

Propositional Dependence and Perspectival Shift*

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1 Preliminaries

A popular view in contemporary metaphysics and philosophy of language represents each singular proposition as ontologically dependent upon the individual (or individuals) it is directly about.¹ This entry examines the significance of that idea for debates in higher-order metaphysics concerning the modal status of propositional existence and nonexistence.

The dependence idea is routinely invoked as a premise in arguments for propositional *contingentism*, the view that it is a contingent matter what propositions exist. In broad relief, the idea is that since it is contingent what individuals there are, it is equally contingent what object-dependent propositions there are. I argue in the paper's first half that, despite initial appearances, a *necessitist* view of propositional existence is entirely compatible with a view of singular propositions as (non-trivially) object dependent. §2 develops a simple argument for propositional necessitism, and defends its premises against salient contingentist alternatives. §3 deploys the notion of propositional *essence* in developing a necessitist theory of object dependence.

The remainder of the paper concerns the theoretical motivations for higher-order (propositional) contingentism. Much of the attractiveness of the view derives from the intuitive observation that, e.g., a possibility in which Socrates does not exist is *ipso facto* a possibility in which the singular proposition that Socrates is wise does not exist. For how could that proposition exist in a possible circumstance in which Socrates never comes into being, given that part of what it is to be that very proposition involves its being directly about *him*? I argue in §4 that we should be suspicious of the evidential weight such intuitive observations afford the higher-order contingentist picture.

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¹See, e.g., [Prior 1968](#), [Adams 1981](#), [Fine 1985](#), [Williamson 2002](#), [Stalnaker 2010, 2011](#), and [Einheuser 2012](#). Henceforth I shall mostly leave the plural qualification implicit.

For they are explained equally well by our capacity to imaginatively shift our modal perspective in the course of counterfactual deliberation. Significantly, that capacity is perfectly compatible with the theoretical possibility that higher-order being is metaphysically non-contingent. Attention to the perspective relativity of propositional existence and nonexistence thus reveals that there is less daylight between higher-order necessitism and contingentism than is typically supposed.

To simplify discussion, the paper assumes a view of propositions as individuated up to necessary equivalence. Thinking of propositions as “coarsely” individuated in this way affords an attractively-simple setting in which to investigate the nature of propositional dependence. For if there are “finely” individuated propositions, in addition to the sort of coarse-grained propositions under discussion here, then it is plausible that each of the former will necessarily determine one of the latter, by virtue of necessarily determining a truth condition.² Thus, in individuating propositions truth-conditionally, we can prescind from debates over the ultimate nature of propositions, and focus at a more general level on what it would be for any singular proposition to depend ontologically upon its subject-matter.³

As a final preliminary, it will be helpful to have some technical resources in place in order to perspicuously represent certain theses and arguments to be discussed over the course of the entry. For that purpose, in what follows I will sometimes employ a higher-order modal language permitting of quantification into any syntactic position.⁴ We can think of the language as based upon a type-theoretic hierarchy of entities, with the type e of *individuals* as the only basic type. Where τ_1, \dots, τ_n are any types, $\langle \tau_1, \dots, \tau_n \rangle$ is the type of n -place relations over entities of types τ_1, \dots, τ_n . Propositions are entities of type $\langle \rangle$ (the “empty” type, or the type of 0-place relations).⁵ The language itself contains the usual stock of first-order (individual) variables x, y, z, \dots ; together with propositional and predicate variables (notated p, q, r, \dots and F, G, H, \dots , respectively); a stock of non-logical constants of any syntactic type; quantifiers \forall and \exists binding variables of each syntactic type; the usual logical constants; and the modal operators \Box and \Diamond . The latter are understood throughout as representing metaphysical necessity and possibility, respectively.

²The determination will of course be many–one whenever the members of a plurality of hyperintensionally individuated propositions are true in exactly the same metaphysically possible circumstances.

³Traditionally, some philosophers have preferred to identify singular propositions with (finely-individuated) “Russellian” propositions, in which individuals and properties figure as immediate constituents (see, e.g., [Salmón 1986](#), [Soames 1987](#), [Crimmins and Perry 1989](#), and [Fitch and Nelson 2018](#)). No such identification is presupposed here. For discussion of singular propositions in non-Russellian frameworks, see, e.g., [Evans 1981](#), [Bach 1987](#), [Recanati 2009](#), and [Dickie 2015](#), ch. 7.

⁴The sort of language I have in mind is essentially that of ML_p , the system of higher-order intensional logic developed by [Gallin \(1975\)](#). See [Williamson 2013](#), ch. 5 for discussion of ML_p . And see [Muskens 2006](#) and [Dorr 2016](#) for discussion of alternative higher-order modal languages.

⁵Compare [Montague 1974](#), 152–53. Cody Gilmore (this volume) develops a theory of propositions as 0-place relations that is independent of the type-theoretic considerations under discussion here.

2 Modal Matters

2.1 Contingentism and necessitism

There is a debate concerning the modal status of individual existence and nonexistence. On one side of this debate is the (first-order) *contingentist*. Roughly characterized, first-order contingentism is the view that individual existence is a largely contingent matter. More carefully, according to the first-order contingentist, there could be an individual that is only contingently something.⁶ So, for example, the first-order contingentist might hold that each of us could have failed to be something, perhaps on the grounds that each of us would have been nothing if the conditions supporting human life had never materialized. On the other side of the debate is the first-order *necessitist*. Roughly characterized, first-order necessitism is the view that individual existence is non-contingent. More carefully, according to the first-order necessitist, it is necessary that each individual is necessarily something. So, for example, given that you and I are both something, the first-order necessitist holds that each of us is necessarily something, and so would be something regardless of any perturbation in matters of contingent fact.⁷

These first-order metaphysical views have higher-order counterparts. My focus here concerns the modal status of propositions.⁸ Could there be a proposition that is only contingently something? The *propositional* contingentist answers in the affirmative. And, traditionally at least, they do so on the grounds that a singular proposition is ontologically dependent upon its individual subject-matter. Since that subject-matter is often contingent, the idea is that it is equally contingent what singular propositions there happen to be. I discuss propositional dependence in greater detail below.

