

On possibly nonexistent propositions

Jeff Speaks

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ABSTRACT. Alvin Plantinga gave a *reductio* of the conjunction of the following three theses: Existentialism (the view that, e.g., the proposition that Socrates exists can't exist unless Socrates does), Serious Actualism (the view that nothing can have a property at a world without existing at that world) and Contingency (the view that some objects, like Socrates, exist only contingently). I sketch a view of truth at a world which enables the Existentialist to resist Plantinga's argument without giving up either Serious Actualism or Contingency.

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1 THE PROBLEM

Alvin Plantinga introduced us to the following argument:¹

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)

The argument is a reductio — but of which premise?

Plantinga took the argument to be a *reductio* of (2), Existentialism; and it is not hard to see why. Premises (4) and (7) look trivial on a first reading, and, of the three named premises, Existentialism looks, on the face of it, like the easiest to give up.

That said, there is good reason not to want to have to relinquish Existentialism. One sort of argument for Existentialism goes via an argument for Millianism, the view that the meanings of names are their referents. It is less that there are straightforward positive arguments for Millianism than that, given Kripke's arguments in *Naming and Necessity*, it is not altogether easy to see what the meaning of a name could be, if not its reference. Kripke's arguments discredited the most attractive versions of descriptivism, and it is difficult to understand what the Fregean sense of a name could be, if not a condition on reference — which is the sort of thing that is expressed by a definite description.² If the meaning of a proper name is the object for which it stands then, plainly enough, the meaning of a name cannot exist unless the object for which it stands exists. But it seems plausible that the meaning of a sentence — i.e., the

¹See Plantinga (1983). I've modified the argument by (following David (2009)) combining two of Plantinga's premises into premise (7). Related arguments are also discussed in Prior (1969) and in Williamson (2001); see below for some discussion of the latter.

²For defenses of 'non-descriptive' Fregeanism, see McDowell (1977) and Evans (1981). For defenses of sophisticated descriptivist views aimed at resisting Kripke's arguments, see Plantinga (1978) for the view that names are rigidified descriptions, and Dummett (1981); Sosa (2001) for the view that names are descriptions which take wide scope over modal operators. For criticism of these approaches, see Soames (1998, 2002); Caplan (2005).

proposition expressed by the sentence (in the relevant context) — cannot exist if the meaning of one of the subsentential expressions of which it is composed fails to exist.³ And these two theses — 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 — together entail Existentialism.⁴

A different sort of argument for Existentialism, emphasized by Timothy Williamson, relies not on the idea that certain expressions are directly referential, but rather on the idea that certain propositions are essentially about the things that they’re about.⁵ Consider, for example, the proposition that Socrates is wise. Could this proposition exist without being about Socrates? If this proposition is essentially about Socrates, and hence could not exist without being about Socrates, and if Socrates can’t stand in relations like that expressed by ‘is about’ without existing, then it follows that this proposition cannot exist unless Socrates does — which is just what the Existentialist says.

Since the assumptions of these two arguments seem plausible (at least to many), it would be good to have a way to preserve Existentialism in the face of Plantinga’s argument. Some who are attracted to Existentialism, like Salmon (1998), might see Plantinga’s argument as discrediting Serious Actualism; others, like Williamson, view the argument as a *reductio* of (6), the premise that there are contingently existing things. But, for most philosophers, the views that not everything exists necessarily and that a property can’t be instantiated without there being something which instantiates it are among their core metaphysical convictions.

Most proponents of Existentialism, therefore, must find some other way out of the argument. Since the argument is valid, and (4) is hardly up for debate, this amounts to the claim that such philosophers must reject (7). On the face of it, though, this is not easy to do. How could a proposition be true at a world without having the property of being true in that world?

My aim in what follows will be to answer this question. If this can be done satisfactorily, it will also provide a way out of Williamson’s argument in “Necessary Existents” that everything which exists exists necessarily. Though Williamson’s intended conclusion is different than Plantinga’s, the argument on which he focuses can, for our purposes, be thought of as the same as Plantinga’s — it’s just that Williamson takes to the argument to be a *reductio* of Contingency rather than Existentialism.

³This is perhaps clearest if one thinks of the meanings of subsentential expressions as constituents of the proposition expressed by the sentence; but even philosophers who abjure talk of structured propositions and their constituents might see the intuitive appeal of the idea that the meaning of a sentence depends for its existence on the existence of the meanings of the words which make up the sentence.

⁴It is worth adding that nothing in this sort of argument for Existentialism turns specifically on the semantics of *names*; if one thinks that, for example, demonstratives but not names are devices of direct reference, the present argument, along with Plantinga’s attempted *reductio*, can be restated without loss. So anyone who thinks that some expressions directly refer to contingently existing things has a reason to preserve Existentialism.

⁵See Williamson (2001), 241-2.

It is, however, important to distinguish Plantinga's argument from two other arguments which can be brought against the Existentialist.

The first is a temporal analogue of Plantinga's argument, which assumes Presentism — the view that only presently existing objects exist — and Serious Presentism — the view that only presently existing objects have properties. If we assume these views, the Existentialist seems to be in trouble. For consider the proposition that Socrates does not presently exist. This proposition has the property of being true, and so (by Serious Presentism) presently exists; but if Existentialism is true, it follows from this that Socrates also presently exists, which contradicts our assumption that the proposition that Socrates does not presently exist is true.

The second related argument concerns the (alleged) *de re* modal properties of objects which don't exist, but could have.⁶ Consider, to borrow an example from Bennett (2005), that George Bush could have had a son who was a bookie, and that that son could have been a janitor instead. Focus on the proposition that, possibly, *that son* could have been a janitor instead. This proposition (i) seems to be true, since people don't have their occupations essentially, and (ii) seems to attribute a *de re* modal property to the bookie son that George Bush could have had. But it is hard for the Existentialist to accept both (i) and (ii). If (ii) is true, then our proposition is a singular proposition about the possible bookie son, which means that, given Existentialism, the proposition can't exist unless the bookie son does. But given (i) and Serious Actualism, the proposition *does* actually exist, which means that the bookie son actually exists as well — which is false.

Many Existentialists will have ready replies to these two arguments. However, in neither case do these replies help to defuse Plantinga's attempted *reductio* of Existentialism.

In the case of the temporal analogue of Plantinga's argument, many Existentialists will be happy to reject one or both of Presentism and Serious Presentism. However, the most common motivations for rejecting these views — for example, arguments from special relativity and from the apparent existence of cross-temporal causal relations — don't provide any reason at all to doubt Actualism or Serious Actualism.

