

David, Buridan, and existentialism defended (! not ?)

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1 Buridan's distinction & the distinction between context and circumstance

Marian and Al call attention to the fact that the analogue of premise (3) in the original argument, but switched from propositions to sentences, seems false. As Marian says:

“take the sentence:

(12) There are no sentences.

This sentence is possible in the sense that the proposition (in our sense) it actually expresses in English, the proposition that there are no sentences, could have been true: the sentence expresses a proposition that is possibly true. However, the sentence itself is not possibly true, i.e. it isn't possible that the sentence is true: (12) could not have been true, at least not in English as it is actually spoken. For this sentence is true in English only if the proposition it actually expresses in English is true. But the sentence expresses in English the proposition that there are no sentences; and if this proposition were true, then the sentence would not exist, hence it would not be true in English as it is actually spoken.”

Remember premise (3) of the original argument:

(3) If possibly Socrates does not exist, the proposition *that Socrates does not exist* is possibly true.

Switched from propositions to sentences, it says:

(3*) If possibly Socrates does not exist, the sentence ‘Socrates does not exist’ is possibly true.

Remember that in this context ‘possibly true’ means ‘has the property true in some possible world.’ What Buridan, and Marian and Al, are pointing out is that sentences of the form of (3*) will not, invariably, be true. To use an example of Marian’s, consider:

(3**) If possibly the name ‘Socrates’ does not exist, the sentence ‘The name ‘Socrates’ does not exist’ is possibly true.

Why is (3**) false? It’s important to see that we are not exploiting the fact that sentences, unlike propositions, have different meanings in different worlds; on the contrary, the falsity of (3**) rests on the assumption that the interpretation of the sentence is being kept constant from world to world. Rather, (3**) is false because the condition for the truth of ‘The name ‘Socrates’ does not exist’ is met by a world only if the name ‘Socrates’ does not exist. That is, the condition for the truth of the sentence entails that the sentence does not exist.

The falsity of (3**) is an illustration of the distinction between context and circumstance familiar from the double-indexing semantics that we discussed earlier. Given a sentence and context, we can ask whether the sentence, as used in that context, is true with respect to an arbitrary possible state of the world.

Some points to note:

- There’s nothing especially mysterious about the idea that a sentence might be true in every context (‘I am here’) but not (given the present context) in every circumstance, or true relative to the present context in every circumstance (‘I am JS’) but not in every context.
- Just so, there’s nothing mysterious about the idea that a sentence could be true with respect to at least one circumstance of evaluation but false at every context. Consider ‘I am not here now’, ‘I do not exist’, or the above sort of example, ‘Sentences do not exist.’ A sentence’s being false in every context in this way does not entail that the sentence expresses a necessary falsehood.
- Our usual way of talking about these things might give rise to the idea that there is an ambiguity in our talk about the truth of sentences: sometimes we mean ‘true at the context’ and other times ‘true at some circumstance.’ But this is a mistake. We always consider a sentence relative to a context of utterance, and ask whether it is true with respect to some circumstance. Sometimes, of course, the circumstance will just be the world and time of the context, and that’s what we call ‘true at a context’; but it is clear that ‘true at a context’ is just a special case of the ordinary notion of truth with respect to a circumstance.

The key point here is that given a sentence and a context of use, we can ask whether that sentence is true or false with respect to an arbitrary state of the world, which might or might not include the sentence. What we have to figure out is whether something like this might be true for propositions as well as sentences.

2 Existentialism and truth conditions

2.1 Three kinds of truth conditions

Let's state the lesson of the foregoing as follows: a truth condition for a sentence S (as used in a given context) is a property that world w has iff S is true with respect to w .

The truth condition C for a sentence S might be related to S in three ways:

1. It might be existence-entailing: if w instantiates C , then S exists at C (example: 'This sentence exists.')
2. It might be nonexistence-entailing: if w instantiates C , then S does not exist at C ('The name 'Socrates' does not exist.')
3. It might be nonexistence-independent: if w instantiates C , then S might or might not exist at C

Clearly, sentences have truth-conditions in this sense. But so do propositions. Let a truth condition for a proposition p be a property that a world w has iff p is true at w . Everyone who thinks that we can talk about truth with respect to different worlds should agree that propositions have truth conditions, in this sense. Then we can ask: are the truth conditions for all propositions such that a world's possessing that truth condition entails that the proposition exists, or not?