Propositional necessitism is the denial of propositional contingentism. According to the propositional necessitist, it is non-contingent what propositions there are. More carefully, propositional necessitism is the view that, necessarily, every proposition is necessarily something. So, for example, the propositional necessitist might hold that even in possibilities in which Socrates never comes into being, there are still singular propositions about him, on the grounds that each proposition about Socrates exists necessarily.

We can use quantifiers of type $\langle \rangle$ to sharpen the contrast between these two higher-order ontological views. The propositional contingentist endorses **PC**, which asserts that there could be a proposition that might have been nothing. The necessitist endorses **PN**, which is equivalent to the

⁶I follow the practice of treating ‘exists’ and ‘is something’ as interchangeable. On first-order contingentism, see, e.g., [Kripke 1963](#), [Marcus 1975, 1985](#), [Adams 1981](#), [Fine 1985, 2005a](#), and [Stalnaker 2011](#).

⁷Often the accompanying metaphysical thought is that each of us would be existent, but somehow non-spatiotemporal (or “non-concrete”), in possible circumstances in which we are pre-theoretically inclined to say we are nothing at all. See [Linsky and Zalta 1994, 1996](#) and [Williamson 1998, 2002, 2013](#) for development of that idea, and for defence of first-order necessitism.

⁸We should distinguish the modal status of a proposition from its modal profile. The former concerns the status of a proposition as a necessary or contingent entity. The latter concerns the status of a proposition as either necessarily or contingently true (false).

negation of **PC**:

$$\mathbf{PC}. \quad \diamond \exists p \diamond \neg \exists q (p = q)$$

$$\mathbf{PN}. \quad \Box \forall p \Box \exists q (p = q)$$

While space considerations preclude an in-depth discussion, the remainder of this section sets out and defends a simple argument in support of the necessitist picture.⁹

2.2 Decidability

The simple argument draws upon the observation that each proposition is necessarily *decidable*, by virtue of drawing an exhaustive (or “total”) distinction in modal space.¹⁰ In our present higher-order setting, we can use a device of lambda abstraction to construct complex predicates of the form $(\lambda v_1, \dots, v_n. \varphi)$, where v_1, \dots, v_n are variables of any type and φ is any formula.¹¹ Now consider a pair of higher-order predicates \top and \perp of type $\langle \langle \rangle \rangle$, interpreted such that $\top ::= \lambda \xi. \forall p [\xi(p) \leftrightarrow p]$ and $\perp ::= \lambda \zeta. \forall p [\zeta(p) \leftrightarrow \neg p]$, where p is any propositional variable. Intuitively, \top and \perp correspond, respectively, to the (monadic, second-order) properties of *truth* and *falsity*. Say that a proposition ρ is *decided* whenever ρ falls within the extension of either \top or \perp . Here is the argument:

1. $\Box \forall p \Box [(\lambda p. \top(p) \vee \perp(p))(p)]$
2. $\Box \forall p \Box [(\lambda p. \top(p) \vee \perp(p))(p) \rightarrow \exists q (q = p)]$
3. $\therefore \Box \forall p \Box \exists q (q = p)$ (1, 2)

In colloquial paraphrase, (1) asserts that, necessarily, every proposition is necessarily decidable.¹² (2) asserts that, necessarily, the decideability of a proposition strictly implies that proposition is something. (3) follows by simple quantified modal reasoning, and asserts **PN**, the core thesis of propositional necessitism.

⁹Williamson 2013, esp. chs. 5-6, contains a detailed study of necessitist higher-order modal logic. See also Merricks 2015, 162–66 for a recent defense of propositional necessitism.

¹⁰Since we can think of a coarse-grained proposition as a truth-condition, each proposition corresponds to a total distinction among possibilities. A proposition “sorts” the possibilities into those which satisfy it, and those which do not.

¹¹Where τ_1, \dots, τ_n are terms of any type, we pronounce ‘ $(\lambda v_1, \dots, v_n. \varphi)(\tau_1, \dots, \tau_n)$ ’ as ‘ τ_1, \dots, τ_n are some *vs* such that φ ’. The idea is that $(\lambda v_1, \dots, v_n. \varphi)$ applies to an n -tuple of entities $\varepsilon_1, \dots, \varepsilon_n$ just when φ applies to $\varepsilon_1, \dots, \varepsilon_n$ under an assignment g such that $g(v_k) = \varepsilon_k$. See Dorr 2016 for discussion.

¹²This and the following natural language paraphrases should be read as colloquial since, under their intended interpretation, the propositional quantifiers are irreducibly higher-order, and thus do not quantify into nominal position. For views of higher-order quantification as both intelligible and irreducible to more familiar forms of first-order quantification, see Montague 1969, Prior 1971, Williamson 2003, and Dorr 2016; compare Boolos 1984, 1985. Rayo and Yablo (2001) investigate candidate natural-language translations of higher-order quantified sentences like (1–3).