In the case of the problem of the possible bookie son, many Existentialists will deny the modal intuition on which the argument rests; that is, they will deny that there *are* *de re* truths of any sort about objects which could have existed, but don't.⁷ But, even if the Existentialist is right to deny the existence of truths of this sort, this clearly provides no reason to doubt the modal intuition on which Plantinga's argument rests: namely, that it is true of Socrates, an actually existing object, that he could have failed to exist.

⁶The problem in this form is due to McMichael (1983).

⁷See, for example, Adams (1981), Fitch (1996), and Bennett (2005).

There is thus a clear sense in which Plantinga's argument is more challenging than either of these other arguments: the most obvious replies that the Existentialist can offer to these arguments don't help at all with Plantinga's argument. However, I won't be relying on the assumption that, of these three arguments, Plantinga's is the hardest for the Existentialist; my main point is just that these three arguments are distinct, and that a solution to one needn't be a solution to the others. My aim in what follows will be only to reply to Plantinga's argument.

2 THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN INNER AND OUTER TRUTH

Let's return to our main question: how can a proposition be true at a world without having the property of being true in that world? A popular answer to this question, which has been forcefully defended by, among others, Kit Fine, is that this only seems impossible because of a failure to notice an ambiguity in our talk about truth. As Fine puts 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.⁸

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 fails, on the grounds that (7) is true only in the weak sense of 'possibly true' — since its being possible that Socrates does not exist requires only that there is some world of which the proposition that Socrates does not exist is true in the outer sense — whereas (1) is true only if 'is true' expresses inner truth.

To opponents of Existentialism, however, the introduction of this sort of distinction can sound like the bare assertion, without argument, that a proposition can be true with respect to a world without existing at it. 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

⁸Fine (1985), 163. See also Prior (1969); for a recent defense of a similar view, see King (2007).

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?⁹

There are really two worries here about Fine's response to Plantinga's argument. The first is simple incomprehension: one might complain that proponents of this strategy simply have not told us enough about 'outer truth' for us to understand what is meant by this term. This worry might be assuaged by showing how this notion might be defined in terms of inner truth, which anti-Existentialists do understand.¹⁰

But this sort of reconstruction of 'outer truth' does not help with a deeper worry about Fine's strategy, which is just that, even if we can somehow define a notion of 'outer truth' sufficient to block Plantinga's reductio, we still have no reason to accept the intuitively implausible idea that our talk about 'truth at worlds' is systematically ambiguous, and so avoid the charge that this defense of Existentialism is an example of what Kripke called 'the lazy man's approach to philosophy' — the habit of positing otherwise unmotivated ambiguities to save contentious philosophical theses.

To rebut this worry, we must do more than define a notion of 'outer truth' which will give us interpretations of 'possibly' and 'possibly true' on which (7) comes out false; we must give a plausible explanation of what it is for a proposition to be true with respect to a possible world from which it emerges as a natural consequence that (7) is false. That is the aim of this paper.¹¹

3 SENTENCES, POSSIBILITY, AND POSSIBLE TRUTH

A good place to begin is, following Marian David, 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.

As is well-known, not all instances of this schema are true. Remembering that 'possibly true' means 'has the property of being 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 the case that I am necessarily located in this place, the antecedent of this conditional

⁹This sort of worry is voiced in, among other places, Crisp (2003).

¹⁰For one way of doing this, see Turner (2005).

¹¹Hence I will not mainly be concerned to reply directly to arguments which have been offered in favor of (7) or close relatives of it; for such arguments, see Bealer (1982) and Williamson (2001). For a brief discussion of the latter, see note 35.

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.¹² The fact that ‘I am not here’ is true at every context but not a necessary truth is a familiar illustration of the need for a double-indexing semantics, which recognizes the need for a distinction between contexts of utterance and circumstances of evaluation.

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. That is what the sort of Existentialist under discussion must claim, and what the proponent of Plantinga’s argument denies.

An initial thought is that the above discussion of sentential truth will *not* carry over to the case of propositional truth. After all, why is ‘I am not here’ true with respect to some circumstances (and hence possible), but not possibly true? Just because the semantic values of the expressions in the sentence relative to a context depend on that context in such a way that in no (proper) context does the sentence express a truth. So, one might think, 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. And so it might seem that we are left without an explanation of how a proposition, as opposed to a sentence,

¹²Here and in what follows I am thinking of contexts as ‘centered possible worlds’: possible worlds with a designated agent and time. If we allow improper contexts, then ‘I am not here’ is true relative to some contexts. I ignore this point in what follows — nothing in the arguments to follow turns on these sorts of questions about the nature of contexts.

could be possible but not possibly true.

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 Marian David:¹³

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.¹⁴

¹³See David (2009). Plantinga discusses the related example ‘There are not sentence tokens’ in Plantinga (1983). There is a slight complication here; perhaps sentence tokens are only contingently sentence tokens, in which case the token ‘There are not sentence tokens’ could exist in the absence of any sentence token. Perhaps, further, this token could exist and be true in the absence of sentence tokens — if, for example, this sentence token is not only not a sentence token essentially, but also possibly another sort of bearer of truth, like a belief state. In this case the sentence token would, contra Plantinga, be true. But we might get around these worries by revising the example to something like ‘There are not sentence tokens, or any other bearers of truth other than propositions.’ Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point.

¹⁴There are some complications here which are not of decisive importance for the argument to follow — since, in the end, the point of this discussion of (7s) is only to set up a certain view about premise (7) in Plantinga’s argument — but are worth flagging nonetheless.

First, to bypass questions about whether sentence types exist contingently or necessarily, we should think of talk about ‘the name ‘Socrates’ as about tokens of the name, rather than the name’s type. But which claim about tokens of this name should it be? A natural thought is something like:

Tokens of the name ‘Socrates’ do not exist.

To show that instances of (7s) corresponding to this sentence are false, we need to show that it is not possible for this sentence to be true. An initially plausible reductio of the possible truth of this sentence is: (i) if this sentence is true, then it must exist; (ii) if it exists, its constituents exist; (iii) a token of ‘Socrates’ is one of its constituents; hence (iv) a token of ‘Socrates’ exists. But (iv) contradicts our initial supposition that the sentence is true — after all, the sentence *denies* the existence of tokens of ‘Socrates.’ The problem with this argument is that (iii) is false; a token of ‘Socrates’ is not a constituent of tokens of this sentence. Rather, a token of a name of ‘Socrates’ is a constituent of the sentence, and it’s not at all obvious that the existence of a token of a name of ‘Socrates’ entails the existence of a token of ‘Socrates.’ So it’s not clear that this is a good example of a sentence which is possible but not possibly true.

