

Existentialism and truth conditions for modal propositions

PHIL 93914
Jeff Speaks

February 18, 2008

1 Boyce's objection

Kenny gave an objection which can be stated like this:

Whatever our view of what it takes for a proposition to be true with respect to a world, it looks like the following proposition should be true:

It is possible that (Socrates not exist and that it be possible that Socrates exist).

That means that there must be some world w such that, with respect to w , each of the following propositions is true:

the proposition that Socrates does not exist.
the proposition that it is possible that Socrates exist.

How does your account allow for this?

Essentially, this is a request that we explain how the account works for propositions expressed by sentences of the form \ulcorner Possibly, S \urcorner . I think that there are two ways to go here:

1. For a proposition to be true with respect to a world is for that world to actually instantiate the property which is that proposition's truth condition. So what we need to find out is what property is the truth condition for the proposition that it is possible that Socrates exist. How about:

the property of being such that, were w actual, possibly Socrates would exist.

As above this is a property that w actually has, but which (if Existentialism is true) would not exist if w were actual. One might wonder what it is for a world to have this property — to be such that, were it actual, possibly Socrates would exist. I

am not sure what to say about this; but I also don't see yet why the Existentialist should, in principle, be unable to answer this question. But I think that there's also a natural way to avoid ascribing these sorts of modal properties to worlds.

2. A second route for the Existentialist involves giving a different treatment of modal and non-modal propositions. Intuitively, this is a reasonable thing to want to do, since the truth conditions of modal claims — about necessary or possible truth, or counterfactuals — should be analyzable in terms of the truth at world of non-modal propositions. So, as long as p , q are not themselves modal propositions, we can give noncircular truth conditions for modal propositions as follows:

$\Box p$ is true with respect to w iff p is true at every world possible with respect to (i.e., accessible from) w
 $\Diamond p$ is true with respect to w iff p is true at some world possible with respect to (i.e., accessible from) w
 $p \Box \rightarrow q$ is true with respect to w iff at the most similar world to w with respect to which p is true, q is also true.

The key point for our purposes — and how this differs from the first account of modal truth conditions — is that on this view, the truth of modal propositions at worlds can be explained without ascribing to those worlds any properties other than those which are required to explain the truth at worlds of non-modal propositions.

This account does rely on relations of possibility and similarity between worlds. Maybe there's some problem with doing this, but I can't see that there is. And even if we did want to explain these notions, it seems that we should be able to do it in terms of the non-modal propositions which are true at each of the worlds.

2 Bailey's objection

Last time, Andrew gave an objection which I'd summarize as follows:

On your account, the proposition that Socrates does not exist is true with respect to a world w if and only if w has the following Nice Property:

NP. the property of being such that, were it actual, Socrates would not exist.

NP is a property which w can have actually instantiate even though, if w were actual, neither NP nor the proposition that Socrates does not exist would exist. This is what makes it, for present purposes, so Nice.

But now consider the following Repugnant Property:

RP. the property of being such that, were it actual, then it would have the following property: the property of being such that if it were actual, Socrates would not exist.

Does w have this property? For the proposed solution to work, it had better not. If it does have this property, then it seems as though, if w were actual, it would instantiate the following property: the property of being such that if it were actual, Socrates would not exist. That is, if w were actual, it would instantiate NP. But w can instantiate NP if w were actual only if NP would exist if w were actual, and this property can (if the Existentialist about properties is right) exist only if Socrates does. This means that, assuming Existentialism, if w were actual, Socrates would exist, which is the conclusion that we were trying to avoid.

So if w actually has RP, if it were actual it would have NP, and so, if the Existentialist is right, if it were actual Socrates would exist.

So you had better hold that w does not have RP. But it is hard to avoid the claim that w must have this property, if we assume only that w has the property your truth conditions say that it does. For we can give the following simple argument:

1. w has NP.
 2. w is actual $\Box \rightarrow$ Socrates does not exist. (1)
 3. w is actual $\Box \rightarrow (w$ is actual $\Box \rightarrow$ Socrates does not exist) (2)
-
- C. w has RP. (3)

which looks valid. And the conclusion implies that w has the property of being such that if it were actual, it would have the property of being such that if it were actual, Socrates would not exist, which is RP. So w 's having NP entails that it also has RP. Since if w has RP Existentialism is false, it is bad to try to save Existentialism via the claim that w has NP.

Assume the standard Lewis/Stalnaker view of counterfactuals, which says that, glossing over subtleties about worlds tied with respect to similarity to the actual world, $p \Box \rightarrow q$ is true at @ iff the nearest world in which p is true is also one in which q is true. Given this, the move from (2) to (3) is fine, and it is hard to see how (2) could not follow from (1). So the argument has to be resisted, if at all, in the step from (3) to (C).

