Actualism, Singular Propositions, and Possible Worlds:
Essays in the Metaphysics of Modality

by

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ABSTRACT

My dissertation consists of three essays in the Metaphysics of Modality:

In “A Puzzle about Truth and Singular Propositions,” I consider two theses that seem to be true and then an argument for the conclusion that they form an inconsistent pair. One thesis is that a proposition that is singular with respect to a given object implies that the object exists. This is so because the proposition predicates something of the object. The other thesis is that some propositions are true with respect to possible worlds in which they do not exist. An example is the negation of the proposition that Socrates is wise. This proposition is true with respect to possible worlds in which Socrates does not exist, but it does not exist in those worlds.

In “Actualism, Ontological Dependence, and Possible Worlds,” I consider Actualism, the doctrine that every possible object is an actual object. Plantinga has argued that the actualist is committed to the existence of unexemplified essences if he analyzes statements of modality by quantifying over possible worlds and over members of their domains. I argue that the actualist is committed to the existence of unexemplified essences even if he paraphrases statements of modality by quantifying only over possible worlds and actual objects.

In “Possibilism and the Nature of Actuality,” I consider Possibilism, the doctrine that there are possible objects that are not actual objects. Possibilism seems to be a coherent ontological doctrine. It is not Meinong’s doctrine that there are objects of which it is true to say that there are no such objects. If one fails to distinguish between these two doctrines, then one’s attempt to refute Possibilism might amount to an attack on a blatant contradiction. I illustrate this claim by arguing that the distinction between Possibilism and Meinong’s doctrine has eluded Plantinga. I then consider the view that Possibilism is a consequence of Lewis’s doctrine that ‘actual’ is an indexical term. I also argue that the sense in which Lewis said that ‘actual’ is indexical is an esoteric sense of the word, not a sense it ordinarily has.

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A Puzzle about Truth and Singular Propositions

1. Singular Propositions

Suppose I point to the man in front of me and, referring to him, I say, “He is wise”: I predicate of him that he is wise. In so doing—in saying about a particular object to which I directly refer that it is so-and-so—I assert a singular proposition with respect to the object of my reference. For the purposes of exposition I will assume that proper names are purely designative: their only semantic function is to designate objects. On this assumption, the singular proposition with respect to the philosopher who drank hemlock that he is wise is the proposition that is ordinarily asserted when a speaker assertively utters the sentence ‘Socrates is wise’. It is the proposition that the sentence ‘Socrates is wise’ ordinarily expresses, namely the proposition that Socrates is wise.

There is implicit disagreement in the literature as to what counts as a singular proposition. With vague qualifications, Plantinga suggests the following characterization of singular propositions:

Let us say, provisionally, that a singular proposition is one that is about some specific object—its subject—and either predicates or denies some property of that object (Plantinga 1974: 136).²

As an example of a singular proposition that denies a property of its subject, Plantinga gives the

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1 I have benefited from discussions with Richard L. Cartwright, Robert C. Stalnaker, and Stephen Yablo. Special thanks are due to Peter B. M. Vranas. He is present throughout this dissertation because of his painstaking suggestions, philosophical and editorial.

2 Plantinga immediately continues: “No doubt this characterization is in the long run deficient in several respects; it may still serve our present purposes.” He does not explain.
It is false that Socrates was snub-nosed.

It does not seem true to me that \( N' \) denies of Socrates the property of being snub-nosed. I would say that to deny of Socrates the property of being snub-nosed is to say something to the effect that Socrates is such that he does not have the property of being snub-nosed. But \( N' \) says nothing to that effect. Rather, it classifies the proposition:

\[ N \quad \text{Socrates was snub-nosed} \]

as false: it denies that Socrates was snub-nosed. Anyhow, this reservation is perhaps merely terminological, as Plantinga (1974: 150) does distinguish between \( N' \) and \( N'' \)

\[ N'' \quad \text{Socrates was non-snub-nosed.} \]

But is \( N' \) singular to begin with? To count as singular, \( N' \) must be about some specific object. I think that if \( N' \) is about some object at all, then it is about some specific object. If the only semantic function of the word ‘Socrates’ is to designate (to pick out, so to speak) Socrates, then if \( N' \) is about Socrates at all, then \( N' \) is specifically about Socrates. But is \( N' \) about Socrates? You might say that, in some sense, \( N' \) must be about Socrates: it denies that he (not Plato or Aristotle) was snub-nosed. But if \( N' \) is about Socrates, what does it say about him? You might suggest that \( N' \) says about Socrates that he was not snub-nosed. But then you would be confusing \( N' \) with the singular proposition \( N'' \). It is \( N'' \) that says about Socrates that he was an object \( x \) such that it is not the case that \( x \) was snub-nosed. In contrast with \( N'' \), it seems to me that \( N' \) is not about Socrates and is therefore not singular with respect to Socrates. My reason for thinking that \( N' \) is not about Socrates is that \( N' \) does not require for its truth that there even be such an object as Socrates. Had Socrates not existed, it would have been false that Socrates was snub-nosed; \( N' \) would have been
true. If \( N' \) does not require for its truth that there be such an object as Socrates, then I do not see how \( N' \) could be about Socrates.

2. Existential Implication

It seems to be necessary that, should there have been no such object as Socrates, it would have been false that Socrates were wise. Equivalently, it seems to be necessary that, should Socrates be wise, there would be such an object as Socrates. This point concerning the singular proposition with respect to Socrates that he is wise carries over, I suppose, to singular propositions with respect to any contingent existent. We seem to have a general principle of existential implication:

\[ EI \quad \text{Every proposition that is singular with respect to a contingent existent implies that the object exists.} \]

But isn’t \( N \) a counterexample to \( EI \)? \( N \) is singular with respect to Socrates: it says of him that he was snub-nosed. But \( N \) does not imply that Socrates exists; it implies only that he existed in the past, when he was snub-nosed. Or consider the proposition:

\[ D \quad \text{Socrates is dead.} \]

\( D \) is also singular with respect to Socrates. It says something about him, namely that he is dead. But \( D \) does not imply that Socrates exists. If Socrates is dead, then he no longer exists, so \( D \), like \( N \), implies only that Socrates existed in the past. I think that the response to this kind of objection to \( EI \) should be that we leave time out of our considerations altogether. When we say that Socrates exists (present tense) we do not mean that he exists in the present. Rather, we mean that he exists at some point in time: past, present, or future.
It seems that one can still think of counterexamples to $EI$. Consider the proposition:

$$P \quad \text{Socrates is possible.}$$

$P$ seems to be singular with respect to Socrates. It says of that very man that he exists in some possible world. But existence in some possible world does not imply existence in the actual world, so $P$ does not imply that there actually is such an object as Socrates. In response, I think that one should point out that the application of the adjective ‘possible’ to an object calls for an explanation in terms of a possibility operator. This operator might be assigned two different scopes in the analysis of the sentence ‘Socrates is possible’. First, it might have the closed sentence ‘Socrates exists’ in its scope, in which case the resulting proposition would be

$$P_1 \quad \text{Possibly, Socrates exists.}$$

$P_1$ is not a counterexample to $EI$ because it is not singular with respect to Socrates: it does not predicate of him that he is so-and-so. Rather, it classifies the singular existential proposition

$$E \quad \text{Socrates exists}$$

as a possible truth. On another reading of the sentence ‘Socrates is possible’, the possibility operator has an open sentence in its scope, namely ‘$x$ exists’:

$$P_2 \quad \text{Socrates is an object } x \text{ such that possibly, } x \text{ exists.}$$

Unlike $P_1$, $P_2$ is singular with respect to Socrates but it is not a counterexample to $EI$, because it does imply that Socrates exists. How could Socrates be such that it is possible that he should exist if did not exist?

One can think of another alleged counterexample to $EI$. Suppose it is said that, had Socrates not existed, he would have been nonexistent. It might be inferred that the singular proposition that Socrates is nonexistent does not imply that Socrates exists and is therefore a counterexample to
EI. In response, I think it ought to be pointed out that every singular proposition $Fa$ has two negations: a non-singular negation and a singular negation. The non-singular negation of a singular proposition $Fa$ is the proposition that classifies $Fa$ as false:

$S'$ It is false that Socrates is wise

is the non-singular negation of the proposition

$S$ Socrates is wise.

On the other hand, the singular negation of a singular proposition $Fa$ is a proposition that says of the object $a$ that it is an object $x$ such that it is false that $x$ is $F$: the singular proposition

$S''$ Socrates is unwise

is the singular negation of $S$.

Similarly, we can distinguish between two negations of the singular proposition $E$: the non-singular proposition

$E'$ It is false that Socrates exists

is one negation of $E$, and the singular proposition

$E''$ Socrates is nonexistent

is another negation of $E$. Now in either case we do not have a counterexample to $EI$. $E'$ is not singular with respect to Socrates: it does not say of him that he is so-and-so. Rather, $E'$ classifies the singular proposition $E$ as false. On the other hand, $E''$ is singular with respect to Socrates. It says of him that he is an object that does not exist: an object $x$ such that it is not the case that $x$ exists. But if $E''$ is analogous to $S''$, then $E''$ does imply that Socrates exists and hence is not a

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3 The non-singular negation of $S'$ is $S$. The singular negation of $S''$ is again $S$. The singular proposition $S''$ is logically equivalent to the conjunction of the singular existential proposition $E$ and the non-singular proposition $\forall x(x=Socrates \rightarrow \neg (wise x))$. Call the latter $G_1$. $G_1$ does not require for its truth that Socrates (or anything else for that matter) exist: it only rules out the possibility that there should be such a wise object as Socrates. The singular proposition $S$ is logically equivalent to the conjunction of the singular $E$ and the non-singular: $\forall x(x=Socrates \rightarrow \neg (wise x))$. Call the latter $G_2$. Each of the singular propositions $S$ and $S''$ is logically equivalent to the negation of the non-singular conjunct of the other: $S$ is equivalent to the negation of $G_1$, and $S''$ is equivalent to the negation of $G_2$. 

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counterexample to $EI$. (Since $E''$ implies that Socrates exists and says of him that he does not exist, $E''$ is necessarily false.)

As a corollary of $EI$, every proposition that is singular with respect to a contingent existent lends itself to Existential Generalization. Every such proposition $Fa$, in conjunction with the proposition that there is such an object as $a$, implies that there are objects that are $F$. If $EI$ is true, then every proposition $Fa$ that is singular with respect to a contingent existent implies that there are objects that are $F$. Thus, $S$ implies that there are wise objects. It also follows that the singular negation of any such proposition—the singular proposition with respect to $a$ that it is an object $x$ such that it is not the case that $x$ is $F$—implies that, for some object $x$, it is not the case that $x$ is $F$. Thus, $S''$ implies that there are objects that are not wise. On the other hand, the non-singular negation of a singular proposition $Fa$ does not lend itself to existential generalization. We cannot infer from it not being the case that $a$ is $F$ that there are objects that are not $F$. Thus, $S'$ does not imply that there are objects that are not wise.

3. A Puzzle

Some philosophers hold the following doctrine of ontological dependence:

$$OD \quad \text{Propositions that are singular with respect to contingent existents depend for their existence on the existence of their subjects.}$$

If $OD$ is true, then had Socrates not existed there would have been no such proposition as

$$S \quad \text{Socrates is wise.}$$

This doctrine carries over, I suppose, to (non-singular) *negations* of propositions that are singular with respect to contingent existents. Thus, like $S$,
It is false that Socrates is wise depends for its existence on the existence of Socrates.

EI implies that every proposition that is singular with respect to a contingent existent is false with respect to every possible world in which its subject does not exist. EI therefore implies that the non-singular negation of every proposition that is singular with respect to a contingent existent is true with respect to every possible world in which its subject does not exist. This, in conjunction with OD, implies that the non-singular negation of every proposition that is singular with respect to a contingent existent is a proposition that is true with respect to possible worlds in which that non-singular negation does not exist. Since there are non-singular negations of propositions that are singular with respect to contingent existents—$S'$ is one such proposition—the following doctrine about truth and existence holds:

TE Some propositions are true with respect to possible worlds in which they do not exist.

We have two theses, namely EI and TE, which seem to be true.

But here is a puzzle—a puzzle about truth and singular propositions, if you will—in the form of an argument for the conclusion that EI and TE form an inconsistent pair. I will argue that, if TE is true, then EI is false. Suppose that TE is true. Let $P$ be a proposition that is true with respect to some possible world in which it does not exist. Since $P$ is true with respect to some possible world in which $P$ does not exist, $P$ does not imply that $P$ exists. Now, let $T(P)$ be the singular proposition with respect to $P$ that it is true. $P$ and $T(P)$ are logically equivalent. Since $P$ does not imply that $P$ exists, $T(P)$ does not imply that $P$ exists. So here we have a counterexample to EI: $T(P)$ is a singular proposition that does not imply that the object it is about (namely $P$) exists.
A case in point would be any non-singular negation of a proposition that is singular with respect to a contingent existent. Let $T(S')$ be the singular proposition with respect to:

$$S'$$

It is false that Socrates is wise

that it is true. $S'$ is true with respect to possible worlds in which Socrates does not exist. Possible worlds in which Socrates does not exist are possible worlds in which $S'$ does not exist. Since $T(S')$ and $S'$ are logically equivalent, $T(S')$ is true with respect to possible worlds in which $S'$ does not exist. $T(S')$ is therefore a counterexample to $EI$: it is a singular proposition that does not imply that the object it is about (namely $S'$) exists.

4. Ontological Dependence

It might be pointed out that, although I presented the puzzle as an argument for the conclusion that $TE$ and $EI$ form an inconsistent pair, I derived $TE$ from the conjunction of $OD$ and $EI$. So perhaps the puzzle should be taken as a consideration against $OD$, as an argument for the conclusion that singular propositions do not depend ontologically on their subjects after all. But, other than the puzzle, do we have any reason for thinking that $OD$ is false? It might be argued against $OD$ that the thesis:

$$OD' \text{ Necessarily, } E' \text{ exists only if Socrates exists.}$$

implies that $E'$ is not a possible truth. Here are three arguments for the conclusion that $E'$ is not a possible truth:

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4 $OD'$ follows from the doctrine that Socrates—the man himself, not an individual essence of his, or some other abstract entity that might somehow represent him—is an essential constituent of $E'$. You might think that the idea that concrete objects could be constituents of (presumably abstract) propositions is mysterious. Should we also say
Argument 1. Every proposition is true, sure enough, only if it exists. It may seem that the following also holds:

\[ A_1 \quad \text{For every proposition } P, \text{ necessarily, if } P \text{ is true, then } P \text{ exists.} \]

\[ A_1 \text{ and } OD' \text{ imply in conjunction that } E' \text{ is not a possible truth. Necessarily, if Socrates does not exist, then } (\text{by } OD') E' \text{ does not exist. Necessarily, if } E' \text{ does not exist, then (by } A_1) E' \text{ is not true.} \]

It follows that, necessarily, if Socrates does not exist, \( E' \) is not true. It is also necessary that if Socrates does exist, \( E' \) is not true. Necessarily, then, \( E' \) is not true. \( E' \) is not a possible truth.

For every proposition \( P \), let \( T(P) \) be the singular proposition with respect to \( P \) that it is true.

Argument 2. Let’s see first that \( OD' \) and

\[ EI \quad \text{Every proposition that is singular with respect to a contingent existent implies that the object exists.} \]

imply in conjunction that \( T(E') \) —the singular proposition with respect to \( E' \) that it is true—is not a possible truth. Suppose, for reductio, that \( T(E') \) is a possible truth. Let \( W \) be a possible world with respect to which \( T(E') \) is true. By \( EI \), \( E' \) exists in \( W \). By \( OD' \), Socrates exists in \( W \). It follows that \( E' \) is false with respect to \( W \) (\( E' \) is the proposition that it is false that Socrates exists). But if so, then \( T(E') \) is false with respect to \( W \), and the reductio is complete. \( T(E') \) is therefore not a possible truth. Next, consider the following thesis:

\[ A_2 \quad \text{For every proposition } P, \text{ it is possible that } P \text{ be true just in case } T(P) \text{ is a possible truth.} \]

\( A_2 \) seems to be true. By analogy, for every object \( x \), it is possible that \( x \) be wise just in case the singular proposition with respect to \( x \) that it is wise is a possible truth. Now if \( T(E') \) is not a possible truth, that concrete objects could not be members of sets? Presumably, sets are abstract objects.
possible truth, then (by $A_2$) it is not possible that $E'$ be true; in other words, $E'$ is not a possible truth.

**Argument 3.** $OD'$ implies that $E'$ is *essentially* false. Necessarily, should there be such a proposition as $E'$ at all, then (by $OD'$) Socrates would exist. But should Socrates exist, $E'$ would be false ($E'$ is the proposition that it is *false* that Socrates exists). Necessarily then, $E'$ exists only if it is false: $E'$ is essentially false. But consider the following thesis:

$$A_3 \quad \text{For every proposition } P, \text{ if } P \text{ is essentially false, then } P \text{ is not a possible truth.}$$

$A_3$ seems to be true. By analogy, for every object $x$, if $x$ is essentially inhuman, then $x$ is not a possible human. If $E'$ is essentially false, then (by $A_3$) it is not a possible truth.

