upon the idea that there are non-existent objects as well as existent ones.

III

Modest Vague Existence. What would vague existence amount to? It will help to begin with some examples. Peter van Inwagen's views about material beings commit him to vague existence for composite objects.⁷ He rejects unrestricted mereology, the view that any two objects have a sum; there is, according to him, nothing which is made up of the particles in my left foot and those in the Moon. Under which restricted circumstances, then, do two or more things make up a larger object? Van Inwagen argues that things compose something when and only when their joint activity constitutes a life. So he believes in simple, partless objects, and in living organisms, but in nothing else. There are no chairs in this room, although there are atoms 'arranged chair-wise'.

⁵ The question is also relevant to anyone who rejects *all* ontic vagueness on the grounds that all ontic vagueness results in vague existence and that ontic vagueness in existence is impossible.

⁶ Evans (1978), Salmon (1981). For resistance see Parsons and Woodruff (1995) or van Inwagen (1990) chapter 18. In section IV of this paper I will discuss the claim that vague existence leads inevitably to vague identity.

⁷ Van Inwagen (1990) chapter 19.

But what it takes for a process to constitute a life is a vague matter, and there are borderline cases of lives: an example may be the activity of the simples in a region we would ordinarily describe as ‘occupied by a virus’. If it is indeterminate whether the activity of some things constitutes a life, then it is indeterminate whether those things compose an organism and thus, for van Inwagen, it is indeterminate whether they compose anything at all. Roughly speaking, it is a vague matter whether the virus exists, and a vague matter whether there are any viruses.

Moreover, according to van Inwagen there are no corpses – once a hamster has ceased to live, the simples which once composed it now compose nothing at all, despite being arranged dead-hamster-wise. But hamsters do not pass from the living to the dead instantaneously. At certain moments, it is indeterminate whether there is still a living hamster on the mat, and thus it is indeterminate whether the simples arranged hamster-wise compose anything at all. It is then a vague matter whether there is a macroscopic object on the mat, and, roughly speaking, it is a vague matter whether the hamster exists.

How can we distinguish vagueness in existence from other kinds of vagueness in the world? Take the unhealthy hamster case, in which it is indeterminate whether there is a macroscopic object on the mat, and thus indeterminate whether there is anything which weighs more than four ounces on the mat. The mere claim that it is indeterminate whether there is anything which weighs more than four ounces on the mat does not commit the speaker to vague existence. The same claim is true in a different kind of case. In the healthy mouse case, there is a mouse with fuzzy boundaries, which weighs approximately four ounces. In both cases, it is

indeterminate whether there is anything on the mat which weighs more than four ounces, but the cases seem importantly different. In particular, the unhealthy hamster looks like a case of vague existence, whereas the healthy mouse is not. Can we say more?

Van Inwagen distinguishes the two types of situation by invoking the notion of borderline cases. In the healthy mouse case, it is indeterminate whether there is anything on the mat weighing more than four ounces, because on the mat there is a borderline case of something which weighs more than four ounces. In contrast, in the unhealthy hamster case, ‘we cannot say that the thing that P compose is a borderline case of a thing that weighs more than four ounces...’ (‘P’ is a name for the simples in question, considered collectively). There are two reasons for this. ‘First, it is indefinite whether there is anything that P compose, and, therefore, we who know this cannot make assertions having “the thing that P compose” as their subject. Secondly, if P did compose something, it would not be a borderline case of a thing weighing more than four ounces, for it would weight exactly ten ounces.’⁸

It is only the first feature, however, that is truly distinctive of cases of vague existence. What’s crucial about vague existence is that, where it occurs, it is at once true that it is indeterminate whether something is *F*, and yet not true that there is a thing such that it is indeterminate whether that thing is *F*.⁹ In the unhealthy hamster case, it is indeterminate whether there is something which weighs more than four ounces, but there is nothing which is such that it is indeterminate whether it weighs more than four ounces. This contrasts with the healthy mouse case, in which there is

⁸ Van Inwagen (1990) p. 272.

something (the mouse) which is such that it is indeterminate whether it weighs more than four ounces.

