ESSAYS IN THE METAPHYSICS OF MODALITY

Alvin Plantinga

Edited by Matthew Davidson

Introduction

For the past thirty years, Alvin Plantinga's work in the metaphysics of modality has been both insightful and innovative; it is high time that his papers in this area were collected together in a single volume. This book contains eleven pieces of Plantinga's work in modal metaphysics, arranged in chronological order so one can trace the development of his thought on matters modal. In what follows I will lay out the principal concepts and arguments in these papers.

"DE RE ET DE DICTO" (1969)

In this essay, Plantinga is concerned mainly with defending the notion of *de re* modality against the attacks of people like W. V. Quine and William Kneale. After looking at some plausible examples of *de re* modality, he considers some of the arguments put forth by Kneale and Quine. He notes that all these arguments trade on a *de dicto/de re* confusion in one of the premises, a confusion that stems from the belief that, as Quine puts it, "necessity resides in the way we talk about things, not in the things we talk about." The following Quinean argument will serve nicely as an example of the sort of attack that Kneale, Quine, and others level against *de re* modality.

(1) Mathematicians are necessarily rational but not necessarily bipedal.
(2) Cyclists are necessarily bipedal but not necessarily rational.
(3) Paul J. Swiers is both a cyclist and a mathematician.

(4) Swiers is necessarily rational but not necessarily bipedal (from (1) and (3)).

(5) Swiers is necessarily bipedal and not necessarily rational. (from (2) and (3)).

(4) and (5) contradict each other, so the essentialist, who presumably would accept both (1) and (2), is in trouble.

The problem with the Quinean argument is that, like the other arguments Plantinga considers, it rests on a *de re/de dicto* confusion. How are we to understand (1) and (2)? The only way that (4) and (5) follow from (1) and (2) (and (3)) is if the necessity is read *de re* in both (1) and (2). But when read *de re* (1) and (2) surely are false. Why should we think that it is true *de re* of each mathematician that he is necessarily rational, or true *de re* of each cyclist that he is necessarily bipedal? These *de re* claims are false, but there are *de dicto* truths lurking in the neighborhood here which give (1) and (2) the appearance of truth. For example, we may grant that the proposition *mathematicians are rational* is necessarily true and the proposition *mathematicians are bipedal* is contingently true. But on this sort of *de dicto* reading, we're not able to reach our contradictory conclusions. So this argument trades on a *de re/de dicto* confusion. The other arguments he considers against *de re* modality founder on the same rock.

In the rest of the essay, Plantinga attempts to show how any *de re* modal claim is equivalent to a *de dicto* modal claim. People like Quine and Kneale seem to be much more sanguine about modality *de dicto* than about modality *de re*; dialectally it would be significant if one could show this *de re-de dicto* equivalence. Plantinga spends many pages chisholming out a formula that will allow for a *de re* to *de dicto* transformation. The reasoning is far too intricate to try to summarize here, but I will say this. It is clear to Plantinga that as far as modality goes, there is an important difference between proper names and definite descriptions. Plantinga's account relies heavily on proper names. Post-Kripke, the differences between the two in modal contexts seems very clear: Names are rigid designators while most definite descriptions are not. But it should be noted that Kripke certainly wasn't alone in the late 1960s and early 1970s in his recognition of important facts about the way names and descriptions behave in modal contexts.

"WORLD AND ESSENCE" (1970)

"World and Essence" is an extremely important essay in the development of Plantinga's thought in the metaphysics of modality. In it he works out many of the core notions he embraces both in his main work in the metaphysics of modality, *The Nature of Necessity*, and in his present thinking. Also, Quentin Smith claims it's the first place where

the necessary *a posteriori* shows up in the philosophical literature. Plantinga begins this essay where "De Re et De Dicto" stops, with a formula for translating *de re* modal claims into *de dicto* modal claims. As the reader will note, it is a fairly complex-looking formula. But the core concepts are easily grasped. To say that an object x has a property p essentially is to say that x has p and it is necessarily false that x has the complement of p. Note that the last clause is satisfied when it is true that x exists in a world and lacks the complement of p and when x doesn't exist in a world (supposedly because all predications of properties of an object in a world in which it doesn't exist are false—this assumption amounts to a view Plantinga will defend in great detail later, serious actualism).

Plantinga introduces his notion of a state of affairs, the sort of entity that is expressed by phrases like "Socrates' being snubnosed" and "Gore's winning the election." As Plantinga later will stress, all states of affairs exist necessarily, yet only some of them are actual or obtain. Immediately after introducing states of affairs, he uses them to say what a possible world is, a maximal (or as he puts it here, "fully determinate") state of affairs, such that for every state of affairs A it either includes or precludes A. A state of affairs S includes a state of affairs A just in case it's not possible that S obtain and A fail to obtain, and a state of affairs S precludes a state of affairs A just in case it's not possible that S obtain and A obtain.

For each world, there will be a *book* on that world. A book is a maximal set of propositions, all of which are true in the world of which it is a book. Maximality here is analogous to maximality in the case of states of affairs: A set of propositions is maximal just in case for every proposition p the set either includes p or its complement p'.

Furthermore, Plantinga introduces the concepts of truth in a world and having properties in a world. A proposition p is true in a world W just in case necessarily, were W actual, p would be true. An object x has a property p in a world W just in case necessarily, were W actual, x would have p.