These were arguments for the conclusion that $E'$ is not a possible truth. But $E'$ is a possible truth. First, there is such a proposition as $E'$. The distinction between $S'$ and $S''$ seems clear. If there is such a proposition as $S'$, then it is hard to see why there would not be such a proposition as $E'$. Second, since there is such a proposition as $E'$, had Socrates not existed, $E'$ would have been true. Third, Socrates is a *contingent* existent; he such that it is possible that he should have never existed. It follows that $E'$ is such that it is possible that it should have been true: $E'$ is a possible truth. Opponents of $OD$ might infer that $OD'$—which is a premise of each of the arguments—is false. In response to this objection to $OD$, I would grant that each of the arguments has a false premise. In each of the arguments, I think that the false premise is not $OD'$. I think that the premises $A_1$, $A_2$, and $A_3$ are all false. I will now argue for the conclusion that $E'$ falsifies each of them.

$E'$ falsifies $A_1$. $E'$ is such that it is not necessary that it exist for it to be true. Had Socrates not
existed, $E'\text{ would have been true but (by } OD\text{) there would have been no such proposition as } E'$.

You might object. $OD'$ implies that, had Socrates not existed, there would have been no such proposition as $E'$ to speak of. Had there been no such proposition as $E'$, there would have been no such true proposition as $E'$. It follows that $E'$ would not have been true—or so the objection goes.

In response I would grant that, had Socrates not existed, there would have been no such true proposition as $E'$. But I am inclined to think that it does not follow that $E'$ would not have been true. This is how Cartwright illustrates the matter:

> By way of an analogy, consider this question: if the Arabic numeral system had never been devised, what would have been the truth value of the sentence ‘$2+3=5$’? Some will say that had the Arabic numeral system never been devised, there would have been no such sentence as ‘$2+3=5$.’ Maybe that’s what should be said. But the Arabic numeral system was devised, and hence we have the sentence ‘$2+3=5$’; we can therefore ask what the truth value of that sentence is with respect to a counterfactual situation in which people do not use Arabic numerals but use, say, Roman numerals instead (Cartwright 1997: 77).

Paraphrasing Cartwright, we can say that Socrates does exist, and hence we have the proposition $E'$; we can therefore ask what the truth value of that proposition is with respect to a counterfactual situation in which the proposition does not exist. I think the answer should be that $E'$—the proposition that it is false that Socrates exists—is true with respect to every situation in which Socrates does not exist. It might be said that, in some sense, $E'$ would not have been true had Socrates not existed—if it is the case that, had Socrates not existed, there would have been no such true proposition as $E'$. I would take issue with that. I do not think that these considerations suggest an ambiguity in the word ‘true’ or in the phrase ‘would have been true’.

$E'$ falsifies $A_2$. It is possible that $E'$ be true: had Socrates not existed, $E'$ would have been true.

But $T(E')$ is not a possible truth. Here is why. The singular proposition with respect to any object
that it is $F$ is a possible truth if and only if $x$ is $F$ in some possible world. If and only if, that is, for some possible world $W$, $x$ would have been among the $Fs$ that would have existed had $W$ obtained. Thus, the singular proposition with respect to Socrates that he is a carpenter is a possible truth if and only if Socrates is a carpenter in some possible world. If and only if, that is, for some possible world $W$, Socrates would have been among the carpenters that would have existed had $W$ obtained. Similarly, $T(E')$ is a possible truth if and only if $E'$ is true in some possible world. If and only if, that is, for some possible world $W$, $E'$ would have been among the true propositions that would have existed had $W$ obtained. But for no possible world $W$, is $E'$ among the true propositions that would have existed had $W$ obtained. For every possible world $W$ in which Socrates exists, if $E'$ is among the propositions that would have existed had $W$ obtained, then $E'$ is among the false propositions that would have existed had $W$ obtained. For every possible world $W$ in which Socrates does not exist, (by $OD$) $E'$ is not among the propositions that would have existed had $W$ obtained. If so, then $E'$ is not among the true propositions that would have existed had $W$ obtained. $T(E')$ is therefore not a possible truth.

$E'$ falsifies $A_3$. $E'$ is both a possible truth and an essentially false proposition. First, $E'$ is a possible truth: a proposition is a possible truth if and only if it is true with respect to some possible world. If and only if, that is, the proposition is such that, had some possible world obtained, it would have been true. $E'$ is true with respect to every possible world in which Socrates does not exist. There are possible worlds in which Socrates does not exist, since Socrates is a contingent existent. Second, $E'$ is essentially false: necessarily, should there be such a proposition as $E'$, then (by $OD$) Socrates would exist and $E'$—the proposition that it is false that Socrates exists—would be false. Notice that (by $OD$) possible worlds in which Socrates
does not exist are possible worlds in which \( E' \) does not exist. Possible worlds in which Socrates does not exist therefore do not falsify the thesis that \( E' \) is false in every possible world in which \( E' \) exists, the thesis that \( E' \) is essentially false.

It might be objected that predicates are true of objects only with respect to possible worlds in which the objects exist. If so, then \( E' \) is not true with respect to possible worlds in which \( E' \) does not exist—or so the objection would go. In response, I would grant the premise of this argument, but not its conclusion. Predication is absolute when we say of an object that it is so-and-so. Predication is world-relative when we say of an object that it is so-and-so in a given world: when we predicate, with respect to the world, of the object that it is so-and-so. Absolute predication implies existence: Socrates is a carpenter only if Socrates exists, \( E' \) is true only if \( E' \) exists. World-relative predication implies that the object of which something is predicated exists in the world with respect to which something is predicated. To say that Socrates is a carpenter in a world \( W \) is to say that, had \( W \) obtained, there would have been such a carpenter as Socrates: there would have been an object \( x \) that would have been both a carpenter and identical with Socrates. Thus, Socrates is a carpenter only in worlds in which he exists.\(^5\) Similarly, to say that \( E' \) is true in a world \( W \) is to say that, had \( W \) obtained, there would have been such a true proposition as \( E' \): there would have been a proposition \( P \) that would have been both true and identical with \( E' \). Thus, \( E' \) is true only in worlds in which it exists.

It might seem as if we sometimes predicate something of an object with respect to possible worlds in which the object does not exist. It might seem as if we say of an object \( x \) that it is so-

\(^5\) Note that it is true of Socrates only with respect to possible worlds in which he exists that he is a carpenter in some possible worlds. On the other hand, it is true with respect to every possible world that Socrates is a carpenter in some
and-so in a possible world \( W \), when \( x \) does not exist in \( W \). For example, we say that Socrates is a contingent existent. This might seem to mean that Socrates is such that, in some possible world, he is a nonexistent object: in some possible world he is an object \( x \) such that it is not the case that \( x \) exists. That is not what we say (anyhow that is not what we would say upon reflection). In fact, we predicate (absolutely) of Socrates that he is an object \( x \) such that, for some possible world \( W \), it is not the case that \( x \) exists in \( W \). We say of Socrates that (actually) he is an object \( x \) such that, had some world \( W \) obtained, it would have been false that \( x \) existed. Truth with respect to a possible world \( W \) is similar to nonexistence in \( W \). When we say of \( E \) that it is true with respect to \( W \) we do not predicate of \( E \) with respect to \( W \) that it is true: we do not say that \( E \) is true in the world \( W \). Rather, we predicate (absolutely) of \( E \) that it is true with respect to \( W \). We predicate (absolutely) of \( E \) that it actually has the world relative property of being true with respect to \( W \). Now \( E \) depends for its truth on the nonexistence of Socrates and \( E \) depends for its existence on the existence of Socrates. There are therefore no possible worlds in which \( E \) is true. \( E \) is true with respect to some possible worlds, but it is not true in them. \( E \) is therefore not a possible truth in the sense that Socrates is a possible carpenter. Socrates is an object \( x \) such that, for some possible world \( W \), \( x \) is a carpenter in \( W \), but \( E \) is not a proposition \( P \) such that, for some possible world \( W \), \( P \) is true in \( W \).

5. Propositions as Subjects of Singular Propositions

It might be pointed out that the puzzle has the following presupposition:

possible worlds.
SP  There are singular propositions that have propositions as their subjects.\(^6\)

Perhaps the puzzle should be taken as a consideration against \(SP\). But, other than the puzzle, do we have any reason for thinking that there are no singular propositions that have propositions as their subjects? It might be argued that, to assert a singular proposition, one would have to utter a sentence in which a *purely designative* phrase—a phrase whose only semantic function is to designate an object—occupies the subject position. It might be argued furthermore that propositions are not the sort of object that purely designative phrases could designate. If so, then whenever we say something about a particular proposition, the proposition we assert is not singular with respect to the proposition of reference—or so the argument against \(SP\) would go.

Suppose I say, “It is true that Socrates is wise.” Don’t I assert a singular proposition about the proposition:

\[
S \quad \text{Socrates is wise?}
\]

Perhaps the first thing to note about the sentence I utter is that it is ambiguous. On the one hand, it can express the proposition that it is true of Socrates that he is wise, which is the singular proposition \(S\). On the other hand, the sentence can express a proposition that classifies \(S\) as true. The view under consideration is that the latter proposition, although about \(S\), is not *singular* with respect to \(S\). The reason for that is that the sentence I utter contains *descriptive apparatus* in subject position: the phrase ‘that Socrates is wise’ *describes* the proposition of reference \(S\), it does not merely pick it out. The argument against \(SP\) is that there is no way to refer to a proposition save by using a description.

A friend of \(SP\) might suggest that I would assert the singular proposition with respect to any

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\(^6\) If \(SP\) is false, then there is at least one kind of object that you will not find in the domain of propositional functions:
given proposition that it is true, if I referred to the proposition by name and then proceeded to predicate of it that it is true. Let Soc be the proposition that Socrates is wise. Consider the following proposition: Soc is true. Isn’t this proposition the singular proposition with respect to the proposition that Socrates is wise that it is true? Here perhaps what should be said is that, although the word ‘Soc’ is grammatically a name, in the circumstances we describe it is not purely designative: it does not serve as a mere tag whose only semantic function is to designate the proposition of reference. The word ‘Soc’ is what Russell (1919: 218) would call an abbreviated description. We seem to introduce an arbitrary name for a particular proposition but, in fact, a descriptive phrase—the phrase “the proposition that Socrates is wise”—is doing the semantic work. This descriptive phrase may not be a definite description of the form “the x such that Fx” but it is a description nevertheless: it contains information that fully identifies the proposition of reference. In contrast with the word ‘Soc’, in the introduction of a real proper name (such as ‘Socrates’), it is possible to avoid using any description of the object named. One can use a demonstrative phrase in the introduction of a proper name. It is (or was) possible to point to Socrates and say, “Let the name ‘Socrates’ name this”. Thus, the name ‘Socrates’ gives us no information whatever about the man Socrates. In the case of reference to propositions, the introduction of the object of reference by means of a descriptive phrase is unavoidable. You cannot point to a proposition: a proposition is an abstract object that is nowhere to be found. Despite appearances then, the alleged name ‘Soc’ is not a proper name and the asserted proposition (namely that Soc is true) is not singular.

In response to this line of reasoning, I would deny that, for a speaker to assert a singular
proposition, he would have to utter a sentence in which a purely designative phrase occupies the subject position. Perhaps this much is right: for a *sentence* to express a singular proposition, it would have to have a purely designative phrase in its subject position. If so, then the sentence ‘It is true that Socrates is wise’ (or ‘The proposition that Socrates is wise is true’) does not express a singular proposition with respect to S. But it does not seem true that a *speaker* must use a purely designative phrase in referring to an object in order to *assert* a singular proposition about the object. There can be direct *speaker’s* reference without direct *semantic* reference: a speaker can refer directly to an object by using a term that is not purely designative.⁷ I think that would be the case if the speaker used a definite description *referentially* in Donnellan’s sense:

...suppose that Jones has been charged with Smith’s murder and has been placed on trial. Imagine that there is a discussion of Jones’s odd behavior at his trial. We might sum up our impression of his behavior by saying, “Smith’s murderer is insane.” If someone asks to whom we are referring, by using this description, the answer here is “Jones” (Donnellan 1966: 237).

Here the *speaker* is using a definite description, namely the phrase ‘Smith’s murderer’, to refer directly to Jones. If so, then the proposition that the speaker asserts—what I would call the *speaker’s proposition*—is singular with respect to Jones even though a *descriptive* phrase occupies the subject position in the sentence which the speaker has assertively uttered. The content of the description in use seems to be irrelevant to the content of the assertion; it is not part of what is being asserted that Jones is Smith’s murderer. If so, then the speaker’s proposition depends for its truth only on whether Jones is insane and is therefore the singular proposition with respect to Jones that he is insane, it is the proposition which the speaker would have asserted had he assertively uttered the sentence ‘Jones is insane’.⁸ In contrast with the speaker’s

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⁷ The distinction between a speaker’s reference and the semantic reference is Kripke’s. See Kripke 1977: 255.
⁸ It might be objected that the speaker did not merely pick out Jones, he also *misdescribed* him as Smith’s murderer.
proposition, the semantic proposition—the proposition that is expressed by the sentence that the speaker has assertively uttered—depends on the semantic functions of the words of which the uttered sentence is composed. In our case, the semantic proposition is not singular because the phrase that occupies the subject position in the uttered sentence is not purely designative. Suppose that—contrary to what we believe—Jones did not murder Smith: the murderer was in fact a sane man who goes by the name ‘Henry’. The semantic proposition is false: Henry—the semantic referent of the phrase ‘Smith’s murderer’—is not insane.\(^9\)

The upshot of the distinction between the speaker’s proposition and the semantic proposition is that from the fact that a speaker assertively utters a sentence that has a descriptive phrase in subject position it cannot be inferred that the proposition he asserts is not singular. The speaker’s proposition is singular if the speaker uses the descriptive phrase to refer directly to an object and then predicates something of the object. Similarly, if a speaker assertively utters a sentence that has a descriptive phrase that refers to a proposition in subject position, then it cannot be inferred that the proposition the speaker asserts is not singular with respect to the proposition of reference. The proposition the speaker asserts is singular with respect to the proposition of reference if the speaker has referred directly to that proposition. So, even if we grant that propositions are not the sort of objects that can be the semantic referent of a purely designative phrase, the question remains: Can a speaker ever refer directly to a proposition?

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\(^9\) I think that the semantic proposition can be said to be about Henry, in the trivial sense that Henry is Smith’s murderer. It might be objected that, if so, then the speaker does not know whom he is talking about. This would be a mistake. The speaker is not talking about Henry: he is talking about Jones.
It might be argued, in support of \( SP \), that if the speaker used the phrase ‘Smith’s murderer’ to refer directly to Jones, then he might as well have referred directly to an assertion of Jones’s. Suppose that, in his trial, Jones says, “Smith was the most lovable person in the world”. You say in response, “What Smith’s murderer has just said is true.” If by ‘Smith’s murderer’ you referred to Jones, then by ‘what Smith’s murderer has just said’ you referred to the proposition that Jones has asserted. But was your reference to the proposition that Jones has asserted direct? If it was, then the proposition you asserted is singular with respect to the proposition that Smith was the most lovable person in the world. It might be replied that your reference to the proposition that Jones has asserted was not direct. The phrase you used is perhaps semantically equivalent to the phrase ‘what Jones has just said’, yet it is a descriptive phrase.

But then, why can’t we say, in support of \( SP \), that you may have used the description ‘what Smith’s murderer has just said’ to refer directly to the proposition that Jones has asserted, just as you have used the description ‘Smith’s murderer’ to refer directly to Jones? It might be replied that, when a speaker uses a definite description to refer directly to an object, then, in place of the definite description, it is possible for him to use a demonstrative pronoun to the same effect. In Donnellan’s example of a referential use of the definite description ‘Smith’s murderer’, the speaker could have pointed to Jones and said, ‘He is insane’. He would have then asserted the singular proposition with respect to Jones that he is insane. But, again, the problem is that one cannot point to a proposition. In response, it could be argued, in support of \( SP \), that we often use pronouns non-demonstratively to refer directly to propositions. First, a speaker assertively utters a sentence and asserts a proposition; then somebody refers to the asserted proposition as this, that or it and proceeds to predicate something of the proposition of reference. Thus, in response to
Jones's statement in court you could have said, "That is true". It seems that you would have asserted a proposition that would be singular with respect to Jones's proposition.