Premise (3) of the original argument is true iff the truth condition for the proposition that Socrates does not exist is existence-entailing, in this sense.

2.2 Truth conditions, states of affairs, and facts

To figure out what the right thing is to say about the existence-entailment of the truth conditions of propositions, the first question to ask is: what sorts of properties of worlds are the truth conditions of propositions?

In the case of *sentences*, it is tempting to say something like this: S is true with respect to w iff w has the following property: the proposition p expressed by S is true with respect to w . Nothing like this will work for propositions; we can't explain the truth of propositions in terms of the truth of some more fundamental bearer of truth.

So what are the truth conditions of propositions? Here are some possibilities:

1. One possibility is that propositions don't have non-trivial truth conditions — they don't have truth conditions which are not like 'the property of being such that p is true.' Given Serious Actualism, this would not advance the debate; the proponent of (3) will take this condition to be existence-entailing, while the opponent of (3) will not.

I think that it would be surprising if propositions only ever had trivial truth conditions, in this sense; there must be some fact about a world in virtue of which p is true at it other than the bare fact that p is true at it. Perhaps this is just another way of saying that that facts, or whatever sorts of things are the truthmakers for propositions, should be distinct from true propositions. This connects to our discussion of Russell's reasons for abandoning his early theory of propositions in 'On the Nature of Truth and Falsity.'

2. Maybe we can explain the truth conditions of propositions in terms of the obtaining of states of affairs. In particular, maybe p is true at w iff there is some state of affairs a such that p represents a and w has the following property: if it were actual, a would obtain.

This has the virtue that it seems to make the truth conditions for propositions existence-independent: there's no reason to think that, just because a state of affairs obtains in a world, a proposition which represents it as obtaining must also exist in that world.

However, as Marian points out (p. 20) this is of limited use to the Russellian. After all, the Russellian will now be analyzing the truth of the proposition that Socrates does not exist in terms of the obtaining of the state of affairs that Socrates does not exist; and presumably the state of affairs that Socrates exists will obtain in a world only if *it* exists, and its existence presumably — at least for the Russellian — will entail the existence of Socrates. So we can still run a version of Al's argument to show there is a possible world in which Socrates both does and does not exist. This sort of 'states of affairs' view of truth conditions is a dead end for the Russellian.

3. But we can go a different route (this is the route followed by what Marian calls 'the Wittgenstein party'). Suppose truth for propositions is a matter of correspondence or failure of correspondence to a fact, and that there are no negative facts. Then how would we think of the truth conditions of the proposition that Socrates does not exist? We would say that this proposition is true at a world iff it is not the case that the world contains the fact that Socrates exists. More generally, we could put the view of the Wittgenstein party as follows:

If p is a positive proposition, then p is true with respect to a world w iff w has the following property: if it were actual, there would exist a fact f such that p corresponds to f .

If $\neg p$ is a negative proposition, then $\neg p$ is true with respect to a world w iff it is not the case that p is true with respect w iff w has the following property: if it were actual, it is not the case that there would exist a fact f such that p corresponds to f .

This commits us to there being a distinction between negative and positive propositions (as well as sentences) and commits us to the nonexistence of negative facts. But other than that, the view seems to be OK. Note that the truth conditions for

negative propositions on this view will in general be existence independent, which is good. In the case of negative existentials of the sort we are interested in, we can see why these propositions will fail to exist in worlds with respect to which they are true. They are true with respect to w just in case the proposition that Socrates exists fails to correspond to a fact, in which case Socrates will not exist at w , in which case the proposition that Socrates does not exist will not exist at w .

Objection: Doesn't this talk of the proposition that Socrates exists corresponding or failing to correspond to facts in w commit us to the existence, in w , of the proposition that Socrates exists? And doesn't this just land us back in our original problem?

