

Existentialism and Plantinga's argument

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1 Why be an existentialist?

Existentialism is the view that singular propositions about an object *o* cannot exist unless *o* does. Two arguments for existentialism:

1. Millianism, plus the dependence of the existence of the proposition expressed by a sentence on the existence of the meanings of words in the sentence expressing the proposition.
2. The idea that singular propositions are essentially about what they are about, plus serious actualism. (Williamson (2001))

2 Plantinga's reductio

But even if it is attractive, existentialism is open to the following argument from Plantinga (1983):

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

Why it seems difficult to give up any of the named premises besides existentialism. (4) is not up for grabs. This indicates that it would at least be attractive for an existentialist to reject (7). The question is whether this rejection can be motivated.

Note: the question is not whether we can give an argument against (7) which would convince a non-existentialist. The question is whether we can show why, by the existentialist's lights, (7) should be rejected. I am inclined to think that we can.

3 Existentialist responses

3.1 *The ambiguity reply*

A popular way to reject (7) is to say that the argument trades on an ambiguity in our talk about 'truth at a world.' As Fine put it,

“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.”¹

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 we grant the legitimacy of this distinction, it is natural for the Existentialist to say that the argument trades on an ambiguity: (7) is true only in the weak sense of 'possibly true', whereas (1) is true only on the strong interpretation of truth at a world. Call this the 'ambiguity reply' to Plantinga's argument.

Problems for the ambiguity reply:

1. Inner truth at w is basically existing at w , and having the property of being true at w . Inner truth is therefore comprehensible to anyone who thinks that we can talk about what properties things can have relative to worlds. But setting aside metaphors about entering into possible worlds with propositions, what do we really know about the notion of outer truth other than that a proposition can be true in the outer sense at a world without existing at that world? What reason do we have to believe that there is such a thing as the outer notion of truth for propositions? (This sort of worry is voiced in, among other places, Crisp (2003).)
2. What plausibility does the idea that 'true' is ambiguous really have? Kripke on the 'lazy man's approach to philosophy.'

The view I will defend has some things in common with the ambiguity view, but its spirit is, as we'll see, different (I think).

¹Fine (1985), 163. See also Prior (1969); for a recent defense of a similar view, see King (2007).

3.2 A sentential analogue of (7)

A good place to begin is by considering an analogue of premise (7) of the original argument, transposed from talk about the possible truth of propositions to talk about the possible truth of sentences. These will be instances of the following schema:

(7s) If possibly *S*, the sentence ‘*S*’ is possibly true.

Not all instances of this schema are true. Remembering that ‘possibly true’ means ‘has the property true in some possible world,’ consider the following instance of (7s):

If possibly I am not here, the sentence ‘I am not here’ is possibly true.

Since it is not a necessary truth that I be located at my desk, the antecedent of this conditional is true; but the consequent is false. The rules governing ‘I’ and ‘here’ (i.e., their characters) guarantee that the sentence ‘I am not here’ is false whenever uttered.

So there’s nothing especially mysterious about the idea that a sentence might be true in every context (‘I am here’) but not (relative to a given context) in every circumstance, or true relative to a given context with respect to every circumstance (‘I am Jeff Speaks’, as uttered by me) but not true in every context (the same sentence, as uttered by you). 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 (‘I am not here now’).

This 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 a context’ and other times ‘true at a circumstance.’ But it is important to see that this is a mistake. When evaluating the truth of a sentence we *always* consider the sentence relative to a context of utterance, and ask whether it is true with respect to some circumstance of evaluation. 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’ in this sense is just a special case of the ordinary notion of truth with respect to a circumstance, and not a ‘separate notion of truth.’

This much is uncontroversial. But the interesting question is not whether sentences of the form of (7s) can be false — everyone agrees they can be — but whether sentences like the original premise (7) can be false.

But one might give the following argument against taking this to be a very close analogy:

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, it might seem, the distinction between context and circumstance does not matter for propositions, and we are left without an explanation of how a proposition, as opposed to a sentence, could be possible but not possibly true.

Reply: This objection overlooks the fact that there are two quite different sorts of sentences which are possible but not possibly true (i.e., which are never true in their context of utterance, but nevertheless do not express necessary falsehoods and are true with respect to a possible

circumstance). One, like ‘I am not here now’, does have this property because of indexicality, and it is true that there is no analogue of this sort of sentence in the case of propositions. But consider the following example from David (2008):

The name ‘Socrates’ does not exist.