Van Inwagen's second feature is not distinctive of vague existence. This is because in ordinary cases of ontic vagueness, not involving existence, there can be vagueness without borderline cases. Consider a different mouse, one which has had an unfortunate accident and is in the process of losing its tail. At a certain moment, it is a vague matter whether the tail is still a part of the mouse. Without the tail, the mouse would weigh two ounces, and with the tail it would weigh six ounces (it's a very heavy tail). Thus it is indeterminate whether there is something on the mat which weighs more than four ounces. The mouse is not a borderline case of weighing more than four ounces (if its weight were determinate it would not be near four ounces), but nor is this a case of vague existence. So the distinction between borderline cases and absence of borderline cases is not the distinction between ordinary indeterminacy and indeterminacy of existence.

The unlucky mouse is not a borderline case of *weighing more than four ounces*, but it is a borderline case in another respect – the mouse and tail are a borderline case of *parthood*. So does the distinction between ordinary indeterminacy and indeterminacy of existence coincide with the distinction between borderline cases and absence of borderline cases after all? No: for in the vague existence case there is also a borderline case in this extended sense. The simples in question are collectively a borderline case of the relation *participating in the same life as*. Talk of borderline cases does not allow us to characterise the distinction between vagueness in existence

⁹ At least, this characterises existence which is first-order vague; higher-order vagueness would require

and other vagueness. We should focus upon the first element of van Inwagen's characterisation: where there is vague existence, there is indeterminacy in whether anything is F , whilst it is not true (or not determinately true) that there is something such that it is indeterminate whether that thing is F .

Can anything more be said? We might attempt to characterise vagueness in existence by considering its impact upon counting. Where there is vagueness in existence, there is vagueness in number. As the hamster is dying, it is indeterminate how many objects there are on the mat. This indeterminacy is not a sure-fire sign of vagueness in existence, for there would be indeterminacy in the number of objects on the mat if it were indeterminate whether some (definitely existing) object were on or off the mat. We might think, however, that if there is indeterminacy in how many objects there are in the entire world, that would indicate that there is vagueness in existence.

Unfortunately for this proposal, there could be indeterminacy in the total number of objects there are without vagueness in existence. Some believe that we cannot simply ask how many things there are in the world, without supplying 'principles of individuation' or 'criteria of identity' for the things we would like to count, perhaps by specifying sortals. But even if we set such concerns aside, the possibility of vagueness in identity could lead to vagueness of number without vagueness of existence. If it is indeterminate whether $a=b$, then it is indeterminate whether a and b are one object or two. If there is a 'pair' of indeterminately identical objects in the room, then it is indeterminate how many objects there are in the room, and if there is a 'pair' of indeterminately identical objects in the universe, then it is indeterminate how

more complexity.

many objects there are in the universe. We cannot characterise vagueness in existence by considering its impact on counting.

It looks, then, as if the fullest account of vague existence – at least the kind of vague existence which van Inwagen posits – is given by the first element of van Inwagen’s characterisation. When there is ontic vagueness in existence, it is indeterminate whether anything is F (for some F), this is not as a result of semantic indecision, and yet nothing is such that it is indeterminate whether it is F . This modest brand of vague existence (modest relative to a brand I will consider below) will be a consequence of many metaphysical views which restrict composition. If some objects compose a larger object when and only when they satisfy some condition C , then if there can be ontic vagueness in whether C is satisfied, there can be modest ontic vagueness in existence.

So what’s so bad about vagueness in existence? I will argue that most objections to vagueness in existence are either objections to the idea that there could be any ontic vagueness at all (I will not deal with these here), or else objections which presuppose that if there is vagueness in existence then there are non-existent objects. But objections of this second kind miss the target: it is possible to accept vague existence in the modest sense without accepting that there are non-existent objects. Before turning to the issue of non-existent objects, I will consider an objection concerning the connection between vague existence and vague identity.

IV

Vague Existence and Vague Identity. I have been assuming for the sake of argument that ontic vagueness is in general unproblematic, and I will not attempt to justify that assumption here. But ontic vagueness in identity encounters special problems, as Evans and Salmon showed. Identity is governed by Leibniz's Law – the principle that if two objects are identical then they share all their properties – and this at least seems to raise insurmountable problems for believers in ontic vagueness in identity.

Roughly speaking, everything is determinately self-identical, so if an object a is only indeterminately identical to an object b , then that in itself constitutes a way in which a differs from b and thus a cannot be identical to b .

Would a commitment to ontic vagueness in existence indirectly commit us to ontic vagueness in identity, and thus require us to confront the Evans-Salmon argument? I will consider two ways in which this might happen. First, we might be uneasy about the fact that claims of existence are sometimes expressed using the machinery of identity. ' a exists' can be rendered as 'something is identical to a ', or ' $\exists x(x=a)$ ', whilst 'something exists' becomes ' $\exists x(x=x)$ '. This might suggest that indeterminacy in existence would entail indeterminacy in identity: if it is indeterminate whether a exists, then it is indeterminate whether something is identical to a .