A potential source of resistance to the argument derives from a “robust” conception of propositional existence, which equates the existence of a proposition with its availability as a potential object of intentional attitudes. We have difficulty conceiving of the inhabitants of a possibility in which Socrates is nothing as being capable, even in principle, of believing or knowing the singular proposition that Socrates does not exist. However, nothing like that robust conception is presupposed by either premise in the necessitist argument set out above. Instead, the argument presupposes a more “austere” sense of propositional existence, on which for a proposition ρ to exist in a possibility is just for that possibility to take a stand on ρ ’s truth value (by *deciding* it). On reflection, it is difficult to see how any proposition could fail to satisfy that minimal requirement. Consider the proposition that Socrates exists. Necessarily, that proposition is true just in case a certain condition—*Socrates existing*—is satisfied. But every possible world either does, or does not, satisfy that condition. On the austere view, this is all that is required in order for a proposition to exist with respect to a possibility.¹³

Nevertheless, we might at least consider what requirements the denial of either premise would impose on a theory of propositions. Drawing upon work by Prior (1968, 1969), the contingentist might reject (1) on the grounds that a singular proposition $\rho(o)$ about a contingent object o will be undecided in worlds in which o does not exist.¹⁴ Prior’s idea was that a circumstance in which an object o is nothing is one in which $\rho(o)$ is “unstateable”, and so neither true nor false. However, beyond its initial plausibility there are strong reasons to view a Priorean rejection of (1) as both technically and philosophically unworkable, along multiple fronts. To take just one example, Prior’s restrictive conception of predicate- and operator-applicability requires the introduction of *weak* and *strong* varieties of modality, in order to preclude the possibility that (e.g.) a necessarily true proposition that is only contingently something will be true in every possible circumstance. But now consider the proposition that Socrates is both wise and unwise. That proposition is not necessarily false, on Prior’s framework, since it is unstateable in worlds in which Socrates is nothing. The proposition that Socrates is both wise and unwise is thus weakly possible on the Priorean approach to modal semantics.¹⁵ But it is implausible at best that any genuine sense of ‘possible’ attaches to an overt contradiction (see Fine 2005a).¹⁶

Alternatively, the contingentist might reject (2), on the grounds that the decideability of a

¹³The proponent of a more fine-grained theory of propositions may still allow that each proposition essentially determines a truth condition, as seems plausible. If so, then the argument from decideability provides equally good grounds for a necessitist view of finely-individuated propositions.

¹⁴Alternatively, the contingentist might reject (1) on the intuitionist grounds that there could be a proposition that is (possibly) undecidable. However, since it is unlikely that the contingentist will wish to rest their position on the abandonment of classical logic, I set this possibility aside here.

¹⁵On Prior’s framework, a proposition ρ is weakly possible just in case $\neg\Box\neg\rho$, and weakly necessary just in case $\neg\Diamond\neg\rho$.

¹⁶For the details of Prior’s framework, see Prior and Fine 1977, 102–15. For further critical discussion of Priorean modal semantics, see Plantinga 1983, Menzel 1990, Bennett 2005, Fine 2005b, Einheuser 2012, and Williamson 2013, 64–71. The contingentist modal semantics developed in Adams 1981 suffers from problems similar to those discussed here in connection with Prior’s framework, as Einheuser (2012) has noted.

proposition ρ fails to strictly imply that ρ is something.¹⁷ Perhaps a proposition could be true, or false, in a possible circumstance without existing (in that circumstance). The remaining challenge will then be to specify the sense in which a proposition could be true, or false, without being something.

Some contingentists attempt to meet that challenge by appealing to a distinction between “inner” and “outer” senses of truth and falsity.¹⁸ Here is [Fine \(1985, 194\)](#) articulating the idea:

One should distinguish two notions of truth for propositions, the *inner* and the *outer*. According to the outer notion, a proposition is true in a possible world regardless of whether it exists in that world; according to the inner notion, a proposition is true in a possible world only if it exists in that world. We may put the distinction in terms of perspective. According to the outer notion, we can stand outside a world and compare the proposition with what goes on in the world in order to ascertain whether it is true. But according to the inner notion, we must first enter with the proposition into the world before ascertaining its truth.

Setting aside the spatial metaphor—a possible world has neither an “inside” nor an “outside”—the guiding idea involves the notion of propositional *representation* (compare [Adams 1981](#) and [Einheuser 2012](#)). Specifically, for a proposition ρ to be true “in” a world w is for ρ to be both true and existent in w . By contrast, ρ will be merely true “of” w whenever matters of particular fact in w are as ρ represents them as being.¹⁹

The cogency of the outer concept of truth thus presupposes that propositions are intrinsically *representational* entities. Along with a growing number of philosophers, I think we should find that conception of propositions implausible. It is *minds* (or perhaps mental states), and not propositions, that represent the world as being thus and so.²⁰ Suppose that, instead of our own world, a world containing no cognitively sophisticated beings of any kind were actual. Presumably, on the view under consideration here, were that world to have been actual, the proposition that Socrates does not exist would be true *of* it, by virtue of correctly representing it. But how could an extra-mental proposition, like the proposition that Socrates does not exist, *represent* things as being a

¹⁷(2) is a higher-order instance of what [Plantinga \(1976, 1983\)](#) calls “serious actualism”, and of what [Fine \(1985\)](#) calls “predicate actualism”. See [Einheuser 2012](#), [Williamson \(2013, 148–59\)](#), [Dorr 2016](#), and [Fritz and Goodman 2016](#) for discussion of related principles connecting property instantiation to existence.

¹⁸The contrast is first introduced in [Adams 1981](#), and is invoked by [Fine \(1985\)](#) in investigating the prospects for higher-order contingentism. More recent developments of the idea include [Stalnaker 2011](#), ch. 2, and [Einheuser 2012](#).