Finally, he introduces the notion of an *essence* or *haecceity*. Here he seems to think that they are equivalent notions; later he will claim that a haecceity is a type of essence, a primitive identity property expressed by phrases like "being Socrates" or "being identical with Socrates". To be sure, in this essay Plantinga includes these sorts of properties as essences. But it appears as though he isn't thinking of haecceities as a separate type of essence here. An essence or haecceity of an object x is a property that is essentially exemplified by x that entails all of x's essential properties and isn't possibly exemplified by anything distinct from x. Late in the essay, Plantinga points out that each of us has innumerably many essential properties. Consider any property p that is exemplified by an object x in a world W. It will be essential to x that it has the property

having p-in-W; in every world in which x exists, it has the property of *having p-in-W.* In addition, consider a property p that is uniquely exemplified by an object x in a world W. Then not only is *having p-in-W* essential to x, *having p-in-W* is an essence of x. That is, it is a property that is had essentially by x and is necessarily such that nothing distinct from x has it. Plantinga calls these sorts of properties "world-indexed properties."

The above metaphysical machinery lays the groundwork for Plantinga's thinking on issues in the metaphysics of modality to this day. However, there is still more in this essay. Plantinga addresses what he calls "the problem of transworld identification" and what others sometimes call "the problem of transworld identity" (Plantinga's terminology is better given the nature of the problem—though neither term is apt, given the meaning of the prefix "trans"). The difficulty is this. Suppose we say that Socrates possibly has p, though he actually lacks p. Then there is a nonactual possible world W in which Socrates has p. But how are we able to pick out Socrates from the myriad of other entities that inhabit W? What "empirically manifest" property will allow us correctly to identify the individual in W who is Socrates? This was a problem that those who are suspicious of modality, like Quine, used to great rhetorical effectiveness against those serious about modality, such as Plantinga. But as Plantinga points out, it is difficult to see what the problem *is.* Which individual in W is Socrates? Why, it's Socrates, that's who. Why does it matter whether in W Socrates has any sort of empirically manifest property (e.g., a sweatshirt that says in bright orange letters "I Am Socrates!") that will let us pick him out from other individuals in the world? We've stipulated that Socrates exists in W. Why must we do anything more?

There is one more item of considerable philosophical interest I'll address in introducing this essay. Plantinga, following Descartes in Meditation VI, develops a modal argument for dualism. That is, he moves from a modal claim like "Possibly I exist and there are no physical objects" to the conclusion that he is distinct from any material object. One may question the validity of the inference (and Plantinga does) from the premise to the conclusion in this case. It appears as though some additional premise is needed to make the argument valid. Plantinga supplies it: Necessarily, if x is material then x is essentially material. This will allow us to move from the possibility of the immateriality of an object to its actual immateriality, which is just what the argument does. It is worth noting that modal arguments for dualism (like this one) have received much scrutiny in the past thirty years; Plantinga in this essay thirty years ago helped to fuel the volume of work on modal arguments for dualism that came after his paper.

Plantinga begins where he left off in "World and Essence" by laying out the basic metaphysical framework he developed there and from which he will pursue further issues in the metaphysics of modality. In this paper he wants to focus on two topics, the "Theory of World-bound Individuals" (TWI) and the Problem of Transworld Identification (or Identity). The former is the claim that individuals exist in only one world; it's not possible for an individual to have any different properties than she actually has. A way of seeing the significance of this claim is to note that if anything about the world were different, nothing that actually exists would exist. The latter problem, the Problem of Transworld Identity we encountered before in "World and Essence."

Intuitively it seems as if I could have lacked any number of properties. I could have had blond hair or I could have been taller than I am. So what is the motivation for holding to TWI, a thesis that *prima facie* looks clearly to be false? Plantinga sets out two arguments, one from the absolute idealists and one from Leibniz. Both arguments are seen to rest on a misunderstanding of the Indiscernibility of Identicals (or "Leibniz's Law"). The principle normally is stated in such a way that it's easy to see how one might misapply it and conclude that TWI is true. Put in simple terms, Leibniz's Law is the claim that if x and y differ in any property, then x and y are distinct. Or conversely, if x and y are identical, then x has a property p iff y has p. Both arguments fail to appreciate that one must be careful when applying it to individuals across worlds (and across times). That is, the principle really should be thought of as applying to a given x and y at the same time in the same world.

Having shown two arguments for TWI to be wanting, Plantinga sets his sights on the allegedly intractable Problem of Transworld Identity. The "problem" seems to arise from a certain picture of possible worlds. Many people who champion the problem talk as if we're to imagine we're peering into other possible worlds and looking for the individual in question. As I noted in "World and Essence," it is as if the proponent of the Problem of Transworld Identity is demanding some sort of manifest property by which we can discern which individual is the one in question. But this is just an example of taking a sometimes-useful picture and abusing it. Do you want to know which person in W is Socrates? It's Socrates, that's who. Plantinga cleverly draws out an analogy between modality and time and points out that we don't demand some sort of empirically manifest property when we're judging transtemporal identity. Socrates no doubt looked quite different when he was a baby than when he was drinking hemlock at the end of his life. Yet we've no problem claiming that baby Socrates

is identical with old, bearded Socrates. The Problem of Transworld Identity is a problem that arises from confused thinking brought about by using a certain picture of possible worlds.

Having looked at arguments for TWI and noted that they are wanting, Plantinga turns to giving positive arguments against TWI. He notes again that it entails what we might call "superessentialism": the claim that I have all my properties essentially. This has absurd entailments. It entails that any proposition predicating of me the complement of any property I have is necessarily false. It also entails that any proposition predicating existence of an individual that actually exists entails every true proposition. Consider Plantinga's example, "Socrates exists." It's true in only one world, the actual world (call it "α"). So if it is true, then α is actual, which of course entails that every proposition that is true in α is true *simpliciter*. Thus, TWI appears to have some serious defects.

However, the proponent of TWI can enlist the aid of counterpart theory, an alternative semantic picture for modal discourse. On this theory, a sentence of the form "a is possibly F" is true iff one of a's counterparts is F. The counterpart relation is one of similarity; x is a counterpart of mine in W iff x is similar enough to me in the right sorts of ways. What sorts of ways are those? It depends on the context of the discussion and the interests of those involved in the modal discourse. An individual x might be my counterpart if we're emphasizing one sort of similarity, yet he may not be my counterpart under a different similarity relation. (See Lewis 1968 and 1986 for a detailed development of counterpart theory for modal discourse. See Plantinga 1974 for criticism of counterpart theory.)