Here is another example that may suggest that such reference to a proposition might be direct. Suppose we are trying to figure out where we first met. You say, "We first met near the bank." Let's call the proposition you asserted B. I then recall our first meeting and concur saying, "That is true." It seems that the proposition I asserted is singular with respect to B. Here the word 'that', as I used it, is not an abbreviation of the description 'what you have just said'. Suppose that by 'bank' you actually meant "riverbank". Let W be a possible world in which by 'bank' you meant "a financial institution". Let B' be the proposition you assert in W. My actual statement is true with respect to W just in case B, not B', is true with respect to W. But if my response were equivalent to "What you have just said is true," it would be true with respect to W just in case B', not B, is true with respect to W. It might be objected that the pronoun 'that', as I used it in the dialog, is anaphoric: it has an antecedent in the sentence you uttered. It is anaphoric, I would agree, but I do not think that it is on that account indirectly referential. If you say, "Socrates is wise" you assert S. If I concur saying, "He is wise," I think I assert S all over again. If so, then the pronoun 'he', as I use it here, is anaphoric and directly referential.10

I do not have to rely on the (widely accepted) doctrine that proper names are purely designative to make the point that anaphoric pronouns might be directly referential. Suppose you say, "A man jumped off the bridge today" and I respond, "He did not jump, he was pushed." It seems to me that the occurrences of the word 'he' here are anaphoric and directly referential. Otherwise,

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10 You might say that, by definition, anaphoric expressions are indirect, as they refer via their antecedent expressions. I would reply that this makes anaphoric expressions indirect in an irrelevant sense. If you asked me whether I heard the news directly from Smith and I said, "No, he told them to me over the telephone", that would be indirect in an
what would be an apt description that I could have used instead of the word ‘he’? The description ‘the man who jumped off the bridge’ will not do, not only because (let’s suppose) two men jumped off that bridge that day, but also because (presumably) the man we are referring to did not jump off the bridge; he was pushed. It seems to me that, in response to your statement, I asserted a proposition that was singular with respect to the man we both had in mind.

6. Propositions as Complex Objects

The puzzle I presented may be of particular interest to philosophers who hold the doctrine that singular propositions are complex objects that have objects and properties as constituents. Complex-object theorists would be inclined to accept the presuppositions of the puzzle, namely $SP$ and $OD$.

The doctrine that singular propositions are complex objects does not imply $SP$, but I guess that complex-object theorists would be inclined to accept $SP$. They might offer the following reasoning in favor of $SP$. To assert a singular proposition about an object, a speaker would have to refer directly to the object and predicate something of it. Thus, one cannot assert propositions that are singular with respect to objects one cannot refer to directly. For the purposes of illustration, suppose we held the doctrine that, to refer to an object directly, one would have to be acquainted with the object. Suppose we also held the extreme view that one is only really acquainted with oneself. We would then have to maintain that one could only refer directly to

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irrelevant sense. Contrast that with a situation in which Smith told the news to Jones and Jones told them to me.

11 It might be suggested that the description ‘the man you and I are referring to’ could substitute for the pronoun ‘he’ as it figures in our dialogue. I would take issue with that on the ground that the proposition I asserted in the dialogue does not require for its truth that you and I refer to something, nor that we exist, for that matter. Your next move might be to rigidify the proposed substitute description. I would then amend my objection correspondingly: what I
oneself (suppose the pronoun ‘I’ would do the job) and that, therefore, the singular propositions one could assert are only about oneself. When I would say, “I am wise,” I would assert the singular proposition with respect to myself that I am wise, but I would only be able to assert non-singular propositions to the effect that Socrates is wise. I would not be able to assert S, the singular proposition which Socrates would assert if he assertively uttered the sentence ‘I am wise’. Now what if, for some odd reason, Socrates could not refer directly to himself? If nobody could refer directly to others, nobody would be able to assert S. Still, there would be (I suppose) such a singular proposition as S. The point is that S does not depend for its existence on being asserted by anybody, or on the existence of speakers who are able to assert it. The complex-object theorist would attribute this ontological independence of S to the kind of object he takes S to be. If S is, say, an ordered pair that consists of Socrates and the property of being wise, then S does not depend for its existence on being asserted by anybody, or on the existence of speakers who are able to assert it. The complex-object theorist might argue that, similarly, even if nobody can refer directly to propositions and (therefore) nobody can assert singular propositions about propositions, if there are any propositions, and if there are any properties, then there must also be ordered pairs of propositions and properties. There must therefore also be singular propositions about propositions: SP must be true.

I think it is true that propositions do not depend for their existence on being asserted, or on the existence of speakers who are able to assert them. Still, propositions depend for their existence on the possibility of being asserted. The notion of an unassertable proposition—a proposition it is not possible to assert—seems to be problematic, perhaps like the notion of an idea it is
impossible to grasp. Thus, if it is impossible to refer directly to propositions, then it is not clear how there could be any singular propositions that have propositions as their subjects.

Complex-object theorists would also be inclined to accept the other presupposition of the puzzle, namely $OD$. If

$$S \quad \text{Socrates is wise}$$

is an ordered pair that consists of Socrates and the property of being wise, then $S$ depends for its existence on the existence of Socrates. Unless he finds a way to undermine $EI$, the complex-object theorist who accepts $SP$ might respond to the puzzle by rejecting the following thesis of logical equivalence:

$$LE \quad \text{For every proposition } P, P \text{ and the singular proposition with respect to } P \text{ that it is true are logically equivalent.}$$

$LE$ is an assumption in the argument for the conclusion that $TE$ and $EI$ form an inconsistent pair. I think it may be hard to reject $LE$, save by rejecting

$$TP \quad \text{For every proposition } P, \text{ there is such a proposition as the singular proposition with respect to } P \text{ that it is true.}$$

It might be suggested that even if there are singular propositions that have propositions as their subjects, there are no singular propositions that predicate truth of their subjects. This might be said in response to the puzzle but, other than the puzzle, do we have any reason for thinking that this should be so?

Perhaps the complex-object theorist who accepts $SP$ would respond to the puzzle by rejecting a thesis that is weaker than $LE$. For all propositions $P$ and $Q$, let’s say that $P$ and $Q$ are necessary equivalents just in case for every possible world $W$, $P$ is true with respect to $W$ if and only if $Q$ is
true with respect to $W$. Here is the puzzle again. Assuming that $TE$ is true, let $P$ be a proposition that is true with respect to some possible world $W$ in which it does not exist. Suppose further that the following thesis of necessary equivalence holds:

$$NE \quad \text{For every proposition } P, P \text{ and the singular proposition with respect to } P \text{ that it is true are necessary equivalents.}$$

Since $P$ is true with respect to $W$, (by $NE$) $T(P)$—the singular proposition with respect to $P$ that it is true—is true with respect to $W$. But $P$ does not exist in $W$. If so, $T(P)$ does not imply that $P$ exists. Again, $T(P)$ is a counterexample to $EI$: it is a singular proposition that does not imply that the object it is about (namely $P$) exists. This formulation of the puzzle has the assumption that $NE$ (not that $LE$) is true.

If $TP$ is true, then $E'$ falsifies $NE$. $E'$ is a possible truth. Let $W$ be a possible world with respect to which $E'$ is true. Since $E'$ is true with respect to $W$, Socrates does not exist in $W$. By $OD$, $E'$ does not exist in $W$. Since $E'$ does not exist in $W$, (by $EI$) $T(E')$ is false with respect to $W$. Since $E'$ is true with respect to $W$, $E'$ and $T(E')$ are not equivalent with respect to $W$. $E'$ and $T(E')$ are therefore not necessarily equivalents and $NE$ is false. (Similarly, if $TP$ is true, then the non-singular negation of any proposition that is singular with respect to a contingent existent is a counterexample to $NE$.)

But, if $TP$ is true, then $NE$ seems to be a compelling thesis. Mere material equivalence (sameness of truth value) as opposed to necessary equivalence between every proposition $P$ and the singular proposition with respect to $P$ that it is true seems too week a thesis about truth. We want a thesis that would bring necessity into the picture. I guess the friend of $TP$ might offer a substitute for $NE$:
NS  Necessarily, for every proposition \( P \), \( P \) and the singular proposition with respect to \( P \) that it is true are equivalent.

In the language of possible worlds, \( NS \) says that, for every possible world \( W \), and for every proposition \( P \) that exists in \( W \), \( P \) and the singular proposition with respect to \( P \) that it is true are equivalent with respect to \( W \). Note that, even if \( TP \) is true, \( E' \) does not falsify \( NS \). In the actual world, we have both \( E' \) and \( T(E') \) and they are equivalent: \( E' \) is false (Socrates does exist) and \( T(E') \) is false: \( E' \) is not true. Now consider \( W' \), a possible world in which Socrates does not exist. \( E' \) is true with respect to \( W' \) and, since \( E' \) does not exist in \( W' \), \( T(E') \) is false with respect to \( W' \). \( E' \) and \( T(E') \) are therefore not equivalent with respect to \( W' \). Still, \( E' \) does not falsify \( NS \), because \( E' \) does not exist in \( W' \).

In response to the puzzle, one might say that the proposition:

\[
S^* \quad \text{It is true that Socrates is wise}
\]

is identical with the proposition:

\[
S \quad \text{Socrates is wise.}
\]

Call this doctrine the identity doctrine. According to the identity doctrine, although the 'that'-clause in the sentence 'It is true that Socrates is wise' may appear to be a singular term, it really is not. In assertively uttering this sentence, we do not refer to the proposition \( S \) and predicate something of it (namely that it is true): we just assert \( S \).

Presumably, this response is not to the effect that, for any proposition \( P \), the singular proposition with respect to \( P \) that it is true is identical with \( P \).\(^{12}\) This would be no objection to the puzzle. If,

\(^{12}\) If, for any proposition \( P \), the singular proposition with respect to \( P \) that it is true is identical with \( P \), then all propositions are singular: every proposition is singular with respect to itself. There would still be an important
for some proposition $P$, $P$ is true with respect to some possible world in which $P$ does not exist, then there still is a singular proposition (namely $P$ itself) that does not imply that an object it is singular with respect to (namely $P$ again) exists. So perhaps we are to infer from the identity doctrine that, for any proposition $P$, there is no such proposition as the singular proposition with respect to $P$ that it is true. But this does not follow. The identity doctrine is compatible with the thesis that there is such a proposition as the singular proposition with respect to $S$ that it is true, but that proposition is not expressed by the sentence ‘It is true that Socrates is wise’. Maybe that’s what should be said.

References


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difference, in respect of singularity, between $S$ and the proposition that the philosopher who drank hemlock is wise: the former is and the latter is not singular with respect to *Socrates*.
Actualism, Ontological Dependence, and Possible Worlds

1. What There Could Have Been

I never owned a horse. But this is just the way things happened to be; it is certainly possible that I should have owned a horse. In a sense, it follows that

\[ P \quad \text{It is possible that there should have been something other than anything there actually is.} \]

It follows because if there is no such object as a horse that belongs to me and it is possible that there should have been such an object, then it is possible that there should have been something other than anything there actually is: a horse that belongs to me. Any such horse would have been an object such that there is actually no such object. This is not to say that it is possible that there should have been something that would not have existed. Surely, it is a necessary truth that everything exists. If I had owned a horse, then it would have definitely existed. However, in another sense \( P \) does not follow: any horse—given the right circumstances—is such that it is possible that it should have been mine.\(^\text{13}\) If so, then my owning a horse does not require that there have been something other than anything there actually is: a new object, so to speak.

It is nonetheless possible that there should have been new objects. Consider Bucephalus, the war-horse of Alexander the Great. Bucephalus might have sired a horse other than any horse that he

\(^{13}\) I could say that any existing horse is such that it is possible that it should have been mine, but this might give the wrong impression that there are nonexistent horses.
ever sired. If it is essential to anything that was not sired by Bucephalus that it not be sired by Bucephalus, then $P$ is true. Note that, for the derivation of $P$, it does not matter whether Bucephalus has ever sired a horse. It matters that he might have sired a horse other than any horse that he ever sired. This is perhaps noteworthy because arguments for $P$ sometimes have unnecessarily strong presuppositions. For instance, Cartwright says:

Now it is (or seems to me to be, anyhow) essential to everything there is that it is not a sister of mine; yet it seems to me possible that I should have had a sister; and so it seems to me that it is possible that there should have been something other than anything there actually is (Cartwright 1997: 82).

For the derivation of $P$ it does not matter that Cartwright has no sister. It matters that it is possible that he should have had sisters other than any he actually has. This, in conjunction with the proposition that it is essential to anything that is not a sister of Cartwright’s that it not be a sister of Cartwright’s, implies $P$.

You may have doubts with respect to the proposition that it is essential to anything that was not sired by Bucephalus that it not be sired by Bucephalus. But even if this proposition is false, $P$ is probably true. Let’s say that a property $Q$ is exclusive if it is essential to anything that does not have $Q$ that it not have $Q$. For example, if it is essential to anything that is not a horse sired by Bucephalus that it not be a horse sired by Bucephalus, then the property of being a horse sired by Bucephalus is an exclusive property. On the other hand, the property of being a horse that I own is surely not exclusive. I never owned Bucephalus, but it is possible that I should have owned him. Let’s also say that a property $Q$ is open if it is possible that there should have been objects that should have had $Q$, other than the objects that have $Q$. If Bucephalus might have sired a horse other than any horse that he had ever sired, then the property of being sired by Bucephalus is open. Now there probably are properties that are both exclusive and open. If there are, then $P$ is
true. For if a property $Q$ is open, then it is possible that there should have been something that should have had $Q$ other than anything that has $Q$. But if $Q$ is exclusive, then any such object would not be anything there is, because anything that does not have $Q$ could not have had $Q$.

To be on firmer grounds with respect to $P$ than considerations of exclusivity allow, one might want to argue for $P$ from the premise that

(1) It is possible that there should have been more objects than there actually are.

It is a matter of logic alone that, had there been more objects than there actually are, there would have been something other than anything there actually is. But what might be said in support of (1)? It may seem that

(2) It is possible that there should have been more horses than there actually are.

It is possible that Bucephalus should have sired more horses than he had ever sired. But (1) follows only if the property of being sired by Bucephalus is exclusive. Otherwise, horses that exist actually might have been sired by Bucephalus and the number of horses would not have increased. So we are back to considerations of exclusivity. Moreover, (2) does not imply (1), even if the property of being sired by Bucephalus is exclusive. Had Bucephalus sired more horses than he ever sired, the number of objects would have remained whatever infinite number it is.\textsuperscript{14}

Besides, the consideration of number is too strong. If it is indeed possible that Bucephalus should have sired more horses than he has ever sired, then the property of being sired by Bucephalus is open. Again, if it is also exclusive, then $P$ is true.

\textsuperscript{14} For all we know the universe may be finite, but I suppose that there are sets of physical objects and sets of such sets etc.
2. Actualism

Plantinga argues for the conclusion that if \( P \) is true, then according to what he calls the *canonical conception of possible worlds* (CC) there are nonexistent objects. Plantinga explains what CC is:

Possible worlds themselves are typically 'taken as primitive', as the saying goes: but by way of informal explanation it may be said that a possible world is a *way things could have been*—a total way. Among these ways things could have been there is one—call it ‘\( \alpha \)’—that has the distinction of being actual; this is the way things actually are. \( \alpha \) is the one possible world that obtains or is actual; the rest are merely possible. Associated with each possible world \( W \), furthermore, is a set of individuals or objects: the *domain* of \( W \), which we may call ‘\( \psi(W) \)’. The members of \( \psi(W) \) are the objects that *exist in \( W \);* and of course different objects may exist in different worlds (Plantinga 1976: 254).

CC includes the following thesis:

\[ D \quad \text{For every possible world } W, \text{ there is a set } \psi(W) \text{—the domain of } W \text{—such that for every object } x, x \text{ is a member of } \psi(W) \text{ if and only if } x \text{ exists in } W. \]

\( U \) is defined in CC as the union of the domains of all possible worlds: for every object \( x \), \( x \) is a member of \( U \) if and only if for some possible world \( W \), \( x \) is a member of \( \psi(W) \). Plantinga argues that if \( P \) is true, then according to CC there are nonexistent objects:

If \( [P] \) is true, then (on the Canonical Scheme) there is a possible world \( W \) in which there exists an object distinct from each of the things that exist in \( \alpha \). \( \psi(W) \), therefore, contains an object that is not a member of \( \psi(\alpha) \); hence the same can be said for \( U \). Accordingly, \( U \) contains an object that does not exist in \( \alpha \); this object, then, does not exist in the actual world and hence does not exist (Plantinga 1976: 256).

Plantinga says here that if \( P \) is true, then, on CC,

\[ P_{W} \quad \text{For some possible world } W, \text{ there is an object that exists in } W \text{ and does not exist in } \alpha. \]

From \( P_{W} \) Plantinga infers that
There is an object that is a member of $\psi(W)$ and is not a member of $\psi(\alpha)$.

The same can be said for $U$, namely:

There is an object that is a member of $U$ and is not a member of $\psi(\alpha)$.