Reply: No. We are presuming that actualism is true, in which case possible worlds, like everything else, exist in the actual world. Truth conditions in the relevant sense are properties of these possible worlds, so they are properties of actually existing things. So, these properties actually exist, and there is no problem with the idea that the *existence* of these properties entails the existence of the relevant proposition. After all, the proposition that Socrates does not exist does, after all, actually exist.

What would be problematic is the idea that if a world with such properties were actual, the relevant proposition would exist. But that's a different matter (see Objection 1 below).

To put the point a different way: consider again the proposition that Socrates does not exist. This is true with respect to w iff w has the following property: it does not contain the fact that Socrates exists. What this view commits us to is only the actual existence of this property, and some possible world's actually instantiating this property. But there is no reason — that I can see — why either of these things is problematic.

4. Another possibility: there's no obvious reason why the truth conditions for propositions should have to make mention of states of affairs or facts. After all, what, intuitively, is the truth condition for the proposition that Socrates does not exist? Presumably something like the following property of a world w : the property of being such that, were w actual, Socrates would not exist. (Or, equivalently: the property of being such that, were w actual, no one would be identical to Socrates.) This property is nonexistence-entailing: if a world has this property, then if this world were actual, Socrates, and hence the proposition that Socrates does not exist, would not exist. This is just what we should want.

The anti-existentialist can hardly object to the idea that the relevant worlds instantiate these properties. So the anti-existentialist's only objection seems to be that the existentialist cannot help herself to these properties. But why not? Again, we are talking about the properties that possible worlds actually instantiate, not the properties that would exist, were those possible worlds instantiated.

Conclusion: we can clearly make sense of the notion of a truth condition of a proposition p , understood as a property of worlds which a world instantiates iff p is true at that world. Plantinga's argument against Existentialism should worry the existentialist only if premise (3) is true, and premise (3) is true iff the truth conditions of propositions are existence-entailing: i.e., if they are properties such that, if a world instantiates the truth condition for a proposition, that proposition exists in the world.

So, it is sufficient to reply to Plantinga's argument to explain a plausible view of the truth-conditions of propositions on which these truth conditions are either existence-independent or non-existence entailing. This can be done either by using facts, or not, as suggested above. As it stands, then, Plantinga's argument should not worry an Existentialist (and also can't be used to motivate giving up Serious Actualism or Contingency).

The anti-Existentialist can, of course, still object to the idea of truth conditions in the above sense, or by showing that there are problems with the above examples of nonexistence-entailing truth conditions. This is where the debate should take place.

3 Objections to the existentialist reply

1. This just pushes the problem back a step. The existentialist about propositions will also be an existentialist about properties, so that the property of not including Socrates cannot exist without Socrates existing. So, the existentialist will have to distinguish between the property of not including Socrates being a property *of* a world, and the property of not including Socrates existing *in* that world. But this is the very distinction — the true at vs. true in distinction — which existentialists are supposed to be making intelligible.

Reply 1. This is not the same distinction. There clearly is a distinction between properties which exist at a world and properties of that world. Consider, for example, the property of being the possible world which I'm most glad did not obtain. Surely this could be a genuine property of a world w without that property being among the properties which would have existed, had that world been actual.

Objection to reply. What are you talking about? The property of being the possible world which I'm most glad did not obtain is a *property*, and all properties exist necessarily, and hence exist at all possible worlds.

Reply to objection to reply. If this is going to be a good argument, it had better not just presuppose the necessary existence of properties, since the assumption that all abstract objects exist necessarily is part of what is in dispute.

Here's a (possibly) less contentious way to state the existentialist's point here. Let's assume that possible worlds are complex properties that the world might have had, but doesn't have. Consider now one such complex property w . In general, properties will themselves instantiate properties, so we can ask: (i) what properties does w instantiate? Since w is a property that the world could have had, we can also ask: (ii) what properties would have existed, had w been actual? The existentialist's point is that these are clearly different questions. Friends of the view that all properties exist necessarily believe that the answer to (i) will just be a subset of the answer to (ii); but this is a view which needs argument. There is no contradiction — if we do not build in the assumption that all properties exist necessarily — in supposing that a possible world could instantiate properties which would not exist, were that world instantiated.