So, though an individual only exists in one world (as per TWI), it is still possible for that individual to have different properties than she actually has. It just needs to be the case that she has counterparts in other worlds with the requisite properties. But problems lurk in the neighborhood. Consider the property *being identical with Socrates*. This clearly ought to be something that Socrates has essentially. But on counterpart theory, it's not had essentially by Socrates. Each of Socrates' counterparts lacks this property; TWI entails this in claiming that individuals are worldbound.

There are more problems that Plantinga brings out. TWI entails that I exist only in this world, α. So if things had gone any differently than they actually did go, I wouldn't have existed, for another world would be actual. If Castro had chosen to refrain from his morning cigar yesterday, I wouldn't have existed. Surely this consequence is absurd.

One might respond to this latter point that if the sentence "if Castro had chosen to refrain from his morning cigar yesterday, I wouldn't have existed" in the above objection is being read through the lens of a standard semantics for modal discourse, and if one reads

it through a counterpart-theoretic semantics, the sentence winds up expressing a false proposition. Let us suppose that this sentence would express a false proposition were we to evaluate it with counterpart semantics. Is it illegitimate to read it with a standard semantics, as the objection does? I think it is not. Even Lewis has to have some recourse to the standard semantics, at the very least in stating his theory. For instance, Lewis will admit that, strictly speaking (and according to a standard semantics for modal discourse) I exist in only one world. He couldn't say, for instance, that since I have a counterpart in another world who has the property *existence*, I exist in more than one world. When he gives the theory, he obviously isn't stating it in terms of itself—that is, in counterpart-theoretic terms. So, though Lewis could give a counterpart reading of the Castro sentence, strictly speaking Lewis would admit that it is true. After all, the statement simply states something that Lewis admits, that if a different world were actual, none of the concrete individuals in the actual world (read rigidly) would exist, though they might have counterparts that would. He can't totally avail himself of the standard modal semantics, and this is one point at which he can't.

There is a strong intuition that is deeply held by many philosophers who reject counterpart theory. Simply put, it is that the possession of a property by *someone else* in another world has nothing whatsoever to do with whether *I* possibly could have had that property. The proponent of counterpart theory will protest that this objection is little more than an outright denial of his theory. But for many philosophers, this very simple point—the fact that someone else in another world has a property has nothing to do with modal facts about me—gets at the heart of what is wrong with counterpart theory.

THE NATURE OF NECESSITY, CHAPTER VIII (1974)

The Nature of Necessity is Plantinga's book on the metaphysics of modality. It is a terrific work, a "treasure trove," as Peter van Inwagen puts it. Much of the book works out in greater detail some of the ideas that appeared in earlier papers. However, there is much that is new, too. I have selected the central chapter on nonexistent objects from this book for inclusion in this collection of essays.

There is a standard argument that has been given for the claim that there are nonexistent objects. Plantinga characterizes it as follows:

(1) There are negative singular existential propositions.
(2) Some of them are possibly true.
(3) In any world where a singular proposition is true, there is an entity that the proposition is about.

(4) There are true negative singular existential propositions, hence there are objects which these propositions are about.

(5) Hence there are objects that don't exist.

When we say "Socrates is snubnosed," it certainly looks like what we're doing is referring to Socrates and then predicating a property of him. Consider the sentence "Socrates does not exist." If we take note of its grammar, the grammatical similarity between the first sentence and the second would lead us to think that here too, we are referring to Socrates and predicating a property of him—*nonexistence.* But if this is true, Socrates must have some sort of positive ontological status. After all, we're referring to him. Hence, one might conclude, there are objects that don't exist.

Plantinga makes a distinction between those singular propositions that predicate a property of an object (e.g., *Socrates is snubnosed*) and those that deny a property of it (e.g., *Socrates is not snubnosed*). The former he dubs "predicative" and the latter "impredicative" singular propositions. He notes that there is a *de re/de dicto* ambiguity with some impredicative propositions (and our example is one of them). *Socrates is not snubnosed* could be read *de re* as *Socrates is nonsnubnosed* (and hence is *predicative*, it predicates the property of *nonsnubnosedness*); or *de dicto* (where the negation applies to the entire proposition) *It is false that Socrates is snubnosed.* Now we are in a position to reconsider our main argument for nonexistent objects. We might revise (3) as

(3') If a predicative singular proposition is true of a subject S in a world W, then S exists in W.

Plantinga is inclined to accept (3'). (We'll see why momentarily.) Now, what does the argument look like if we replace (3) with (3')? If we do this, we need it to be the case that the negative singular propositions we're using to motivate the claim that there are nonexistent objects are predicative (e.g., *Socrates has nonexistence*). This is what is required by the antecedent of (3'). Plantinga denies that any true singular negative existential propositions are predicative. All true singular negative existential propositions are impredicative. All are of the form *It is false that S exists.* Why think this? Plantinga thinks that objects have no properties, not even *nonexistence,* in worlds in which they don't exist. This is a view which he later comes to call "serious actualism." So, the standard argument above is seen to be flawed, once we correctly understand its third premise and see the truth of serious actualism.

The rest of the chapter deals with the interesting question of the metaphysical status of fictional creatures. Here we have yet another argument for nonexistent objects—the truth of fictional propositions. It could be stated as follows. It is true that, for example, Hamlet is

male. We have here a sentence that refers to an object and predicates a property of that object. But Hamlet clearly doesn't exist. Therefore, there are nonexistent objects. Plantinga rejects this argument, in part because he doesn't think that fictional names are referring terms. In some sense, this clearly is true. It is false that Hamlet exists (in the real world). "Hamlet" doesn't refer to anything in the actual world.[1] Yet, we do say it is true (in the fiction *Hamlet*) that Hamlet is male. So, if fictional terms don't refer at all, how can we account for the truth of this claim? If proper names don't refer in fictional contexts, how do they function?

