More on existentialism

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1 The semantics of counterfactuals

One question which Kenny asked last time was about how this approach to truth at a world can handle the standard Stalnaker-Lewis semantics for counterfactuals. According to (one version of) that view, a formula $p \ \Box\!\!\rightarrow q$ is true iff the nearest world at which p is true is also a world at which q is true.

One might put the following gloss on this: the formula is true iff, where w is the nearest world at which p is true, the following is the case: were w actual, q would be true. But surely then q would have to exist, were w actual — which will be problematic for true counterfactuals whose consequent includes propositions like the proposition that Socrates does not exist.

The proponent of the kind of existentialist view I have been sketching can accept the Stalnaker-Lewis semantics, but not the gloss just given. Instead the whole thing should be explained in terms of the official account of truth at a world, i.e.:

> $p \ \Box\!\!\rightarrow q$ is true iff the nearest world which instantiates p's truth condition also instantiates q's truth condition.

This takes relative similarity (nearness) relations between worlds as primitive, but that's no different from the standard semantics. Either could be supplemented by a theory of this relation.

2   More truth conditions for propositions

This raises the question of how to give systematic truth conditions for propositions; for the reasons discussed last time, there is no easy way to do this via quantification over propositions. One possibility we discussed last time was to get around this problem by expressing the view as the claim that every instance of a schema like

> 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.

is true; but the worry is that this presupposes the notion of truth which it is the job of this sort of account to explain.

Instead I suggest that a systematic account of truth conditions for propositions can be given by a recursive definition based on types of propositions, as follows:

> 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. The semantics for counterfactuals above could be added to this list.

Note that this involves commitment to the idea that propositions, as well as sentences, can, e.g., be negations. This would be defied by, for example, the standard versions of possible worlds semantics. It might also be denied by someone who thought that S and $\neg neg S$ express the same proposition —- though such a person might still think that S gave the 'real' logical form of the proposition which each expresses.

It seems to me plausible that propositions have these sorts of properties — like the property of being a monadic predication — and have them essentially.

It is not, however, a trivial claim that an account of truth of this sort could be developed which did not end up leading to problems of the sort Plantinga was trying to generate for the proposition that Socrates does not exist.

3   Monadic & dyadic truth

Another source of worry about this view, which we also discussed last time, is that it reverses the usual order of explanation between the monadic truth predicate ('true') and the dyadic truth predicate ('true with respect to w'). A natural thought is that we should explain the latter in terms of the former: surely what is true simpliciter must be more fundamental than what is true with respect to this or that circumstance.

One way to bring out the motivation here is to imagine that all we had were the facts about what is true with respect to what — it is natural to think that this would leave out an important aspect of reality: namely, the facts about what is true simpliciter.

Insofar as I agree with these worries about the dyadic truth predicate, I agree that this predicate should not be taken as basic. But on the kind of view sketched above, it is not taken as basic; the dyadic truth predicate is explained in terms of what things would instantiate which properties were certain worlds actual.

One might try to argue against this view by saying: imagine that all we had were facts about what would be the case were certain worlds actual; wouldn't that leave out facts about what *is* the case?

Yes, of course. But that is an objection only if we think that the only facts are facts about worlds instantiating particular truth conditions, which of course is no part of the present view. It is a fact that were α actual, grass would be green; but it is also a fact that grass is green (full stop).

So, in general, the order of explanation which comes out of this sort of view is:

> p is true (monadic) $\equiv_{df}$ p is true at w & w is actual (instantiated, realized, obtains, ...)
>
> p is true at w $\equiv_{df}$ w instantiates p's truth condition

So we bottom out where, I think, we should: in things having certain properties. In particular, we bottom out in worlds instantiating truth conditions, and one world possessing the property of bring actual.