This is just an instance of a more general point: for any property F , there's a contrast between the properties that F instantiates, and the properties that would exist, were F instantiated. Everyone should think that there are properties in the

second class that are not in the first; the existentialist about properties claims that in some cases, there are properties in the first class that are not in the second.

A few more examples to illustrate the point:

- Suppose that someone is an Aristotelian about properties and thinks that possible worlds exist only contingently. Then they think that there is at least one possible world w which is such that, were that world actual, there would be no possible worlds. Consider the property of being a possible world. This theorist should then think that w instantiates this property, but that this property would not exist, were w actual. Whatever might be wrong with this view, it is not the last bit; that seems clearly coherent, given the other commitments. But if this makes sense, then so does the distinction between properties instantiated by a world, and properties that would exist, were that world instantiated.
- Facts can exist in some worlds, but not others. But presumably, if there are such things as possible worlds, there are also facts about those possible worlds. Consider a possible world w . It is a fact that w is not the actual world. But were w actual, this fact would not exist. This distinction — between facts about possible worlds, and the facts that would exist were those worlds actual/instantiated — is parallel to the distinction between properties of worlds, and the properties that would exist, were those worlds actual/instantiated. It is extremely implausible, I think, to deny that these distinctions make sense.

Reply 2. Is it so obvious that the Existentialist about propositions should also be an Existentialist about properties of the above sort? I'm inclined to think that the two should go together, but I am not sure that I have an argument for this. In any case, I'd like to be an Existentialist about both.

2. I don't understand what it could mean for a proposition to be true at a world without existing at that world! (Said while holding hands over ears.)

Reply. This requires nothing other than understanding what it is for a proposition to be true at a world. A proposition is true at a world iff that world is as the proposition says it is. Suppose that a proposition p says that the world satisfies some condition C . Then for a proposition to be true at a world at which it does not exist is for some world to satisfy C but for it to be the case that the proposition does not exist at that world. Of course, one could boggle at the idea that a proposition fails to exist at some worlds; but the present argument is supposed to show that this idea is false, not assume that it is.

3. This is 'the lazy man's approach to philosophy' — there's one sense in which the proposition that Socrates does not exist is true at a world, and one sense in which it is not. But is there any plausibility to the idea that our ordinary truth talk is ambiguous in this way? Isn't it bad to posit ambiguities to save philosophical theses like Existentialism?

Reply. It is not the case that we have two different notions of truth at work here. Rather, we have one notion of truth: a proposition is true at a world iff that world satisfies a certain condition. We can then ask whether the actual world, or some arbitrary world, satisfies that condition. The idea that propositions can fail to exist no more undermines the univocality of our talk about truth at a world than

the contingent existence of sentences undermines the univocality of our talk of the truth of sentences (relative to contexts) with respect to various circumstances of evaluation.

4. For a proposition to be true at w is for it to be the case that, had w been actual, the proposition would have been true. But on this view — letting w be some world with respect to which the proposition that Socrates does not exist is true — if w were actual, the proposition would not exist, and hence would not be true.

Reply. I don't see the appeal of the idea that truth at a world should be explained by what would be true, were that world actual. Something closely related is true: p is true at w iff what p says is the case would be the case, were w actual. As above, we can cash out 'what p says is the case' in terms of the properties of worlds we were calling 'truth conditions': these are properties of worlds which say what would be the case is such a world were instantiated. A proposition is true at a world iff the world has the relevant property.

5. The distinction between context and circumstance is relevant for sentences only because the contexts supply values for the indexicals in the sentence; but propositions are composed of the semantic values of expressions relative to a context, and hence are not *themselves* context-sensitive. So the distinction between context and circumstance does not matter for propositions. For this reason, it is at best misleading to assimilate the example of the proposition that Socrates does not exist, which you say is never true in a world in which it is entertained, but is nonetheless true with respect to some possible worlds, to the example of sentences like 'I am not here now', which are never true in a context of utterance and yet can be (given a context) true with respect to some other possible world. The latter, but not the former, can be explained in terms of the rules governing indexical expressions.