These problems would not arise if we spoke a ‘Lagadonian language,’ in the sense of Lewis (1986), in which expressions of the language include objects which are names of themselves. But we don’t need to consider such fanciful examples to avoid the problem with the previous example; a sentence in English which seems to do the trick is:

Tokens of names of Socrates do not exist.

which *does* contain a token of ‘Socrates’ as a constituent. Hence we can argue, using (i)-(iii), that if this sentence is true then (iv) a token of ‘Socrates’ exists. And if (iv) is true, this sentence is false, since a token of ‘Socrates’ is a token of a name of Socrates. So the sentence is false if true, and therefore not possibly true.

To this argument, one might object that the above sentence could be true in a world in which ‘Socrates’ is not a name of Socrates. This is true but, I think, not relevant, since when we talk about sentences that are possible but true in no context, we always implicitly stipulate that we’re setting aside worlds in which the expressions in the sentence have a different character. Otherwise, claims that “I am here now” is true in every context and that “I am not here now” is false in every context would be obviously incorrect.

Another way to get a sentence of the right sort would be to use a sentence which contains both a token of ‘Socrates’ and a token of a name of ‘Socrates’, as in

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’ is 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. We can explain the fact that sentences like ‘The name ‘Socrates’ does not exist’ are possible but not possibly true as follows: relative to the actual world as context, this sentence is true with respect to a possible circumstance if and only if that circumstance has a certain property — the property of being such that in that circumstance, the name ‘Socrates’ does not exist. But any circumstance which instantiates this property will be such that the sentence does not exist in that circumstance. Since (assuming, as above, Serious Actualism) nothing can have a property in a circumstance without existing in that circumstance, any circumstance which instantiates the relevant property will then be such that the sentence does not have the property of being true in that circumstance.

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.¹⁵ 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 (‘This sentence token does not exist.’).

Socrates does not exist, and the preceding token of ‘Socrates’ does not exist.

Alternatively, we might also appeal to demonstrative expressions, as in

dthat(these word tokens) do not exist.

This very sentence token does not exist.

These do re-introduce indexicality, though the role played by indexicality in making this sentence false in every context is quite different than in the case of “I am not here now.”

Thanks to an anonymous referee for very helpful discussion of these issues.

¹⁵Here and in what follows, I identify worlds and circumstances of evaluation for simplicity of exposition; this is a harmless simplification, since the problems under consideration are all to do with possible truth. But the framework can be adapted to other views of circumstances of evaluation, whether these be world/time pairs, centered worlds, or something else.

- It might be existence-independent: $\forall w$, if w instantiates F , then S might or might not exist at w ('Grass is green.').

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.

It is, strictly speaking, a mistake to talk about *the* truth condition of a sentence: the definition of truth conditions for sentences given above does not suffice to determine a unique property for each sentence. All we have said is that a property F is a truth condition for S just in case a world instantiates F iff S is true at that world. Given that distinct properties may be necessarily co-instantiated, a sentence may be associated with several distinct truth conditions. However, if one truth condition for a sentence is nonexistence-entailing, then every truth condition for that sentence will be. After all, we know from the definition of truth conditions that if F , G are truth conditions for some sentence S , the same worlds must instantiate F as instantiate G , since each are instantiated by just those worlds at which S is true. So, if every F -world is one at which S does not exist, then every G -world will also be one at which S does not exist. For this reason, talk about whether 'the' truth condition for a sentence is nonexistence-entailing is for our purposes a harmless simplification.

So far we have seen that there are two sorts of sentences which are possible but not possibly true: the first were indexical sentences of a certain sort, while the second are sentences whose truth-conditions are nonexistence entailing. The first sort of sentence had no analogue in the case of propositions; the natural next question is whether the second sort of sentence has a propositional analogue.¹⁶

From the point of view of the Existentialist who is also a Millian believer in structured propositions, we should expect the reasons that some instances of (7s) are false to carry over to the case of propositions. After all, the reason why

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

is false is that the sentence

¹⁶Even opponents of the distinction between possibility and possible truth for propositions, after all, grant that there is such a distinction for sentences. I've already mentioned Plantinga's example of 'There are not sentence tokens'; Williamson (2001) says that "There is the illusion of a distinction between truth in a world and truth of a world for propositions because we appear to be able to model such a distinction on a corresponding distinction for sentences, forgetting that the presence of the latter depends on the absence of the former" (240).

The name ‘Socrates’ does not exist.

denies the existence of one of its own constituents.¹⁷ But, according to the Existentialist, this is exactly what the *proposition* expressed by

Socrates does not exist.

does. It denies the existence of Socrates, who is himself a constituent of the proposition that Socrates does not exist. So, intuitively, we should expect this proposition to be possible but not possibly true for exactly the same reasons we found that the sentence

The name ‘Socrates’ does not exist.

was possible but not possibly true.

4 PROPOSITIONS AND THEIR TRUTH CONDITIONS

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 of propositions with respect to different worlds should agree that propositions have truth conditions, in this sense.

Given this apparatus, we can intelligibly ask — as we asked in the case of sentences — whether the truth conditions for propositions are uniformly existence-entailing, or not. 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).

Seeing the availability of this strategy is one thing, carrying it out another; there some attractive views of the truth conditions of propositions which will not help the Existentialist cause. For example, one might grant that propositions have truth conditions, but deny that they are ever more interesting than trivial properties like the following:

Trivial truth conditions

The truth condition for p is the following property of worlds: the property of being such that p is true at the world.

¹⁷Though see footnote 14 for some complications about the interpretation of this sentence.

If propositions never had anything other than these sorts of trivial truth conditions, this would not count either way in the debate between the opponent and proponent of premise (7); but it would have the consequence that the apparatus of truth conditions would not advance the debate at all, since the question ‘Can w instantiate the truth condition for p without p existing at w ?’ would just be a trivial restatement of ‘Can a proposition be true at a world without existing at that world?’, which of course is the very question at issue.

Other ways of thinking about the truth conditions of propositions are even worse for the Existentialist, for they have the immediate implication that the truth conditions for all propositions are existence-entailing. Consider, for example, the following view of the truth conditions of propositions:

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; if this were the right account of the truth conditions of propositions, possibility would immediately entail possible truth, and (7) would be true. So if this is the right account of the truth conditions of propositions, it looks like Existentialism is in a tough spot.