If this is indeterminacy in identity (which I doubt), it is nevertheless not vulnerable to the Evans-Salmon argument. There is no particular thing of which it is said that it is indeterminately identical to a . Rather, if it is indeterminate whether a exists, it is indeterminate whether *anything* is identical to a . We should not infer from the claim that it is indeterminate whether something is identical to a to the stronger claim that

something is such that it is indeterminate whether it is identical to a . This ban on moving the existential quantifier through the indeterminacy operator is the same as that urged by van Inwagen in the original characterisation of vague existence: it's indeterminate whether anything on the mat weighs more than four ounces, but we should not infer that there is something on the mat which is such that it is indeterminate whether it weighs more than four ounces.

Is there a different way in which vagueness in existence might lead to vagueness in identity? If there is vagueness in what things the world contains, this might be thought to entail vague identity amongst sets. For example, consider the set of the simples, P , which are the candidate-composers of the unhealthy hamster: call this set SP . Now consider the set of the things on the mat, SH . If the hamster were determinately dead, then, according to van Inwagen, P would be the only things on the mat. If the hamster were determinately alive, then the things on the mat would be P plus the hamster. This suggests that in the indeterminate situation, it is indeterminate whether SP is identical to SH .¹⁰

If this is indeed a problematic instance of vagueness in identity, then the consequences will be serious, for all ontic vagueness gives rise to such apparent vagueness in identity between sets. Recall the healthy mouse with fuzzy boundaries – in that case it looks as if it is indeterminate whether the set of things on the mat weighing more than four ounces is identical to the set containing only the mouse. If these are genuinely ontic indeterminacies in identity, then either we must find a response to the Evans-Salmon argument, showing that vague identity is after all

coherent, or else we must concede that there cannot be any kind of vagueness in the world.

Recall the situation once again: it is determinate that SP has as members all and only P . It is determinate that SH has as members all of P , and it is indeterminate whether SH has a further member (the hamster). This looks like trouble: if the number of P is n , then SP is such that it is determinate whether it has exactly n members, whilst SH is not such that it is determinate whether it has exactly n members. I think that, for believers in ontic vagueness who accept the force of the Evans-Salmon argument, the best move is to accept that SP and SH are simply not identical. Sets can be determinately distinct without determinately differing in their membership, just so long as it is indeterminate whether they differ in their membership.

Does this compromise Extensionality, the principle that sets are identical if and only if they have the same members? Yes. But Extensionality can be retained wherever membership is determinate. If it is determinate that two sets have the same members, then it is determinate that they are identical. If it is determinate that two sets do not have the same members, then it is determinate that they are not identical. If we use a Kleene truth-table, supposing that the two sides of a biconditional must have the same status (true-true, false-false or indeterminate-indeterminate), then Extensionality entails that where it is indeterminate whether two sets have the same members, then it is indeterminate whether they are identical.¹¹ So if we wish to preserve ontic vagueness without vague identity, then we shall need to give up this last claim: unless we adopt different semantics for the biconditional, then we must reject Extensionality.

¹⁰ There are pitfalls involved in establishing intuitions about indeterminacy by considering

But this drastic-sounding move at least has no consequences where membership is determinate. If we go so far as to admit indeterminately-membered sets, it should come as no surprise that we shall have to make adjustments elsewhere.

V

There Can't Be Something which Indeterminately Exists. Having dealt with the relatively clear objection from vague identity, I turn now to less clearly articulated objections to vague existence. A common thought is this: there just can't be something which neither definitely exists nor definitely doesn't exist. Read unsympathetically, this is simply the question-begging statement that, given that there's no semantic indecision in 'exists', there cannot be indeterminacy in existence. Analogously, the plain statement that there just *can't* be an object that neither definitely has a certain atom amongst its parts nor definitely doesn't have that atom amongst its parts is hardly a knock-down argument against ontic vagueness in boundaries.

