

Philosophical Issues in Quantified Modal Logic

Handout 6: Plantinga on Existentialism

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One kind of essence: a *thisness*; the property of being identical with x , for some object x .

As we saw last week, Robert Adams endorses the existentialist thesis that thisnesses are ontologically dependent upon their exemplifications: take any thisness t and the object x of which t is the thisness; t could not have existed if x had not.

A property is quidditative if it is either a thisness or involves a thisness in a certain way (e.g. being identical with Nero or Cicero; being more bloodthirsty than Nero, etc.).

Qualitative properties are non-quidditative.

It sounds to me like a property is quidditative if and only if having that property essentially involves bearing a certain relation to x , for some object x . This explains why I thought that a qualitative property was a *non-relational property*. But this is wrong. An example of a qualitative property could be e.g. *being a father*. In a standard sense of the expression “relational property”, *being a father* is a relational property, since having that property requires standing in a relation to something else. In particular, x satisfies ‘is a father’ iff $\exists y(x \text{ fathered } y)$. But there need be no *particular* y such that x satisfies ‘is a father’ iff x fathered y .

A singular proposition is (and this isn’t a definition) a proposition expressed by a sentence containing a “directly referential” term (a “logically proper name”, in the sense of Bertrand Russell). Of course this isn’t helpful, since one typically says that a term is “directly referential” if and only if it contributes simply an object to the propositions expressed by sentences containing it, in other words a term is directly referential iff utterances of sentences containing it invariably express singular propositions about its referent. But you get the idea. Or not.

[I prefer thinking of a singular proposition as one containing a stick figure somewhere between angle brackets, but this is not strictly speaking accurate because e.g. some singular propositions contain pictures of tables between angle brackets]¹

First existentialist thesis: Quidditative properties are ontologically dependent upon the individuals whose thisnesses they involve.

Second existentialist thesis: Singular propositions are ontologically dependent upon the individuals they involve.

Plantinga’s purpose is to argue against existentialism.

¹ This is not a serious comment.

One might have thought that Plantinga would be sympathetic to existentialism. After all, in “Actualism and Possible Worlds”, and again in this paper, he argues that *sets* only exist if their members exist. So why doesn’t he say the same thing about properties and propositions?

It is natural to think, indeed, that a crucial difference between sets and properties lies just here. Sets are ontologically dependent upon their members; hence a set with a contingent member is itself contingent. But properties with contingent exemplification typically aren’t ontologically dependent upon those exemplifications. The set of dogs – the set that is in fact the set of dogs – would not have existed had my dog Mischa or any other dog failed to exist; but the property *being a dog* can get by perfectly well whether or not there are any dogs at all. Why suppose it is any different with quidditative properties? (p. 5)

Plantinga is right to draw a distinction between the property of being a dog and (say) the actual extension of this property, namely the set of dogs now in existence. The latter would not exist if some of its members didn’t exist, but there still would be the property of *being a dog*. By analogy, Plantinga argues that we should think that the property of (say) *being identical to Jeff King* would exist, even if Jeff King did not.

But is the relation between the property of *being a dog* and its actual extension really analogous to the relation between *being identical to Jeff King* and Jeff King? In one sense, it is analogous; Jeff King is the actual extension of *being identical to Jeff King*. But in another sense it isn’t. The property of *being a dog* could have another extension, whereas the property of *being identical to Jeff King* could not have another extension. If the property of *being a dog* had another extension (say Froofie the dog rather than Plantinga’s dog Mischa), then one might be tempted to think that *being a dog* still existed. But consider a possible situation in which there were no dogs, and never had been any dogs. That seems to me to be analogous to the situation in which Jeff King didn’t exist, and never had existed. Would *being a dog* still exist in that situation? Some metaphysicians would deny that it would exist in that situation. For example, some metaphysicians endorse what David Armstrong calls the Principle of Instantiation:

The Principle of Instantiation for properties asserts that, for each property P, there exists (not necessarily now) a particular, x, such that Px. (p. 76 of A Theory of Universals).²

Suppose we accept The Principle of Instantiation. Then, we would have no problem accepting Plantinga’s point that the property of *being a dog* can exist even in worlds in which its actual extension doesn’t (say because Froofie the dog has replaced Mischa as one of the existents). But this simply does not lead to a denial of existentialism. The Principle of Instantiation entails both that *being a dog* does not exist in any world in which it has never been instantiated, and that *being identical to Jeff King* does not exist in

² For the official statement of the principle, see Armstrong’s Nominalism and Realism, p. 113. I used this formulation because it makes clear the non-presentist sense of “exists”.

any world in which Jeff King does not exist. So one can clearly accept Plantinga's claim that sets and properties differ in the way that they do, without giving up on existentialism.

