**February 11: More Background; into Stalnaker 2012**

Relation between the actualism/possibilism distinction and the necessitism/contingentism distinction?

Contingentist possibilism: There are things that don’t actually exist, and some things might not have existed.

Necessitist possibilism: There are things that don’t actually exist, and everything exists necessarily.

Williamson & Stalnaker (incorrectly) suggest that this is Lewis’ view. It’s not obviously coherent.

Contingentist actualism: Everything actually exists, and yet it is true that there *could be* something that doesn’t (actually) exist.

Held by me, Stalnaker, arguably the mainstream view even if it turns out to be hard to implement.

Necessitist actualism: everything actually exists and everything necessarily exists.

Linsky & Zalta, at least on the above characterization of actualism. One of the morals of “Proxy Actualism” is basically that although there is room for this position in logical space, there’s something about necessitism that offends actualist scruples and motivations, if not the letter of the position. (So it’s necessitist, but is it *really* actualist?)

Linsky and Zalta’s picture. (Williamson’s is basically the same, except that he doesn’t characterize himself as an actualist, because he thinks the term is contentless.) Plantinga.

Motivations for necessitism? Special reasons for *actualists* to be necessitists?

A reason for everyone to endorse necessitism?

When we get to Williamson, we’ll see his latest thoughts on why he thinks everybody ought to be necessitists, even if the actualist/possibilist distinction is chucked. Here’s an earlier argument, from his 2001 (“Necessary Existents). It’s a riff on—basically a tollens-ing of—a 1983 argument of Plantinga’s (“On Existentialism”); Stalnaker discusses a version of it on 44-47).[[1]](#footnote-1)

1. Necessarily, if Socrates doesn’t exist then the proposition that S doesn’t exist is true.
2. Necessarily, if the proposition that S does not exist is true then the proposition that S does not exist exists. (application of “serious actualism”)
3. Necessarily, if the proposition that S does not exist exists then S exists. (“existentialism”/ontological dependence of a proposition on what it is about)
4. Necessarily, if S does not exist then S exists (1-3)

——————————

Necessarily, S exists.

Reasons for *actualists* to be necessitists?

1. The McMichael problem—accommodating iterated *de re* modal claims.

2. Accommodating the possibility of aliens given a certain (simplistic?) understanding of actualism

3. Actualism is putatively incompatible with Kripke semantics, which permits the domains of the worlds to vary.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Stalnaker 2012 (new version)

His goal is to provide a possible worlds semantics that

Avoids “extravagant metaphysical commitments”

Is compatible with contingentism

Is still “realist” in some to-be-articulated sense?

Not his goals:

Provide a reductive account of modality

*Argue* for contingentism, or any particular modal claim

Question: what is the roadblock? Why does Stalnaker take it to be hard to provide a modal framework like that? Some combination of the following issues:

• McMichael’s argument about iterated modalities (see end of chapter 1)

• the Plantinga/Williamson argument (see end of chapter 2)

• the charge that Kripke semantics is not compatible with actualism

• a new problem to be spelled out below

The new problem appears in the following quick passage on 13-14, though the material over the next few pages both helps elucidate what the idea is supposed to be, and how Stalnaker wants to respond to it.

Since we are actualists, we have only the resources that the actual world provides for representing possibility. We can represent a purely existential possibility (for example, that there is a purple cow) if we can understand the property of being a world in which there is a purple cow. But we understand a property in terms of what it would be for it to be instantiated, and this general property would be instantiated only if a more specific property [is instantiated], being a world in which a particular x exists, where x is a purple cow. We have a problem if we want to say that while there might have been purple cows, there are no particular things that might have been purple cows (Stalnaker 2012, 13-14).

This basically boils down to two claims.

Claim 1 (lies behind the last sentence of the passage): the Barcan formula is not compatible with contingentist actualism (plus two further assumptions—that things have at least roughly the modal properties we think they do, and that claims like ‘possibly there is a purple cow’ are true.)

Claim 2 (the rest of the passage): seemingly harmless principles having to do with witnesses for existential claims appear to entail the Barcan formula (but don’t really).

Claim 1 is straightforward.