Plantinga thinks that in telling a story, a storyteller directs the attention of the audience to various propositions (along with mental images and the like). In the most basic cases, the proposition expressed would be expressed by an existentially quantified sentence (e.g., "There is an x, and x=George, and x is tall. . . ."). In more complex cases there will be multiple propositions like the one above, both about George and other characters. For each character in a fiction, Plantinga thinks that there is such an existentially quantified sentence that expresses what he calls a *Story Line*. So in fictional discourse, the storyteller is directing our attention to various Story Lines. All sorts of hard questions remain, though. Does the Story Line include obvious truths, like the fact that 2+2=4? Does it include truths not explicitly mentioned in the sentence expressing the Story Line, the fact that George was taller than a gopher? What about unmentioned facts—does George have a favorite ice cream? Plantinga suggests that with these latter sorts of cases, it's indeterminate as to what their answer is.

Now the storyteller doesn't assert that the various Story Lines are true in reality. He merely calls our attention to them and invites us to entertain them. There is some sense in which the sentences he utters express true propositions; if we affix something like "In the story" (basically a true-in-fiction operator) to these sentences, we will get sentences that express true propositions.

"Actualism and Possible Worlds" (1976)

This is one of Plantinga's most important and impressive essays in the metaphysics of modality. Plantinga is concerned here with setting out a metaphysics of modality in an actualist mode. Actualism, as Plantinga defines it (he gets the term from Adams 1974), is the claim that there aren't and could not be any nonexistent objects. We saw before that Plantinga wants to avoid nonexistent objects. So his commitment to actualism is nothing new; he has come to label a position he already held.

Plantinga begins by laying out very clearly the sort of metaphysical picture that standard Kripke-semantics for modal logic would suggest. I won't go into details on this picture, called by Plantinga the "Canonical Conception" of modal metaphysics, since Plantinga's lucid exposition needs no further elaboration. Of particular importance in the Canonical Conception is the union U of all individuals in α and every other world. Since it is plausible to suppose that U includes individuals not in α, the Canonical Conception leads very naturally to the view that there are nonexistent objects. Plantinga points out that we could weaken this claim and still violate actualism: we could show that it is possible that there be nonexistent objects. We do this simply by noting that surely there is some world W that is such that U contains an individual that doesn't exist in W. It's possible that the domain of all individuals, actual and possible, include at least one individual who doesn't exist in some world. This is to say that it is possible for there to be nonexistent objects, which is a violation of actualism.

Plantinga sets out his own metaphysics of modality in contrast to that of the Canonical Conception. There are noteworthy places where the two metaphysical pictures differ. Consider properties. On the Canonical Conception, properties are functions from worlds to sets of individuals (we can ignore relations for simplicity), or alternatively, sets of ordered pairs, whose first member is a world and second is a set of individuals. Usually, on this second way of looking at things, the world part of the ordered pair is dropped, and properties are thought of as sets of individuals. On this picture, we can see that properties can exist contingently. Plantinga's example is the property *being Quine*, which on the Canonical Conception just is Quine's singleton set. But it exists iff Quine does. In worlds where Quine doesn't exist, neither will his singleton, and hence neither will the property *being Quine*. This is problematic, though, because it seems quite reasonable to suppose that properties are necessarily existing entities. The problem is that sets are ontologically dependent on the existence of their members, whereas properties aren't dependent on the individuals that instantiate them.

There are other differences. On the Canonical Conception logically equivalent propositions are identical. So "2+2=4" and "No circle is a square" express the same proposition. Yet, intuitively they don't express the same proposition.[2] Also, possible worlds and propositions end up existing contingently on this picture. On the Canonical Conception possible worlds have their domain of individuals essentially. Suppose my coffee cup didn't exist. Then the domain of existing objects would be lacking one object it actually has. But then the actual world α wouldn't exist, for it has its domain of objects essentially. This quickly leads to the contingency of propositions, for if propositions are sets of worlds, were my coffee cup not to exist, neither would any proposition that contained α as a member.

Of note in this chapter is a method of "reducing" *de dicto* modal claims to *de re* modal claims. Simply put, the *res* in question will be the proposition in question, and the property ascribed to it will be some modal property (*being possible*, for instance). So we can take the *de dicto* claim *It is possible that Socrates is snubnosed* and note that it is equivalent to the claim that *Socrates is snubnosed* has the property *being possible*. Earlier in "De Re et De Dicto" we had a "reduction" that went the other way, from *de re* to *de dicto*.

Also of note in this chapter is Plantinga's acceptance of the fact that necessarily, objects have *existence* essentially. This may seem implausible at first, which is why Plantinga found the claim to be "dubious" in "De Re et De Dicto." But really, the claim is harmless and follows naturally from understanding what it is to have a property essentially. An object o has a property p essentially iff o has p in every world in which o exists. Clearly o exists in every world o exists. So o has *existence* essentially. But we must be careful to distinguish this claim from the claim that o exists necessarily, or in every possible world. Socrates has existence essentially, but exists contingently. Among necessarily existing individuals are properties, propositions, states of affairs and possible worlds, and if the Ontological Argument is sound, God. To say that possible worlds exists necessarily is to say that each world exists in every world, which paves the way for understanding the possibility relation between worlds as an equivalence relation. (S5).[3]

Plantinga, in response to an objection to actualism, makes use of individual essences to go "proxy" for nonexistent objects when making certain modal statements. This is something that most actualists today do when they need to be able to say things that *prima facie* look to commit them to the existence of nonexistent objects. (The same goes for presentism about time.) Suppose the actualist wanted to say that it's possible that there exist an object distinct from any in α. How could the actualist say this? Plantinga makes use of individual essences, which exist necessarily. To say that it is possible that there exist an individual distinct from any individual in α is to say that there is an unexemplified individual essence that is exemplified in some other world W. (An essence of an individual S is exemplified in a world W just in case necessarily, were W actual, S would exist.)