This is a good way to bring out an important aspect of the dialectical situation. The Existentialist is responding to an argument against her position; to do so, it is sufficient that she explain a view of the truth conditions of propositions on which premise (7) is false, so long as that view of the truth conditions of propositions is otherwise satisfactory. To head off this line of response, the proponent of Plantinga’s *reductio* must do more than simply give a competing view of the truth conditions of propositions on which premise (7) comes out true; he must show that the Existentialist’s view of the truth conditions of propositions is incorrect. Of course, a convincing positive argument for his own view of truth conditions would be sufficient to do that, since, if we assume that the anti-Existentialist’s view of truth conditions entails that (7) is true and the Existentialist’s that it is false, they’ll be inconsistent.¹⁸

¹⁸I think that many opponents of Existentialism find the view implausible because they think that the above Existence-entailing view of truth conditions is obviously correct. One response to this attitude is to explain an alternative view of truth conditions for propositions which capture the perceived strengths of the Existence-entailing view; I’ll attempt this below. But one can also respond by pressing a kind of dilemma for the proponent of Existence-entailing truth conditions who employs Plantinga-style arguments as a *reductio* of Existentialism. (The idea behind this dilemma came from a talk by Timothy Williamson, though he shouldn’t be held responsible for the argument which follows.)

Consider the following formula:

(E) $\exists x \diamond x$ does not exist.

If (E) is false, then Contingency (premise 6 in Plantinga’s *reductio*) is false, and the argument against Existential-

So can the Existentialist give any plausible view of the truth conditions of propositions? In the case of *sentences*, it is tempting to describe their truth conditions as follows: 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 provide truth conditions for propositions; we can't explain the truth of propositions in terms of the truth of some yet more fundamental bearer of truth. But, as David (2009) suggests, the Existentialist might note that this definition of truth conditions for sentences has an important and attractive feature: it explains how a sentence can be true at a world in terms of the properties of something else — a proposition — at that world. Since the proposition's existing at that world does not entail that the sentence exists at that world, this gives us a grip on how a sentence can be true at a world without existing at that world. Can the Existentialist find some sort of entity to play an analogous role in the definition of truth conditions for propositions?

A natural suggestion, which David considers, is the view that we can explain the truth conditions of propositions in terms of the obtaining of states of affairs represented by those propositions. In particular, maybe the following view of truth conditions is correct:

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

ism is defused. So suppose instead that this formula is true. Then, given the usual understanding of quantification into modal contexts, there must be some world w at which an object o satisfies the condition expressed by 'does not exist.' But this can't mean that there is a world w which is such that, were w actual, an object o would satisfy the condition expressed by 'does not exist' since, plausibly, it is not possible for there to be nonexistent objects. So it must be possible for an object to fall in the extension of a predicate 'at' a world without the world being such that, were the it actual, the object would be in the relevant extension. But doesn't this distinction — the distinction between satisfying a condition at a world vs. being such that, were the world actual, it would satisfy that condition — sound a lot like the distinction between truth at a world and what would be true were the world actual, which the proponent of Existence-entailing truth conditions denies?

Another way to put the same point is that it seems that the friend of Existence-entailing truth conditions must endorse the following formulation of the Converse Barcan Formula:

$$\exists x \diamond Fx \rightarrow \diamond \exists x Fx$$

For, if the converse Barcan formula were false, it would seem that there could be some proposition — the one expressed by ' Fx ' relative to an assignment of a value to the variable — which was true with respect to some world without it being the case that any world is such that, were that world actual, this proposition would be true — and to admit this possibility is just to admit the possibility of a gap between a proposition's being true at a world and that proposition's being such that, were the world actual, that proposition would have the property of being true. But if the friend of Existence-entailing truth conditions concedes that the Converse Barcan Formula is true, then the dilemma above re-emerges. For (E) plus the converse Barcan formula implies that

$$\diamond \exists x x \text{ does not exist.}$$

which certainly seems false. So (E) must (assuming the correctness of the Existence-entailing view of truth conditions) be false. And in this case, again, premise (6) of Plantinga's *reductio* is false, and the argument against Existentialism is blocked.

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 Existentialist 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.

We've now considered three views of the truth conditions of propositions, none of which give the Existentialist a principled reason for rejecting (7). Can the Existentialist do better?

I think so. Consider the following relatively non-committal view of the truth-conditions of the proposition that Socrates does not exist:

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 (or, 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. So why isn't this minimalist view of truth conditions enough for the Existentialist to block the *reductio* at premise (7)?

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 otherwise satisfactory 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.

It is useful to head off at the outset one line of objection to the view that truth conditions are properties like the property a world w has just in case, were w actual, Socrates would not exist: this is a doubt about the intelligibility of locutions like 'were w actual.' On any view of possible worlds, we must have some way of talking about properties like this, because on any view of possible worlds we must be able to talk about what is the case 'in that world.' It makes no difference to the present view if we express the truth conditions for propositions using 'according to w ' or 'were w instantiated' or 'were w the case' rather than 'were w actual.' Those more comfortable with these paraphrases can substitute them without loss in what follows.

A more serious worry is based not on the intelligibility of this sort of locution, but rather on its admissibility in the present context. We're defining truth conditions for propositions as properties of worlds, which indicates that we're relying on a prior understanding of possible worlds in order to provide an account of truth at a world. But this might seem objectionably circular — especially if one thinks of possible worlds as maximal sets of compossible propositions, or some other construction out of the propositions which are true at those worlds.

This would be a serious worry if the apparatus of truth conditions were meant to provide an analysis of 'truth at a world.' But the point of this apparatus is only to provide a way of talking about the relationship between propositions and worlds which is neutral between various views of the nature of propositions and of possible worlds. The idea is that anyone (at least, anyone who believes in propositions and possible worlds) can grant that propositions have truth conditions, in the sense explained above, because this is compatible with various views of *what it is* for a possible world to instantiate the relevant truth condition.

Consider, for example, the view just mentioned, on which possible worlds are maximal sets of compossible propositions. On this view, what it is for a proposition p to be true at w might just be for p to be a member of the set of propositions which w is. After all, on this sort of view, p will be a member of just those worlds which are such that, were they actual, Socrates would not exist. Since these worlds actually exist, there's nothing here to which the Existentialist must object. It is true (to mention a point to which I'll return later) that the Existentialist must say that, though the proposition that Socrates does not exist is a member of various possible worlds, the proposition which attributes truth to the proposition that Socrates does not exist is not. But

this is just a particular view of the facts about which propositions are compossible, and is no general objection to the idea that possible worlds are maximal sets of compossible propositions.¹⁹

Similar remarks apply to other views of possible worlds. Suppose that we think of possible worlds as complex properties that the world could have instantiated, but doesn't.²⁰ So construed, a world will instantiate the truth condition for the proposition that Socrates does not exist iff were that world instantiated, nothing would be Socrates. This sort of view of possible worlds is thus naturally accompanied by a different analysis of what it is for a world to instantiate a truth condition than the view of worlds as maximal sets of compossible propositions — but each view is equally compatible with the idea that we can talk about truth at a world in terms of worlds instantiating truth conditions of propositions.