By the definition of $\psi(\alpha)$, (4) implies that

There is a member of $U$ that does not exist in $\alpha$.

From (5) Plantinga infers that

There is a member of $U$ that does not exist,

and from (6) he infers that

There is an object that does not exist.

Plantinga has an objection:

I believe there neither are nor could have been things that do not exist; the very idea of a nonexistent object is a confusion, or at best a notion, like that of a square circle, whose exemplification is impossible. In the present context, however, this remark may beg some interesting questions. Let us say instead that the canonical conception of possible worlds exacts a substantial ontological toll (Plantinga 1976: 257).

Is the idea of a nonexistent object the idea of an object such that there is no such object? This would be an idea “whose exemplification is impossible”. But if, by way of analyzing $P$, CC implied that there are nonexistent objects, then we would not say that CC “exact a substantial ontological toll”. Rather, we would say that any CC analyst who holds that $P$ is true contradicts himself. I will argue that a CC analyst who holds that $P$ is true should reject Plantinga’s argument.

Plantinga has the following suggestion:

Suppose we follow Robert Adams… in using the name ‘Actualism’ to designate the view that there neither are
nor could be any nonexistent objects (Plantinga 1976: 257).

If there could not be any nonexistent objects, then there are no nonexistent objects. The view designated here as ‘Actualism’ is simply that necessarily everything exists. But this view is unobjectionable! Lewis accepted it. In his theory—a counterpart-theoretic variant of $CC$—otherworldly objects do exist:

When we quantify over less than all there is, we leave out things that (unrestrictedly speaking) exist *simpliciter* (Lewis 1986: 3).

Yet nobody would call Lewis an actualist. In fact, contrary to Plantinga, Adams is not using the name ‘Actualism’ to designate the view that there neither are nor could be any nonexistent objects. Adams is concerned rather with what he calls *Actualism with respect to possible worlds*:

...the view that if there are any true statements in which there are said to be nonactual possible worlds, they must be reducible to statements in which the only things there are said to be are things which there are in the actual world...(Adams 1974: 202-203).

If this is Actualism with respect to possible worlds, then Actualism (I suppose) is the doctrine that the only things there are are things which there are in the actual world. Adams says elsewhere:

*Actualism is the doctrine that there are no things that do not exist in the actual world. The actualist agrees, of course, that there could have been things that do not actually exist; in particular, there could have been individuals other than those that there are* (Adams 1981: 7)

According to Adams, then, Actualism is the doctrine that everything exists in the actual world.

Because it involves the notion of the actual world, the formulation of Actualism as the doctrine that everything exists in the actual world might give the wrong impression that Actualism presupposes the possible-worlds analysis of modality. I think you can find the idea that modality
is susceptible to a possible-worlds analysis objectionable—or avoid the talk of possible worlds for any other reason—and still be an actualist. I would formulate Actualism as the doctrine:

\[ A \]
Every possible object is an actual object.\(^{15}\)

This formulation involves the concept of actuality, rather than the concept of the actual world. Formulated in terms of possible worlds, Actualism is the doctrine:

\[ A_w \]
For every object \( x \) and every possible world \( W \), if \( x \) exists in \( W \), then \( x \) exists in \( \alpha \).

If \( U \) is the set of all possible objects, then Actualism is the doctrine:

\[ A_U \]
Every member of \( U \) exists in \( \alpha \).

Returning to Plantinga’s argument, note that (5), in conjunction with \( A_U \), implies (6).\(^{16}\) It seems, then, that Actualism is an implicit premise of Plantinga’s argument. But the CC analyst who holds that \( P \) is true must also hold that Actualism is false. The CC analyst interprets subjunctive quantifiers—phrases such as ‘it is possible that there should have been’—as quantifiers over possible objects that may or may not be actual objects. He would explain that we normally do not quantify over everything whatever. We only quantify over a certain kind of objects: actual objects. Thus, when we say of an object that it \textit{is} (or that it \textit{exists}), the significance of the indicative mood is that it restricts us to actual objects. We mean that the object is or exists actually: in the actual world, that is. The CC analyst proposes that we ignore the normal significance of the indicative mood and use ‘is’ in a nonrestrictive or an all-inclusive sense, to apply to anything whatever. In the nonrestrictive sense, to say of something that it \textit{is} is to say of it that it is in actuality or not in actuality. Thus, everything is. For the predicates of the modal

\(^{15}\) Possibilism is the negation of Actualism, namely the doctrine that there are possible objects that are \textit{not} actual objects.

\(^{16}\) It might be pointed out that (6) follows from (5) in conjunction with the weaker thesis that every \textit{existing} member
language there are, in the language of $CC$, counterparts that have room for variables and proper names that range over possible worlds. Thus, for the one-place predicate 'horse' of the modal language, the language of $CC$ has a two-place counterpart 'horse in'. Statements in which the mood of a verb is indicative, such as

(8) Bucephalus is a horse

are analyzed as relative to $\alpha$, the so-called actual world. Thus, (8) is analyzed as:

(8c) Bucephalus is a horse in $\alpha$.

Indicative quantifiers—quantifiers that contain a verb in the indicative mood, such as 'there are'—range over objects that exist in $\alpha$. The proposition

(9) There are horses

is analyzed in $CC$ as the proposition:

(9c) There are horses in $\alpha$.

Similarly, the proposition:

(10) Everything exists

is analyzed in $CC$ as the proposition:

(10c) Every object in $\alpha$ exists in $\alpha$.

Subjunctive statements are analyzed by means of quantifying over possible worlds and over the objects that exist in possible worlds. Thus, the $CC$ analyst would take $P$ to be the proposition:

$P_C$ For some world $W$ and some object $x$, $x$ exists in $W$ and $x$ does not exist in $\alpha$.

But $P_C$ is the negation of the actualist doctrine $A_W$ (a $CC$ analyst who thinks that $P$ is false is thereby an actualist). The $CC$ analyst who holds that $P$ is true would therefore say that Plantinga's implicit premise of Actualism is false. He would thus avoid the conclusion that there

of $U$ exists in $\alpha$. True, but why should one hold the weaker thesis if one were not an actualist?
are nonexistent objects.\footnote{\text{Had Plantinga ended the argument with (5), the CC analyst would have accepted it. In saying that } P \text{ is true, the CC}}

It might be said plausibly that the CC analyst who holds that $P$ is true is committed to an idea whose exemplification is impossible. The CC analyst who holds that $P$ is true is committed to the doctrine that there are possible objects that are not actual objects. This doctrine is not (or does not seem to be) a possible truth. However, Plantinga’s analogy between non-actual objects and square circles is not a good analogy, I think. Unlike the idea of a square circle, the idea of a non-actual object does not seem to involve a contradiction. The idea of a non-actual object is not the idea of an object such that there is no such object. It is the idea of an object such that there is such an object, but not in actuality.

3. Ontological Dependence

The possible-worlds actualist—the actualist who accepts the possible-worlds analysis of modality—is committed to the doctrine:

$$E_a \quad \text{Every possible world exists in the actual world.}$$

Plantinga commits himself to a stronger doctrine:

$$E_w \quad \text{Each world exists in each world.}$$

Why should we accept $E_w$? Even if $E_a$ is a necessary truth, $E_w$ does not follow. Plantinga is not worried:

...each world exists in each world. This may sound excessively Plotinian. What it means, however, is simple and obvious enough. The actual world, for example (suppose we name it ‘$\alpha$’ for ease of reference), is a state of affairs that obtains. Had some other world been actual, $\alpha$ would not have obtained; still, there would have been
such a thing as \( \alpha \); \( \alpha \) would have been a merely possible state of affairs (Plantinga 1974: 47).

We might grant that, had some world \( W \) obtained, \( \alpha \) would have been a merely possible state of affairs. From here, Plantinga seems to infer that, had \( W \) obtained, there would have been such a world as \( \alpha \). I don’t think it follows. I think we can say that \( \alpha \) is possible with respect to some worlds in which it does not exist. Plantinga offers an analogy in support of \( E_W \):

*Obtaining or actuality* for states of affairs is like truth for propositions. The proposition

\[
[M] \quad \text{G. Cantor is a mathematician}
\]

is true; had things been appropriately different, it would have been false. *False*, but not *non-existent*; there would have been such a proposition, but it would not have been true. In the same way, \( \alpha \) obtains. Had things been different, \( \alpha \) would have been a merely possible state of affairs; there would have been such a state of affairs as \( \alpha \), although that state of affairs would not have been actual (Plantinga 1974: 47).

I am inclined to think that the analogy between obtaining for states of affairs and truth for propositions works against Plantinga. It suggests that \( \alpha \) does *not* exist in every possible world. I agree that if Cantor had been a *non*-mathematician—had he chosen, say, to become a lawyer or a doctor—\( M \) would have been false but not nonexistent. But this does not mean that \( M \) would have existed *no matter what*. I am inclined to think that had Cantor never existed (or if the field of Mathematics had never come into being) \( M \) would not have existed either. The following doctrine of ontological dependence seems to hold:

*\( OD_p \) Propositions that are singular with respect to contingent existents depend for their existence on the existence of their subjects.*

Let \( M_S \) be a possible state of affairs in which Cantor is a mathematician. If Cantor had not been a mathematician would there still have been such a state of affairs as \( M_S \)? Plantinga would say that there would. I am not sure. I grant that if Cantor had not been a mathematician, \( M_S \) would have

*analyst* *is* saying that there are possible objects that do not exist in \( \alpha \).
been *possible*. But it does not follow that *there would have been* such a state of affairs as $M_S$. I guess that Plantinga would say that it does follow: if $M_S$ had *been* possible it would have *been*, it is as simple as that—or so his argument might be. It does not seem to me that saying that $M_S$ would have been possible is saying that $M_S$ would have had the modal property that it is possible that it should obtain. It seems to mean merely that it would have been possible *that* $M_S$ should obtain. Similarly, it might be said that, had Cantor not existed, he would have been a possible object. But this does not mean that *there would have been* such an object as Cantor, an object that would have had the modal property of being an object $x$ such that it is possible that $x$ should be. Rather, it seems to mean merely that it would have been possible *that* Cantor should be. Even if $M_S$ would have existed had Cantor failed to be a mathematician, the question is whether it is *necessary* that $M_S$ should exist. As with the corresponding proposition $M$, I am inclined to think that it is not necessary. Here too, it seems to me that had Cantor never existed, the state of affairs $M_S$ would not only not have obtained, it would not have existed. My inclinations in the case of the proposition and in the case of the state of affairs are similar because in both cases it seems to me that we are dealing with objects that depend for their existence on the existence of Cantor.

A mere analogy between obtaining for states of affairs and truth for propositions should not make one endorse $E_W$. But Plantinga offers more than an analogy. First, he observes that

In semantical developments of modal logic, one meets the suggestion that a possible world may be possible *relative to* some but perhaps not all possible worlds. To say that $W$ is possible relative to $W'$ is to say that $W$ would have been possible if $W'$ had been actual; alternatively, it is to say that every proposition true in $W$ is possible in $W'$, or that every state of affairs that obtains in $W$ is possible in $W'$ (Plantinga 1974: 51).

He then goes on to argue that the relation of possibility in what he calls *the broad logical sense* holds between all possible worlds. Even so, I do not see why a world $V$ should exist in a world $W$. 
if \( V \) is possible relative to \( W \). Perhaps for the following reason. If \( V \) is possible relative to \( W \), any proposition that is true in \( V \) is possible in \( W \). But what is it for a proposition to be true or possible in a world? According to Plantinga,

To say that \( p \) is true in a world \( W \) is to say that if \( W \) had been actual, \( p \) would have been true (Plantinga 1974: 46).

Similarly, I guess, to say that \( P \) is possible in a world \( W \) is to say that had \( W \) obtained, \( P \) would have been possible. If so, then since \( V \) is possible relative to \( W \), for any proposition \( P \), if \( P \) would have been true had \( V \) obtained, then \( P \) would have been possible had \( W \) obtained. At this point Plantinga might argue as follows. Let \( Q \) be the singular proposition with respect to \( V \) that it is actual. Had \( V \) obtained, \( Q \) would have been true. Since \( V \) is possible relative to \( W \), had \( W \) obtained, \( Q \) would have been possible. But had \( Q \) been possible it would have existed, but then—since \( Q \) is singular with respect to \( V \)—\( V \) would also have existed. \( V \) therefore exists in \( W \).

This argument has what seems to be the false presupposition that a proposition is possible only with respect to worlds in which it exists. A reason for having this presupposition might be the thought that, when we say of a proposition \( P \) that it is possible with respect to a world \( W \), we say something to the effect that \( P \) has a modal property in \( W \), the property of being a possible truth.\(^{18}\) This would imply that \( P \) exists in \( W \), as having a property in a world requires existence in it. I think that what we say rather has the effect that \( P \) actually has a modal property: \( P \) is actually such that, had \( W \) obtained, \( P \) would have been possible. Having this property actually does not imply that \( P \) exists in \( W \); it implies that \( P \) exists in the actual world. Call worlds in which Cantor

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\(^{18}\) A reason for having this thought might simply be a confusion concerning the scope of ‘in \( W \)’. One might not distinguish between having (in \( \alpha \)) the property of being-a-possible-truth-in-\( W \) and having in \( W \) the property of being-a-possible-truth.
does not exist cantorless worlds.\textsuperscript{19} Let \( W_C \) be a cantorless world. Suppose we say that \( M \) would have been possible had \( W_C \) obtained. This does not mean that \( M \) has in \( W_C \) the modal property of being a possible truth. \( M \) does not even exist in \( W_C \), so it does not have any properties in it, modal or not modal. Still, \( M \) has (in the actual world) the modal property that it would have been possible had \( W_C \) obtained.

Plantinga’s considerations in favor of \( E_W \) were based on an analogy between states of affairs and propositions, and on the universality of the possibility relation between possible worlds. I found these considerations to be unconvincing.\textsuperscript{20} Another consideration in favor of \( E_W \)—a consideration that Plantinga would not offer—is that the possible-worlds analysis together with plausible doctrines of ontological dependence require that \( E_W \) be true. In the possible worlds analysis, modal operators such as ‘it is possible that’ are interpreted as quantifiers over possible worlds. Thus, the proposition:

\[ PM \quad \text{It is possible that Cantor should be a mathematician} \]

is analyzed as:

\[ PM_W \quad \text{There is a possible world in which Cantor is a mathematician.} \]

One might think that \( PM \) and:

\[ E' \quad \text{It is false that Cantor exists.} \]

are compossible. \( E' \) implies the negation of \( M \), not that it is impossible that \( M \) be true. Now if \( PM \) and \( E' \) are compossible, then \( PM \) is true with respect to some cantorless worlds. Let \( W_C \) be such a

\textsuperscript{19} Being a cantorless world is a property that worlds have essentially, if they have it at all.

\textsuperscript{20} Plantinga cannot consistently argue for \( E_W \) on the ground that possible worlds are abstract and therefore necessary existents. He recognizes that sets (presumably abstract entities) that have contingent existents as members are themselves contingent existents. For example, he says (1976: 260): “Quine’s singleton, for example, could not have existed if Quine had not. For from the actualist point of view, if Quine had not existed, there would have been no such object as Quine at all, in which case there would have been nothing for Quine’s singleton to contain.”
world. If $PM$ and $PM_W$ are equivalent, then $PM_W$ is also true with respect to $W_C$. Call worlds in which Cantor is a mathematician $M$ worlds. It seems to follow that there is an $M$ world in $W_C$. The reason for that is that when we evaluate quantified statements in terms of possible-worlds, we let quantifiers range over objects that exist in the world of evaluation. Thus, we say that it is true with respect to a world $W$ that there are talking donkeys just in case there are talking donkeys in $W$. If so, then there is an $M$ world in $W_C$—or so it seems.

But the $OD$ theorist would say that $M$ worlds depend ontologically on Cantor. Suppose we are in a cantorless world and we want to say what must be the case in order for $\alpha$ to obtain ($\alpha$ is an $M$ world). $\alpha$ is a possibility that is not qualitative with respect to Cantor: for $\alpha$ to obtain, Cantor himself—not just anybody who resembles him—must be a mathematician. If so, then to say what must be the case in order for $\alpha$ to be obtain, we should say of $M$ that it must be true. But $OD_P$ implies that $M$ does not exist in cantorless worlds. If so, then there are no $M$ worlds in $W_C$. The $OD$ theorist says that there are no $M$ worlds in $W_C$ while the possible-worlds analysis seems to require that there be $M$ worlds in $W_C$. It seems that the possible-worlds analysis is unavailable to the $OD$ theorist.

I do not think that this consideration shows that the possible-worlds analysis requires that there be $M$ worlds in $W_C$. But first, isn’t the $OD$ theorist contradicting himself? How could it be possible in $W_C$ that Cantor should be a mathematician if there are no $M$ worlds in $W_C$? This is not a contradiction, I think. When we analyze modality in terms of possible worlds, we consider truth as a relation between propositions and worlds: a proposition $P$ is true with respect to a world $W$, if $P$ would have been true had $W$ obtained. The principal doctrine of the possible-worlds analysis is:
A proposition is possibly true just in case it is true with respect to some possible world.

