

**Philosophical Issues in Quantified Modal Logic**  
Handout 5: Adams on Actualism and Essences  
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As we saw last week, Plantinga's version of actualism involved the following theses:

- (1) Merely possible objects do not exist.
- (2) Possible worlds are complete maximal states of affairs
- (3) States of affairs are abstract objects that exist necessarily
- (4) The actual world is the only complete, maximal state of affairs that *obtains*.
- (5) An essence of an object *o* is a property that *o* has essentially, and in no possible world *w*, is there something that has that property and is distinct from *o*.
- (6) Properties, including essences, exist necessarily.
- (7) Apparently singular propositions (such as "Ford is ingenious") in fact express propositions about essences. Such propositions necessarily exist.
- (8) Statements that apparently involve quantification over merely possible objects are paraphrasable in terms of quantification over essences.

This set of views allows Plantinga to accept the truth of statements such as "There could have been some objects that don't actually exist" and "Jeff King might not have existed" consistently with actualism. By (7), the sentence "Jeff King might not have existed" expresses the proposition that it is possible that the essence of Jeff King is not exemplified. Since Jeff King's essence exists even at worlds at which Jeff King doesn't (by (6)), the proposition that the essence of Jeff King is not exemplified exists at worlds at which Jeff King doesn't, and can be true at such worlds.

The purpose of Robert Adams's paper, "Actualism and Thisness", is to argue that "all possibilities are purely qualitative except insofar as they involve individuals that actually exist." It is a corollary of this that "...all the non-qualitative possibilities are possibilities for actual individuals." In the course of the paper, Adams argues that these metaphysical views pose problems for (6) and (7). Adams then argues for a different actualist account of the truth of statements such as an utterance of "Jeff King might not have existed", one that exploits a distinction between *truth in a world* and *truth at a world*.

Before we begin the discussion of Adams's paper, it helps to make a distinction between several distinct theses:

Actualism: the thesis that there are no non-actual individuals.

Serious Actualism: No object could have a property without existing.

Serious Actualism\*: Non-actual individuals cannot enter primitively into any relations.

One might think that serious actualism follows from actualism, because one might think that having a property at a world entails that one exists at that world. But as Plantinga points out (pp. 12-13), this argument is questionable. As we have seen earlier in the semester, when one adds modal operators to classical quantification theory, rules of

inference such as existential generalization and universal instantiation are no longer clearly valid. For example, a free logician might want to allow there to be some truths involving non-referring terms. Adoption of such a free logic will allow objects to have properties at worlds at which they do not exist.

Adams seems to conflate actualism and serious actualism: on p. 7 of “Actualism and Thisness” he writes:

Actualism is the doctrine that there *are* no things that do not exist in the actual world...Possibilists affirm, and actualists deny, that possible but non-actual entities can enter into relations and have properties, and can therefore be values of variables in the logic of predicates.

The relation between serious actualism and serious actualism\* is a little unclear to me, because it depends upon the thorny notion of “primitively”. What exactly is the issue between serious actualism and serious actualism\*? Perhaps it is that serious actualism\* allows that “definitions could be devised by which a ‘non-actual individual’ with many properties could be logically constructed out of things that actually exist” (p. 8, Adams), whereas a “‘hard’ actualist might insist on rejecting such definitions”?

Plantinga maintains that there are *essences* of all the individuals there could possibly have been. If some of these essences of non-actual individuals are non-qualitative, then we can specify non-qualitative possibilities using these non-qualitative essences. Adams is chiefly out to show that that there are no essences of non-actual individuals that are (a) non-qualitative and (b) involve some non-actual individuals.

It is central to Plantinga’s project that there are many essences of many things there only could have been. It is not clear to me whether it is central to Plantinga’s project that any of these essences of non-actual objects are non-qualitative essences that involve non-actual individuals. What should we think?

Four kinds of essences:

- (1) Thisnesses
- (2) Qualitative essences
- (3)  $\alpha$ -relational essences
- (4) world-indexed essences

A thisness “is the property of being a particular individual, or of being identical with that individual.”