The general moral is that, as far as I can see, any view of possible worlds can accept the apparatus of truth conditions as a neutral way of talking about truth at a world. Any view of possible worlds will want to supplement this neutral way of talking with an account of what it is for a world to instantiate a given truth condition, and these accounts will differ depending on one's view of the nature of possible worlds. But the fact that the apparatus of truth conditions leaves these important questions about the nature of worlds and the analysis of truth at a world unanswered is in the present context a virtue rather than a vice.

With the foregoing in mind, I think that it should be uncontroversial that (i) worlds have properties like the property of being such that were it actual, Socrates would not exist, and (ii) a world instantiates this property just in case the proposition that Socrates does not exist is true at that world. So it should be uncontroversial that the property of being such that were it actual, Socrates would not exist is a truth condition for the proposition that Socrates does not exist. What is *not* uncontroversial, of course, is the idea that this truth condition for the proposition that Socrates does not exist is nonexistence-entailing: the Existentialist will think that it is, while the anti-Existentialist will think that it is not. Nonetheless, the Existentialist at

¹⁹One caveat: this approach does rule out the conjunction of the view that possible worlds are maximal sets of compossible propositions with the idea that what it is for two propositions to be compossible is for it to be possible for the two propositions to be jointly true, since the Existentialist thinks that the propositions that Socrates does not exist and that $2+2=4$ are compossible but that it is not possible for them to be jointly true, since it is not possible for the proposition that Socrates does not exist to be true, let alone true with some other proposition. This is, however, just another way of making the point that, according to the Existentialist who takes the line I've recommended, some propositions will be possible but not possibly true. For an Existentialist of this sort, a pair of propositions will be compossible iff there is some world which instantiates the truth conditions of each — just as, on the present view, a proposition is true at a world if some world instantiates its truth condition, not if there's a world which is such that, were it actual, the proposition would be true.

One might object that this is circular: on this sort of view, we'd be explaining possible worlds as sets of compossible propositions and then explaining compossibility in terms of possible worlds jointly instantiating truth conditions of propositions. But the same charge of circularity might be brought against anyone who endorses the view that possible worlds are maximal sets of compossible propositions, since such a theorist is explaining possible worlds in terms of compossibility, and compossibility in terms of joint truth in a possible world. Such a theorist might respond that compossibility is a primitive notion — but the Existentialist might say just the same thing. Or the theorist might respond by offering a reductive account of compossibility — but then it seems that whatever account is given could also be adapted by the Existentialist.

²⁰This view is defended by many. See, for example, Soames (2005).

this point has at least an initial defense against Plantinga's attempted *reductio* of Existentialism: he has explained a view of the truth conditions of propositions on which, given Existentialist assumptions, a proposition can be possible even though it does not have the property of being true in any possible world.

5 PROPERTIES OF POSSIBLE WORLDS AND EXISTENCE IN POSSIBLE WORLDS

How might the anti-Existentialist attack this defense? A plausible line of argument is that, 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 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: the Existentialist can simply deny that a world's satisfying a certain truth condition entails that, were that world actual, the truth condition in question would exist.²¹

²¹With this point in hand, it becomes clear that we *could* use facts to explain the truth conditions of sentences as well. Consider the Wittgensteinian view that there are no negative facts, and suppose that truth for propositions

But one might reasonably worry that this maneuver 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 just as dubious as the distinction — the true at vs. true in distinction — which Existentialists are supposed to be making intelligible?

No. 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. 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.²²

is a matter of correspondence or failure of correspondence to a fact. We could then say that the proposition that Socrates does not exist is true at a world iff it is not the case that, were the world actual, it would contain the fact that Socrates exists. More generally, we could put the view as follows:

For any positive proposition p , 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 .

For any negative proposition $\neg p$, $\neg p$ is true with respect to a world 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 a ontology of facts, along with the view that there are no negative facts. These are rather heavy commitments. But for our purposes the important point is that 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 any fact which would exist were w actual, in which case Socrates would not exist if w were actual, in which case (says the Existentialist) the proposition that Socrates does not exist would not exist if w were actual. Nonetheless, w actually instantiates the truth condition for the proposition that Socrates does not exist, and hence that proposition is true with respect to w .

However, this view can, from the perspective of the anti-Existentialist, look a bit gerrymandered; and in any case it would be preferable to have a view of the truth conditions of propositions which came with less metaphysical baggage — thus the focus on the Minimalist view of truth conditions explored in the main text.

²²To take another example: 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.

At this stage, 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? I don't see how. 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.

The anti-Existentialist can, of course, *understand* the present claim that a world can instantiate the truth condition for some proposition p without p 's existing at w without conceding that the correct truth conditions for propositions are such as to make this possible. So let's turn to some criticisms of the Minimalist view of truth conditions sketched above.

6 TRUTH CONDITIONS AND MONADIC VS. DYADIC TRUTH PREDICATES

It may not have escaped notice that 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 .

is true. But this raises awkward questions about propositions which are not expressed by any sentence, and seems to be an attempt to explain the truth conditions of propositions in terms of the truth of instances of a certain schema — which is intuitively backwards.

A more promising alternative is to give an account of truth conditions based on types of propositions, in something like the following way:

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 (something would be o).

If p is the negation of 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 not exist (nothing 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 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 not instantiate F .

and so on.

Of course filling out the ‘and so on’ is far from trivial; but I do think that it is plausible that there should be some way of doing it.²³ 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 is given in terms of what would be the case were that world actual, and which need make no mention of truth.²⁴

This sketch of Minimalist truth conditions is a good way into another important objection which might be brought against the present sort of view. This is the objection that the present view reverses the usual order of explanation between the monadic truth predicate (‘true’) and the dyadic truth predicate (‘true with respect to w ’). It seems that any plausible view must recognize the former as well as the latter. Just 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, simply, *true*.

²³The above is just one way in which we might get started; another candidate which would deliver the right result, but which would assign different truth conditions to the proposition that Socrates does not exist, would treat all negative propositions as follows:

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 .

This would serve the Existentialist’s purposes as well as the view sketched in the main text, since it would still be the case that a world could instantiate the relevant truth condition without its being the case that the proposition would exist, were the world actual.

²⁴Ignoring, of course, propositions whose subject matter is truth, such as propositions which attribute truth to another proposition.

An alternative approach would be to give a general statement of Minimalist truth conditions using substitutional quantification. For discussion, see Hill (2002). Some of the same worries raised above about the explanation of truth conditions in terms of schemata arise with this account.