¹⁹[Stalnaker \(2010, 2011\)](#) develops an alternative conception of outer truth in terms of *entailment* relations holding between worlds (construed as maximal propositions) and propositions. See [Williamson 2013](#), 296–300 for criticism of Stalnaker’s higher-order contingentist framework.

²⁰See, e.g., [Buchanan and Grzankowski \(this volume\)](#) and [Speaks \(this volume\)](#). On propositional representationality more generally, see [King 2007 \(and this volume\)](#), [Hanks 2015 \(and this volume\)](#), and [Soames 2013, forthcoming \(and this volume\)](#).

certain way as a matter of its intrinsic nature, and in the complete absence of any intentional states? In general, it is unclear how anything extra-mental could be intrinsically representational in the intended sense.²¹

Rather than complicate our modal semantics and its underlying metaphysics with cumbersome distinctions, we might instead proceed under the defeasible hypothesis that propositional necessitism is true. In the remainder of this paper, I argue that, despite initial appearances, necessitism coheres entirely with considerations that are routinely advanced in support of the alternative, contingentist, picture.

3 Object Dependence

3.1 The modal view

Consider the propositions expressed by (4) and (5):

4. Socrates was wise.
5. The teacher of Plato was wise.

Both are actually true in virtue of what Socrates was like. But there is an intuitive sense in which the proposition expressed by (4) differs from that expressed by (5), by being more immediately semantically related to Socrates. According to one traditional idea, the salient difference is one of *aboutness*. On the traditional view, the proposition that Socrates was wise is “directly” about Socrates, and for that reason counts as a singular proposition about him (Adams 1981; Kaplan 1989, 568–71; Cartwright 1997).²² By contrast, the proposition that the teacher of Plato was wise is only mediately, or indirectly, about Socrates, and for that reason counts as non-singular (at least with respect to Socrates).²³

A popular metaphysical view represents each singular proposition as *ontologically dependent* upon the individual(s) it is directly about. The basic idea is that what singular propositions there are is a matter that is metaphysically determined by, or “grounded in”, what individuals there happen to be.²⁴ That singular propositions are object dependent in this sense has traditionally been invoked as a premise in arguments for propositional contingentism. Consider this argument, due to Robert Stalnaker:

²¹Compare Putnam 1981, 1-21.

²²The singular/non-singular contrast goes back at least to Russell 1903. For historical overview, see McGrath 2005 and Fitch and Nelson 2018.

²³Some philosophers might view (5) as expressing a singular proposition about Socrates in the actual world on the grounds that Socrates actually satisfies the definite description ‘the teacher of Plato’. Whether this is so turns upon complex issues concerning the semantics of descriptions that I will not be exploring here.

²⁴The dependence idea goes back at least to Prior (1968, 1969). It is developed in some detail in Prior and Fine 1977 and in Fine 1977, 1985.

It seems plausible to assume, first, that there are some propositions [...] that are object-dependent in the sense that the proposition would not exist if the individual [the proposition is about] did not. It also seems plausible to assume that there are some objects that exist only contingently and that there are singular propositions about those objects. These assumptions obviously imply that there are singular propositions that exist only contingently [...]. (Stalnaker 2011, 22–23)

The same contingentist line of thought underlies these remarks by Peter Fritz and Jeremy Goodman:

Consider the proposition that you exist and the property of being identical to you. Now suppose you had never been born. The first-order contingentist thinks that, had you never been born, there would have been no such thing as you. The higher-order contingentist thinks that, moreover, there would have been no such thing as the proposition that you exist or the property of being identical to you. [...] In this sense [the higher-order contingentist thinks] the proposition that you exist and the property of being identical to you each draws a distinction that, had you never been born, there would not have been to be drawn. (Fritz and Goodman 2016, 648)²⁵

As a final example, consider this argument by Joshua Armstrong and Jason Stanley:

[M]any theorists have adopted the thesis that singular thoughts are metaphysically dependent on the objects they are about in a way non-singular thoughts are not. Different theorists have used slightly different theoretical frameworks to characterize the notion of object dependence. Perhaps the most common view is to hold that singular thoughts only exist in worlds in which the objects they are about exist [...]. Singular thoughts about contingently existing objects would thus also only contingently exist. (Armstrong and Stanley 2011, 209-10)

In each case, the idea is that contingency at the level of first-order existence induces a parallel degree of contingency at the level of (object dependent) singular propositions. Other theorists to endorse propositional contingentism on essentially these grounds include Prior (1968, 1969), Prior and Fine (1977), Adams (1981), Fine (1977, 1980, 1985), Salmón (1998), Hoffmann (2003), Bennett (2005), Hofweber (2006), David (2009), Einheuser (2012), and Speaks (2012).

The contingentist argument presupposes a view of object dependence as involving a systematic *modal* correlation between each singular proposition and its subject-matter. The idea is that for a singular proposition $\rho(o)$ to depend, in the salient metaphysical sense, upon an object o is for it to be impossible that $\rho(o)$ exist when o does not. We can formalize this modal view of object-dependence as follows, employing a multigrade *aboutness* predicate A :²⁶

²⁵Fritz and Goodman register caution as regards the full generality of this line of thought. Their concern involves actually existing properties which uniquely determine possible individuals that might be reasonably viewed as nonexistent by first-order contingentist lights. See Williamson 2013, 270-71 for related discussion.

²⁶Interpret A such that $A(\rho, \varepsilon_1, \dots, \varepsilon_n)$ whenever ρ is directly about entities $\varepsilon_1, \dots, \varepsilon_n$.

MD. $\Box\forall x\Box(\exists pA(p, x) \rightarrow \exists y(x = y))$

MD asserts that, necessarily, everything x is such that the existence of a singular proposition about x strictly implies that x is something. Combined with the thesis of first-order contingentism ($\Diamond\exists x\Diamond\neg\exists y(x = y)$), **MD** implies **PC** as a matter of simple quantified modal logic.