A qualitative essence would be “a purely qualitative property that is an essence”

An  $\alpha$ -relational essence is a property of the form bearing R to  $a_1 \dots a_n$ , where R is a purely qualitative relation, and  $a_1 \dots a_n$  are actually existing objects.

A world-indexed essence is a property that is indexed to a particular world, such as “being the best dressed Rutgers philosophy professor in world w.”

Adams argues that world-indexed essences are irrelevant to his paper. But I’m not sure that they are irrelevant, at least to his critique of Plantinga. Couldn’t Plantinga appeal to world-indexed qualitative essences to obtain his essences?

Perhaps Adams thinks that world-indexed essences can’t exist in other worlds (since they are properties containing other worlds as constituents). But then why doesn’t he say that?

Adams argues that a thisness for an individual can only exist in a world if that individual exists in that world (p. 11):

My thisness is a property that I would have in every possible world in which I would exist- but equally, my thisness could not exist without being *mine*. It could not exist without being the thisness *of* Robert Merrihew Adams. So if there were a thisness of a non-actual individual, it would stand, primitively, in a relation to that individual. But according to actualism non-actual individuals cannot enter primitively into any relation. It seems to follow that according to actualism there cannot be a thisness of a non-actual individual.

Adams adds:

A similar argument shows that an actualist must deny that there are any singular propositions about non-actual individuals.

So thisnesses cannot play the role that (say) Plantinga requires them to play – as actual surrogates for merely possible objects. Furthermore, Adams thinks that the prospects are dim for finding any such surrogates. Adams uses the term “haecceities” for “the supposed non-qualitative entities that could largely play the part of a thisness of x even if x never existed,” and remarks:

It is not easy to say what haecceities would be. That is indeed the chief objection to them. Suppose H\* is my haecceity. What would H\* have been if I had never existed? It would be misleading at best for an actualist to claim that H\* would have been my haecceity in that case, for he thinks there would have been no me for it to be related to. But one might hold that H\* would have been something that could have been a haecceity of an individual, and that could not have been a haecceity of different individuals in different possible worlds. That would fit it to represent me in worlds in which I myself would not exist. Likewise it might be claimed that there are infinitely many such entities in the actual world, deputizing here for individuals that would exist in other possible worlds. But what would these entities be?

Adams also thinks that  $\alpha$ -relational essences will not do the trick, as there will be worlds (e.g.) in which  $\alpha$  exists but I do not. For example, where Moishe and Hannah are the sperm and egg that came together to result in me, my  $\alpha$ -relational essence is not “the result of Moishe and Hannah”, since there are worlds in which Moishe and Hannah exist, but didn’t get together to form me. Finally, In other work, Adams argues that objects do not all have merely qualitative essences. So, it follows that Adams thinks that Plantinga’s search for actually existing essences to be surrogates for merely possible objects is fruitless.

(What about world-indexed essences?)

Plantinga construes “Jeff King exists” as expressing the proposition that Jeff Kinginess is exemplified. Therefore, on Plantinga’s view, it is true that Jeff King might not have existed. In a world with no Jeff King, the proposition that Jeff Kinginess is exemplified still exists, and can be false. But if we abandon the search for essences of merely possible objects, then Plantinga’s strategy of retranslating singular propositions into propositions about necessarily existing essences fails. So we need another strategy.

The problem:

- (1) It could have been that Jeff King does not exist.
- (2) (1) is true if and only if the singular proposition that Jeff King does not exist is true with respect to some accessible world  $w$ .
- (3) In order for the singular proposition that Jeff King does not exist to be true at some world  $w$ , it must exist at  $w$ . (by actualism)
- (4) The singular proposition that Jeff King does not exist exists at a world  $w$  only if Jeff King exists at  $w$ .
- (5) If Jeff King exists at  $w$ , then the singular proposition that Jeff King does not exist at  $w$  is false.
- (6) So, there is no world  $w$  at which the singular proposition that Jeff King does not exist is true.
- (7) So, it could not be that Jeff King does not exist.