We turn now to Plantinga's main contribution to the philosophy of language.

"THE BOETHIAN COMPROMISE" (1978)

In this chapter Plantinga argues for a particular sort of Fregean view about names: a conception on which names express properties that determine the reference of the name. He begins by noting difficulties

for the Millian about proper names. A Millian believes, with John Stuart Mill, that names don't express properties that are their contents that determine their reference; the semantic content of a proper name just is the individual to which the name refers. Classically there are four sorts of problems the Millian must confront.[4] First, if the content of a name is the object it denotes, what do we say about empty names? It would appear that they are contentless. This is problematic when we consider sentences that have empty names, for it's difficult to see how such a sentence could express a proposition. Suppose Noah never existed. Consider the sentence, "Noah built an ark." If "Noah" is empty, hence contentless on the Millian view, it is difficult to see how this sentence could express a proposition. Yet surely it does express a proposition; it's not as though such a sentence is meaningless. The Fregean is free to say that empty terms have a content (a property or properties) even if the term doesn't refer.

Second, what about true negative existentials? Suppose I utter "Hamlet doesn't exist." I'm saying something true with this statement. Yet how could I express a proposition with this utterance if "Hamlet" is empty, and hence contentless? The Fregean is free to say that "Hamlet" expresses a property or properties and can construe the true negative existential as a statement about this property or these properties (something to the effect that the property or properties in question aren't exemplified).

Third, the Millian has problems with opaque contexts. Suppose the Superman stories were true. Then Clark Kent=Superman, and on the Millian picture these names have identical contents, the man Clark/Superman. But if this is true, how can it be that Lois can believe that Superman is strong without believing that Clark Kent is strong? Both of these sentences express the same proposition; they say the same thing. The Fregean is free to say that "Clark Kent" and "Superman" express different properties and hence make different semantic contributions to the propositions expressed by the sentences in which they appear. This is to say that the two sentences can express different propositions on a Fregean view.

Last, it appears as though a Millian will have problems explaining the significance of some identity statements. "Superman" and "Clark Kent" mean the same thing on a Millian picture, so the claim "Superman is Superman" *prima facie* should be no more or less informative than the claim "Clark is Superman." Yet surely the latter can be informative while the former is not. The Fregean can explain this by claiming that the two names here express different properties and hence the two sentences above will express different propositions.

(I should note that in spite of these objections, many, perhaps most, of the philosophers of language today are Millians.)

There is a problem with the Fregean view, though. Most people

think that proper names are rigid designators; they denote the same object in each world in which that object exists. The sorts of definite descriptions that express the contents of names on a Fregean picture don't appear to be rigid designators. Suppose the name "Cain" expresses the property expressed by the definite description "the man who killed Abel." It seems that this definite description can pick out different people in different counterfactual circumstances, while it seems the name "Cain" picks out the man Cain in any counterfactual circumstance. One way to see this is to note that "Cain is Cain" is necessarily true, while "Cain is the man who killed Abel" is contingently true. Other people could have killed Abel.

This point is made forcefully by Kripke (1980). However, Plantinga has the resources to solve this problem within a generally Fregean framework. Following Boethius, Plantinga claims that proper names express essences. In particular, they express world-indexed essences (or the properties expressed by α-transforms of definite descriptions, as Plantinga puts it). So while it is a contingent matter that Cain killed Abel, it is a necessary truth that *in α Cain killed Abel.* Plantinga has proper names express these world-indexed properties, each of which is essential to the individual who instantiates them. In particular, there is a subclass of these properties, those whose "non α-transformed" segment of the property is uniquely instantiated, that will be (individual) essences of the individual who instantiates them. The description "in α the man who killed Abel" will refer to Cain and only Cain in any world in which he exists. Hence, "Cain" will turn out to be a rigid designator on Plantinga's view. Plantinga has devised a view that inherits all the benefits of a Fregean view, and allows for names to be rigid designators. It is a clever theory indeed.

More particularly, coreferring names can express semantically and epistemically inequivalent world-indexed properties. So "Superman" might express *being the strongest man alive in α,* "Clark Kent" might express *being the weakest man at the Daily Planet in α.* This will allow Plantinga to account for the significance of some identity statements and the problem of opacity just the way a standard Fregean would. This view is a shift from the position he held in 1974 in *The Nature of Necessity.* There he thought that names expressed haecceities. By 1978 he thinks that they express a different sort of individual essence, one that allows for coreferring names to differ in cognitive significance.

Plantinga shows how he can incorporate intuitions that the referent of proper names is fixed causally by world-indexing a causal description and having its content function as the content of a proper name. So, being the person who *bears* R to "Socrates" in α where "R" designates the desired causal relation, could serve as the content of "Socrates." He also shows how one can world-index Searle's "cluster theory" of proper names. Searle believes that proper names express

the property *having enough of the Si*, where Si is a cluster of descriptive properties. World-indexing this content will allow one to keep Searlean intuitions while at the same time allowing for rigid designation.

One very interesting consequence of Plantinga's view is that if a term that has a world-indexed property or properties as a content is empty, sentences that use the name as a referring term turn out to express necessary falsehoods. Suppose no one killed Abel, and the content of "Cain" is *being the man who killed Abel in* α. Then any proposition "about" Cain will be a necessary falsehood. So *Cain is tall* will turn out to be necessarily false, since no one satisfies the content of "Cain" in any world. I don't think that this tells against his view or helps it either, but it is worth noting.