To analyze modality in terms of the relation of truth between propositions and worlds is not to deny that truth is a property that some propositions have in worlds in which they exist. A proposition $P$ is true in a world $W$ in which it exists just in case $P$ is true with respect to $W$. It seems to me that to suggest an alternative to $WA$ according to which a proposition is possibly true just in case it is true in a world in which it exists would be to rule out a conceptual possibility. It is that a proposition might be both essentially false (false in every possible world in which it exists) and a possible truth. The OD theorist would say that this conceptual possibility is realized by negations of existential propositions that are singular with respect to contingent existents. $E'$ is true with respect to every cantorless world. If $E'$ depends for its existence on the existence of Cantor, then $E'$ requires its own nonexistence for its truth. $E'$ is therefore essentially false and a possible truth. Now $WA$ lends itself to a generalization:

$WA^*$  A proposition is possibly true with respect to a world $W$ just in case it is true with respect to a world that is possible with respect to $W$.

Thus, when we analyze modality in terms of possible worlds, we consider possibility as a relation between worlds. We subscribe to $WA^*$ as opposed to the doctrine that a possibility statement is true with respect to a given world if it is true with respect to worlds that have the property of possibility in the world of evaluation. We see that to say that it is possible in $W_C$ that Cantor should be a mathematician is not to commit to the existence in $W_C$ of a world that has (in $W_C$) both the property of being possible and the property of being an $M$ world. It is to commit rather to the actual existence of an $M$ world that is possible with respect to $W_C$. We should therefore reject the inference from the thesis that there are no $M$ worlds in $W_C$ to the conclusion that $PM$ is false.
with respect to \( W_C \). Since it is not part of the OD theorist’s position that there should be no \( M \) worlds that are possible with respect to cantorless worlds, it does not follow that the possible-worlds analysis is not available to the OD theorist.

4. Unexemplified Essences

Plantinga argues for the conclusion that the possible-worlds actualist who holds that \( P \) is true has to appeal to essences:

\[ \ldots \text{the domain of any possible world } W, \text{ from the actualist perspective, is a subset of } \psi(a). \text{ Since there are no objects distinct from those that exist in } a, \psi(W) \text{ cannot contain an object distinct from each that exists in } a. \text{ Of course the actualist will happily concede that there could have been an object distinct from any that exists in } a. \text{ Hence there is a possible world } W \text{ in which there exists an object distinct from any that actually exists. The actualist must hold, therefore, that } \psi(W) \text{ is a subset of } \psi(a) - \text{despite the fact that } W \text{ includes the existence of an object that does not exist in } a. \text{ How can this be managed? How can the actualist understand} \]

\[ [P] \text{ There could have been an object distinct from each object that actually exists if he holds that } \psi(W), \text{ for any } W, \text{ is a subset of } \psi(a) \text{? ...Easily enough; he must appeal to essences (Plantinga 1976: 268).} \]

Plantinga explains later:

How then shall we understand \([P]\)? Easily enough; \([P]\) is true if and only if there is a world where

\[ (34) \text{ there is an object that does not exist in } a \]

is true. But (34) is true in a world \( W \) if and only if there is an essence that is exemplified in \( W \) but not in \( a \). \([P]\) is true, therefore, if and only if there is at least one essence that is exemplified in some world but not exemplified in fact—if and only if, that is, there is an unexemplified essence (Plantinga 1976: 272).

A question that may be of some importance is what precisely might the appeal to essences accomplish. This is not made clear in Plantinga’s text.
Actualism is compatible with $P$. Actualism is also compatible with the conjunction of $P$ and $D$.

For every possible world $W$, there is a set $\psi(W)$—the domain of $W$—such that for every object $x$, $x$ is a member of $\psi(W)$ if and only if $x$ exists in $W$.

Actualism, in conjunction with $D$, implies

For any possible world $W$, $\psi(W)$ is a subset of $\psi(\alpha)$.

It follows that $P$ is compatible with $A_{\psi}$. The actualist does not have to appeal to essences in order to reconcile $P$ with $A_{\psi}$.

It may seem that the actualist has to reconcile

For some possible world $W$, there is an object that exists in $W$ and does not exist in $\alpha$.

with $A_{\psi}$. How could there be, in some world $W$, an object that does not exist in $\alpha$ if, for every world $W$, every object that exists in $W$ also exists in $\alpha$? It seems to me that the actualist does not have to appeal to essences to solve this problem either. But first, to see whether essences could be of any help, the problem must be formulated in terms of essences through and through. Plantinga's:

For some essence $E$ and some possible world $W$, $E$ is exemplified in $W$ and $E$ is not exemplified in $\alpha$.

must be reconciled with a reformulation of Actualism in terms of essences. The burden of reconciliation rests on Plantinga. To reformulate Actualism in terms of essences, Plantinga can say that an essence is exemplified just in case there is an object that exemplifies it. Reformulated in terms of essences, Actualism is the doctrine:

For every essence $E$, if $E$ is exemplified, then $E$ is exemplified in $\alpha$. 

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Reconciling $P_E$ with $A_E$ might not be easier than reconciling $P_W$ with $A_\varphi$. How could an essence be exemplified in some world but not in $a$, when every exemplified essence is exemplified in $a$? $P_E$ and $A_E$ imply in conjunction that

\[(11) \quad \text{For some essence } E \text{ and some world } W, E \text{ is exemplified in } W \text{ and } E \text{ is not exemplified.}\]

(11) calls for an explanation. Plantinga is not off the hook yet.

Plantinga might say that if an essence is not exemplified in $a$, then it is not exemplified at all, because every exemplified essence is exemplified in $a$—proposition $A_E$. But then how could an essence be exemplified in some world but not in $a$? To proceed, Plantinga might say that an essence $E$ is exemplified in a world $W$ just in case there is in $W$ an object that exemplifies $E$ in $W$.

Thus, an essence is exemplified in some world but not in $a$ (and therefore not exemplified) just in case it is exemplified in some world by an object that does not exist in $a$. Well yes, but how could there be, in some world, an object that does not exist in $a$—proposition $P_W$—when everything exists in $a$—proposition $A_\varphi$? This attempt to reconcile $P_E$ and $A_E$ presupposes both $P_W$ and $A_\varphi$. We can accept this as an explanation only if we can reconcile $P_W$ with $A_\varphi$. But this is what we set out to do in the first place. Essences seem to be of no help.

I think it might be possible to reconcile $P_E$ with $A_E$ without reverting to $P_W$ and $A_\varphi$. The actualist can say that an essence $E$ is exemplified in a world $W$ just in case $E$ would have been exemplified had $W$ obtained. Thus, (11) is equivalent to:

\[21 \text{ The exemplifying object has to exist in } W. \text{ Let } W \text{ be a world in which there are only humans that do not exist in } a. \text{ We want to say that the property of being human is exemplified in } W \text{ even though, for every object } x, \text{ it is not the case that } x \text{ is human in } W. \text{ Furthermore, the property has to be exemplified by the object in the world. Socrates exists in worlds in which there are no philosophers. He does not exemplify the property of being a philosopher in}\]
(11') For some $W$ and some $E$, had $W$ obtained, $E$ would have been exemplified, and (actually) $E$ is not exemplified.

The seeming contradiction in (11) is dissolved. An essence that is exemplified in some world need not be exemplified: it would have been exemplified had the world obtained, but it need not be exemplified if the world does not obtain. $P_E$ with $A_E$ are thus reconciled.

This explanation could serve Plantinga but it suggests a way to reconcile $P_W$ with $A_W$ without appealing to essences. The actualist could avoid the appeal to essences if he explained what he thinks it is for objects of some kind (say, talking donkeys) to exist in a given possible world. If we knew that, we might be able to assess the ontological commitment that is involved in an actualist assertion of $P_W$. If it turned out that, in asserting $P_W$, the actualist is not committed to the existence of non-actual objects, then $P_W$ is in no conflict with the actualist thesis $A_W$. The actualist might explain that there are talking donkeys in a world $W$ just in case, had $W$ obtained, there would have been talking donkeys. It seems that, in asserting that there are talking donkeys in $W$, there is no ontological commitment on the part of the actualist, to objects with the modal property that they would have been talking donkeys had $W$ obtained. The absence of such a commitment is conveyed by the subjunctive mood of the actualist's quantifier: the actualist is not saying that there are any objects of some kind, he is only saying that there would have been objects of some kind had $W$ obtained.\(^{22}\) We can now assess the ontological commitment that is involved in the actualist’s assertion of $P_W$. According to the Actualist understanding of existence in possible worlds, $P_W$ is the thesis that, for some world $W$, had $W$ obtained there would have

\(^{22}\) In contrast with this explanation, a CC analyst would say that there are talking donkeys in $W$ just in case, for some object $x$, $x$ is a talking donkey in $W$. The CC analyst is thus ontologically committed to objects that are talking donkeys in $W$. This is straightforwardly suggested by the plain existential quantification over objects: ‘for some

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those worlds, even though he is a philosopher.
existed an object other than any object that exists in \( \alpha \). In asserting \( P_w \), the actualist does not commit himself to the existence of anything that does not exist in \( \alpha \). The reason for that is that existential quantification carries no ontological commitment when it is in the subjunctive mood. The actualist in not saying that \textit{there are} objects that exist in some possible worlds but not in \( \alpha \). He is saying rather that \textit{there would have been} objects that do not exist in \( \alpha \) had some worlds obtained. Thus, from an actualist standpoint, \( P_w \) concerns objects there might have been, not objects that, in some non-modal sense of the word ‘are’, are. The actualist does not have to appeal to essences in order to reconcile \( P_w \) with \( A_w \) because they are compatible.\textsuperscript{23}

The appeal to essences is meant to accomplish something other than the reconciliation of \( P_w \) with \( A_w \), I think. An actualist who holds that \( P \) is true cannot quantify over the domains of possible worlds if the domains of possible worlds are thought of as the sets of objects that exist in each world: Actualism implies \( A_w \) and the analysis would yield that \( P \) is \textit{false}. If the actualist could replace the domain function \( \varphi \) of \( CC \) with a function that assigns to each world the set of essences that are exemplified in it, he would be able to \textit{deny} that the domains are subsets of the domain of \( \alpha \). He would then have a substitute for his suspicious sounding subjunctive explanation of existence in a world, and he would be able to mimic the reductive analysis of \( CC \) by quantifying, not only over possible worlds, but also over members of their domains.

To populate the domains with essences, an actualist would have to assume that:

\begin{equation}
(12) \quad \text{Necessarily, every object has an \textit{actual} essence.}
\end{equation}

\textsuperscript{23} The actualist would reject \( P_c \) as an analysis of \( P \). He would say that you couldn’t analyze a true statement such as \( P \) by existentially quantifying over non-actual objects because there are no such objects to quantify over. For the actualist, the analysis should have the inverse direction, if at all. He might tolerate existential quantification over non-actual objects, as long as he does not have to take it at face value. \( P_c \) must be viewed as \textit{literally} false, he would
In conjunction with $P$, (12) implies the worrisome doctrine:

\[ UE \quad \text{There are unexemplified essences.} \]

Some might argue for (12) from the conjunction of:

\[ NE \quad \text{Necessarily, every object has essence.} \]

and

\[ (13) \quad \text{Necessarily, every essence is a necessary existent.} \]

Perhaps friends of essences would take $NE$ for granted. I guess that Plantinga would not have too much trouble with (13) either. He says:

Socrates is a contingent being; his essence, however, is not. Properties, like propositions and possible worlds, are necessary beings. If Socrates had not existed, his essence would have been unexemplified, but not nonexistent (Plantinga 1976: 268).

$OD_P$ is a plausible doctrine of ontological dependence. It implies that propositions that are singular with respect to the contingent existent Socrates depend for their existence on the existence of Socrates. The following also seems to be a plausible doctrine of ontological dependence:

\[ OD_E \quad \text{Essences of contingent existents depend for their existence on the existence of their objects.} \]

$OD_E$ implies that if Socrates has an essence, then that essence depends for its existence on the existence of Socrates. If so, then it is impossible that an essence of Socrates be unexemplified. I guess that Plantinga would say that the analogy with singular propositions undermines the doctrine that the essence of Socrates depends ontologically on Socrates. Plantinga says that

propositions are necessary beings.

say, and as non-literally true only because it can be understood as the true modal statement $P_w$.  

Populating the domains of possible worlds with essences is a way for the actualist to reconcile $P$ with the possible-worlds analysis of modality. There may be other ways. Stalnaker says:

Whatever the fate of Plantinga’s particular theory of individual essences, the general point is difficult to avoid. Any actualist who accepts the intuitively very plausible thesis that there might have been individuals other than those that actually exist will need to distinguish in some way between individuals in the strict sense and their representatives in the domains of the possible worlds (Stalnaker 1986: 129).

I agree, but it is hard for me to see how the fate of Plantinga’s particular theory of individual essences is different from the fate of Stalnaker’s particular theory of possible worlds.

5. Possible Worlds

Metaphysicians of modality commonly take our pre-philosophical tendency to move back and forth between idioms of modality and idioms of quantification over possibilities to license a paraphrase of statements of modality as statements of quantification over possible worlds (Lewis 1973: 84). Whether you are an actualist or a possibilist, if you think that modality is susceptible to a possible-worlds analysis, or if you take literally the seemingly less committal possible-worlds paraphrases that only explicitly quantify over possible worlds and actual objects, then you would have to say what you think possible worlds are.

What could the possibilist’s possible worlds be like? Stalnaker (an actualist) says:

Other possible worlds, according to the possibilist, are concrete universes, spatially and temporally disconnected from our own, but just as real (Stalnaker 1986: 121).

Lewis is a possibilist who thinks that possible worlds are concrete universes. In Lewis’s theory (1986: 198), worlds do not have parts in common. But I do not think that every possibilist who
analyzes modality in terms of possible worlds has to have this view. Consider a CC analyst who is also a possibilist because he thinks that \( P \) is true. What prevents him from adopting Stalnaker's view of possible worlds as ways the world might have been? In fact, I think it would be hard for CC analysts to maintain that possible worlds are disjoint concrete universes. Consider the proposition:

\[
(14) \quad \text{Cantor is in fact a mathematician, but he could have been a doctor.}
\]

In CC, (14) is analyzed as the proposition:

\[
(14_c) \quad \text{Cantor is a mathematician in } a \text{ and, for some world } W \text{ other than } a, \text{ Cantor is a doctor in } W.
\]

But in CC, it is the actual objects themselves—not their counterparts or representatives—that exist (beside merely possible objects, perhaps) in other possible worlds. Since one cannot be a mathematician or a doctor without existing, \((14_c)\) implies in CC that Cantor exists in a world other than \( a \), as well as in \( a \). But here is a question that CC is silent about: is Cantor scattered among the different worlds in which he exists, or does he exist as a whole in each of them? If he exists as a whole in every world in which he exists, then \((14_c)\) implies that Cantor exists as a whole in more than one possible world. But if so, then possible worlds are not disjoint concrete universes. CC analysts can say that possible worlds are disjoint concrete universes only if they are also willing to say that Cantor has proper parts in different worlds. This would be an incredible thing to say. It is not only a small part of Cantor that exists actually; it is the whole man.

Modality can be compared and contrasted with space and with time with respect to two metaphysical perspectives. One perspective is ontological: Does everything exist \textit{locally}, so to
speak? Regarding modality the question is whether everything exists *actually*. Regarding time it is whether everything exists *now* and regarding space it is whether everything exists *here*. The second metaphysical perspective pertains to the existence in whole or in part of physical objects such as human beings. Do we wholly exist actually or do we have parts that are merely possible? Do we wholly exist now or do we have parts that exist in the past or in the future? Are we wholly or only partly here? There seems to hold a logical connection between the two perspectives. If everything exists actually, then I do not have merely possible parts. If everything exists now, then I do not have temporal parts that exist in the past or in the future. If everything exists here, then I do not have parts in other places. This seems to be the only logical connection between the two perspectives in question. Regarding modality, for example, I hold that everything exists actually, so I must hold that I do not have merely possible parts. But I might have held that, although it is *not* possible that there should be human beings that would have merely possible parts, it *is* possible that there should be objects that would be merely possible. Or I might have held yet a different opinion: I might have held that I do *not* exist wholly in the actual world and that, therefore, some objects (proper parts of mine) are merely possible objects. This would be an incredible though possible position to hold. Now Stalnaker says:

If you think of time as space-like, then you will think of continuant individuals—persons and physical objects—as extended through time in the same way that they are extended through space. We are the same as our histories. Only a part of you exists now; other temporal parts are past, or yet to come (Stalnaker 1986: 134).