But there is a more sympathetic reading of the objection, which stresses what's special about existence. There can't *be* something which is such that it is indeterminate whether it *is*. Read in this way, the objection tries to bring out a tension between positing an object and attributing merely vague existence to it. The thought is that to posit an object, to quantify over it or refer to it is already to be committed to its existence. Having committed oneself to the existence of an object – 'there is an object...' – it is somehow wrong then to draw back from the commitment and claim

counterfactual determinacy: the closest determinate world might be very unlike our own.

that it is indeterminate whether the object exists. That's why we shouldn't claim that there are objects which only vaguely exist. Such a claim only makes sense if the initial quantification 'there are objects...' leaves it open whether those objects exist. This objection to vague existence stems from the belief that there are no non-existent objects: talk of vague existence conjures up the idea of an object which somehow straddles two domains, the existent and the non-existent. And if there is no domain of non-existent objects, then such straddling looks impossible, and there cannot be vagueness in existence.

But van Inwagen's modest brand of vague existence is immune to this sort of objection: indeed he characterises vagueness in existence by remarking that where there is such vagueness, it is incorrect to claim that there is an object which has indeterminate features. He writes 'What does it mean to say that existence is vague?...it cannot mean that there are certain objects that fall into a vague frontier between existence and nonexistence. For suppose χ to be one of those objects. If χ is there to be talked about in the first place, then χ exists, and in fact definitely exists. (Again, those who believe in nonexistent objects will not accept the presuppositions of this argument...)'¹²

We might suppose that, despite van Inwagen's protestations, he is committed to non-existent objects simply by his assertion that it is indeterminate whether anything macroscopic is on the mat whilst the hamster is dying, or by his assertion that it is indeterminate whether there are any viruses. But analogous reasoning would suggest that anyone who denies that certain things exist is committed to non-existent objects.

¹¹ Tye (1994) p. 194.

Neither tame tigers nor the tooth fairy exist, and most of us think that we can accept these truths without accepting that there are tame tigers or fairies.

Modest vague existence amounts to ontic indeterminacy in whether a given property is instantiated, in the absence of an object which indeterminately instantiates the property. This is very like the second-order account which is often invoked to explain the nature of existence and the workings of ‘exists’ in determinate cases. According to the Russellian tradition, existence is a property of properties, the property *having an instance*. Elephants exist: the property *being an elephant* has an instance. Tame tigers do not exist: the property *being a tame tiger* does not have an instance. It is controversial how this approach can handle talk of existence in conjunction with proper names or with demonstratives, and what sorts of properties need to be invoked.¹³ Nevertheless, the second-order approach is believed by many to be preferable to thinking of existence as a first-order property of individuals, expressed by a first-order predicate.

Denying that existence is a first-order property might seem to provide ammunition against vague existence. If we accept that there can be vagueness in the world, yet resist the idea that there could be vagueness in existence, a natural rationale for this differential attitude would be that, perhaps unlike colour, parthood or boundaries, existence is not a first-order property or relation of objects. But just as we can understand existence denials without thinking of *nonexistence* as a special sort of property, we can understand indeterminacy in existence without thinking of *vague existence* as a special sort of property, possessed only by shadowy half-objects, and,

¹² Van Inwagen (1990) p.240.

indeed, without thinking of *existence* as a property which may be indeterminately instantiated. The cases envisaged by van Inwagen provide examples of ontic vagueness in existence which do not rely upon the idea that existence is a property of ordinary objects. In such cases, it is indeterminate whether there is a macroscopic object composed by some particular simples, but not because there is an object which is such that it is indeterminate whether that object is composed by those simples. The vagueness arises out of the vagueness in whether the simples stand in a certain relation to one another – the relation of *participating in the same life as*. This fits the characterisation of ontic vagueness I began with – it is determinate which objects and which relation are in question, whilst indeterminate whether the objects instantiate the relation – yet we have not needed to allude to a further property, *existence*.

VI

Immodest Vague Existence? There is a modest brand of vague existence, whose supporters do not need to posit non-existent objects, nor believe that existence is a first-order property. But what of those who *do* accept that existence is a first-order property: can they accept vague existence? A first thought might be that, if existence is a property, then it is a special, logical property (as identity may be), which simply must be precise. In discussions of worldly vagueness, it is common to distinguish between vagueness due to vague objects on the one hand, and vagueness due to vague properties (or relations) on the other. This would suggest that, if there is indeed a property of existence, and if it is vague whether a certain object has that property, then this vagueness must be attributed either to the object in question or else to existence itself. In the special case of vague existence, it is not determinate whether

¹³ Salmon (1998).

there is an object there to blame. Thus it might seem that the vagueness should be attributed to existence itself, and yet that existence is just not the sort of property that can be vague.

