

(Serious) actualism and Russellianism

PHIL 93515

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In class we discussed a seeming conflict between Russellian views which allow objects to be constituents of propositions, and the (serious) actualist view that no object can have a property without existing. The basis for the argument is provided by Al's paper 'On existentialism'. Here is a sketch of the argument from that paper.

(One point is worth noting, that I skipped over in class: the argument is directed at the view that some propositions about contingently existing objects only exist if those objects do. Many have taken this to be a natural consequence of Russellianism, thinking that if an object is a constituent of a proposition, then the proposition can't exist unless that object does. But, as Al notes, it is possible to avoid the argument by denying that this is a consequence of Russellianism.)

The argument (in a condensed version):

1. Possibly, Socrates does not exist. (premise)
 2. It is possible that the proposition *that Socrates does not exist* is true. (1)
 3. Necessarily, if the proposition *that Socrates does not exist* is true, then the proposition *that Socrates does not exist* exists. (serious actualism)
 4. Necessarily, if the proposition *that Socrates does not exist* is true, then Socrates does not exist. (trivial)
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- C. It is possible that the proposition *that Socrates does not exist* exists even though Socrates does not.

Given this set-up of the argument, we can see that one of the responses to it that we discussed in class misses the mark. The suggestion was something like this:

'Socrates does not exist' is equivalent to ' \neg Socrates exists.' But perhaps ' $\neg S$ ' is true even if ' S ' lacks a truth value. So all that we need to solve the problem is a world in which 'Socrates exists' lacks a truth value. And surely the Russellian can claim that this is so in any world in which Socrates fails to exist — in such a world, 'Socrates exists' would fail to express a full proposition, and so would lack a truth value, and so 'Socrates does not exist' would be true.

The problem with this as a response to the above argument is that it confuses the question of whether a sentence S is true as used in some possible world w with the question of whether the proposition we actually use S to express is true with respect to w . For this to be relevant to the above argument, the following inference would have to be valid:

1. S actually expresses the proposition p .
 2. S , as used in w , expresses a truth.
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- C. p is true with respect to w .

But this inference is not valid. '2+2=5' could have been used to express a truth in some possible world; that would not make that a world in which the proposition that 2+2=5 was true.

There are two main responses to Plantinga's argument for Russellians who accept the assumption that propositions involving objects can't exist without the objects existing.

1. Give up serious actualism (P3), and say that propositions can have the property of being true without existing. For a defense of this position, the best place to look is Salmon, 'Nonexistence'.
2. Deny the validity of the move from P1 to P2: 'Possibly, S ' can be true even if the proposition (actually) expressed by S is not true in any possible world. This has been defended by Kit Fine and Arthur Prior. Here's one way to develop this thought, which Plantinga discusses: we distinguish between having truth essentially and having truth necessarily. In particular, letting ' p ' stand for propositions:

- p is true necessarily iff p is true in every possible world.
- p is true essentially iff p is true in every possible world in which p exists.

If truth entails existence, then a proposition can have truth necessarily iff it exists in every possible world.

Then, using this distinction, we give the following truth conditions for 'Possibly, S ':

'Possibly, S ' is true iff the proposition expressed by ' S ' does not have falsehood necessarily (i.e., is not false in some possible world).

This account of sentences of the form 'Possibly, S ' blocks the move from P1 to P2, since 'Possibly, S ' can be true without there being any world in which the proposition expressed by ' S ' both exists and is true.

Plantinga raises a serious problem for this view. First, note that this view will license the truth of lots of sentences which appear to be false:

Possibly, Socrates is non-self-identical.

Possibly, Socrates is wise and unwise.

Worse, the following looks logically valid:

Socrates is non-self-identical

 Something is non-self-identical.

This indicates that if 'Possibly, Socrates is non-self-identical' is true, so should be 'Possibly, something is non-self-identical.' But the latter is, even given the above truth conditions for 'Possibly, S ', false.