The higher-order necessitist might endorse a view of object dependence along the lines of **MD**, thus adopting a conception of first-order ontology as non-contingent. For example, [Williamson \(2013, 289\)](#) presents an argument from **MD** and propositional necessitism to first-order necessitism along these lines:

6. $\Box\forall x\Box\exists p(A(p, x))$

7. $\therefore \Box\forall x\Box\exists y(x = y)$ (6, **MD**)

By (6), necessarily, everything x is such that, necessarily, there exists a proposition about it (perhaps this is the proposition that x is something). (7) follows validly from (6) and **MD**, and asserts that, necessarily, every individual is necessarily something. Thus **MD** collapses propositional necessitism into necessitism about first-order existence.

However, and *pace* Williamson and other higher-order necessitists, it is far from clear that endorsement of the dependence idea commits the propositional necessitist to a controversial view of ontology as non-contingent at all orders of being. Conversely, and *pace* Stalnaker and other contingentists, it is not at all obvious that first-order contingency induces a corresponding degree of contingency at the level of object-dependent propositions. The higher-order necessitist can appeal to resources other than modality to explain the sense in which a singular proposition depends ontologically upon its (potentially contingent) subject-matter.

3.2 Propositional essence

In particular, the necessitist can appeal to facts about propositional *essences*.²⁷ Presumably, given a singular proposition $\rho(o)$, that $\rho(o)$ is directly about o is not a merely accidental fact about it. That observation is reflected in modal judgments to the effect that a singular proposition is about the same individual in every circumstance in which the proposition exists. The proposition that Socrates is wise, for example, is not about Socrates in our world and about Theatetus in another. What explains this? A natural answer is that it pertains to what the proposition *is*—to its “nature”, or “identity”, in a metaphysical sense—that it be directly about Socrates and not some other individual. It is *because* it is essentially about Socrates that the proposition that Socrates is wise is about Socrates in every counterfactual possibility.

²⁷An alternative strategy, which I shall not explore here, would analyse the ontological dependence of singular propositions in terms of metaphysical “grounding” ([Fine 2001, 2012](#); [Rosen 2010](#)). See [Wilson 2014](#) for scepticism about grounding as a distinctive, *sui generis* relation of metaphysical dependence.

Drawing upon Fine’s influential (1994) discussion, I am using ‘essence’ (and ‘nature’, and ‘identity’) in a broadly neo-Aristotelian manner, as pertaining to what an entity *is* in a metaphysically constitutive sense. Part of the attractiveness of that “definitional” way of thinking about essence is that it allows us to disentangle questions of modality from those of essentiality. For it to be essential to an entity that it have some feature, on the definitional approach, is not merely for it to be (metaphysically) necessary that the entity have that feature. Instead, the idea is that a feature will be essential to an entity when it is metaphysically constitutive of what that entity is that it have that feature. As Fine famously pointed out, not every metaphysically necessary property of an entity will count as essential to it in that more restrictive, definitional, sense.

The higher-order necessitist can extend this way of thinking about essentiality to the *aboutness* relation. On this view, it will be constitutive of the identity of each singular proposition that it be directly about its particular subject-matter. For example, given that the proposition that Socrates is wise is directly about Socrates, on this view it will pertain to the nature of that proposition that it stand in the aboutness relation to Socrates (and no other individual). This observation leads naturally to a non-modal understanding of propositional dependence. For it is plausible to think that the existence of an entity ϵ will *depend*, in the salient metaphysical sense, upon the existence of exactly those objects that figure ineliminably in a statement of what ϵ is. So, for example, insofar as it pertains to the nature of Socrates’s singleton that it have Socrates as its only member, on this view the singleton will depend ontologically upon Socrates, and not vice-versa. Similarly, on this view, the existence of any singular proposition $\rho(o)$ will depend upon that of its subject-matter o , given that to be *about* o is partly constitutive of what the proposition is. The existence of the proposition, we might say, “presupposes” the existence of the object. On this approach, propositional dependence amounts to a kind of ontological presupposition.²⁸

Unlike the modal view of object dependence discussed above in §3.1, the “presuppositional” account outlined here does not entail that a singular proposition $\rho(o)$ could not exist in the ontological absence of o . At most, the account implies that for any object-dependent proposition $\rho(o)$, it is impossible that $\rho(o)$ exist without being *about* o . That is plausible, on the assumption that *aboutness* is an essential relation. The remainder of this section addresses the objection that $\rho(o)$ could not be about o in a possible circumstance in which o is nothing.

3.3 Modal locking

We have seen that higher-order necessitism affords a sense in which, for some singular proposition $\rho(o)$, $\rho(o)$ might have existed in the ontological absence of its subject-matter o . As an illustration, consider this argument:²⁹

²⁸Fine (1985, 185–86) recognizes a “presuppositional” sense of dependence broadly similar to that under discussion here. Curiously, however, Fine assumes the modal view of dependence when arguing for a contingentist theory of propositional existence.

²⁹The argument is structurally similar to one advanced by Plantinga (1983). Plantinga deploys his version of the argument as part of a broader criticism of the dependence doctrine (construed modally, as in §3.1). See also Williamson 2013,

8. $\forall x \Box \exists p \Box (p \leftrightarrow \exists y (x = y))$

9. $\exists x \Diamond \neg \exists y (x = y)$

10. $\therefore \exists x \Diamond (\exists p \Box (p \leftrightarrow \exists y (x = y)) \wedge \neg \exists y (y = x))$ (8, 9)

We can read (8) as asserting that, for absolutely every individual x , there is necessarily the proposition that x is something.³⁰ By (9), there is an individual that is only contingently something. (10) follows validly from (8) and (9), and asserts that, for some individual x , it is possible that the proposition that x is something exists when x is nothing. That conclusion is clearly incompatible with a modal view of object dependence along the lines of **MD**. The claim I will defend here is that no incoherence arises given a conception of object dependence in terms of (propositional) essence.

