

# Plantinga's argument against existentialism

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February 11, 2008

1	The argument . . . . .	1
2	Deny Existentialism . . . . .	2
3	Deny Serious Actualism . . . . .	3
4	Deny Contingency . . . . .	3
5	The distinction between outer and inner truth . . . . .	3
	5.1 The problem of extensional equivalence . . . . .	4
	5.2 Why is this a kind of truth at a world? . . . . .	5

## 1 The argument

Plantinga gives (roughly) the following argument:

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)

The argument is a *reductio* — but of which premise?

## 2 Deny Existentialism

Plantinga intended the argument as a reductio of (1), Existentialism. And it's not hard to see why. Premises (3) and (7) look trivial, and of Existentialism, Contingency, and Serious Actualism, many will be least attached to Existentialism.

But there is some motivation for finding another response to the argument:

- The intended target is quite broad, encompassing not just Millian views but also Fregean views which make use of 'object-dependent senses'. (See Evans (1982, 1981).)
- A view of names which avoids the argument will have to make the meaning of a name — it seems — some condition whose existence is independent of the referent of the name, but which is such that, given that names are rigid designators, (1) it is only ever uniquely satisfied by the referent of the name, and (2) it is satisfied by the referent of the name in every world where that referent exists. It is very hard to find conditions like this.
- The best hope seems to be that we concoct such conditions via world-indexed conditions expressed by rigidified descriptions like 'the actual  $F$ ' (see Plantinga (1978), among other places). These views avoid Kripke's modal argument against descriptivism. But these views run into very serious problems; one we discussed is that they seem — given that inhabitants of most possible worlds cannot so much as refer to @, the actual world — committed to the truth of claims like 'If there had been one more proton in this piece of chalk, no one could have believed that Aristotle was a philosopher.'
- What about descriptions involving the individual essences of things? On one interpretation, this is just the rigidified description view above. But we might also understand these essences as non-world-indexed properties of an object  $o$  such that they cannot be instantiated by any object other than  $o$ , and must always be instantiated by  $o$ ; and they can't be properties whose existence depends on the existence of  $o$ , else using them in the semantics of names would lead to a version of Existentialism. (In the terminology of Adams (1981), this means that they must be qualitative essences rather than thisnesses or @-relational essences.) I have trouble believing that there are properties like this, but I have not argued against this view. If you do believe in these properties: do you think that each object has one, or many? If many, how many?
- A different kind of argument for Existentialism, suggested in Williamson (2001): the proposition that, e.g. Fido is a dog seems to be essentially about Fido. So, in any world where it exists, it must be about Fido. So, in any world in which the proposition exists, Fido stands in the 'is about' relation to it. But things can't stand in relations without existing; so Fido must exist in these worlds.

In any case, we'll be asking whether there is another way around Plantinga's argument.

### 3 Deny Serious Actualism

Salmon (1998) is an example of a philosopher who denies premise (5), the claim that an object cannot have properties in a world unless it exists in that world. Here's what he says:

“Some may balk at my proposal on the grounds that it conflicts with the metaphysical principle that any object must exist in every conceivable circumstance in which that object has any properties. This principle that existence is a condition for having properties — that existence precedes suchness — underlies the Kantian doctrine that existence is not itself a property (or “predicate”). It, like the Kantian doctrine it supports, is a confused and misguided prejudice. Undoubtedly, existence is a prerequisite for a very wide range of ordinary properties — being blue in color, having such-and-such mass .... But the sweeping doctrine that existence universally precedes suchness has very clear counterexamples in which an object from one circumstance has properties in another circumstance in virtue of the properties it has in the original circumstance. Socrates does not exist in my present circumstance, yet he has numerous properties here — for example, being mentioned and discussed by me. ...”

To accept this is to accept that, for example, a property might be instantiated even though nothing instantiates it. This sounds odd. Sounding odd is not a refutation, but (in my view) it would be better if the existentialist were not forced into this route.

### 4 Deny Contingency

Williamson (2001) considers an argument similar to Plantinga's, and responds by denying that there are contingently existing objects: any object which exists at all, exists contingently. On his view, you exist in some possible worlds as an embodied person, and in the other possible worlds as a merely possible person.

It sounds crazy; a possible motivation is thinking of existence and identity as logical notions which apply to things necessarily if at all.

As above, I don't know of a refutation of this view, but I think that it would be better if the existentialist could avoid this commitment.

### 5 The distinction between outer and inner truth

Perhaps the most popular reply to Plantinga's argument from friends of Existentialism has been that the argument trades on an ambiguity in 'truth at a world.' Thus Kit Fine:

“One should distinguish between 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. (Fine (1985), 163)

This distinction between inner and outer truth corresponds to the distinction between truth in a world and truth at a world in Adams (1981). Let's call this the 'ambiguity response.'

How would this help with the argument? Since possibility is truth at a world and necessity is truth at every world, corresponding to the distinction between inner and outer truth is a distinction between strong and weak necessity and possibility, with the former defined in terms of the inner notion of truth, and the latter in terms of the outer notion of truth. If this distinction makes sense, it is natural for the existentialist to say that the argument trades on an ambiguity: (3) is true only in the weak sense of 'possibly true', whereas (5) is true only on the strong interpretation of truth at a world.

A natural reply to this objection: for a proposition to be true at a world is for that proposition to have the property of being true in that world, in just the same sense in which any object can have any property in that world. This is evidently the strong sense of necessity and possibility. Given this, what could 'weakly necessary' or 'weakly possible' mean? Equivalently, what could 'outer truth', as opposed to 'inner truth', be? This worry, I think, is what is behind the complaint that the ambiguity response is just a kind of verbal dodge which is, ultimately, ad hoc. [Crisp, Plantinga]

This really splits into two problems. The first is just to give conditions on outer truth which don't lead to ridiculous conclusions — to give an extensionally adequate definition of outer truth. The second is to explain why the notion defined by those conditions should count as a notion of truth at a world.

### 5.1 The problem of extensional equivalence

To convince the skeptic about outer truth, it is natural to try to define outer truth in terms of inner truth.

*Outer truth = inner truth + inner non-falsity.* Here's one way to develop this thought, which Plantinga discusses: we distinguish between having truth essentially and having truth necessarily. In particular:

- $p$  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.

Weak possibility would then be the opposite of essential truth: a proposition would then be weakly possible iff its negation is not true necessarily (even if its negation is true essentially).

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	
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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 even in the weak sense of ‘possibly’, false. This looks implausible; it is hard to believe that there is any sense of ‘possible’ in which the above claims are possibly true, and that there’s a sense of ‘possible’ which is not close under logical consequence.

*Piecemeal definitions.* The above is the simplest and most intuitive attempt to define outer truth in terms of inner truth. But, even if it fails, that does not mean that a more complicated definition along the same lines would not be extensionally adequate. For a clear and interesting attempt to do this, see Turner (2005).

## 5.2 Why is this a kind of truth at a world?

Two remaining worries, even if the above problems get satisfactory answers:

- Let’s suppose that we can define a relation between propositions and worlds such that the relation holds iff the proponent of outer truth thinks that the proposition should be true at that world. Why should his opponent grant that this is a definition of a kind of truth?
- How plausible is it that there is a special kind of heretofore unnoticed ambiguity in our talk about truth at worlds? There’s a worry here that this reply to Plantinga’s argument employs what Kripke called ‘the lazy man’s approach to philosophy.’ This would be less worrisome if the proposed ambiguity were a special case of some other, already noticed, ambiguity.

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