How is (C) supposed to follow from (3)? Let's look more closely at these:

- (3) w is actual $\Box \rightarrow (w$ is actual $\Box \rightarrow$ Socrates does not exist)
- (C) w is such that, were it actual, then it would have the following property: the property of being such that if it were actual, Socrates would not exist.

It looks as though (C) can be restated as (C*):

- (C*) w is actual $\Box \rightarrow (w$ has the following property: the property of being such that if it were actual, Socrates would not exist)

If anything, this makes the argument look more convincing, since it looks as though (3) and (C*) just say the same thing.

However, they don't say the same thing, and the move from (3) to (C*) is one which the Existentialist is committed to rejecting. To see this, let w (again) be some world in which Socrates does not exist, and consider the propositions expressed by the following two sentences:

- (i) w is actual $\Box \rightarrow$ Socrates does not exist.
- (ii) w is actual $\Box \rightarrow$ the proposition that Socrates does not exist is true.

It looks like the Existentialist is committed to regarding (i) as true, but (ii) as false. But then consider the proposition expressed by the following conditional:

- (iii) Socrates does not exist \rightarrow the proposition that Socrates does not exist is true.

(iii) is actually true, but it follows from the fact that (i) can be true and (ii) false that (iii) is not true with respect to every possible world. In particular, it is false with respect to w .

We can make a similar point about properties, rather than propositions. Consider the following two propositions:

- (i) w is actual $\Box \rightarrow$ Aristotle would not have been identical to Socrates.
- (ii) w is actual $\Box \rightarrow$ Aristotle would have had the property of being non-identical to Socrates.

Again, the Existentialist about properties will think that (i) is true but (ii) false — because, in w , the property of being non-identical to Socrates does not exist. In general, for the Existentialist about propositions and properties, conditionals of the following form will not be necessarily true:

- $p \rightarrow$ the proposition that p is true.
- n is $F \rightarrow n$ has the property of being F .

We should not overstate this point. For many propositions and properties, these conditionals will hold, and these conditionals always hold when the relevant propositions and properties exist. But for propositions and properties which are not existence-entailing, they will fail.

I think that it is not clear how much the possible falsity of these conditionals counts against Existentialism. On the one hand, they at least initially look like necessary truths, which seems bad for the Existentialist who must deny that they are. On the other hand, maybe they look like necessary truths just because we aren't thinking about scenarios in which the relevant propositions and properties do not exist; if we think that there's good reason for thinking that they can fail to exist, then the possible falsity of these conditionals

is perhaps not too surprising. (Al discusses the falsity of these sorts of conditionals in his paper, ‘Why propositions cannot be concrete’, though his main target in that paper is that idea that all propositions exist contingently rather than the Existentialist idea that some do.)

In any case, the point of immediate relevance is that once we see that conditionals of this form are (by Existentialist lights) possibly false, we can see — I think — how the Existentialist should respond to Andrew’s objection. The move from (3) to (C) is valid iff the conditional formed by taking the consequent of (3) as antecedent and the consequent of (C) as consequent is necessarily true. But that conditional is one of the ones which we have just seen that the Existentialist can’t take to be necessarily true — (C) introduces commitment to the existence of properties which is not a part of (3).

There’s an interesting connection here to ‘easy’ arguments against nominalism of the form ‘Something is F , therefore something has a property, therefore there are properties.’

Let’s see how this inference looks on the two ways of treating modal propositions discussed above. The truth of (3) entails that the following proposition is true with respect to w :

w is actual $\Box \rightarrow$ Socrates does not exist.

As noted above, there are two ways of thinking about what property a world must have for this proposition to be true with respect to it:

1. The world must have the following property: it must be such that, were w actual, Socrates would not exist.
2. The world must be such that the nearest world to it which instantiates the property of being such that were it actual, w would be actual would also instantiate the property of being such that were it actual, Socrates would not exist.

To me, the second seems more natural, and makes clear that explaining what it is for counterfactual propositions to be true with respect to worlds does not involve attributing to the worlds any properties beyond those already needed to explain the truth of the antecedent and consequent of the counterfactual with respect to the relevant world. It also makes it clearer that w needn’t have the Repugnant Property — unless the idea that the proposition that Socrates does not exist is true with respect to w is *already* such that it entails that w has this property. (Though the first way of thinking about things, which ascribes modal properties to worlds, is also, so far as I can see, consistent with thinking that the counterfactual is true with respect to w even though w lacks RP.)