Reply. There are (at least) two kinds of sentences which are never true in their context of utterance, but nevertheless do not express necessary falsehoods and hence can be true with respect to some other possible world. One, like 'I am not here now', contains indexicals. But another — illustrated by 'The name 'Socrates' does not exist' — is like this because the condition for its truth entails that it not exist. It is true that propositions, unlike sentences, cannot be context-sensitive, and so that the proposition that Socrates does not exist cannot be fairly assimilated to 'I am not here now.' But — if Existentialism is true — propositions can be such that the condition that a world must satisfy for it to truly describe that world entails that the proposition not exist. This is exactly parallel to the case of 'The name 'Socrates' does not exist'.

6. The response to the argument complicates modal logic. Let w be a world with respect to which the proposition p that Socrates does not exist is true, and let @ be the actual world. $\diamond p$ is true in @, which means that p must be true in some possible world, e.g. w . But on this view the proposition that Socrates does not exist is never true *in* a world, since it does not exist in the worlds with respect to which it is true! So we have $\diamond p$ even though there is no world w such that p is true at w , which is clearly intolerable.

Reply. This is confused. @ is the context of utterance, and p exists at @. We've already explained what it means for p to be true with respect to an arbitrary world, and this definition does not require that p exist at that world even though of course,

like everything else, p must exist at @. Maybe there are problems with the proposed definition of truth at a world — but what are they?

Same objection, new form: The response complicates modal logic, since it forces us to give up bivalence. p will be neither true nor false at worlds at which p does not exist.

Reply. Same point as above. The explanations of truth at a world are such that p will be true or false at every world, whether or not it exists at these worlds.

7. Unanswered but merely possible objection: maybe an argument parallel to the argument against existentialism about propositions can be generated for existentialism about properties. If so, it looks like the solution I defend above might not be available. I don't see how to run such a parallel argument at this point.

4 A residual problem

The present objection to the anti-existentialist argument rejects premise (3) of that argument:

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| 1. Necessarily, if the proposition <i>that Socrates does not exist</i> exists, then Socrates exists. | Existentialism |
| 2. Possibly, Socrates does not exist. | Contingency |
| 3. If possibly Socrates does not exist, the proposition <i>that Socrates does not exist</i> is possibly true. | |
| 4. The proposition <i>that Socrates does not exist</i> is possibly true. | (2,3) |
| 5. Necessarily, if the proposition <i>that Socrates does not exist</i> is true, then the proposition <i>that Socrates does not exist</i> exists. | Serious Actualism |
| 6. Necessarily, if the proposition <i>that Socrates does not exist</i> is true, then Socrates exists. | (1,5) |
| 7. Necessarily, if the proposition <i>that Socrates does not exist</i> is true, then Socrates does not exist. | |
| 8. Necessarily, if the proposition <i>that Socrates does not exist</i> is true, then Socrates exists and does not exist. | (6,7) |
| C. Possibly, Socrates exists and Socrates does not exist. | (4,8) |

But you might notice something puzzling about this way of replying to the argument. The only role (3) plays in the argument is in (with (2)) entailing (4), which is the claim that the proposition that Socrates does not exist is true in some possible world. So, if rejecting (3) is to have any relevance, (4) had better (by the existentialist's lights) be false.

But this is kind of odd. We know from this argument that, if existentialism is true, then this proposition is such that, even though it is true with respect to many possible worlds, it could not have been true. This might seem like it gets the existentialist into trouble:

The premises of the argument just concluded are surely all knowable a priori if knowable at all; same with the arguments for existentialism. So we can

know a priori that any negative existential proposition like the proposition that Socrates does not exist must be false. But this is crazy. Consider a debate about whether Nessie exists. This can surely only be settled by a posteriori means, not by sitting in an armchair thinking about the philosophy of language.

Does this show that, in general, we cannot know a priori whether we are entertaining a singular or descriptive proposition?