Things are a little bit trickier for Adams, however, since not only is there no indication that he accepts The Principle of Instantiation, his view that qualitative properties exist necessarily seems to entail that he must reject it (since, for example, there presumably are possible worlds with no red things). I think Plantinga could legitimately object to Adams's position that Adams thinks that there are properties that could exist without being instantiated at all. If so, why not think that *being identical to Jeff King* could exist without being instantiated at all?

I think Plantinga makes something like this point in the following passage (pp. 5-6):

...of course the question about me and my thisness is whether the property of being exemplified by me is essential to it. Since we are given that the property *being exemplified by me if at all* is essential to it, the real question is whether *being exemplified* is essential to it: and it isn't in the least obvious that it *is*. Adams holds that an object may have a qualitative essence – an essence that doesn't involve a thisness – and the qualitative essence—an essence that doesn't involve a thisness – and the qualitative essence of an object, he thinks, would have existed even if the object hadn't. Of course if I had not existed, my qualitative essence wouldn't have been my qualitative essence; it wouldn't have been related to me by the is-the-qualitative-essence-of relation. But it could have existed even if I hadn't. Why suppose things are different in the case of my thisness?

This is an *ad hominem* argument against Adams (on the assumption –which I hadn't realized—that Adams endorses qualitative *essences*). I am sympathetic to Plantinga's view that there is an analogy between the existence of a property and its having some extension or other, and the existence of a thisness, and the existence of the thing of which it is a thisness. From this perspective, Adams's view that properties can exist without having ever had extensions seems to fit somewhat uncomfortably with his view that a thisness cannot exist unless the thing of which it is a thisness exists.

Plantinga then turns to raise some doubts about the second existentialist thesis – the thesis that singular propositions are ontologically dependent upon the objects they are directly about. He considers the following argument for this claim:

Premise 1: Proper names do not express properties.

Premise 2: Sentences containing proper names do in fact express propositions.

Premise 3: A proposition is an articulated structure containing constituents standing in relation to each other.

Now suppose you accept these three premises: what sort of proposition will be expressed by a sentence like (1) ["William F. Buckley is wiggly"] if the proper name it contains does not express a property? What would be the constituents of

such a proposition—what would be, so to speak, its subject-place constituent? What more natural than to take William F. Buckley himself, that fugleman of the right, as a constituent of the proposition expressed by (1)? On this view, singular propositions include among their constituents not just abstracta, such as Buckley's essence, but concreta, such as Buckley himself. If one holds that propositions have constituents, that proper names do not express properties, and that sentences containing them express propositions, then the view that such propositions contain concrete objects as constituents can seem quite compelling. (p. 7)

So:

Premise 4: If a concrete object O is a constituent of a proposition P, then P is ontologically dependent upon O.

Then, Plantinga goes on to !@#\$\$% about the unclarity of the notion of a *constituent of a proposition*.

The most famous part of the paper is in Section III, namely Plantinga's "Anti-Existentialist Argument".

Premise 1: Possibly Socrates does not exist.

Premise 2: If Premise 1 is true, then the proposition *Socrates does not exist* is possible.

Premise 3: If the proposition *Socrates does not exist* is possible, then it is possibly true.

Premise 4: Necessarily, if Socrates does not exist had been true, then *Socrates does not exist* would have existed.

Premise 5: Necessarily, if *Socrates does not exist* had been true, then Socrates would not have existed.

Therefore: *Socrates does not exist* is possibly true. (from 1, 2, and 3)

Therefore: Necessarily, if *Socrates does not exist* had been true, then *Socrates does not exist* would have existed and Socrates would not have existed. (from 4 and 5)

Conclusion: It is possible that Socrates does not exist and the proposition *Socrates does not exist* exists

The conclusion is the negation of the second existentialist thesis that the existence of a singular proposition is dependent upon the existence of the object it is about. The singular proposition *Socrates does not exist* could exist in a situation in which Socrates does not exist.

As Plantinga points out, some of the premises in this argument should be uncontroversial. For example, Premise 5 (Plantinga's (7)) is simply an instance of (where S is any sentence):

Necessarily (the proposition that S is true \rightarrow S)

This seems hard to deny (absent perhaps some possible views about the Liar Paradox).

The most controversial premises are Premises 3 and 4. Premise 3, as we discussed last class, is denied in Prior's system Q. Prior distinguishes between two senses of "possible", a weak sense and a strong sense. In the weak sense of "possible", "possibly p" is true if and only if there is some possible world in which it is not the case that p is false (and a possible world in which p does not exist is a possible world in which it is not the case that p is false). In the weak sense of "possible", premise 1 is true. But premise 3 is false for the weak sense of "possible". We discussed Plantinga's objections to Prior's distinction between weak and strong senses of "possible" last class; we will return to them later when we discuss Section IV of Plantinga's paper.

Premise 4 is the most interesting premise. It is, as Plantinga notes, an instance of serious actualism, the doctrine that non-existents cannot have properties.

Digression on actualism vs. serious actualism (discussed last time, but not on handout):

Actualism: The doctrine that all quantifiers range only over existents.