As we have seen, Adams accepts (3) and (4), and takes them to be consequences of actualism. The premise Adams rejects here is (2):

In reply to this objection, I deny, then, that ‘It is possible that  $p$ ’ always implies that the proposition that- $p$  could have been true. Philosophers have often found it natural to characterize possibilities and necessities in terms of what propositions would have been true in some or all possible situations... This seems harmless enough so long as it is assumed that all propositions are necessary beings. But it is misleading if (as I hold) some propositions exist only contingently. From an actualist point of view, modalities (especially non-qualitative modalities) are not to be understood in terms of a non-modal property (truth) that propositions could have had, but in terms of modal properties that actually existing entities do have.

To say that I might never have existed is not to say that the proposition that I never exist could have been true. (p. 19)

### **Truth-at-a-world vs. Truth-in-a-world**

First, we need to look at Adams's notion of other possible worlds:

If there are any possible worlds, actualism implies that they, like anything else, must be, or be constructed from, things that exist in the actual world.

'World-Stories': maximal consistent sets of actually existing propositions.

Note that these world-stories cannot be identified with other possible worlds; at best, they are actualist surrogates of other possible worlds:

In a typical non-actual world there would exist some individuals that never exist in the actual world. If such a world were actual, there would be singular propositions about those individuals, and some of them would be true. But no such propositions are included in the world-stories of such worlds, since no such propositions actually exist. The world-stories therefore do not include all the propositions that would exist and be true if the corresponding worlds were actual. Some world-stories may not even contain enough to determine a world completely. (p. 21)

[One thing that puzzles me: Adams seems clear that these world stories are not the possible worlds themselves, but possible-world surrogates. It seems from this that Adams believes that other possible worlds exist (they, after all, are the things described by the world surrogates!), but are impossible to describe. There seems to be a tension in the view here]

Using world-stories, Adams introduces the distinction between truth-at-a-world and truth-in-a-world:

A world-story that includes no singular proposition about me constitutes and describes a possible world in which I would not exist. It represents my possible non-existence, not by including the proposition that I do not exist but simply by omitting me. That I would not exist if all the propositions it includes, and no other actual propositions, were true is not a fact internal to the world that it describes, but an observation that we make from our vantage point in the actual world, about the relation of that world story to an individual of the actual world.

Let us mark this difference in point of view by saying that the proposition that I never exist is (in the actual world) true *at* many possible worlds, but *in* none. Only propositions that are included in a world-story are true *in* the world story it describes... Thus it is true *at* possible worlds in which Napoleon would exist and I would not, that I am not identical with Napoleon; but that proposition is not true *in* those worlds, because it would not exist in them...

Now, of course, Adams must describe the conditions under which various propositions are true at worlds. Here is what Adams has to say:

Let  $w$  be a possible world, and  $a$  an actual individual that would not exist in  $w$ . Then:

(C1) All propositions that are included in the world-story of  $w$  are true at  $w$  as well as in  $w$ .

(C2) If  $p$  is an atomic singular proposition about  $a$ , then  $\sim p$  is true at  $w$ .

(C3) All propositions that follow truth-functionally from propositions true at  $w$  are true at  $w$ .

(C4) If ' $\Phi(a, x_1 \dots x_n)$ ' is an atomic propositional function from  $x_1 \dots x_n$  to singular propositions about  $a$ , then ' $\sim \exists x_1 \dots \exists x_n \Phi(a, x_1 \dots x_n)$ ' is true at  $w$ .

(C5) All propositions that follow by a free quantificational logic from propositions true at  $w$  are true at  $w$ .

(C6) If ' $\diamond p$ ' and ' $\square p$ ' are singular propositions about  $a$ , then ' $\sim \diamond p$ ' and ' $\sim \square p$ ' are true at  $w$ .

(C7) If ' $\sim \exists x_1 \dots \exists x_n \diamond(\Phi(a, x_1 \dots x_n))$ ' and ' $\sim \exists x_1 \dots \exists x_n \square(\Phi(a, x_1 \dots x_n))$ ' are singular propositions about  $a$ , then they are true at  $w$ .

Let  $w$  be a possible world at which Jeff King does not exist. Here are some consequences of these definitions (in particular, of (C6) and (C7)). First, the following sentences are all false at  $w$ :

$\diamond(\text{Jeff King exists})$ ,  $\diamond \sim(\text{Jeff King exists})$ ,  $\square(\text{Jeff King exists})$ ,  $\square \sim(\text{Jeff King exists})$ .