But the existence of a monadic truth predicate of this sort can be used against the Existentialist. For, once we have both monadic truth and ‘true at’ on the table, it seems as though we should be able to give an explanation of one in terms of the other — it would be extremely surprising if there were *no* substantive connection between truth and truth at a world. Further, it might seem, monadic truth must be more fundamental than truth at a world — surely what is true *simpliciter* must be more fundamental than what is true with respect to this or that circumstance. This suggests that truth at a world must be analyzed in terms of monadic truth. But, unfortunately for the Existentialist, she cannot give the most straightforward explanation of the dyadic truth predicate for propositions in terms of a monadic truth predicate — that p is true at w iff were w actual, p would be (monadic) true — on pain of lapsing into the Existence-entailing truth conditions mentioned above.

Given that this otherwise attractive view of the relationship between monadic truth and truth at a world is unavailable to the Existentialist, the challenge for the Existentialist is to articulate some plausible view of the relationship between these two.

I think that the Existentialist has two options here, both of which are promising. The first is to reverse the usual order of explanation, and explain monadic truth in terms of truth at a world. The second is to give an explanation of truth at a world in terms of monadic truth which does not lead immediately to the Existence-entailing view of truth conditions. I’ll discuss these in turn.

A natural suggestion for how we might analyze monadic truth in terms of truth at a world is as follows:

$$p \text{ is true (monadic)} \equiv_{df} p \text{ is true at } w \ \& \ w \text{ is actual (instantiated, realized, obtains, ...)}$$

Now, one might try to argue against this sort of analysis as follows: consider the proposition that w is actual, which is part of the above analysis of monadic truth. Is this supposed to be true in the dyadic or the monadic sense? It can’t be the latter since, while it is true that this proposition is true at w , the proposition that some distinct world w^* is actual is equally true at w^* — and this is not sufficient for propositions true at w^* to be true in the monadic sense. So the proposition which ascribes monadic truth to the proposition that w is actual is part of our definition of monadic truth — and, if we try to apply our analysis of monadic truth to the proposition that w is actual itself, this proposition obstinately re-appears in the analysis. Hence, it seems, the proposed analysis of monadic truth is circular.

This argument is analogous to Frege’s argument in “The Thought” for the indefinability of truth:

“every ... attempt to define truth collapses ... For in a definition certain characteristics would have to be stated. And in application to any particular case the question would always arise that it were true that the characteristics were present. So one goes round in a circle.”

But this argument is flawed.²⁵ Just because the success of an analysis requires that certain propositions be true, it does not follow that the proposition which attributes truth to those propositions is itself part of the analysans.

The same diagnosis can be given of the foregoing argument against the analysis of monadic truth in terms of truth at a world. This analysis does require that the proposition that w is actual be true in the monadic sense — but this proposition’s being true is no part of the analysans. Rather, the analysans only includes w ’s instantiating the property of being actual. And there seems to be no reason why the proponent of the view that monadic truth is to be analyzed in terms of truth at a world should have to deny that worlds can genuinely instantiate properties of this sort, and that there so doing is not to be explained in terms of monadic truth.

What about the intuition that monadic truth must be prior to truth at a world, since what is the case must be more fundamental than what is true relative to various circumstances? After all, imagine that all we had were facts about what would be the case if certain worlds were actual; wouldn’t that leave out facts about what *is* the case? Yes, of course. But the intuition about the primacy of what is the case over what would be the case were certain worlds actual is an intuition that the proponent of the analysis of monadic truth in terms of truth at worlds can accept — it is, after all, no part of that analysis that the only facts are facts about worlds instantiating particular truth conditions. It is a fact that were α actual, grass would be green; but it is also a fact that grass is green (full stop), and that α is actual (full stop). So our explanation of truth, and truth with respect to worlds, bottoms out where, I think, it should: in things having properties and standing in relations to each other.

Another way of putting this is that the intuition behind the idea that monadic truth should be prior to truth at a world is not, fundamentally, an intuition about truth: it is an intuition that what is the case must be more fundamental than what would be the case were certain situations actual. And this is an intuition that the proponent of the view that monadic truth should be analyzed in terms of truth at a world can respect.

So this sort of view is one viable option for the Existentialist. But the Existentialist might also offer a way in which truth at a world can be explained in terms of monadic truth.

Recall the view of truth conditions by types of propositions sketched above, and take for example the view of truth conditions suggested for predications of monadic properties:

²⁵This diagnosis of Frege’s argument is drawn from Chapter 2 of Soames (1999).

If p is a predication 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 .

This gives the condition which a world must satisfy for an arbitrary proposition of this sort to be true at that world. But it is natural to think that every proposition is also associated with a property which is such that the proposition is true in the monadic sense iff the universe instantiates that property. In the case of monadic predications, a natural suggestion is:

If p is a predication of a monadic property F to o , then p is true (monadic) iff the universe instantiates the following property: the property of being such that o instantiates F .

Let's call these (for lack of a better term) monadic truth conditions.²⁶ Then the (dyadic) truth conditions for a proposition might be derived from its monadic truth conditions via rules of the following sort:

If a proposition's monadic truth condition is the property of being such that o instantiates F , then that proposition is true at w iff, were w actual, o would instantiate F .

Some delicacy is required here. For the same reason discussed in connection with the Minimalist view of truth conditions, we can't simply generalize the link between monadic and dyadic truth conditions by saying that if G is the monadic truth condition for a proposition p , then p is true at w iff were w actual, the universe would instantiate G — since, in cases like the proposition that Socrates does not exist, this property would not exist if the relevant worlds were actual. So, as above, the link between monadic and dyadic truth conditions has to be articulated by types of proposition. But this seems to introduce no new problems of principle.²⁷

7 TRUTH CONDITIONS FOR MODAL PROPOSITIONS

When thinking about the Existentialist idea that a proposition can be true at a world without existing at that world, many people have the intuition that this idea will founder upon the analysis of modal propositions. However, there is a natural application of the apparatus of truth conditions to modal propositions:

²⁶Once we recognize the existence of monadic truth conditions, a tempting view is that propositions just are properties of this sort. I hope to develop this view in future work.

²⁷Keeping in mind, as noted above, that giving this sort of recursive definition of truth by types of propositions is a highly non-trivial task which I'm making no serious effort here to carry out.

$\diamond p$ is true with respect to w iff some world possible with respect to (i.e., accessible from) w instantiates ... [insert a statement of p 's truth condition].

$\Box p$ is true with respect to w iff every world possible with respect to w instantiates ... [insert a statement of p 's truth condition].