Timothy Williamson has argued that no “well-developed metaphysical theory” can explain how (10) might be true under its intended interpretation. Williamson writes:

Why cannot there be a (false) proposition necessary and sufficient for me to be something when I am nothing? [The answer is that] no well-developed metaphysical theory explains how a proposition can always modally lock onto an individual when there is no such individual to lock onto, just as no theory explains how a property (such as a haecceity or anti-haecceity) can always modally lock onto an individual when there is no such individual to lock onto. (Williamson 2013, 292)³¹

Roughly speaking, a proposition *modally locks onto* an individual, in Williamson’s sense, when it determines a truth condition that is necessarily sensitive to how things stand with that individual. Presumably, any singular proposition will modally lock onto its subject-matter in that sense. Williamson’s objection is that nothing can explain how a proposition could modally lock onto its subject-matter in a circumstance in which that subject-matter does not exist.

The correct response to Williamson’s challenge was anticipated long ago by David Kaplan. Kaplan writes:

Some have claimed that though a proper name might denote the same individual with respect to any possible world (or, more generally, possible circumstance) in which he exists, it certainly cannot denote him with respect to a possible world in which

290-92 for related discussion.

³⁰Strictly speaking, and as Williamson (2013, 290) notes, p is a proposition that truth of which is strictly necessary and sufficient for x to be something. That may not be the proposition that x is something on a view of propositions as individuated more finely than up to necessary equivalence.

³¹By ‘haecceity’, Williamson means a property the exemplification of which is both necessary and sufficient for identity with a specific individual. An example is the property of *being Socrates*. Fine (1985) and Williamson (2013, 267–77) discuss the parallel question of whether haecceistic properties could exist in the ontological absence of the individuals in terms of which they are defined.

he does not exist. [...] This is a mistake [based upon] a simple confusion between our language and theirs. [...] The inhabitants of a world in which Quine never exists would likely have no name for him. So what! He exists here. *We* have a name for him, namely ‘Quine’. It is *our* terms and formulas whose denotation and truth value are being assessed with respect to the possible world in question. (Kaplan 1973, 503–505)

Call a relation R *circumstantial* when, necessarily, R holds of some n -tuple of entities in a possible circumstance only if those entities exist in that circumstance. Call a relation R *transcendental* when R is not circumstantial. Kaplan’s point is that the *denotation* relation between a singular term and its referent is transcendental. But it seems plain that many other perfectly coherent relations are transcendental as well. For example, certain diachronic temporal relations appear capable of relating entities that exist at different times: plausible candidates include *remembering*, *anticipating*, and *being the progeny of* (compare Salmón 1987). These observations extend to modal relations, some of which relate individuals across different possible worlds (consider modal *counterparthood* as developed by Lewis (1968, 1971) and Stalnaker (1986), or transworld *survival as*, discussed by Parfit (1984)). Insofar as relations like these are coherent, the correct response to Williamson’s challenge is that *direct aboutness* is a transcendental relation. It relates a singular proposition $\rho(o)$ and its individual subject-matter o across possibilities not all of which “contain” o .

Part of the intuitive pull of Williamson’s challenge lies in the fact that we have difficulty conceiving of a singular proposition $\rho(o)$ literally existing “in” a possible world in which o does not exist. For given that $\rho(o)$ is essentially about o , how could ρ be something in w when o is not? What is $\rho(o)$ about, “in” w ? But here we need to carefully distinguish the robust and austere senses of propositional existence discussed in §2.2. For a proposition to exist robustly in a world is for that proposition to somehow be among the items located in that world. But on the austere conception, a proposition is not a part of a world, in even a loose or metaphorical sense (if anything, on this view a world is a part of a proposition). Instead, on the austere view, for a proposition ρ to exist in a world w is just for w to decide ρ , and so for it to be the case that either $w \in \rho$ or $w \in \neg\rho$. A proposition is (or determines) a condition which “sorts” the possibilities into those which satisfy that condition and those which do not. For a proposition to be directly about an individual, at a world, is for that sorting to be appropriately sensitive to what the individual’s properties are like in that world. There is no obvious requirement that the individual itself be a member of that world’s first-order domain.

4 Perspective Relativity

There is a kind of perspective relativity underlying much of our modal thinking that has been largely overlooked in recent higher-order metaphysics.³² Clarifying the nature of that relativity

³²The discussion in this section applies ideas I’ve developed elsewhere, first with Jessica Wilson and more recently with Wilson and Benj Hellie (Murray and Wilson 2012; Hellie et al. 2021).

illuminates what is ultimately correct about propositional contingentism, but in a way that coheres with a necessitist theory of higher-order being.

Let's start with the observation that the propositional ontology of a possibility can be described in more than one way. Consider a possibility w in which Socrates never exists. And now consider the singular proposition ρ^- that Socrates never exists. Is ρ^- something at w ? Observations made earlier in this paper support an affirmative answer (§2.2). For ρ^- is presumably *true* at w , given that (a) w is a possibility in which Socrates is nothing, and (b) necessarily, ρ^- is true just in case Socrates is nothing. And if so, then presumably ρ^- *exists* at w —otherwise what would there be, at w , to be the true proposition that Socrates is nothing? Equally flat-footed considerations extend to any other singular proposition about Socrates, such as the proposition that Socrates is wise. Presumably, that proposition is false, and thus existent, at worlds like w , given that Socrates fails to exemplify any “positive” features in possibilities in which he does not exist.³³ These observations are just corollaries of a view of each proposition as determining a total distinction in logical space.