But you can also think of time as space-like in the “ontological localism” respect but *not* as space-like in the whole-part respect. You can think of modality, of time and of space as different from each other when it comes to the two metaphysical perspectives in question. With respect to the ontological question, you can think of modality as different both from time and from space.
You can think that everything exists actually and be a realist with respect to past and future objects, just as you can be a realist with respect to objects that exist elsewhere. With respect to the whole-part perspective, one can think of modality and time as different from space. One can think of people as existing as wholes whenever they exist, just as they would have existed wholly had they been different from the way they are. On the other hand, you can still say that different parts of each person occupy different regions in space.

What could the actualist’s possible worlds be like? In Stalnaker’s view, the world we are all part of and possible worlds are objects of different kinds. The world we are all part of is a physical universe and possible worlds—the actual world among them—are ways the world might have been, complex properties that the whole physical universe might have exemplified. But does the phrase ‘the world’ in “ways the world might have been” denote the same physical universe, the universe we are in fact part of, with respect to every possible world? In other words: is every possible world a way the actual physical universe might have been? Some possible worlds may plausibly be thought of as ways the actual physical universe might have been, but I do not think that Stalnaker is committed to the view that any possible world is a way this world might have been. Possible worlds are complex properties that any physical universe might have exemplified: ‘the world’ denotes, with respect to any possible world $W$, the concrete universe that would have existed had $W$ obtained. This would be a plausible reading as Stalnaker speaks interchangeably of possible worlds as ways the world might have been and as ways things might have been. A possible world with respect to which $P$ is true is a way some non-actual things (among actual things, perhaps) might have been. So perhaps by ‘things’ Stalnaker means things that might have existed, the totality of which might constitute a complete physical universe.
It may seem that possible worlds are available to the actualist, at least in a limited way, without forcing him to appeal to essences. The actualist can say what it is for a proposition to be true with respect to a possible world without appealing to essences. He can say what it is for a property to be exemplified in a possible world without appealing to essences. The actualist can also say what it is for a particular (actual) object to exemplify a property in a possible world without appealing to essences. Thus, Cantor exemplifies the property of being a mathematician in a world $W$ just in case had $W$ obtained there would have been such a mathematician as Cantor. It seems that only if he chooses to take the further step of replacing all modal idioms with idioms of quantification that the actualist should appeal to essences so that he have objects to populate the domains of possible worlds with. This is an illusion, I suspect. It seems to me that the actualist must appeal to essences if he wants to say that there are possible worlds.

The conjunction of $P$ and $NE$ implies:

$$PE$$

It is possible that there should have been an essence that actually no object exemplifies.

If Bucephalus had sired a horse other than any horse that he ever sired, then the essence of any such new horse would have been an essence that actually no object exemplifies. $PE$ presupposes $NE$ but it is otherwise inoffensive. $PE$ does not imply that there are any unexemplified essences. Nor does it imply that it is possible that there should have been unexemplified essences: essence that would have been unexemplified. Moreover, $PE$ is consistent with Actualism: it does not imply that there are any non-actual essences. But now, the actualist who is committed to the existence of possible worlds is committed to the doctrine that every possible world is an actual object. If possible worlds are complex properties, then they are actual complex properties—or so
the actualist must say. It seems that any possible world with respect to which \( P \) is true is a possible world that has an essence that actually no object exemplifies as a constituent. If possible worlds have their constituent properties essentially and they are all actual objects, then there are *actual* essences that no actual object exemplifies: there are unexemplified essences after all! It thus seems that the actualist is committed to the extravagant ontology of unexemplified essences not only in order to reconcile Actualism with the possible-worlds analysis but also in order to reconcile Actualism with the doctrine that *there are* possible worlds.

Furthermore, the actualist who is committed to the existence of possible worlds must reject \( ODE \).

\( P_E \), in conjunction with \( ODE \), implies

\[
P^* \quad \text{It is possible that there should have been an essence other than any essence there actually is.}^{24}
\]

\( P^* \) is consistent with Actualism, but if \( P^* \) is true and possible worlds have their constituent properties essentially, then some possible worlds are *not* actual objects. This would *not* be consistent with Actualism. This problem carries over to other theories of possible worlds that purport to be consistent with Actualism. Adams (1974: 204) suggests that a possible world is the set of propositions that would have been true had the world obtained. Let \( W \) be a possible world

\[24 \text{It is plausible that there might have been *qualitative* properties that do not actually exist. When we deny that the property of being red is exemplified in a possible world } W \text{ what we say might be true in two different ways. First, the property of being red might exist in } W \text{ yet nothing in } W \text{ would be red. If we managed to eliminate all instances of redness in the universe by destroying red objects or painting them green all over, it would be strange to say that with the elimination of the very last instance of redness, the property of being red would also cease to exist. There would still be such property to speak of, it seems, but it would exist unexemplified. The other way in which it might not be the case that the property of being red is exemplified in a possible world } W \text{ is that the property itself would not exist in } W. \text{ Consider the possible state of affairs in which the physical laws were always different so that there never was such a phenomenon as electromagnetic radiation. In this case it seems that, not only there would have been no red objects, there would have been no such property as the property of being red. Now if in the actual physical universe there are qualitative properties that would not exist in other concrete universes, then perhaps there might have been concrete universes in which there would have been qualitative properties that do not exist in the actual physical universe.}
\]
in which Bucephalus sires a horse other than any horse that he ever sired. Had \( W \) obtained, there would have been, with respect to any such new horse, a true singular proposition that would have predicated of that particular horse that it is a horse. But if \( OD_P \) is true, then any such proposition would have depended ontologically on the horse it would have been about, and would have been such that actually there is no such proposition: it would have been a new true proposition! The set of all true propositions that would have existed, had \( W \) obtained, is therefore not an actual set. If that set is identical with \( W \), then \( W \) does not exist actually.

One might take this consideration to undermine doctrines of ontological dependence such as \( OD_E \) and \( OD_P \): one can always insist that, while Bucephalus’s new offspring is not an actual object, his essence is an actual object. But the actualist for whom doctrines of ontological dependence are dear would rather say that theories of possible worlds are irreconcilable with Actualism. He would have to relinquish not only the possible worlds analysis of modality but also the literal understanding of the seemingly less committal modal possible-worlds scheme of paraphrase.

References

Possibilism and the Nature of Actuality

I  On What Possibilism Actually Isn’t

There is controversy among metaphysicians of modality. Possibilists say that actual (or realized) objects do not exhaust the totality of everything there is. Reality, they say, consists of objects that are merely possible (or potential), as well as of actual objects. Actualists disagree. Reality and actuality, they say, are one and the same.

One may wonder what the fuss is all about. It may seem obvious that the controversial thesis

\[ P \text{ There are possible objects that are not actual} \]

is false. It is false (I think), but note that \( P \) is not the thesis:

\[ C \text{ There are possible objects that do not exist.} \]

\( C \) is a contradiction. It entails that there are objects that do not exist, which is Meinong’s notorious thesis:

\[ M \text{ There are objects of which it is true to say that there are no such objects.}^{25} \]

\( M \) is a contradiction, if anything is. On the other hand, the possibilist thesis \( P \) is (or at least seems to be) a coherent ontological thesis.
If one fails to appreciate the distinction between $P$ and $C$, then one’s attempts to refute $P$ might amount to no more than a futile attack on what is a blatant contradiction, namely $C$. In this section I illustrate this claim. I argue that the distinction between $P$ and $C$ has eluded Plantinga. Plantinga has formulated an argument that may appear to be for the possibilist thesis $P$ and then detected a fallacy in it. But the argument is in fact for the contradiction $C$. Or at least, the argument involves the fallacy only if it is interpreted as an argument for $C$. \footnote{Language doesn’t make it easy to appreciate the distinction between $P$ and $C$. The words ‘There are possible objects that do not exist’ formulate $P$, not $C$, if the mood of the word ‘exist’ conveys actuality and the mood of the quantifier ‘there are’ does not convey actuality. One might want to use the adverb ‘actually’ to mark the difference between $P$ and $C$: $P$ would be the thesis that there are possible objects that do not \textit{actually} exist and $C$ would be the thesis that there are possible objects that do not \textit{simply} exist. It seems to me that, for people who do not already have a grip on $P$, it would be hard to see what work the word ‘actually’ would do here: they would wonder how there could be any objects that would exist but not \textit{actually} exist. I prefer to formulate $P$ as the thesis that some possible objects of dubious (presumably modal) status. One is asserting a contradiction, namely $M$. On the other hand, $C$, in the sense of a contrast between ‘objects that exist’ and ‘objects that do not exist’, is a failure to appreciate the distinction between $P$ and $C$.}

In chapters VII and VIII of \textit{The Nature of Necessity}, Plantinga argues against the thesis:

\begin{equation*}
C \quad \text{There are possible objects that do not exist.}
\end{equation*}

He says:

\begin{quote}
[A] possible object that does not exist... is a thing such that there exists no such thing, to paraphrase Meinong—a monumentally perplexing idea (Plantinga 1974: 132).
\end{quote}

This does not appear to be an argument against the thesis:

\begin{equation*}
P \quad \text{There are possible objects that are not actual.}
\end{equation*}

Plantinga is not pointing to an alleged modal distinction (say, between being and existence) and saying of that distinction that it is objectionable. If one merely paraphrases Meinong when one says that there is an object such that there \textit{exists} no such object, then one does not posit any objects of dubious (presumably modal) status. One is asserting a contradiction, namely $M$. On the other hand, $C$, in the sense of a contrast between ‘objects that exist’ and ‘objects that do not exist’, is a failure to appreciate the distinction between $P$ and $C$. 

\footnote{This is a quote from Meinong (1904: 83).}
other hand, when one says that there is an object that is not actual, one does not assert $M$. One says, rather, that there is an object $x$ such that, in actuality, no object is $x$. In the language of possible worlds, one says that there is an object $x$ such that, for every object $y$ in the actual world, $x$ is not $y$. This is not (or does not seem to be) Meinong's thesis.

Plantinga proceeds to consider what he takes to be an argument for $C$:

[I]n other possible worlds there must be... objects that are distinct from anything that exists in $\alpha$. And in saying that there are possible but nonexistent objects, we do no more than call attention to these objects.

Suppose we concede the argument's premises: in some possible world there exist objects distinct from any that exist in $\alpha$. The studied vagueness of its conclusion may leave us perplexed. Is the claim only that there could have been objects distinct from any that exist in $\alpha$? This is no doubt so; but it seems excessively dramatic to put this point by saying that there are some possible but nonexistent objects. Is the claim instead to be taken literally as the suggestion that there really are some things that do not exist? Then the concluding step seems totally unwarranted (Plantinga 1974: 132).27

The argument that Plantinga considers has a single premise:

(1) It is possible that there should have been something other than anything there actually is.28

The conclusion of the argument is $C$.29 I grant that (1) does not entail $C$. But, instead of the relationship between (1) and $C$, consider the relationship between (1) and $P$. There is a stance toward modality according to which (1) and $P$ are the same proposition. Reductionism—as I shall

objects are not actual. It seems to me that the use of the adjective 'actual' suggests that the thesis under consideration is not a contradiction.

27 Plantinga uses the Greek letter 'α' as a proper name of the actual world.

28 The formulation of (1) in terms of possible worlds (as in the quotation from Plantinga) is not required. (1) seems to be true. Consider Bucephalus, the war-horse of Alexander the great. Bucephalus might have sired a horse other than any horse that he ever sired. If it is essential to anything that is not a horse sired by Bucephalus that it not be a horse sired by Bucephalus, then (1) is true.

29 The first candidate that Plantinga considers (in the quotation) for being the conclusion of the argument—the claim that there could have been objects distinct from any that exist in $\alpha$—is surely not the conclusion of the argument: it is
call this stance—says that possible truth is truth about possible things. According to the reductionist, the thesis that it is possible that there should have been talking donkeys is the thesis that there are talking donkeys. Lewis was a reductionist. He held the view that many donkeys—albeit otherworldly—do indeed talk! If you insisted, "There are no talking donkeys," then Lewis would say that you speak truly only if your quantifiers are duly restricted. According to the reductionist, the thesis that it is possible that there should have been objects other than anything there actually is—proposition (1)—is the thesis that there are possible objects that are not actual—proposition $P$. (Note that a reductionist need not be a possibilist: one could maintain that (1) and $P$ are the same false proposition.) Bringing Reductionism to bear on (1) might make one grasp $P$, but Plantinga does not do that. Instead, he considers an argument from (1) to $C$. This supports my thesis that Plantinga fails to appreciate the distinction between $P$ and $C$. This thesis is corroborated as one proceeds to read Plantinga’s text.

2

Plantinga goes on to say that $C$ has a history in Philosophy. This would be strange. $C$ is an obvious contradiction; it does not merit much attention. According to Plantinga, G. E. Moore formulated an argument for $C$. Plantinga quotes Moore:

...it seems as if purely imaginary things, even though they be absolutely self-contradictory like a round square, must still have some kind of being—must still be in a sense—simply because we can think and talk about them. And now in saying that there is no such thing as a round square, I seem to imply that there is such a thing. It seems as if there must be such a thing, merely in order that it may have the property of not being. It seems, therefore, as if to say of anything whatever that we can mention that it absolutely is not, were to contradict ourselves: as if absolutely everything we can mention must be, must have some kind of being (Plantinga 1974: the premise of the argument, namely (1).
Call this argument $MA$. Plantinga seems to be misinterpreting Moore. The conclusion of $MA$ is not that the modal contradiction $C$ (or that $P$, for that matter) is a possible truth. $MA$ has the non-modal conclusion that imaginary objects have being, that there are such things. $MA$ is basically this. We think about imaginary objects. Anything that we think about has being. Therefore: Imaginary objects have being. That’s it. No modality! Not in the premises and not in the conclusion.\textsuperscript{32}

Intending to give another example of an argument for $C$ in the history of Philosophy, Plantinga quotes Russell:

\textit{Being} is that which belongs to every conceivable term, to every possible object of thought—in short to everything that can possibly occur in any proposition, true or false, and to all such propositions themselves. Being belongs to whatever can be counted. If $A$ be any term that can be counted as one, it is plain that $A$ is something, and therefore that $A$ is. “$A$ is not” must always be either false or meaningless. For if $A$ were nothing, it could not be said not to be; “$A$ is not” implies that there is a term $A$ whose being is denied, and hence that $A$ is. Thus unless “$A$ is not” be an empty sound, it must be false—whatever $A$ may be, it certainly is. Numbers, the Homeric gods, relations, chimeras and four-dimensional spaces all have being, for if they were not entities of a kind, we could make no propositions about them. Thus being is a general attribute of everything, and to mention anything is to show that it is (Russell 1937: 449).

It seems that Plantinga is also misinterpreting Russell. Like Moore, Russell is not advocating some kind of modal thesis. Russell is arguing for the conclusion that any meaningful denial of being is false. If it is meaningful to say that Pegasus is not, then there \textit{is} an object whose being is

\textsuperscript{30} The quote is from Moore (1953: 289). The quote in Plantinga’s text is (insignificantly) inaccurate. I quoted directly from Moore.

\textsuperscript{31} $C$ is a modal thesis: it says that there are possible objects that do not exist.

\textsuperscript{32} The language of $MA$ is modal, but needlessly so. If we omit the word ‘can’ from “simply because we can think and talk about them,” we still have an argument to the same effect. Note that Moore does not accept $MA$: see Moore (1953: 291).
Plantinga says that the argument for \( C \) "gains strength" when we turn to singular propositions:

Consider Socrates, for example; he exists in the actual world but not in every world. That is, there are possible worlds in which Socrates does not exist. Let \( W \) be such a world: had \( W \) obtained, then

\[
(2) \quad \text{Socrates does not exist}
\]

and

\[
(3) \quad \text{Possibly Socrates exists}
\]

would have been true. Had \( W \) obtained, therefore,

\[
[\text{C}] \quad \text{There is at least one nonexistent possible object}
\]

would have been true (Plantinga 1974: 135,136).

Call this argument \( PA \). I don't think that \( PA \) is a valid argument. I cannot see how the conjunction of (2) and (3) entails \( C \). Why should there be a (possible) nonexistent object, if Socrates does not exist? Surely the possibility that Socrates should exist does not do the trick. On the other hand, \( MA \) is valid. If we think about, say, Pegasus, and anything that we think about has being, then Pegasus has being. Now if \( PA \) is not valid and \( MA \) is valid, how could \( PA \) be any stronger than \( MA \)?

According to Plantinga, one might propound the following reasoning in favor of \( PA \):

No doubt existence is not an ordinary property; perhaps it does not much resemble such properties as being red or being six feet tall. Still, it is a property of some sort. And if it is, then it must have a complement—there must

---

33 You might say that Pegasus is, all right, but it is a mythical object, not a real object. My response would be that reality consists of everything whatever. If Pegasus is not a real object, then there is no such object.