There are various problems with this reasoning, not least the unsupported claim that existence is just not the sort of property which can be vague. However, the easiest way to neutralise this objection is to deny that, in any case of ontic vagueness, the vagueness is in principle attributable either to the object or to the property. If we believe that ontic vagueness always involves either a vague object or a vague property, we will be left wondering exactly what a vague property is supposed to be, and feeling that if anything is a clear case of a precise property, then existence is. But in fact there is no reason to attribute blame in this way. We should simply regard the situation, or state of affairs, as vague, rather than attempting to attribute the vagueness to one element rather than another.¹⁴ So in the case of vague existence, we need not puzzle over whether to attribute the vagueness to the ‘object’ in question or to the supposed property of existence, nor need we worry about whether existence can really be a vague property. Properties are neither precise nor vague; rather, it is sometimes indeterminate whether a given property is instantiated (or whether it is instantiated by a given object). If existence is a first-order property, we cannot legitimately rule out vague existence simply by asserting that existence is a sharp property.

Despite this, merely believing that existence is a first-order property of objects is not enough to make an immodest brand of vague existence look coherent. Suppose that existence is a first-order property, but one which is possessed by everything, because

¹⁴ I provide arguments for this claim in my (2001) chapter 4.

there are no non-existent objects. If there are no non-existent objects for quantifiers to range over, then we cannot claim immodestly that there is an object which is such that it is indeterminate whether that object instantiates *existence*. Is the supposition that existence is a first-order property compatible even with modest vague existence? A Russellian can understand modest vague existence as, roughly speaking, ontic indeterminacy in whether a property is instantiated, in the absence of any object which indeterminately instantiates the property. But what should we say about such a situation if existence is a first-order property yet there are no non-existent objects? Presumably, that there is ontic indeterminacy in whether (for example) *existence* and *being a virus* are coinstantiated, whilst there is no object which indeterminately instantiates that combination of properties. Even if existence is a property, modest vague existence need not be a matter of indeterminate instantiation of that property by some object. Without non-existent objects, there are no borderline cases of *existence*, even if there is modest vague existence.

To embrace immodest vague existence we must countenance non-existent objects. Colin McGinn has recently argued that there is a property of ordinary objects, *existence*, which may be expressed by the predicate 'exists'.¹⁵ Part of the motivation for this position is supplied by criticism of the Russellian orthodoxy. By way of positive argument, McGinn provides an account of 'existential' quantification compatible with his own property view of existence, and a discussion of non-existence. One attraction of the Russellian view is that it allows us to understand how existence denials can be true, without our having to posit non-existent objects. To

¹⁵ McGinn (2001) chapter 2.

claim that Pegasus does not exist is to claim that a certain property is not instantiated; it is not to claim that there is an object, Pegasus, which is non-existent.

To handle non-existence, McGinn distinguishes between fictional objects and merely possible objects. The latter exist, but do not actually exist: when we claim that tame tigers do not exist, all we mean is that the (existent) tame tigers do not *actually* have existence. Fictional objects, on the other hand, are objects which do not exist, and do not even possibly have existence, though they are objects nevertheless. What would vague existence amount to, on this picture?¹⁶ Presumably, indeterminacy in existence would be indeterminacy in whether some object was merely possible or actual, whether it just possibly exists or actually exists. There are merely possible objects, there are actual objects, and perhaps there are objects which are neither determinately merely possible nor determinately actual. Whether this is more problematic than ontic vagueness in colour, position or parthood will depend upon the metaphysical account we give of the difference between mere possibility and actuality – an issue for further investigation. Whilst belief in non-existent (or not actually existent) objects does not compel belief in immodest vague existence – after all, there might be no ontic vagueness whatsoever – it is at least a necessary condition for that belief.

VII

Conclusion Vague existence seems a peculiar notion, and on the strength of this, philosophers have rejected metaphysical theories which involve restricted composition, like van Inwagen's view. But what seems objectionable about vague existence is the idea that it requires non-existent objects. Non-existent objects are

¹⁶ McGinn himself does not consider this question.

required only for immodest vague existence, however, according to which there are things which neither determinately exist nor determinately fail to exist. Metaphysical theories involving restricted composition entail at most that there is modest vague existence, which does not require non-existence, does not presuppose that existence is a first-order property of things, and does not entail that there is vague identity (if we are willing to loosen Extensionality). Until and unless we see a compelling argument against all ontic vagueness, the prospect of modest vague existence does not give us reason to reject theories involving restricted composition.

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