The instance of (7s) corresponding to this sentence is false:

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

The name ‘Socrates’ is a contingently existing thing, so the antecedent of this conditional is true; but the consequent is false. Suppose for reductio that there is a world in which ‘The name ‘Socrates’ does not exist’ has the property of being true. Then, given Serious Actualism, ‘The name ‘Socrates’ does not exist’ must also exist; but if the sentence ‘The name ‘Socrates’ does not exist’ exists, the name ‘Socrates’ must also exist, in which case, contra our supposition, ‘The name ‘Socrates’ does not exist’ must be false, not true.

So some non-indexical sentences are possible but not possibly true. The distinction between context and circumstance is just as important for understanding these sentences as it is for understanding how indexical sentences can be possible but not possibly true.

The similarity, from the Millian point of view, between (7) and the above instance of (7s): each deny the existence of one of their own constituents.

3.3 Truth conditions for sentences

Here is one way to put the point above.

Let’s call a property which a circumstance of evaluation instantiates if and only if some sentence S is true at that circumstance a *truth condition* for S : it is a condition which a world satisfies if and only if S is true at that world. Everyone who thinks that we can meaningfully talk about sentences being true with respect to worlds should agree that sentences have truth conditions, in this sense. With this notion on the table, we can then note that a truth condition F for a sentence S might be related to S in three ways:

- It might be existence-entailing: $\forall w$, if w instantiates F , then S exists at w (example: ‘This sentence exists.’).
- It might be nonexistence-entailing: $\forall w$, if w instantiates F , then S does not exist at w (‘Sentence tokens do not exist.’).
- It might be existence-independent: $\forall w$, if w instantiates F , then S might or might not exist at w .

The above examples are sufficient to show that some sentences have truth conditions which are existence-entailing, some which are nonexistence-entailing, and some which are existence-independent. And this is enough to show that the sentential analogue of premise (7) will not hold for every sentence, since it fails for any sentence whose truth conditions are nonexistence-entailing and true with respect to at least one possible world.

3.4 Truth conditions for propositions

To see how we might carry over the present discussion of sentences to the case of propositions, we'll have to show how the apparatus of truth conditions can apply to propositions. This in itself presents no problems: a truth condition for a proposition p will be a property that a world w has iff p is true at w . As in the case of the truth conditions of sentences, everyone who thinks that we can talk about the truth or propositions with respect to different worlds should agree that propositions have truth conditions, in this sense.

The Existentialist should want the truth conditions for some propositions to be nonexistence-entailing; after all, premise (7) of Plantinga's argument is false if the truth condition for the proposition that Socrates does not exist is nonexistence-entailing, and what we are looking for is a way for the Existentialist to block Plantinga's argument by rejecting (7).

Here are some different ways of thinking about truth conditions:

Existence-entailing truth conditions

The truth condition for p is the following property of worlds: the property of being such that, were the world actual, p would have the property of being true.

Fairly clearly, this is not a view of the truth conditions of propositions that a defender of Existentialism who wants to reject premise (7) while holding on to Serious Actualism can accept. (This view is endorsed in, among other places, van Inwagen (1986).)

States of affairs truth conditions

The truth condition for p is the following property of worlds: the property of being such that, for some state of affairs a such that p represents a , were the world actual, a would obtain.

This seems to be the sort of thing we're looking for: because 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, there seems to be no reason to think that, on this view, a proposition's being true at a world should entail that the proposition exists at that world.

But, as David points out, this virtue vanishes on closer examination. On this sort of suggestion, the Russellian will now be analyzing the truth of the proposition that Socrates does not exist with respect to w in terms of the obtaining, in w , of the state of affairs that Socrates does not exist; and presumably (by Serious Actualism) the state of affairs that Socrates exists will obtain in w only if *it* exists in w , and its existence presumably — at least for the Existentialist — will entail the existence of Socrates. It would be odd, even if convenient, to hold that the existence of the *proposition* that Socrates does not exist entails the existence of Socrates but that the existence of the *state of affairs that Socrates does not exist* does not; if anything, one would expect the roles to be reversed. So this sort of 'states of affairs' view of truth conditions is a dead end for the Existentialist.

Minimalist truth conditions

The truth condition for the proposition that Socrates does not exist is the following property of worlds: the property of being such that, were the world actual, Socrates would not exist.²

²Or, equivalently: the property of being such that, were the world actual, no one would be identical to Socrates.

I call this view of truth conditions ‘Minimalist’ because the properties this view attributes to worlds make no mention of propositions, states of affairs, or any entities other than those, like Socrates, which are the subject matter of the proposition in question. The Minimalist truth condition for the proposition that Socrates does not exist is a property which, Existentialists and their opponents should both agree, some possible worlds instantiate; and, more to the point, all should agree that a possible world instantiates this property iff the proposition that Socrates does not exist is true with respect to that world. But, crucially, this property is, by Existentialist lights, 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. But this is just what we said that the Existentialist should want.