34 \( PA \) might be dismissed too easily. It is said in it of Socrates that he exists in the actual world. That is not true. Socrates drank hemlock in 399 BC. Consequently, he ceased to exist in the actual world. If he was not resurrected since then, then Socrates does not exist in the actual world. The response to this kind of objection should be that we leave time out of our considerations altogether. When we say that Socrates exists (present tense) we do not mean that
be a property $P$ such that $x$ has $P$ if and only if $x$ does not exist. Now [(2)] is the false proposition that Socrates has that property; it is a singular proposition that predicates of Socrates the property of nonexistence. [(2)] is in fact false; but if $W$ had obtained, it would have been true. If $W$ had obtained, Socrates would not have existed; still, there would have been a true proposition that was both about him and predicated a property of him. But how could there be a true proposition about Socrates—in particular one predicking a property of him—in $W$ if, in $W$, he had no kind of being or ontological status at all (Plantinga 1974: 136)?

This explanation has the conclusion that $M$, not $C$, is a possible truth.\(^{35}\) Without the possible-worlds lingo, the explanation is as follows. It is not necessarily true (although it actually \textit{is} true) that Socrates (or any other contingent existent, for that matter) exists. It follows that (2) could have been true. But had (2) been true, Socrates \textit{would} have existed—or so one might think. The reason for thinking so is that in (2) something (namely nonexistence) seems to be predicated of Socrates. Any proposition in which something is predicated of Socrates requires for its truth that Socrates exist. The worrisome conclusion is that, had Socrates not existed, there would have been a nonexistent object, namely Socrates, so $M$ would have been true.

Plantinga offers a way out. He notes that, in this reasoning in favor of $PA$, it is said of proposition (2) \textit{both} that it entails that Socrates exists \textit{and} that it could have been true. Plantinga finds that objectionable. He says that we need to distinguish between two propositions:

$(2')$ It is false that Socrates exists

and

$(2'')$ Socrates is nonexistent.

$(2')$ classifies as false the proposition that Socrates exists. On the other hand, $(2'')$ says of he exists in the present. Rather, we mean that he exists at \textit{some} point in time: past, present or future.

\(^{35}\) The conclusion in the explanation is that, in $W$, Socrates has being, not possible being. Accordingly, there is no use in this explanation for the assumption in $PA$ that (3) would have been true had $W$ obtained. This assumption is needed in $PA$ because the conclusion of $PA$ is that it is possible that there should have been possible nonexistent
Socrates that he does not exist: that he is an object \( x \) such that it is not the case that \( x \) exists. Now that we have the distinction between (2') and (2''), we can ask: is (2) identical with (2') or with (2'')? If (2) is identical with (2'), then although (2) could have been true (Socrates is a contingent existent), (2) does not entail that Socrates exists ((2') does not predicate anything of Socrates). But if (2) does not entail that Socrates exists, then the truth of (2) with respect to \( W \) does not entail that \( M \) is true with respect to \( W \). \( PA \) therefore fails. On the other hand, if (2) is identical with (2''), then although (2) entails that Socrates exists ((2'') predicates something of Socrates), (2) could not have been true.\(^{36}\) But if (2) could not have been true, then \( PA \) has a false premise, namely that (2) would have been true had \( W \) obtained. \( PA \) therefore fails. (2) is either (2') or (2'').

Either way, Plantinga concludes, \( PA \) fails.

This may be a successful response to an argument for the conclusion that \( M \) is a possible truth, but I don’t think it applies to \( MA \). \( MA \) does not involve a failure to make a distinction that is analogous to the distinction between (2') and (2''). \( MA \) may have the presupposition that we think about imaginary objects when we deny that they exist. This is not the thesis that we think about imaginary objects when we say of them that they are nonexistent. It is not said in \( MA \) of imaginary objects that they are nonexistent.\(^{37}\) Besides that, \( M \) is a contradiction! Nobody (well, perhaps with the exception of Meinong) would really want to argue for the conclusion that \( M \) is a possible truth. It is \( P \) that should have been the object of Plantinga’s considerations, not \( M \). My hypothesis that Plantinga fails to appreciate the distinction between \( P \) and \( C \) explains why he is

\(^{36}\) (2'') entails that Socrates exists, but it says of him that he does not exist, so (2'') cannot be true.

\(^{37}\) If you want to put too fine a point on it, you might say that Moore did not use the word ‘exist’ (and its cognates) in formulating \( MA \). My point remains. \( MA \) may have the presupposition that we think about imaginary objects when we deny that there are such objects. This is not the thesis that we think about imaginary objects when we say of them that they are objects such that there are no such objects. We do not say of imaginary objects that they are objects such
spending so much time on an argument for the conclusion that what is in fact Meinong’s blatant contradiction is a possible truth.

4

I think that reductionists might actually argue along the lines of PA for the conclusion that the possibilist thesis is a possible truth. Suppose the reductionist applies the word ‘exists’ only to actual objects but lets his variables range over everything whatever. He would argue as follows for the conclusion that the possibilist thesis is a possible truth. Let \( W \) be a possible world in which Socrates does not exist. Had \( W \) obtained

(2) Socrates does not exist

and

(3) Possibly, Socrates exists

would have been true. (3) entails:

(4) For some object \( x \), \( x = \text{Socrates} \)

—or so the reductionist would say. (2), in conjunction with (4), entails:

(5) For some object \( x \), \( x \) does not exist.

(5), in conjunction with the thesis that every object is a possible object, entails:

(6) For some object \( x \), \( x \) is possible and \( x \) does not exist,

which is the possibilist thesis \( P \), when ‘exists’ applies only to actual objects. The reductionist would conclude that \( P \) is true with respect to \( W \), and that the possibilist thesis is a possible truth.

Note that Plantinga’s distinction between (2') and (2'') should cut no ice with reductionists. They would grant that there are two ways to negate the sentence ‘Socrates is an \( x \) such that \( x \) exists’.

that there are no such objects.
The negation sign might have a large scope:

\[ L \quad -(\text{Socrates is an } x \text{ such that } x \text{ exists}). \]

The negation sign might also have a small scope:

\[ S \quad \text{Socrates is an } x \text{ such that } -(x \text{ exists}). \]

But, from a reductionist standpoint, this distinction of scope results in no difference in truth conditions! According to the reductionist, if the word ‘exists’, as it appears in \( L \) and \( S \), is restricted to apply only to actual objects, then both \( L \) and \( S \) are true with respect to possible worlds in which Socrates does not exist, and both \( L \) and \( S \) are false with respect to possible worlds in which Socrates does exist.\(^{38}\) Also according to the reductionist, if the word ‘exists’, as it appears in \( L \) and \( S \), applies to anything whatever, then both \( L \) and \( S \) are false with respect to every possible world.\(^{39}\) Thus for both interpretations of ‘exists’, \( L \) and \( S \) are necessarily equivalent—or so the reductionist would say. If so, then at least from a reductionist standpoint, \( PA \) as an argument for the conclusion that the possibilist thesis is a possible truth escapes Plantinga’s allegation of a fallacy.

II Semantical and Metaphysical Considerations on Actuality

Actualism is the doctrine that every possible object is an actual object. Many actualists believe in

\(^{38}\) The reductionist and the primitivist (a primitivist is anybody who denies Reductionism) disagree only about the truth value of \( S \) with respect to possible worlds in which Socrates does not exist. According to the reductionist, had any such world obtained, Socrates would have been a non-actual object: \( S \) would have been true. According to the primitivist, had any such world obtained, there would have been no such object as Socrates: \( S \) would have been false.

\(^{39}\) The reductionist and the primitivist disagree only about the truth value of \( L \) with respect to possible worlds in which Socrates does not exist. According to the reductionist, had any such world obtained, Socrates would have existed (he would have been a non-actual object): \( L \) would have been false. According to the primitivist, had any
the existence of possible worlds and they analyze statements of modality in terms of them. Possible-worlds actualists say that a proposition is a possible truth just in case it is true with respect to some possible world and that an object is possibly so-and-so just in case it is so-and-so in some possible world. Now only of one possible world such actualists say that it is an actual world. They say that a proposition is true just in case it is true with respect to that particular world and that an object is so-and-so just in case it is so-and-so in that world.

But how could every possible object be an actual object, when some possible worlds are not actual? This seems like a contradiction. Actualists would explain that they use the term ‘actual’ in two different ways. They say that an object is an actual object in the sense that it exists in the actual world, but the actual world is actual in the sense that it obtains.

One cannot attribute this ambiguous language to Lewis. Lewis also believed that there are non-actual possible worlds, but he held that they—as well as the objects that exist in them—do not exist in the actual world. Lewis was not an actualist. But if it is not true that everything exists in the actual world, then what makes the actual world special? Lewis thought that nothing really does:

It is true that our world alone is actual; but that does not make our world special, radically different from all other worlds (Lewis 1970: 18).

By way of explanation, Lewis suggested his doctrine that (IA) ‘actual’ is an indexical term. He enunciates IA immediately next:

I suggest that “actual” and its cognates should be analyzed as indexical terms: terms whose reference varies, depending on relevant features of the context of utterance. The relevant feature of context, for the term “actual,” is the world at which a given utterance occurs. According to the indexical analysis I propose, “actual” such world obtained, Socrates would not have existed: L would have been true.
(in its primary sense) refers at any world w to the world w. "Actual" is analogous to "present," an indexical term whose reference varies depending on a different feature of context: "present" refers at any time t to the time t (Lewis 1970: 18).

But what is the primary sense of 'actual', the sense in which it is said to be an indexical term? Lewis explains:

...we can distinguish primary and secondary senses of "actual" by asking what world "actual" refers to at a world w in a context in which some other world v is under consideration. In the primary sense, it still refers to w, as in "If Max ate less, he would be thinner than he actually is." In the secondary sense it shifts its reference to the world v under consideration, as in "If Max ate less, he would actually enjoy himself more" (Lewis 1970: 19).40

In the sense that Lewis calls primary, at any world W, 'actual' refers to W, the world of utterance. It seems to me that 'actual' does not have the primary sense in the sentence:

\[ S \quad \text{If Max ate less, he would be thinner than he actually is.} \]

The thesis that 'actual' has the primary sense in S is compatible with the fact that S has the truth value that it has. Suppose that Max is as thin as he could possibly be. Let \( L(\alpha) \) be a possible world that is as similar to \( \alpha \) as much as Max's eating less than he does in \( \alpha \) permits. According to the analysis of counterfactual conditionals, S is true just in case Max is thinner in \( L(\alpha) \) than he is in the world that 'actual' refers to. If 'actual' has the primary sense, then (since we utter the word 'actual' at \( \alpha \) ) 'actual' refers to \( \alpha \). If so, then the analysis of counterfactuals implies that S is true just in case Max is thinner in \( L(\alpha) \) than he is in \( \alpha \). Since Max is as thin as he could possibly be, Max is not thinner in \( L(\alpha) \) than he is in \( \alpha \). S is therefore false. This is a positive result for the

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40 Lewis speaks of "the world under consideration" where Max eats less, but the uniqueness of reference that is conveyed by the use of the definite article need not hold according to Lewis's own analysis of counterfactual conditionals (See Analysis 3 in Lewis (1973: 10). The sentence 'If Max ate less, he would actually enjoy himself more' is true according to this analysis if and only if some (accessible) world in which Max eats less and enjoys himself more is closer to the actual world than any world in which Max eats less and does not enjoy himself more, if there are any (accessible) worlds in which Max eats less. There might be more than one world that satisfies this
thesis that 'actual' has the primary sense in $S$: since Max is as thin as he could possibly be, $S$ should be false. But now, let $P$ be the proposition that $S$ expresses. The thesis that 'actual' has the primary sense in $S$ seems to be incompatible with the thesis that $S$ expresses $P$. $P$ is a possible truth: there are possible worlds $W$ in which Max is such that, if he ate less than he does (in $W$), he would be thinner than he is (in $W$). Let $M$ be such a world and let $L(M)$ be a world that is as similar to $M$ as much as Max's eating less than he does in $M$ permits. According to the analysis of counterfactuals, $S$ is true with respect to $M$ just in case Max is thinner in $L(M)$ than he is in the world that 'actual' refers to with respect to $M$. But if 'actual' has the primary sense, then 'actual' refers to $\alpha$ with respect to $M$: $\alpha$ is the world of utterance and, in the primary sense, 'actual' always refers to the world of utterance! If so, then according to the analysis of counterfactuals, $S$ is true with respect to $M$ just in case Max is thinner in $L(M)$ than he is in $\alpha$. Since Max is as thin as he could possibly be, Max is not thinner in $L(M)$ than he is in $\alpha$. $S$ is therefore false with respect to $M$. But $P$ is true with respect to $M$. If 'actual' has the primary sense in $S$, then $S$ does not express $P$. It follows that 'actual' does not have the primary sense in $S$.

When 'actual' does have the primary sense, the function of the actuality sentence operator is the inverse of the semantic function of the necessity operator. Every result of putting a sentence that expresses a necessary truth for the dots in 'Necessarily...' expresses a true proposition. In the primary sense of 'actual', every result of putting a sentence that expresses a truth for the dots in 'Actually...' expresses a necessary truth. It is surely not necessary that Boston should be the capital of Massachusetts. It is possible that Cambridge should have been the capital of Massachusetts. However, in the primary sense of 'actually', it is necessary that, actually, Boston
is the capital of Massachusetts. This sense of 'actual' seems to me to be esoteric. It is a sense that may be grasped by semanticists of modality, but it is not a sense that ordinary folks commonly associate with the word 'actual'. Everybody should agree that, actually, Boston is the capital of Massachusetts. Very few people would say that it is necessary that this should actually be so. If I am right that the so-called primary sense of 'actual' is not a common sense, then it is not a primary sense either. Now even if in this sense (however you want to call it), 'actual' is indexical, since it is a contrived sense, IA cannot be consequential.

Van Inwagen argues for the conclusion that IA is not an indexical theory on the ground that it is compatible with:

[PR] There are many possible worlds. All of them exist, though, of course, only one of them is actual. Its actuality consists in its having a certain property—actuality—that the others all lack, though each of them might have had it (Van Inwagen 1980: 412).

PR is incompatible with "any theory that could properly be called an indexical theory"—or so Van Inwagen's argument goes.

To begin with, I think that IA is not compatible with PR. Note the last clause of PR: "though each of them might have had it". IA pertains only to what Lewis calls the primary sense of 'actual'. In that sense, none of the non-actual worlds might have had the property of being the actual world. To say that a non-actual possible world W might have been actual is to say that 'actual' refers to W with respect to some non-actual world V. But, in the primary sense, 'actual' refers to a with respect to any world V, not to W. In the primary sense of 'actual', being the actual world is being this world. Being this world is a property that the actual world has necessarily and it is
impossible that any other world should have had this property. This is analogous with indexical terms in their similarly defined primary senses. In the primary sense of the term 'today', on any day \( d \), 'today' refers to \( d \), even when another day is under consideration. In this sense, no other day in history was today: many days were \textit{called} 'today'—yesterday, to take a recent example—but they were \textit{not} today. Or consider the indexical term 'I'. No one other than I is I. People other than I refer to themselves as 'I' but they are \textit{not} I.

If \( PR \) is incompatible with \( IA \), then, as it stands, Van Inwagen's argument for the conclusion that \( IA \) is not an indexical theory fails. We might save his argument by trimming \( PR \). Consider the assumption that "any theory that could properly be called an indexical theory" of 'actual' is incompatible with:

\[
PR' \quad \text{There are many possible worlds. All of them } exist, \text{ though, of course, only one of them is actual. Its actuality consists in its having a certain property—actuality—that the others all lack.}
\]

I think that \textit{any} theory that is consistent with \( IA \) is also consistent with \( PR' \). This is because \( IA \) \textit{implies} \( PR' \). If, at any world \( W \), 'actual' refers to \( W \), then (if there are many possible worlds) at any world \( W \), \( W \) is actual and the other worlds are not actual. It follows that the actual world has (in the actual world) a property that the worlds that are not actual do not have: it is actual and they are not. Van Inwagen might object that in \( IA \) nothing is said about properties, whereas \( PR' \) does talk about properties. If so, then \( IA \) does not imply \( PR' \)—or so his objection might be. In reply, I would grant that the \textit{word} 'property' does not occur in the formulation of \( IA \), whereas it does occur in the formulation of \( PR' \). So, what? Consider an analogy. Suppose somebody held the thesis that if the word 'here' is indexical, then there is no such property as the property of being here. My response would be that there \textit{is} such a property as the property of being here. I
have this property: I am here. In contrast with me, many things are not here. If I am here and other things are not here, then I have a property that things that are not here lack: the property of being here. Similarly, if there is a world that is actual and there are worlds that are not actual, then the world that is actual has a property that the others all lack: the property of being actual.