$p \Box \rightarrow q$ is true with respect to w iff at the most similar world(s) to w which instantiates ... [insert a statement of p 's truth condition] also instantiates ... [insert a statement of q 's truth condition].²⁸

If the Existentialist can adopt these views about the truth conditions of modal propositions, then modal propositions do not require the Existentialist to ascribe any properties to worlds beyond those which are required to explain the truth of non-modal propositions.²⁹

Complications may seem to arise, however, when we consider the propositions expressed by sentences which contain embedded modal operators.³⁰ Consider, in particular, the proposition expressed by

If it were the case that Socrates did not exist, it would still have been possible for Socrates to exist.

i.e.,

Socrates does not exist $\Box \rightarrow (\diamond \text{Socrates exists})$

Can the Existentialist accommodate the intuition that counterfactuals of this sort can be true?

Given the view sketched above, for this counterfactual to be true it must be the case that the nearest world at which Socrates does not exist — call this w — instantiates the truth condition for the proposition that possibly Socrates does not exist. But this is just for there to be some world possible relative to w which instantiates the truth condition for the proposition that Socrates exists. So far, nothing in the model constrains our view of the accessibility relation; so, in particular, we could if we wish let that relation be symmetric and transitive and endorse S5 as the correct logic for metaphysical possibility. Given that Socrates actually exists, on this

²⁸It is important to see that this view of the truth conditions of modal propositions does not imply that, for example, the claim that the proposition expressed by 'Possibly S ' is necessarily equivalent to a proposition which attributes a certain property to the proposition expressed by S since, crucially, the truth conditions for non-modal propositions don't involve those propositions' instantiating certain properties. If they did, this would (given Serious Actualism) undercut the aim of letting certain propositions be true with respect to worlds without existing at those worlds. This feature of the view also, I think, avoids the argument of Carmichael (forthcoming), §2.2 that views of the sort being developed here are committed to rejecting the S4 and S5 axioms.

²⁹Plantinga (1983) argues convincingly that some ways of letting propositions be possible but not possibly true — like those which identify possibility with possible non-falsehood — lead to unacceptable assignments of necessity and possibility to propositions. But it doesn't follow that every version of 'Priorian existentialism' has this feature.

³⁰Thanks to Josh Rasmussen, Kenny Boyce, and Andrew Bailey for very helpful discussions of the issues discussed in what follows.

interpretation the counterfactual above will come out true – which, plausibly, is what we should want.

But a plausible argument can also be given for the opposite conclusion.³¹ Consider a world, w , with respect to which the antecedent of the counterfactual above is true. If w were actual, then (assuming that Existentialism about properties is true) the property which is the truth condition for the proposition that Socrates exists — namely, the property of being such that, were that world actual, Socrates would exist — would not exist.³² Hence, if w were actual, no world could instantiate this truth condition. But then it follows that, were w actual, it would not be possible that Socrates exists, since this is possible iff some possible world instantiates the truth condition for the proposition that Socrates exists, and we have already seen that if w were actual this truth condition would not be around to be instantiated. This line of argument seems to show that, contra the conclusion of the preceding paragraph, the Existentialist is committed to the claim that the above counterfactual is false. And, more generally, it seems that this shows that if Existentialism is true, the accessibility relation cannot be symmetric, since w is possible relative to the actual world α , but α would not be possible, were w actual.

However, it seems to me that this argument rests on a mistake. The mistake is to assume that we should think about the truth conditions of counterfactual conditionals by thinking about worlds in which the antecedent is true, and asking: were those worlds actual, what would be true? But the question we should be asking is: which propositions are such that their truth conditions are actually instantiated by those worlds? Given that (according to the sort of Existentialist view under examination) it can be true both that a world instantiates p 's truth condition and that were the world actual, p would not exist (and hence, given Serious Actualism, would not be true), one must be careful to keep these questions distinct.

As before, it is useful to think of this distinction by thinking about the distinction between contexts and circumstances. When we evaluate counterfactual sentences, we don't ask whether the nearest world at which the antecedent is true is a world which is such that, were the consequent uttered there, it would be true — rather, we ask whether the consequent, as uttered in the actual context, is true if we take that world as the circumstance of evaluation. Just so, when we evaluate the propositions expressed by counterfactual sentences like the above, we shouldn't ask whether, were the relevant world actual, the proposition expressed by the consequent would have the property of being true — we should ask whether the consequent is actually true of that world (i.e., whether that world actually instantiates that proposition's truth condition).

³¹This argument is related to what Bennett (2005) aptly calls 'out and back world-hopping arguments.' In her terms, the response to this argument which follows is an attempt to show that one can keep the symmetry of the accessibility relation without abandoning w -ism for α -ism.

³²Here I am assuming that Existentialism is not just true, but fixedly actually true in the sense of Davies and Humberstone (1980).

But even if the proponent of this sort of view is not, by so doing, forced into any particular modal logic, the line of reasoning just sketched does lead to some counterintuitive consequences. Consider the following sentence:

The proposition that Socrates does not exist is true.

This is, apparently, an attribution of a monadic property — being true — to something — a certain proposition. Hence, given the truth conditions for attributions of monadic properties to objects given above, this proposition is true with respect to a world w iff were w actual, the relevant proposition would instantiate the property of being true. But we already know that, on the sort of Existentialist view under consideration, this is impossible: for it to instantiate this property, it would have to exist, and hence Socrates would as well — rendering the proposition false, not true. (That it is impossible for this proposition to be true already follows from premise (5) of Plantinga's *reductio*; and I've provided no reasons for doubting any of the premises needed to get to (5).)

But from this it follows that the proposition expressed by the material conditional

If Socrates does not exist, then the proposition that Socrates does not exist is true.

will not be a necessary truth: after all, there will be some worlds which instantiate the truth condition of the antecedent but, given the argument just rehearsed, none which instantiate the truth condition of the consequent. And, in general, on the present view instances of the schema

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

will not express necessary truths. For many propositions, these sorts of conditionals will hold necessarily, and these conditionals always hold with respect to a world when the relevant propositions exist at that world. But for propositions like the proposition that Socrates does not exist, conditionals of this sort will not be necessary truths.