3.5 *Objection to minimalist truth conditions*

Here are some objections to this sort of view of the truth conditions of propositions:

1. The proponent of Plantinga’s argument might, of course, object that by *her* lights, the property of being such that, were it actual, Socrates would not exist does *not* entail the nonexistence of the proposition that Socrates does not exist. This is correct, but irrelevant. The Existentialist’s aim is to give an account of truth conditions for propositions which, by his own lights, will give a principled reason for rejecting (7). The aim is not to give an argument using only premises that the anti-Existentialist will accept that (7) is false — the Existentialist might well grant that there is no such argument to be had, and that every good argument against (7) will use Existentialism as a premise.

2. The objection from lack of generality.

In the case of the Minimalist view of truth conditions, unlike the other three views stated above, the view was not given a fully general statement applicable to all propositions. Rather, I just stated the truth condition corresponding to a *single* proposition, the proposition that Socrates does not exist. And attempts to give the view a general formulation run into problems similar to those which plague certain kinds of disquotational theories of truth. One wants to say something like

For any proposition p , the truth condition for p is the following property of worlds: the property of being such that, were the world actual, p .

But this is not well-formed, since the variable occurs once in subject and once in sentence position. We could always formulate the Minimalist view as the claim that every instance of the schema

The truth condition for the proposition that S is the following property of worlds: the property of being such that, were the world actual, S .

but this raises awkward questions about propositions which are not expressed by any sentence. Instead, I think that we should generalize by types of propositions, by thinking of the Minimalist account as including clauses like the following:

If p is an existential proposition that attributes existence to o , then the truth condition for p is the following property of worlds: the property of being such that, were the world actual, o would exist (one of the objects which exists in the world would be o).

If p is an attribution of a monadic property F to o , then the truth condition for p is the following property of worlds: the property of being such that, were the world actual, o would instantiate F .

If p is the negation of another proposition q , then the truth condition for p is the following property of worlds: the property of not instantiating the truth condition for q .

and so on.

I don't claim that filling out the 'and so on' should be trivial; but I do think that it is plausible that there should be some way of doing it. This is for the same reason that the Minimalist account seems plausible in the first place: there should be some way of explaining what it takes for a proposition to be true at a world which does not make mention of that proposition.

3. Just as the appeal to Socrates-involving states of affairs only delayed the problem for the Existentialist, so the appeal to Socrates-involving properties (such as the property of worlds of being such that, were the world actual, Socrates would not exist) is only a temporary fix. One might develop this argument in the following way:

Presumably, the Existentialist about propositions will also be an Existentialist about properties, and hold that 'Socrates-involving' properties such as the property of being such that Socrates does not exist cannot exist unless Socrates does. But the present account of truth conditions attributes just such a Socrates-involving property to possible worlds in which Socrates is supposed *not* to exist. So the idea that a world could instantiate these truth conditions without Socrates existing at that world is inconsistent with Existentialism about properties.

It might seem that the Existentialist is thus forced into the awkward position of thinking that propositions but not properties involving Socrates can only exist if Socrates does — and this is no more plausible than the view, already rejected above, that states of affairs but not propositions involving Socrates can exist without Socrates.

But the Existentialist is not forced into this position. To see why, it is important to be clear about what sorts of properties truth conditions are. We are presuming that actualism is true, in which case possible worlds, like everything else, exist in the actual world. Truth conditions 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 Socrates, and of the relevant proposition. After all, both Socrates and the proposition that Socrates does not exist do, 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.

4. One might object that this just pushes the problem back a step. If we are assuming that the Existentialist about propositions is also an Existentialist about properties, then it appears that he will have to distinguish between a property's being a property *of* a world, and a property's existing *in* that world. But isn't this the very distinction — the true at vs. true in distinction — which Existentialists are supposed to be making intelligible?

But this is not the same distinction. There clearly is a distinction between properties which exist at a world and properties of that world. Suppose, for illustration, 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 instantiated? 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 proper subset of the answer to (ii); but this is a view which, in the present context, 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 actually 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.

3.6 *Back to inner and outer truth*

We are thinking of propositional truth, like sentential truth, in terms of the distinction between context and circumstance of evaluation. In these terms, 'inner truth' can be thought of as 'truth at a context' and 'outer truth' is can be defined as 'truth with respect to some circumstance, given the actual world as context.'