Take as given that it’s possible that there is a purple cow. The Barcan formula entails that something is possibly a purple cow. But that is denied by contingentist actualists who claim that things have roughly the modal properties we think they do. What is it that could be a purple cow? The actualism part requires that it be an actually existing object; the contingentism/no “extravagant metaphysical commitments” part requires that it not be an uninstantiated essence or L/Z style nonconcrete thing; the claim that things have roughly the modal properties we take them to have means that it’s not me or you, etc. So the Barcan formula must be rejected.

Claim 2 involves an implicit argument that is new as far as I’m aware. But note that Stalnaker makes it to swat it aside; he doesn’t think it works.

The reference to ‘understanding’ possibilities etc. is incidental, I think. The point isn’t supposed to be an epistemic one.

Relevant background ideas/assumptions/claims:

Distinction between generic and specific (containment) properties: generic ones do not reference particular things, and specific ones do. Question: does any of this really need to be done in terms of *containment* properties?

There exist uninstantiated generic properties.

There do not exist uninstantiated specific properties.

A generic property is instantiated iff a specific property is instantiated by the same thing.

There exist uninstantiated *second-order* generic properties that can do duty for the nonexistent specific ones—namely, properties like *being one or another of the specific properties corresponding to the generic property being a purple cow*. (Mutatis mutandis for generic/specific *containment* properties.)

The argument:

1. It’s possible that there is a purple cow iff (=) there is a generic property *being a purple cow* that is possibly instantiated.
2. If there is a generic property *being a purple cow* that is possibly instantiated, there is a specific property *being the particular purple cow c* that is possibly instantiated.
3. But if the specific property *being the particular purple cow c* exists, *c* exists.
4. And if the specific property *being the particular purple cow c* is possibly instantiated, *c* is possibly a purple cow.

——————————————

So if it’s possible that there is a purple cow, there exists something, *c*, that is possibly a purple cow.

Stalnaker’s objection:

I take it that he denies premise 2, and instead affirms

2\*: If there is a generic property *being a purple cow* that is possibly instantiated, there is a second-order generic property *being one or another of the specific properties corresponding to the generic property being a purple cow* that is possibly instantiated.

On my reading, Stalnaker is suggesting that the “true existentials require witnesses” thought expressed on p. 15—the claim that a generic property is instantiated iff a specific property is instantiated by the same thing—doesn’t support 2, but only the weaker 2\*.

His idea, I think, is that actualism can avoid the Barcan Formula by stating that propositions (& worlds) can be maximal without being fully specific.

A proposition p is *maximal* iff for every proposition x, p either entails x or ~x

A proposition is *fully specific* only if for every existential proposition it entails, it also entails a singular proposition that is witness to that existential proposition.

But somehow this move gets you into McMichael’s problem, he says.

Here’s a different concern about the argument:

One might well wonder why the first premise is

1. It’s possible that there is a purple cow iff (=) there is a generic property *being a purple cow* that is possibly instantiated.

Rather than

1\*. It’s possible that there is a purple cow iff (=) it is possible that the generic property *being a purple cow* is instantiated.

*Arguably*, 1 is question begging. (In moving from antecedent to consequent, it swaps the order of the existential quantifier and the possibility operator, just as the Barcan formula itself does.) Now, one can run the above argument starting from 1\*, but only by inserting something like this premise:

(?) For any property P, if it’s possible that P is instantiated, P exists and is possibly instantiated.

In conjunction with 1\*, (?) yields 1, and the argument can proceed as above. But (?) is presumably exactly as dialectically dodgy in the context of an argument for the Barcan formula as 1 is. (I.e., either they are both dodgy or neither is.) Perhaps (?) is somehow justified on actualist grounds, but it would be nice to see explicit discussion of it.

1. For further discussion of arguments like this, see Adams, “Actualism and Thisness” (1981); Fine, “Plantinga on the Reduction of Possibilist Discourse” (1985); Einheuser, “Inner and Outer Truth” (2012); Speaks, “On Possibly Nonexistent Propositions” (2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For further discussion, see Linsky and Zalta, “In Defense of the Simplest Quantified Modal Logic,” (1994); my “Two Axes of Actualism” (2005); Peacocke, *Being Known* (1999) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)