"DE ESSENTIA" (1979)

This chapter appeared in a *Festschrift* for Roderick Chisholm, and thus Plantinga spends some time dealing with issues in Chisholm's philosophy. The content of the paper makes it an ancestor of his seminal paper "On Existentialism" at which we will look next. Plantinga begins the essay by laying out his account of essences. He then takes up a claim of Chisholm's, that it is impossible for one individual to grasp another's essence. Plantinga finds this dubious, though perhaps there is more to the claim than one might think at first (see Davidson 2000b, forthcoming). He introduces the term *serious actualism* for the claim that an object has properties in a world only if it exists in that world. As we saw, this is a proposition he accepts in "World and Essence" and in chapter VIII of *The Nature of Necessity*. Now the proposition has a name. Plantinga thinks that it follows from actualism. This is a claim he will take back and then later embrace in some of his later work.[5]

Plantinga divides properties into two kinds, those that make essential reference to an individual (like *being Socrates*) and those that don't (like *being a mountain climber*). The first sort of property he calls "quidditative"; the latter he calls "qualitative."

The bulk of this paper is focused on exploring and critiquing a view Plantinga calls "existentialism." Existentialism is the view that singular propositions and quidditative properties depend for their existence on the objects they are "about." Many people (direct reference theorists in particular) hold to the claim that individuals are constituents of singular propositions. If propositions have their constituents essentially, one can see why such a person would be an existentialist. If one thinks of haecceities as "thisnesses" (see Adams 1979), it might seem natural to accept the second thesis of existentialism; if there is no "this" as it were, how could there be a thisness?

Plantinga considers whether an essence could consist wholly of qualitative properties.[6] To him it looks as if for any collection of qualitative properties, it is possible that more than one individual exemplify them (in different worlds). So he rejects the claim that an essence could be constructed of wholly qualitative properties.

It is a common existentialist maneuver to distinguish the possible from the possibly true. Consider the proposition *Socrates does not exist.* This proposition is possible, according to the existentialist, though not possibly true. It can be true only if it exists, and it exists only if Socrates exists, in which case it would be false. So "being possible" is weaker than "being possibly true." These two modalities have duals, naturally enough. The dual of weak possibility is strong necessity and the dual of strong possibility is weak necessity. These relationships will become clearer when we look at some of the uses to which the existentialist puts them. There is a third sort of possibility, possible truth in a world. This, supposedly, would be even stronger than possible truth. But for our purposes the first two senses of possibility and their duals are most important.

One reasonably might ask what it could mean to say that something is possible but not possibly true. The only sense that Plantinga can make out of this is to say that if something is possible, yet not possibly true, it is possibly non-false. *Socrates does not exist* is not possibly true, but it is possibly non-false: In worlds where Socrates does not exist, neither does this proposition, and hence it has no truth value at such worlds.

Plantinga raises some devastating counterexamples to existentialism and these varying notions of possibility. The existentialist wants to say that possible non-falsehood is possibly enough; we can use this notion to explain how it is true that it is possible that Socrates not exist. Though the proposition *Socrates does not exist* is not possibly true, neither is it necessarily false. Again, when Socrates does not exist, this proposition won't exist and hence won't be false. But there are many propositions that are "possible" in this sense. Consider the proposition *Socrates is a philosopher and Socrates is not a philosopher.* It is possible in just the same sense as *Socrates does not exist* is possible. But surely this shows that this sense of possibility, which is weaker than possible truth, is far too weak to capture the possibility involved in the proposition *Socrates does not exist.* In fact, the denial of the existentialist's own thesis comes out true on this weak sense of possibility. The existentialist wants to say that it's not possible for Socrates not to exist and either singular propositions about Socrates or Socrates' essences exist. Let E be one of these two sorts of entities. So the existentialist wants to claim that it's impossible that *E exists and Socrates does not exist.* But it is clear that this claim is possible on the existentialist's weaker sense of possibility. It is possibly non-false; in worlds where Socrates

does not exist, this conjunctive proposition won't exist, either; hence it won't be false at these worlds. The existentialist appears to be hoist on his own petard.

Plantinga concludes that for propositions, the only sense of possibility is possible truth. He does concede that there might be two senses of possibility for sentence tokens. Consider the token "There are no sentence tokens." In no world is it true; however, there are worlds in which it doesn't exist and hence isn't false. It might be said to be possible, though not possibly true, because of the existence of such worlds.

"On Existentialism" (1983)

Here Plantinga deepens and expands on his exploration and critique of existentialism. Again, existentialism is the view that quidditative properties and singular propositions are dependent for their existence on the objects they are "about." Plantinga considers two arguments for the thesis and one, at length, against it. The first argument for existentialism is the sort of appeal to intuition we saw in "De Essentia." Isn't it just clear that *being Socrates* or *being this person* (that is, Socrates) are dependent on the existence of the person they are about? As we expressed it earlier, "How can there be a 'thisness' if there is no 'this?'"

The second argument is that on certain views of content, concrete individuals can be constituents of propositions. Propositions presumably have their constituents essentially if they have constituents. So, were the person who is the subject of the singular proposition not to exist, neither would that proposition.

Plantinga finds neither of these arguments persuasive. His intuitions aren't in accord with the first argument, and he finds the nature of constituency to be unclear. He's not quite sure what it is to be a constituent of a proposition, and he has even less of an idea when it's a physical object that is being considered for constituenthood.

The real meat of this paper lies in his argument against existentialism. It is similar to an argument given by Fine (1977), who claims that he found the argument in Prior's work. However, as far as I know, no one else states it and examines it with the rigor Plantinga does.[7] I will state it, using the premise numbers Plantinga uses in the text.

(3) Possibly, Socrates does not exist.

(4) If (3) then the proposition *Socrates does not exist* is possible.