Serious actualism: The doctrine that all predicates are false of non-existents.

$Ex = \exists y(y = x)$

(1) $\Box \forall x(Fx \rightarrow Ex)$

(2) $\forall x \Box(Fx \rightarrow Ex)$

As Kit Fine points out, (1) is a trivial consequence of actualism, but (2) is independent of actualism.

As I said last class, it's easy to describe a logically possible actualist who is not a serious actualist. Suppose I'm an actualist; my quantifiers range only over actual things. The only things that exist are actual things. But I allow there to be true predications of the form "Fx", where "x" is assigned something not in the domain of the world by the assignment function. So, in some world, there could be a truth of the form:

(3) $Fx \ \& \ \sim Ex.$

In fact, I don't think this is as strange a position as Fine makes it out to be on p. 197. Let F be the predicate "does not exist". It is not strange or contradictory at all to allow there to be a world at which the following is true:

(4) $x \text{ does not exist} \ \& \ \sim Ex.$

Indeed, one might think that the truth of (5) forces us into this position, assuming we are actualists:

(5) $\forall x (\text{Person}(x) \rightarrow \Diamond(x \text{ does not exist}))$

In fact, the combination of actualism and the rejection of serious actualism is one way to reconcile the truth of the following two claims:

- (1) Possibly, Jeff King does not exist.
- (2) It is not possible that there is something that does not exist.

Actualism leads us to accept (2), and the rejection of serious actualism is one way to accept (1). This might be the position Kripke is groping for on p. 78 of *Naming and Necessity*, when he says that terms refer even in worlds in which they do not exist:

[When I speak of a rigid designator referring to the same thing in all possible worlds] I also don't mean to imply that the thing designated exists in all possible worlds, just that the name refers rigidly to that thing. If you say 'suppose Hitler had never been born', then 'Hitler' refers here, still rigidly, to something that would not exist in the counterfactual situation described.

As we shall see, Plantinga describes a route to accepting (1) that does not proceed via the denial of serious actualism; it proceeds by denying that "Jeff King does not exist" has a subject-predicate structure in (1).

The instance of serious actualism to which Plantinga appeals is:

$$(SAT) \quad \Box(Tp \rightarrow Ep)$$

That is, necessarily, if the proposition that p is true, that p exists.

There is, of course, an immediate objection here. Plantinga arrives at the objection in a round-about way, by raising an objection to himself. But we may as well raise it directly, before raising the objection Plantinga correctly to himself. Why think that sentences of the form "Tp" are genuinely of subject-predicate form? That is, why think that "Tp" attributes a property, the property of being true, to a thing?

This may seem to be a silly response. "The proposition that p is true" does seem to have the surface form of an attribution of a property to an object. But Plantinga needs to make a similar move to block the following apparent consequence of serious actualism:

If Socrates has P, then Socrates exists.
So if Socrates does not exist, then Socrates exists.

Indeed, this strongly suggests (e.g. even Kit Fine notices this (pp. 209-210)) that a parallel argument to the one Plantinga gives for the necessary existence of propositions can be given for the necessary existence of objects:

- (1) Possibly, Socrates does not exist.
- (2) Necessarily, if Socrates does not exist, then Socrates has the property of not-existing.
- (3) Necessarily, if Socrates has the property of non-existing, then Socrates exists.

(4) Possibly, Socrates exists and Socrates does not exist.

Since (4) is false, it is a reductio of (1).

As Fine remarks, "...as an argument for the necessary existence of propositions, [Plantinga's argument] should have no more cogency than the admittedly absurd argument...for the necessary existence of individuals."

["Admittedly absurd" – keep that phrase in mind as we progress through the readings this semester]

So what does Plantinga do? He denies that sentences such as "Socrates does not exist" have a subject-predicate structure. That is, he denies premise (2) of Fine's "admittedly absurd" argument for the necessary existence of objects.

Fine claims that there is no more cogency to Plantinga's argument for the necessary existence of propositions than the "admittedly absurd" argument for the necessary existence of objects. But I'm not sure this is so. Both arguments appeal to serious actualism, which is accepted on all sides. So the question is just whether Fine is right to say that (SAT) is on a par with (SANE):

(SA) $\Box(Tp \rightarrow Ep)$

(SANE) $\Box(a \text{ does not exist} \rightarrow Ea)$

But it seems to me that (SA) and (SANE) are not necessarily on par. There is a serious question about *which sentences involve genuine predications*, and so which apparent predications are in fact genuine predications and are hence existence entailing, if one is a serious actualist. But it's not at all clear to me that the question is unanswerable, nor that the answer won't render the verdicts that Plantinga desires. In contrast, Fine just seems to think it is obvious that the advocate of contingently existing propositions can make, with apparent predications of truth, the same move as Plantinga makes with sentences such as "Socrates does not exist", and deny that they genuinely involve attribution of a property to an object.