But we can also consider our question concerning w from a different angle. And when we do, it can seem equally correct to describe w as a world in which ρ^- is nothing. Thinking about w in this second way involves “untethering” our point of view from the actual world @, and considering what propositions exist from the standpoint of w . We can think of this standpoint as a false, because non-actual, perspective on the ontological facts “in” w that *would be* veridical, were w and not @ the actual world. Considering w in this second way, asking whether ρ^- exists at w is rather like asking whether, from our own point of view here in @, there are truth-evaluable singular propositions about some (particular) fourth child of Socrates's.³⁴ In each case, there is an intuitive sense in which a basic ontological presupposition of the question—that something *is* Socrates, or that *particular* possible child—fails to be satisfied, and for that reason the question cannot even be coherently entertained.³⁵ If we continue to think of a proposition as existing at a possibility only if it is decided by that possibility, then we should answer our target question concerning ρ^- in the negative when considered from the merely “hypothetical” vantage point afforded by w .

These observations are not in tension. In considering our target question in the first way discussed above, we held fixed the fact that both Socrates and ρ^- are *actually* something when describing w as a possibility at which ρ^- exists. This involved our using ontological and corresponding semantic resources available here in the actual world, in order to evaluate the question of whether ρ^- exists at w .³⁶ Subsequently asking our question in the second way discussed above required a kind of *shift* at the level of how w was being represented. That shift involved our thinking of w as

³³I am here treating ‘*is unwise*’ as expressing a property distinct from that expressed by the syntactic negation of ‘*is wise*’. See [Plantinga 1983](#) and [Fine 1985](#) for discussion of this issue; compare [Williamson 2013](#), 156–58.

³⁴Socrates had three sons of which we are aware.

³⁵Or at least cannot be coherently entertained entirely “within” the perspective afforded by the possibility at issue. This idea is precisified below.

³⁶In the terminology of two-dimensional semantics, this involved the consideration of w as *counterfactual*. For discussion, see (e.g.) [Davies and Humberstone 1980](#), [Stalnaker 2003](#), and [Chalmers 2006](#).

though we ourselves were located “in” w , not $@$, and considering whether ρ^- is something from that internal perspective on w . Thinking of w in this second way involved our taking up the point of view of an agent for whom w , and not $@$, is the actual world.³⁷ It is because of this shift at the level of our perspective on the facts “in” w that our positive and negative verdicts on the question of whether ρ^- is something at w are not in tension.

Of course, talk of the *perspective* afforded by a possibility is loose. Drawing upon influential work by Kaplan (1977, 1979), Lewis (1980), and others, we can make it more precise by thinking of a modal perspective as a kind of *context*.³⁸ Kaplan originally identified a context c with a package of extra-linguistic parameters, including not only a possible world w_c , but also a salient agent (or thinker) a_c , a time t_c , and a location ℓ_c . As is familiar, Kaplan’s project was broadly semantic, and aimed at explaining the sensitivity of (certain aspects of) linguistic meaning to concrete features of the circumstances in which language is used. But despite the familiarity of those ideas, we can also think of a context, and the related notion of an *index* (of evaluation), in abstraction from their traditional semantic applications. Viewed in that more abstract sense, a non-actual context just represents a hypothetical situation from which other, counterfactual, possibilities can be meaningfully described. What we have observed so far is that the higher-order description of possibility w is a matter that is sensitive not only to what individuals exist in w , but also to whether it is our world or w that is treated as the base context—or *perspective*—from which w is described.

But that sort of perspective relativity does not translate into genuine *contingency* at the level of what propositions, properties, and relations there happen to be. Metaphysical contingency involves variation across possibilities that are counterfactual relative to the view from *our* world $@$ —in effect, the only context that is genuinely real. That observation is reflected in a familiar semantic representation of metaphysical modality as involving quantification over possible worlds, relative to a single fixed contextual parameter:³⁹

- 11a. $\models_w^c \Box \varphi$ just if, for all $w' \in W$, $\models_{w'}^c \varphi$
- b. $\models_w^c \Diamond \varphi$ just if, for some $w' \in W$, $\models_{w'}^c \varphi$

Here, φ is any sentence and W is a set of worlds; ‘ $\models_w^c \varphi$ ’ indicates that φ is true at w as from (or relative to) c . Observe that on this quantificational picture, the upper parameter of context is represented as insensitive to the semantic action of both \Box and \Diamond , which serve only to shift the

³⁷In the terminology of two-dimensional semantics, this involved our considering w “as actual”, rather than as merely counterfactual. Though heuristically useful, the relevant sense of “perspective” at issue here should not be understood as essentially agential or first-personal, for reasons that are familiar from the epistemology of conditional thought. See, e.g., Evans and Over 2004, 1–13; 113–33, and Williamson 2007, ch. 5.

³⁸The contributions of both Kaplan and Lewis in turn systematized earlier advances in “two-dimensional” semantics that began with Kamp’s (1968; 1971) double-index semantics for temporal logics, later generalized to modal languages by Åqvist (1973) and Segerberg (1973).

³⁹See Kaplan 1979; compare Portner 2009, 40–5.

lower (indexical) world-parameter relative to which φ is evaluated. That independence of context from the semantic contribution of a (metaphysical) modal operator meshes smoothly with a view of genuine necessity and possibility as involving how things go in possibilities that are counterfactual, relative to the actual world. Our capacity to imaginatively enter into non-actual perspectives on other possibilities that disagree with our own on matters of higher-order ontology is immaterial when it comes to the modal status of each actual proposition.