It is hard not to see this as a regrettable consequence of Existentialism. But there are at least two things to be said here. First, while there is no denying that these conditionals at first have the appearance of necessary truths, one might explain away this appearance by saying that, when the conditionals seem necessary, we are thinking only of worlds in which the relevant propositions exist — and of course the conditionals *are* true with respect to those worlds. Once we take seriously the existence of worlds in which the relevant propositions fail to exist, it is perhaps not too surprising that the conditionals don't express necessary truths. Second, if the foregoing is correct, there is no avoiding the possible falsity of some of the conditionals described above, 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.³³

Anyone who thinks this a price worth paying will also have a principled response to Williamson’s argument (mentioned earlier) for that conclusion that everything which exists exists necessarily. The first premise of Williamson’s argument is the claim that

Necessarily, if I do not exist then the proposition that I do not exist is true.³⁴

On the present view, this is false, since there will be worlds which instantiate the truth condition for the proposition that I exist without instantiating the truth condition for the proposition which attributes truth to that proposition.³⁵

8 CONCLUSION

It is an interesting question how this view maps on to Fine’s reply to Plantinga’s argument, discussed above. In one sense, the present way of denying premise (7) seems different from Fine’s reply: it does not seem to depend on claiming that our talk about truth at worlds is

³³One might try to raise an epistemic worry here for the Existentialist. Surely we sometimes know of propositions that they are true, or of things that they have a certain property. But presumably we know that a proposition is true by knowing the proposition; and if, as the Existentialist says, a proposition can be true with respect to a world even if the proposition that that proposition is true is not, how can we be justified in inferring the proposition that p is true from p ? The answer, as the above should make clear, is that in any world in which subjects can entertain p , p exists; and in these cases there is no gap between a proposition’s being true with respect to a world and the proposition that attributes truth to that proposition being true with respect to the world.

This point, by the way, shows that the kind of response to Plantinga’s argument which I’ve defended *cannot* be adapted to serve as a response to a temporal analogue of that argument which assumes both presentism and serious presentism: the problem is that in that case there appear to be singular propositions about past existents to which we can bear propositional attitudes and hence which (given serious presentism) must *now* exist. However, this disanalogy needn’t be an objection to the present response to Plantinga’s argument, since — as noted at the outset — the denial of presentism or serious presentism is considerably more plausible than the denial of actualism or serious actualism.

³⁴Williamson (2001), 233.

³⁵Williamson considers a related objection to his first premise, and argues (238–40) that the idea of propositions being true at worlds in which they don’t exist “betrays a failure to grasp what contingency is.” One of Williamson’s worries seems to be that the proponent of the view that propositions can be true at worlds at which they don’t exist must think of propositions as being specific with respect to world, as containing “a tacit variable” to be filled in by a world. While I agree that this would be a problematic commitment, I don’t see why it is one that the proponent of the view I’ve been sketching need accept. A proposition might be associated with truth conditions, in the above sense, which might in turn be instantiated by possible worlds, without that proposition being in any sense about those worlds.

But this might not be Williamson’s main worry. He also compares the view that propositions can be true at worlds at which they don’t exist with Lewis’s modal realism, and objects that a Lewisian multiverse cannot be “the distinctive subject matter of modal discourse” and is, instead, “simply more of what there is, about which we can ask genuinely modal questions.” I’m sympathetic to this sort of criticism of Lewis, but, again, I don’t see that this sort of criticism is a problem for the sort of view I’ve been sketching. One might try to develop this criticism by saying that, on the present view, the only modal facts are facts about which worlds instantiate the truth conditions of which propositions, and that this is simply “more of what there is” rather than a distinctively modal subject matter. Perhaps this shows that the instantiation of truth conditions by worlds can’t be the whole story about modality — but it is no part of the present view that it is. The Existentialist who adopts the view sketched above can agree that, in addition, there are irreducibly modal facts about which worlds could have been actual. (This is related to the points made in the discussion of monadic truth vs. truth at a world discussed above.)

systematically ambiguous, and does not seem to depend on a distinction between inner and outer truth, or weak and strong necessity. 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.

On the other hand, though, the present way of thinking about what it is for a proposition to be true at a world might be thought of as a way of capturing the distinction between inner and outer truth that Fine and at least some other proponents of the distinction between inner and outer truth seem to have had in mind. Recall that 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 analogous to ‘truth at a context’ and ‘outer truth’ can be thought of as ‘truth with respect to some circumstance, given the actual world as context.’

Given this point, it is clearly backwards to think of inner truth as the basic notion, and outer truth to be some obscure 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 .³⁶ There is thus a good sense in which ‘true in the inner sense’ is not a new species of truth — it is just truth at a world plus something else, existence in that world.

There are, of course, good dialectical reasons why proponents of the distinction between inner and outer truth might try to respond to skepticism about this distinction by trying to explain the latter notion in terms of the former notion — after all, the skeptics in question grant the intelligibility of the former notion, and deny the intelligibility of the latter notion. But this should not obscure the fact that, on the present way of understanding things at least, outer truth is clearly the more fundamental of the two notions. It is just as odd to try to explain outer truth in terms of inner truth as to explain truth at an arbitrary circumstance in terms of truth at a context.³⁷

³⁶This mirrors the case of sentential truth if we set aside indexicality: a sentence is true in the outer sense at a w iff w satisfies that sentence’s truth condition, and true in the inner sense at w iff w satisfies that sentence’s truth condition *and* the sentence exists at w . Note, by the way, that the idea that outer truth is prior to inner truth does not contradict the remarks above about the relationship between monadic truth and truth at a world — *both* inner truth and outer truth are meant to be sorts of truth at a world, and hence both are distinct from monadic truth.

³⁷Turner (2005) and Adams (1981) both try to explain outer truth in terms of inner truth (in Adams’ terminology, this is to explain ‘true at’ in terms of ‘true in’). But it is not clear whether they genuinely think that this is the right order of explanation, or whether the proposed explanations are simply dialectically useful in convincing

Serious questions about this way of understanding truth at a world remain. For example, it is not obvious that the Minimalist view of truth conditions sketched above can be suitably generalized, and one might worry that the above remarks about iterated modal operators will not avoid implausible assignments of truth conditions to certain modal sentences. But if no problems of this sort arise, we should conclude that Plantinga’s argument should not worry an Existentialist — even if he believes that Socrates exists only contingently, and no matter how serious his actualism.³⁸

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skeptics of the intelligibility of a distinction on which they rely. (Even if the former is true — which would make their approach more distant from the one I’ve been defending — there may be a certain formal similarity between the apparatus they employ for defining outer truth in terms of inner truth and the account of truth conditions by type of proposition discussed in §6. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pointing this out.)

By contrast, Fine (1980) does not define the ‘truth set’ of a proposition in terms of its ‘existence set’; and King (2007) sketches an independent account of ‘true at.’ I think that King’s approach is most similar to the one defended here.

³⁸Thanks to Marian David, Antony Eagle, Matthew Lee, Josh Rasmussen, Andrew Bailey, the participants in my spring 2008 seminar at Notre Dame, and an anonymous referee for helpful discussion of these issues.

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