Given this point, it is somewhat perverse to, as some proponents of the ambiguity reply have done, take inner truth as the basic notion, and outer truth to be some notion which needs definition in terms of inner truth. Just as truth at a context C is just a special case of truth, relative to a context, at a circumstance — it is truth, relative to C as context, taking the world of C as circumstance of evaluation — so here outer truth is the basic notion, and inner truth is just a special case of it. A proposition is true in the outer sense at w iff w satisfies that proposition's truth condition. A proposition is true in the inner sense at w iff w satisfies that proposition's truth condition *and* the proposition exists at w .

Can one still reasonably insist that one does not understand what it could mean for a proposition to be true at a world without existing at that world?

To understand the present view, all that is required is a grasp of the idea that propositions are associated with properties of worlds such that a proposition is true at a world just in case that world instantiates the proposition's associated property — what I have been calling the proposition's truth condition. We then combine this definition of a truth condition with the antecedently understood notion of existence at a world — x exists in w just in case, had w been actual, x would have existed — to generate the Existentialist's claim that a world can instantiate proposition's truth condition without the proposition existing at that world. Of course, one could boggle at the idea that a proposition could fail to exist at some worlds; but the present argument is supposed to show that this idea leads to absurdity, not just assume that it does.

4 **Consequences of these existentialist maneuvers**

The rejection of (7) can thus be presented as a fairly natural consequence of some views which seem to me plausible. But this sort of view does have some costs. They seem to me to be worth paying, but different people will evaluate the case differently.

4.1 Some surprising false strict conditionals

In general, for the Existentialist about propositions and properties, conditionals of the following forms will not be necessarily true:

$p \rightarrow$ the proposition that p is true.

n is $F \rightarrow n$ has the property of being F .

For many propositions and properties, these sorts of conditionals will hold necessarily, and these conditionals always hold with respect to a world when the relevant propositions and properties exist at that world. But for propositions and properties like the proposition that Socrates does not exist and the property of being identical to Socrates, they will not hold with respect to every world.

This is, I concede, a somewhat odd consequence of Existentialism. But there is no avoiding it, so long as we accept, along with Existentialism, the theses of Contingency and Serious Actualism. If one thinks that these three theses are sufficiently well motivated, accepting that these conditionals can be false with respect to worlds in which the relevant propositions and properties fail to exist may well be worth the price.

4.2 Existentialism, S_4 , and S_5

Different modal logics can be thought of as different views about the accessibility relation — i.e., the ‘possible relative to’ relation.

S_4 includes the axiom:

$$(4) \Box p \rightarrow \Box \Box p$$

or, equivalently,

$$(4^*) \Diamond \Diamond p \rightarrow \Diamond p$$

(4) says that accessibility is transitive.

S_5 includes both this axiom and the following axiom guaranteeing the symmetry of the accessibility relation:

$$(5) \Diamond p \rightarrow \Box \Diamond p$$

The existentialist who thinks that actualism is not just true but necessary must reject symmetry and hence S_5 . After all, consider a world w with respect to which the proposition that Socrates does not exist is true. w is possible relative to @. But were w actual, @ would not be possible. Hence accessibility is not symmetric.

This result is not specific to the sort of existentialist view I’m defending. but will follow from any view according to which (i) actualism would have been true no matter what world was actual and (ii) there are no de re propositions about nonactual objects. See e.g. Adams (1981) and the discussion of world-hopping arguments in Bennett (2005).

I think that plausible arguments can also be given against (4); if so the right modal logic would have been weaker than S_4 .

4.3 Truth and truth at a world

One standard thought about truth is that we should be able to explain truth with respect to a world in terms of truth simpliciter in something like this way: p is true at w iff were w actual, p would be true. But this is just the existence-entailing view of truth conditions described above, which the existentialist must reject. So my sort of existentialist must reject the idea that truth with respect to a world can be explained in terms of a more fundamental notion of truth.

I do not think that this is so bad, though perhaps I am missing something. It seems plausible to me that, on the view sketched above, truth simpliciter should be explicable in terms which make no use of the property of being true — truth should be explicable in terms of what is the case.

5 Putting this together with the property theory of propositions

I'm not quite sure how well this sort of defense of existentialism fits with the property view of propositions that I am also tempted to defend, but here's the basic idea.

Above I said that propositions are associated with properties of worlds which are their truth conditions; a natural thought is that, if we like the property view, we should just identify propositions with those truth conditions. So, for example, the proposition that Socrates does not exist is the property of worlds expressed by open sentences of the following sort:

Were w actual, it is not the case that Socrates would exist (no one would be identical to Socrates).

To believe this proposition is to predicate it of the actual world. Perhaps to believe that it is possible is to believe the existentially quantified claim that there is some possible world which (actually) instantiates this property. (Or, perhaps it is to predicate of the actual world the property of being such that it is possible that Socrates not exist.)

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