Secondly, the following are all true at these worlds:

$\sim \diamond(\text{Jeff King exists})$ ,  $\sim \diamond \sim(\text{Jeff King exists})$ ,  $\sim \square(\text{Jeff King exists})$ ,  $\sim \square \sim(\text{Jeff King exists})$ .

Since ' $\diamond(\text{Jeff King exists})$ ' is false at  $w$ , and ' $\sim \square \sim(\text{Jeff King exists})$ ' is true at  $w$ , the equivalence of ' $\diamond$ ' and ' $\sim \square \sim$ ' fails. Similarly, since ' $\square(\text{Jeff King exists})$ ' is false at  $w$ , and ' $\sim \diamond \sim(\text{Jeff King exists})$ ' is true at  $w$ , the equivalence of ' $\square$ ' and ' $\sim \diamond \sim$ ' fails. That stinks.

A further bad consequence discussed by Adams is that the modal axiom:

$p \rightarrow \diamond p$  fails, since where  $p$  is 'Jeff King does not exist', it does not follow that ' $\diamond \text{Jeff King does not exist}$ '.

Here is how Adams defends himself against the charge that these consequences are unacceptable. First, he argues that ' $p \rightarrow \diamond p$ ' is valid, where validity is defined in terms of truth *in* a world. He argues that preserving its validity for truth in a world may be enough to show us what is right about ' $p \rightarrow \diamond p$ '. Secondly (and more importantly), he argues that there is a 'weak' version of ' $p \rightarrow \diamond p$ ' that is true at all worlds, namely ' $p \rightarrow \sim \square \sim p$ '.

Let  $p$  be the proposition  $\sim$ Jeff exists, and  $w$  be a world at which Jeff does not exist. Consider the problematic instance of ' $p \rightarrow \diamond p$ ':

$\sim$ Jeff exists  $\rightarrow \diamond \sim$ Jeff exists

The antecedent is true at  $w$ , and the consequent false. But now consider:

$\sim \Box \sim \sim$  Jeff exists.

' $\Box \sim \sim$  Jeff exists' is a singular proposition about Jeff. So ' $\sim \Box \sim \sim$  Jeff exists' is true at  $w$ . So, while letting  $p$  be " $\sim$ Jeff exists" invalidates ' $p \rightarrow \diamond p$ ', it does not invalidate ' $p \rightarrow \sim \Box \sim p$ '.

Adams says that many of the intuitive principles that his theory invalidates are valid when one replaces ' $\diamond$ ' with ' $\sim \Box \sim$ ' and ' $\Box$ ' and ' $\sim \diamond \sim$ '. For example, consider the S4 axiom, relative to a transitive frame:

$\Box p \rightarrow \Box \Box p$

Let  $p$  be the proposition that  $\sim$ I am a rock.  $\Box p$  is true at the actual world, since even at worlds at which I do not exist,  $\sim$ I am a rock is true (since it is an atomic negation). But at such worlds,  $\Box \sim$ I am a rock is false, by clause (C6), and so  $\Box \Box \sim$ I am a rock is false. So S4 is invalid even on a transitive frame. By contrast, the 'weak' version of this axiom is valid on such a frame:

$\Box p \rightarrow \Box \sim \diamond \sim p$

Relative to a world in which I do not exist,  $\sim \diamond \sim$ I am a rock is true.

Now consider the S5 axiom, relative to a frame in which the accessibility relation is an equivalence relation:

$\diamond p \rightarrow \Box \diamond p$

Let  $p$  be the proposition that I am cool. Then the antecedent of S5 is true in the actual world. But supposing that there is some accessible world in which I don't exist,  $\diamond$ I am cool is false at that world, and so  $\Box \diamond$ I am cool is false at the actual world.

But consider:

$\diamond p \rightarrow \Box \sim \Box \sim p$

Consider a world at which I do not exist.  $\Box \sim p$  is false at that world, and so  $\sim \Box \sim p$  is true at that world. So this 'weak' version is valid.