(5) If the proposition *Socrates does not exist* is possible it is possibly true.

(6) Necessarily, if *Socrates does not exist* had been true, then *Socrates does not exist* would have existed.

(7) Necessarily, if *Socrates does not exist* had been true, then Socrates would not have existed.

(8) (From (3), (4), and (5)) *Socrates does not exist* is possibly true.

(9) (From (6) and (7)) Necessarily, if *Socrates does not exist* had been true, then *Socrates does not exist* would have existed and Socrates would not have existed.

(10) (From (8) and (9)) It is possible that both Socrates does not exist and the proposition *Socrates does not exist* exists.

Let us consider the argument as Plantinga has presented it. He takes (4) to be relatively uncontroversial, though he very briefly addresses an objection to it. (6) follows from serious actualism; if a proposition has *being true* in a world, it exists in that world. Here Plantinga doesn't think that actualism entails serious actualism. Previously he did, and he will again in the next essay we examine. But here he thinks it doesn't follow from actualism alone, though he certainly thinks it's true.

He considers one argument against serious actualism that rests on a blurring of the predicative/impredicative distinction. It goes as follows. Consider a world in which Socrates doesn't exist. *Socrates is not tall* is true in such a world. This is to say that Socrates has the property of *being non-tall*, which contradicts serious actualism. We saw this sort of argument arise when we looked at the selection from *The Nature of Necessity*. There we noted a *de dicto/de re* ambiguity in statements like "Socrates is not tall." This sentence might express the proposition *Socrates has the property of being non-tall* or it might express the proposition *It's false that Socrates is tall.* When Socrates does not exist, we take it to express the latter proposition. So this really isn't a good objection to serious actualism, and (6) seems acceptable.

The argument with respect to (5) follows very closely the argument concerning weak possibility from "De Essentia." Plantinga examines weak possibility and its dual as a way of showing that (5) is false. But the weak sense of possibility is far too permissive, as we saw in "De Essentia," and thus the hopes of having a proposition that is possible yet not possibly true are dashed. (7) is uncontroversial, and the rest of the premises follow from previous premises.

"Reply to John L. Pollock" (1985)

This piece nicely illustrates much of Plantinga's current thinking on the metaphysics of modality. It is taken from a collection of essays on Plantinga's work (see Tomberlin and van Inwagen 1985), and this particular essay was written in response to John Pollock's contribution to the work. Since it is a response to particular objections, the piece isn't as fluid as a normal paper, and what is said about it here also will be piecemeal.

Plantinga begins by trying to make sense of the claim that there are objects that don't exist. Call this position "possibilism." Plantinga wants the first quantifier to be read as widely as one would like, so that it ranges over Meinongian possible and impossible objects and Lewisian possibilia if there are such creatures. So the possibilist is claiming something significant when he says that there are some objects that don't exist; it's not equivalent to the obvious contradiction "There exist objects that don't exist."

In his essay Pollock proposes *nonexistence* as a property that objects have in worlds where they don't exist. This would violate serious actualism, however. Plantinga gives an argument to the conclusion that necessarily, *nonexistence* is unexemplified. It proceeds as follows:

(1) Necessarily, for every property p, if p is exemplified, then there is (read this quantifier as widely as you like) something that exemplifies p.

(2) Necessarily, for every property p, whatever exemplifies p exists (from actualism).

(3) Necessarily, if *nonexistence* is exemplified, then it is exemplified by something that exists (which is impossible).

(4) Therefore, necessarily, *nonexistence* is unexemplified.

Plantinga has had a change of heart from "On Existentialism"; he thinks that there is a good argument from actualism to serious actualism. It goes as follows.

Consider a world W in which Socrates exemplifies any property p.

(5) Necessarily, if Socrates exemplifies p, he exemplifies p and *existence* or he exemplifies p and *nonexistence*.

(6) Necessarily, *nonexistence* is unexemplified (from (4) above).

(7) Therefore, necessarily, if Socrates exemplifies p, he exemplifies *existence*.

So it appears as though there is a good argument from actualism to serious actualism.[8]

In response to some arguments Pollock makes, Plantinga distinguishes between satisfying a condition *at* a world as opposed to satisfying a condition *in* a world. He argues that the condition -(x exists) is satisfied *at* many worlds, but *in* none. His argument is very similar to the one above for the conclusion that *nonexistence* isn't possibly exemplified.

He begins with a conception of what it is to satisfy a condition in a world: An object x satisfies a condition C in a world W if and only if necessarily, if W had been actual, then x would satisfy C. Then, the argument proceeds as follows.

(8) Necessarily, for any condition C, if C is satisfied there is (in as wide a sense as one likes) something that satisfies it.

(9) Necessarily, for any condition C, whatever satisfies C exists (actualism).

(10) Necessarily, If -(x exists) is satisfied, it is satisfied by something that exists (from (9)).

(11) Therefore, necessarily, -(x exists) is unsatisfied.

Plantinga distinguishes between satisfying a condition at a world and satisfying a condition *in* a world. He takes the above argument to show that Socrates satisfies -(x exists) in no world. However, he grants that he can satisfy this condition at worlds; he satisfies it at any world in which he doesn't exist. Plantinga thinks that Pollock may be confusing the two notions.

One important distinction comes out in Pollock's piece that Plantinga accepts: The states of affairs that compose a possible world must be temporally invariant (if they obtain, there is no time at which they don't obtain). Otherwise, which world is actual could change over time, and this is not desirable.

"Two Concepts of Modality: Modal Realism and Modal Reductionism" (1987)

People often call David Lewis a modal realist (usually it's "extreme modal realist"). However, Plantinga wants to argue in this paper that Lewis is no realist about matters modal at all. So *prima facie* Plantinga is making a quite interesting claim.