5 Conclusion

It is possible that much of the intuitive pull of higher-order contingentism derives from pragmatic pressure to imaginatively shift perspectives (contexts) in the course of counterfactual modal deliberation. Considering a counterfactual world w in which Socrates is nothing, perhaps we tacitly untether our “external” perspective on w , in effect supposing ourselves into a context centered on w and not @. Given that no propositions about Socrates exist from within that imaginatively entertained perspective, it can appear contingent here in actuality just what singular propositions there happen to be. However, the internal view on other possible worlds is irrelevant when it comes to the substantive modal question of whether every actual proposition is necessarily something. What we have seen here is that an affirmative answer is consistent with considerations routinely advanced in support of higher-order contingentism.

6 Appendix

This appendix shows how to model the perspective relativity of propositional existence and nonexistence in terms of a single fixed space of possible worlds.

Drawing upon work by [Stalnaker \(2011\)](#), the basic idea is to employ a set of relatively fine-grained partitions of possibility space to represent the perspective relativity of higher-order ontology.⁴⁰ Let W be a set of worlds and D a set of possible individuals, and let $Q: W \rightarrow D^n$ be a function associating each $w \in W$ with a first-order domain $D(w) \subseteq D$. We allow that for worlds $u, v \in W$, it may be that $D(u) \neq D(v)$ (see [Kripke 1963](#)). Now define a binary equivalence relation \approx over W such that, for worlds $w, u, v \in W$, $u \approx_w v$ just when any proposition entirely about members of $D(w)$ has the same truth value in u as it does in v . Naturally, \approx will induce distinct partitions on W relative to any worlds v and u such that $D(v) \neq D(u)$.

Given a world w , let c_w be a context centered upon w (a *modal perspective*). We use the equivalence relation \approx_w to define the set of metaphysical possibilities that exist in view of c_w as follows:

⁴⁰On partition spaces see [Lewis 1988](#), [Yablo 2014](#), ch. 3, and [Yalcin 2018](#). Though Stalnaker deploys the idea in the service of a model-theoretic semantics for higher-order contingentism, this appendix focuses on adapting Stalnaker’s approach to a setting compatible with propositional necessitism.

$$W(c_w) ::= \{S \subseteq W : \forall u, v \in W (u, v \in S \leftrightarrow u \approx_w v)\}$$

$W(c_w)$ is the set of possible worlds that exist from the perspective of w . More carefully, the definition says that $W(c_w)$ is a set of subregions of W , each comprising a subset of W the members of which are equalant under \approx_w . Intuitively, each subregion (or *cell*) in $W(c_w)$ represents a genuine metaphysical possibility relative to c_w .⁴¹

Where τ is any type and w is any possibility, define the *quantificational domain* of type τ , relative to c_w , as follows:

$$D^\tau(c_w) ::= \begin{cases} D^e(c_w) = Q(w), & \text{when } \tau = e \\ (\mathcal{P}(D^{t_1}(c_w) \times \dots \times D^{t_n}(c_w)))^{W(c_w)}, & \text{when } \tau = \langle t_1, \dots, t_n \rangle \end{cases}$$

The definition identifies the domain of type e , relative to c_w , with a subset of D ; and where τ is a relation of type $\langle t_1, \dots, t_n \rangle$, the definition identifies the corresponding domain with a set of functions from $W(c_w)$ onto n -tuples of entities of types t_1, \dots, t_n .⁴² Given that we identify propositions with 0-place relations (of type $\langle \rangle$; §1), we can (conventionally) identify *truth* and *falsity* with the empty set and its singleton, respectively, and represent the domain of propositions that exist in view of c_w with a set of functions from $W(c_w)$ onto truth values:

$$D^\emptyset(c_w) ::= \{\emptyset, \{\emptyset\}\}^{W(c_w)}$$

Recall that $W(c_u) \neq W(c_v)$ whenever $D(u) \neq D(v)$. Since we are treating the propositions that exist in view of a context c_w as sets of “coarsely-individuated” worlds in $W(c_w)$, on the present picture $D^\emptyset(c_w)$ will be determined by the first-order “composition” of $D^e(c_w)$.

Extending that basic picture to a necessitist setting is straightforward. Where τ is any type, c_w is a possible context, and $v \in W(c_w)$ is a possibility that is counterfactual in view of c_w , define the *counterfactual domain* of type τ at v , $D^\sigma(c_w, v)$, as follows:

$$D^\tau(c_w, v) ::= \begin{cases} D^e(c_w, v) = D(v) \subseteq D, & \text{when } \tau = e \\ (\mathcal{P}(D^{t_1}(c_w) \times \dots \times D^{t_n}(c_w)))^{W(c_w)}, & \text{when } \tau = \langle \sigma_1, \dots, \sigma_n \rangle \end{cases}$$

Relative to a fixed context c_w , the definition identifies the first-order domain of any possibility that is counterfactual in view of c_w with a set of possible individuals; and where τ is any higher-order type, the counterfactual domain at v of type τ relative to c_w is identified with the domain of type τ relative to c_w . Since we identify propositions with 0-place properties it is a simple matter to confirm that on this picture each proposition that is something in view of a context is *necessarily* something (in view of that context).

⁴¹As Stalnaker (2011, 31) articulates the idea, distinct points in $S \subseteq W(c_w)$ have the same “representational significance” from the vantage point of w , given that all such points will be indiscriminable in terms of the propositional resources available in w .

⁴²Intuitively, that is the extension of the relation at each $w \in W(c_w)$. Where X is any set, $\mathcal{P}(X)$ is the power set of X .

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