Van Inwagen also argues for the conclusion that \( I_A \) is not an indexical theory because

\[ \text{...it leaves out something essential to the idea of indexicality...: a possible world (like a place or a time) is a context or circumstance of utterance (Van Inwagen 1980: 413).} \]

I agree that the idea that a possible world is a circumstance of utterance is essential to the indexicality of ‘actual’. It seems that one could accept \( I_A \) and reject the thesis that ‘actual’ is indexical, saying that a possible world is not a circumstance of utterance. But surely, Lewis presupposes that a possible world is a circumstance of utterance, so the question that should concern us is whether this presupposition is true. I think it is. Utterances are events and events take place not only at certain times and certain locations: they take place in possible worlds. If so, then I don’t see any reason why we should not consider possible worlds to be circumstances of utterance, circumstances that, together with times, locations, and other circumstances, constitute contexts in which utterances are made. (There may be a difference between the way the notion of a context of utterance relates to possible worlds and the way it relates to times and to places in which utterances take place. Suppose we consider all the possible contexts in which a given utterance could have been made. In each possible world the utterance takes place in at most one context. On the other hand, for any given time in which it was made, an utterance takes place in many possible contexts. The same is true for the place of utterance. For our purposes, this difference does not matter.)
According to Van Inwagen, the conjunction of $IA$ and:

$$CU \quad \ldots \text{to specify the world in which an utterance is spoken is to specify a circumstance under which that utterance is spoken (Van Inwagen 1980: 413).}$$

does imply that ‘actual’ is indexical. But Van Inwagen says of $CU$ that is not “coherent” because it presupposes that

$$\ldots \text{there must be such a thing as the world in which an utterance containing ‘the actual world’ is spoken (Van Inwagen 1980:416).}$$

Van Inwagen says that this uniqueness does not obtain:

But it does not seem to be the case that each utterance of ‘the actual world’ takes place in a single world. Last week, talking to my class in the philosophy of religion, I said, “There is much evil in the actual world.” This utterance of ‘the actual world’ was, I suppose, a particular event, and, I would suppose, this very event took place in many distinct possible worlds. It seems evident, for example, that if any given electron in the Andromeda galaxy had failed to exist, this event (my utterance of ‘the actual world’) would nevertheless have taken place (Van Inwagen 1980: 416).

It is true that Lewis speaks of “the world at which a given utterance occurs”. In Lewis’s theory of possible worlds, utterances are world-bound events. However, the way philosophers usually think of possible worlds, the fact that the same utterance could have taken place even if things had been different from the way they are implies that the very same utterance took place in other possible worlds, as well as in the actual world. But why does it matter that the utterance in question took place in many possible worlds? Presumably because the uniqueness that is conveyed by the use of the definite article in the formulation of $CU$ (“the world in which an utterance is spoken”) does not obtain. But it does obtain, just as the uniqueness that is conveyed by uses of ‘the’ in ‘The cat is on the mat’ obtains, even though there are many cats.

There are possible contexts in which Van Inwagen’s utterance took place in the Parthenon in
Athens in the year 432 BC. This does not preclude us from talking about the place where the utterance was made and about the time when it was made. Indeed, we do speak about the place and the time of utterance when we are talking about unquestionably indexical expressions such as ‘here’ and ‘now’. The reason for that is that we only speak about the place where an utterance was made and about the time when it was made with respect to a particular context of utterance. With respect to the actual context in which it was made, the place in which Van Inwagen’s utterance was made was the classroom where he taught the class in the philosophy of religion, and the time in which the utterance was made was sometime during that class. Similarly, we only speak about the world in which an utterance was made with respect to a particular context in which the utterance was made. Each possible context in which a given utterance was made determines a unique possible world in which the utterance was made. Thus, with respect to the actual context in which Van Inwagen’s utterance was made, there is a unique world in which that utterance was made: it is the actual world. If so, then the uniqueness that is conveyed by the use of the word ‘the’ in the formulation of CU does obtain.

Van Inwagen’s main complaint against IA is that it has a

...far-reaching consequence: that every definite description (with the possible exception of “rigid” definite descriptions like ‘the even prime’) is an indexical phrase. Take, for example, ‘the originator of the Theory of Relativity’. Though Einstein in fact enjoys the distinction of being the referent of this phrase, he might not have. There are worlds in which, e.g., Calvin Coolidge is the originator of the Theory of Relativity... And thus (a possible world being a circumstance of utterance), ‘the originator of the Theory of Relativity’ depends for its reference upon the circumstances in which it is uttered, as does any other “non-rigid” description. ...‘the originator of the Theory of Relativity’ ought not to be any sort of indexical (Van Inwagen 1980: 413,414).

41 Consider the thesis that, on any day d, an utterance of the term ‘today’ refers to d. This thesis is true when we limit our discussion to reference in the actual world: today’s utterances of the word ‘today’ could have been made
I am not sure that this consequence is *too* far-reaching. I know that, usually when people talk about indexical expressions, they talk about personal pronouns such as ‘I’ and ‘you’, and demonstrative pronouns such as ‘this’ and ‘that’. They also talk about adverbs such as ‘here’, ‘now’, and ‘today’, and about adjectives such as ‘present’. The list of indexicals surely contains a few other expressions but it usually does not include non-rigid definite descriptions such as ‘The originator of the Theory of Relativity’ (OTR). Still, OTR may be an indexical term. Or at least, it may have an indexical element to it. If ‘actual’ is indexical, then since OTR is equivalent to ‘the actual originator of the Theory of Relativity, OTR might be an indexical term. But then, Van Inwagen does not think that ‘actual’ is an indexical term.

But why *isn’t* OTR an indexical term? Van Inwagen says that it is a conviction of his that it isn’t:

> Upon examining the intuitions that underlie this conviction, I find that they may be embodied in the following principle: *(P)* If $R$ is a referring phrase, and if it is not possible that there be distinct occasions of utterance $A$ and $B$ such that, on occasion $A$, $R$ refers to some object $O$, and on $B$, $R$ does *not* refer to $O$, then $R$ is not indexical (Van Inwagen 1980: 414).

Van Inwagen says that he can claim no more for the principle $P$ than that he finds it plausible. It might be held that it is essential to indexicals that their references vary from one occasion to another. If it possible that an indexical $R$ refer to some object $O$, then it must also be possible for $R$ not to refer to $O$. But $P$ poses a stricter requirement of variance. It requires same-world variance of reference: the $O$-referring utterance and the non-$O$-referring utterance should occur in the same possible world. But why should we think that indexicality requires same-world variance of reference? Van Inwagen does not really say. This may seem like an arbitrary requirement that begs the question.

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yesterday. If they had been made yesterday, they would have referred to yesterday, not to today.
Van Inwagen thinks that the problem with the indexical analysis is that it presupposes that possible worlds are circumstances of utterance: he takes the indexical analysis to be a conjunction of IA and CU. But the conjunction of IA and CU does not imply that OTR is indexical. IA is irrelevant to the conclusion, so consider:

**ROTR** At any world W, OTR refers to the originator of the theory of relativity at W.

I guess that Van Inwagen would take the conjunction of ROTR and CU to imply that OTR is indexical. The quoted passage suggests that he thinks that ROTR is true, so I guess that, thinking that OTR is not an indexical term, Van Inwagen would infer that CU is false. Since he takes CU to be a conjunct in the indexical analysis, his subsequent inference would be to the conclusion that the indexical analysis is also false. Now I don’t think that it really follows that CU is false.

Note that the inference from the conjunction of ROTR and CU to the conclusion that OTR is indexical has the presupposition:

**L** Any term whose reference varies depending on relevant features of the context of utterance is an indexical term.

Consequently, if OTR is not indexical, then the conjunction of CU and L is false. But if so, then it follows that CU is false only on the assumption that L is true. But L must be false. Otherwise, almost every term is an indexical term, even proper names turn out to be indexical! Some proper names refer at different occasions to different objects. The name ‘George Bush’ changes its reference from one context of conversation to another. These days it mostly refers to the former governor of Texas, but ten years ago or so, the very same name referred to a different man in many contexts. Now, we don’t want to say that any proper name that is a name of more than one object is an indexical term. Since L has this unwelcome implication, it must be rejected.
Van Inwagen examines a “premise from which something that might reasonably be called an
indexical theory of actuality could be derived,” namely that the phrase ‘the actual world’ means
‘this world’. But then he argues that the phrase ‘this world’ has no clear meaning:

But I am doubtful whether [‘this world’] has any very clear meaning. I am doubtful about this because I am
doubtful about whether it is possible to make ostensive reference to the actual world… The problem is this:
each of us exists in many worlds and, moreover, exists in many worlds epistemically indistinguishable from the
actual world… Now if it is possible to make ostensive reference to the actual world, then there must be some
sense in which the actual world is salient for us, some way in which it stands out. But how could it stand out
among all those worlds from which it is indistinguishable (Van Inwagen 1980: 419)?

I think it is right that the actual world is not salient for us. Although the actual world is the way
everything is, whereas every other world is merely a way things could have been, the actual
world is not epistemically distinguishable from many other worlds. However, I am not sure it
follows that the phrase ‘this world’ has no meaning. 42 Consider an analogy. Suppose I am
completely lost in the woods. My location is not salient for me in the sense that any location in
the woods $L$ is such that, for all I know, I may be at $L$. Still, it seems that the term ‘here’ (or ‘this
place’), in my mouth in this situation, denotes my location. If I say, “I am here,” then I assert a
true proposition even if I am not in a position to know exactly which proposition it is: any
location in the woods $L$ is such that, for all I know, the proposition I assert may be to the effect
that I am at $L$. I think Van Inwagen would say in response that there is something distinctive
about my location: it is the place in which a certain thought occurs to me—an event I am aware
of—whereas no world is the world at which any event that anyone is aware of occurs. 43 I grant
that my location is unique in that it is the place in which my thought occurs to me, whereas the

42 Van Inwagen admits that “all of us who use the language of possible worlds occasionally speak of “this world,”
and no one seems to be much troubled by this phrase” (Van Inwagen 1980:419).
thought occurs to me in many possible worlds. Still, being unique in this way does not render my location salient for me: for all I know I could be having the same thought in other locations.

Another objection to $IA$ is that it is incompatible with Actualism. Consider the following passage from Adams:

According to the indexical theory, actuality is a property which the actual world possesses, not absolutely, but only in relation to us, its inhabitants. Absolutely considered, the actual as such does not have a different status from the possible as such... The indexicalist doctrine seems very implausible to me. It is greatly at variance with our normal way of thinking about actuality, which I am very reluctant to give up. We normally believe that actuality as such is, absolutely considered, a special metaphysical status—that the actual is, absolutely considered, more real than the merely possible. We do not think that the difference in respect of actuality between Henry Kissinger and the Wizard of Oz is just a difference in their relations to us (Adams 1974: 194,195).

Call this objection the objection from relativity and let $RA$ be the doctrine that “actuality is a property which the actual world possesses not absolutely, but only in relation to us, its inhabitants”.

The objection from relativity has two parts. The first is that $IA$ implies $RA$. $IA$ implies that so-called actual objects such as Kissinger are similar, in respect of actuality, to so-called non-actual objects such as the Wizard of Oz: Kissinger is actual at some worlds and the Wizard of Oz is actual at some worlds. It follows that, when we consider things from an absolute standpoint, we see no difference, in respect of actuality, between actual objects and non-actual objects—or so the first part of the objection from relativity goes. The second part of the objection from relativity is that $RA$ is incompatible with Actualism. Adams says that we do not think that the difference, in
respect of actuality, between Kissinger and the Wizard of Oz is “just” a difference in relation to us. I think he means that we do not think that the difference in respect of actuality between Kissinger and the Wizard of Oz is a difference in relation to us. We are actualists: we believe that every possible object is an actual object. If so, then the difference between actual objects and non-actual objects is that actual objects exist and non-actual objects do not exist.

I find the first part of the objection from relativity objectionable: it seems to me that $IA$ does not imply $RA$. Actuality is a relative term in $IA$: $IA$ does not say anything about what is (simply) actual and what is not (simply) actual. $IA$ has therefore no implication whatever regarding how things are considered from an absolute standpoint. If both Kissinger and the Wizard of Oz say, “I am actual,” then $IA$ implies that what each of them says is true at the worlds in which he says it. But $IA$ is compatible with the metaphysical doctrine that $\alpha$ is the way things are. If $\alpha$ is the way things are, then what Kissinger says is true and what the Wizard of Oz says is not true. If $\alpha$ is the way things are, then there is an absolute difference, in respect of actuality, between Kissinger and the Wizard of Oz: Kissinger is actual and the Wizard of Oz is not actual.

8

Lewis held the so-called modal realist doctrine ($MR$) that possible worlds are physical universes, things of the same sort as the world we inhabit. If so, then the actual world is a small part of what there is. Stalnaker objects. He says:

The thesis that there is no room in reality for other things than the actual world is not, like solipsism, based on a restrictive theory of what there is room for in reality, but rather on the metaphysically neutral belief that “the actual world” is just another name for reality. (Stalnaker 1976: 229).

I am not sure it is a metaphysically neutral matter of meaning that the phrase ‘the actual world’ is
another name for reality. It is another name for reality (I think) but that it is another name for reality is a metaphysical doctrine, namely Actualism. At any rate, Stalnaker objects to the idea that one could argue for MR on the assumption that IA is true. I accept his objection, but I think it could be strengthened. Stalnaker says:

[IA] seems to imply that the actuality of the actual world—the attribute in virtue of which it is actual—is a world-relative attribute. It is an attribute which our world has relative to itself, but which all the other worlds have relative to themselves too; so the concept of actuality does not distinguish, from an absolute standpoint, the actual world from the others. But if there is no absolute property of actuality, does this not mean that, looking at things from an objective point of view, merely possible people and their surroundings are just as real as we and ours (Stalnaker 1976: 228)?

This argument is of the form: “IA implies RA, and RA implies MR. Therefore, IA implies MR.” Stalnaker blocks the inference by arguing for the conclusion that IA does not imply RA. I agree that IA does not imply RA: I argued for this conclusion in my response to the objection from relativity. I also think that RA does not imply MR. Suppose that, as Stalnaker maintains, possible worlds are complex properties that a total physical universe might exemplify. Suppose further that no possible world is exemplified. (This is not part of Stalnaker’s theory.) If so, then RA is true: actuality is a relative property just as it is a relative property in Lewis’s theory. But then MR is false: the worlds are abstract, they are not physical universes. If so, then both premises of the argument that Stalnaker objects to are false. Still, it does not follow that IA does not imply MR.

I think that one can do more than block the inference from IA to MR. I will argue for the conclusion that the inference is not valid. I think that MR implies RA. When a New Yorker and a Bostonian say, “I am a local,” they both speak truly. It makes no sense to wonder who among them (if any) is really a local, who is a local in an absolute sense. There is no such sense: being a
local is a relative property. Actuality in Lewis’s theory is similar to the property of being a local. According to Lewis, if both an otherworldly man and I say, “I am actual,” then we both speak truly. This is a consequence of Lewis’s doctrine that possible worlds are physical universes, things of the same sort as the world we inhabit. If possible worlds are physical universes, then, when we say of the actual world that it is actual, we cannot say more than that it is our world, actuality must be a relative property. Now if $IA$ does not imply $RA$, and $MR$ implies $RA$, then (by the transitivity of implication) $IA$ does not imply $MR$.

Stalnaker’s objection to the premise that $IA$ implies $RA$ is this:

The mistake in this reasoning, I think, is in the assumption that the absolute standpoint is a neutral one, distinct from the view from within any possible world. The problem is avoided when one recognizes that the standpoint of the actual world is the absolute standpoint, and that it is part of the concept of actuality that this should be so (Stalnaker 1976: 229).

If the standpoint of $\alpha$ is the absolute standpoint, then—since $\alpha$ is actual from the standpoint of $\alpha$—$\alpha$ is actual from the absolute standpoint: $\alpha$ is actual and $RA$ is false. Now Stalnaker claims that it is a “mistake” to say that the absolute standpoint is world-independent. This seems to me to be too strong. To begin with, it would be enough to argue for the conclusion that $IA$ is compatible with the thesis that $RA$ is false. Furthermore, Stalnaker is not standing on neutral ground here. Lewis would definitely take issue with the claim that it is a mistake to say that the absolute standpoint is world-independent. Their different opinions as to what the absolute standpoint is are inseparable from the doctrines that Stalnaker and Lewis hold as to what kind of an object the actual world is. Stalnaker’s view that the standpoint of the actual world is the absolute standpoint follows from his doctrine that the actual world is the way things are. If the actual world is the way things are, then only what is true with respect to the actual world is
(simply) true. Actualism follows: only things that exist in the actual world exist. Lewis's view that the absolute standpoint is world-independent follows from his thesis that possible worlds are physical universes. If possible worlds are physical universes, then the way things are in any possible world is the way they (simply) are. There is only one point of view, Lewis would say, and if it is unique, then it must be absolute. Thus, both opinions as to the nature of the absolute standpoint are metaphysically biased.

References