Plantinga begins by laying out what he calls three grades of modal realism. Grade I is that there are necessary and contingent propositions, and objects have essential and accidental properties. Grade II is that there are possible worlds, which are temporally invariant maximal states of affairs. Grade III is that objects have properties in worlds, and there are individual essences.

He then turns to Lewis's modal metaphysics. Lewis is very similar in some regards to his teacher Quine. Like Quine, Lewis thinks that basically there are concrete objects and sets. Lewis will use these to "construct" a whole host of different entities.[9] For Lewis, possible worlds are concrete objects, each spatiotemporally unrelated to any other. Objects exist only in one world; they are worldbound. But they do have counterparts, objects distinct from them that resemble them in certain ways. Propositions are sets of worlds, properties are sets of individuals, and individual essences are sets of counterparts.

Plantinga's contention is that really all Lewis is doing is choosing entities to *model* things like propositions, properties, and possible worlds. Yet these are but weak surrogates for the real thing, Plantinga contends. For instance, intuitively propositions and properties are much more fine-grained than they are on Lewis's conceptions of

them. Furthermore, propositions are supposed to be the sorts of things that are true and false, and they are supposed to be capable of being the objects of our attitudes. Yet sets are neither true nor false; nor are they the sorts of things that can be believed or entertained. So Plantinga's contention is that Lewis is at best a modal reductionist, and he's certainly no modal realist. The sorts of things he offers up as possible worlds, propositions, and properties at best partially fit the role they are supposed to play.

Lewis thinks that we have no well-defined concepts of possible worlds, propositions, or properties. We have different ways of making these concepts precise. On some ways of making these concepts precise, sets and large concrete objects will do just fine. On other ways of making them precise, for example sets might not completely fill the "proposition" role. But to insist on one precise conception of any of these entities is to miss the semantic indecision that we exhibit with respect to these terms. What we have here are rough roles, and different entities can play these roles, depending on which elements of the roles we want to stress.

Plantinga doesn't buy any of this. He's certainly willing to grant that our concepts of properties, propositions, and possible worlds may not be totally precise, but they're also not so nebulous as to allow things like sets to count as propositions and properties. Our concepts are better defined than Lewis thinks they are, and we can do better than insist that at best what we have are rough roles that different objects may play. There are several essential features of our concepts of these entities, and anything that lacks these features just can't be counted as satisfying these concepts.

So at best what Lewis is doing, according to Plantinga, is modeling certain properties of things like properties, propositions, and possible worlds. But that's *all* he's doing—modeling—and the models he proposes should not to be confused with the real things they're modeling.

"Why Propositions Cannot Be Concrete" (1993)

One might be tempted to identify propositions with something concrete. For instance, they might be sentences in the language of thought. Or they might be sentence tokens on a page. Plantinga wants to argue that no physical object can be a proposition.

There is an immediate problem with identifying propositions with physical objects. It certainly appears possible that there be no physical objects. If this were the case, we should want to say that the proposition *there are no physical objects* is true. But we can't say this, for the very proposition we're affirming is itself a physical object and wouldn't exist in such worlds. Because of serious actualism, this proposition couldn't be true in such worlds.

The person who wants to identify propositions with something physical can't say then that this proposition would be true if there were no physical objects. It wouldn't exist in order to be true if there were no physical objects. Supposedly it is possible for no physical objects to exist, though. So the concretist will want to say that it is possible that there are no physical objects without it being possibly true that there are no physical objects, for this would require the existence of a physical object—a proposition. Can we make sense of a notion of possibility other than possible truth? We did so in the case of existentialism. Possibility in that instance was possible non-falsity, and it looks like that will be the case here, as well. It is possible that it is not false that there are no physical objects. So we again find occasion for a weaker sense of possibility. However, we've also seen that there are serious problems with affirming that possible non-falsity is possibility enough. The proposition $2+2=5$ is possibly non-false; in a world in which there are no physical objects, it won't be false (since it won't exist). So it looks like this appeal to a weaker sense of possibility in order to rescue the intuition that it's possible that there be no physical objects fails.

We'll also have occasion for a weaker sense of necessity due to the contingency of physical objects. We can't say that what it is for a proposition to be necessarily true is for it to be true in every world, since some worlds will have no physical objects and hence no true propositions. We must weaken our notion of necessity to something like: a proposition is necessary if it is true in every world in which it exists. $2+2=4$ is true in every world in which it exists and hence is necessary. However, there are propositions that are true in every world in which they exist that appear to be contingent. Consider the proposition *There are physical objects*. If this proposition exists, it's *ipso facto* true since it itself is a physical object. Hence it's necessary. Yet intuitively this proposition is not necessary; surely it's possible that there not be physical objects.

The moral to draw from all this is that it's possible that propositions be physical objects.

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Notes

1. There are views on which fictional creatures are abstract objects, so "Hamlet" would refer. See Salmon 1998.

2. See Stalnaker 1976, 1984; and Lewis 1986 for responses to this objection.

3. See Chandler 1976 and Salmon 1981, 1986 for reasons for thinking that the possibility relation between worlds isn't S5.

4. The literature here is vast; I point the reader to Recanati 1993 for a good overview of the territory in contemporary philosophy of language. See also Davidson, forthcoming. I also should say that the responses to each of these objections are numerous. However, my role is to introduce the reader to Plantinga's thought, and giving each of these problems its due would take us too far away from Plantinga's own thought.

5. For more on serious actualism, see Bergmann 1996, 1999, Hudson 1997, and Davidson 2000a, 2000b, forthcoming.

6. See Adams 1981 for more on this.

7. See Davidson 2000a for further application and examination of this sort of argument.

8. See Bergmann 1996; 1999; Hudson 1996; and Davidson 2000a, forthcoming, for more on this.

9. See Lewis 1986, p. 64, where he states that he is undecided as to whether there are tropes or immanent universals.

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