

# Ostrich Actualism\*

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## 1. Introduction

Hidden within Derek Parfit's three volumes of *On What Matters*, we find a prolonged discussion on the debate between actualism and possibilism. Given the author and the overall work, many would expect the discussion to concern the actualism-possibilism debate in normative ethics. But, surprisingly, Parfit enters the debate in modal metaphysics that goes by the same name. This debate concerns mere possibilia, possible but non-actual things such as golden mountains and talking donkeys. Roughly, possibilism says that there are such things, and actualism says that there are not.

Actualism has approached the status of philosophical orthodoxy. And many of Parfit's own contemporaries number among its defenders, including Robert Merrihew Adams (1974, 1981), Alvin Plantinga (1974, 1976), and Robert Stalnaker (1976).<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, Parfit argues for possibilism. He even argues that self-proclaimed actualists like Plantinga are, in fact, unwitting possibilists. Though Parfit's arguments do not fully succeed, they do highlight a tension within the frameworks of many actualists. Many actualists conscript abstract objects into the role of "possible worlds" to avoid quantifying over mere possibilia. But, in doing so, actualists must quantify over mere possibilia anyway. When we alleviate this tension, a Parfit-friendly form of actualism arguably remains. This form of actualism says that while everything that exists is actual, it is also true in some sense that there are mere possibilia.

We begin in Section 2 with Parfit's distinction between actualism and possibilism. Then, in Sections 3 and 4, we assess his main argument for possibilism. Next, inspired by Parfit, I offer a related argument, which extends from Sections 5 through 7. I argue that given two plausible assumptions, actualists of various sorts must quantify over mere possibilia. But this doesn't necessarily mean that actualism fails. We can peel off the metaphysical thesis of possibilism from the linguistic thesis that there is a sense in which it is true that there are mere possibilia. I outline a view that combines the linguistic thesis with an actualist metaphysics.

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<sup>1</sup> For critiques of actualism, see Tomberlin (1994, 1996, 2001). David Lewis (1986) has often been thought of as the arch-possibilist. But there are good reasons to question this classification. See Menzel (2014). I should note that Parfit (2011, p. 798, n. 729) also questions this classification. For more references and a discussion of possibilism along Lewisian lines, see McDaniel (2017, p. 73-75).

## 2. The Actualism-Possibilism Distinction

Some doubt that we can clearly and meaningfully draw a distinction between actualism and possibilism (Williamson 1998, p. 259; 2013, p. 22). And those who attempt to do so offer an array of distinctions.<sup>2</sup> For example, formulations of the views often differ on their modal status. Some define actualism non-modally as the view that everything is actual. Others define actualism modally as the view that, *necessarily*, everything is actual.<sup>3</sup>

The meanings of the modal and non-modal formulations also depend on what it means to be actual. Some say that ‘actual’ is an indexical like ‘here’ (Lewis 1970; Stalnaker 1976). Similar to the way that ‘here’ refers to the place and time of utterance, indexicalists about actuality say that ‘actual’ refers to the world of utterance. However, while utterances of ‘here’ often occur at different places and times, few believe that any utterances of ‘actual’ occur in any (at least partially) concrete worlds other than our own. The thought isn’t that other concrete worlds lack people, or lack people who know the word, or lack people who know it but never use it. The thought, rather, is that there are no other concrete worlds at all. The actual world exhausts all that exists. So actualists typically believe that what’s actual coincides with what exists.<sup>4</sup>

Actualists also typically endorse the existentially loaded view of the quantifier and reject any distinction between ‘there is’ and ‘there exists’ (Linsky and Zalta 1994, p. 436).<sup>5</sup> So actualists generally believe that what *is* coincides with what *exists*. Given the prior actualist commitment about the coincidence of existence and actuality, actualists typically believe that what is, what exists, and what’s actual all coincide. But sometimes they express this coincidence as a modal truth, and sometimes they don’t. Parfit characterizes actualism both ways. He first characterizes actualism in the modal way:

**Actualism 1.** To be, or to exist, is to be actual, so there cannot be anything that is merely possible. (2011, p. 467)

Here, Parfit identifies being with actuality, and the embedded parenthetical remark (i.e., “or to exist”) seemingly identifies being with existence. Then, on the basis of these identifications, Parfit infers that there cannot be mere possibilities. Actualism 1 therefore contains or implies a number of common actualist-friendly propositions:

**Anti-Meinongianism.** Everything (there is) exists.

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<sup>2</sup> For recent work on the distinction itself, see Cameron (2016) and Menzel (2019).

<sup>3</sup> On the difference, see Bennett (2005, p. 311 ff.)

<sup>4</sup> Compare Stalnaker (1986, p. 128). See Parfit (2011, p. 722–723).

<sup>5</sup> Drawing on research in linguistics, Thomas Hofweber (2016, p. 58 ff.) rightly points out that, strictly speaking, ‘there is’ is not a quantifier. But ‘there is’-statements do express quantificational statements. I will continue to call ‘there is’ and ‘there exists’ quantifiers to convey that they appear in quantificational statements.

**Anti-Possibilism 1.** Everything (there is) is actual.<sup>6</sup>

**Anti-Possibilism 2.** Everything that exists is actual.

**Modal Anti-Possibilism 1.** Necessarily, everything there is, is actual.

**Modal Anti-Possibilism 2.** Necessarily, everything that exists, is actual.

We will later return to some of these, especially Anti-Meinongianism.<sup>7</sup> For now, it will suffice to note that if being and actuality coincide, as Parfit suggests, then it would seem to follow that, necessarily, everything there is, is actual.

Parfit also defines actualism along non-modal lines:

**Actualism 2.** There is nothing except what actually exists. (2011, p. 719)

What “actually exists” is presumably what exists in the actual world. So if the actual world exhausts both the actual and the existing, then, again, we get the actualist coincidence between what is, what exists, and what’s actual. While this coincidence secures Anti-Meinongianism and Anti-Possibilism 1 and 2, it doesn’t imply anything about Modal Anti-Possibilism 1 or 2.

How does Parfit define possibilism, then? Someone could reject one or both of the Anti-Possibilist modal theses and contend that there *could* be something merely possible. Someone could also reject one or both of the non-modal Anti-Possibilist theses and argue that there *is* something merely possible. Parfit initially characterizes possibilism along these non-modal lines:

**Possibilism.** There are some things that are never actual, but are merely possible. There are some things that might happen but never actually happen, and some things that might exist but never actually exist. (2011, p. 467).

Minimally, we may conceive of Parfit’s possibilism as the negation of Anti-Possibilism 1. In fact, Parfit (2011, p. 719) later characterizes possibilism as the view that “there are some things that are merely possible.” As we’ll see, Parfit also denies Anti-Possibilism 2 and Anti-Meinongianism in important but attenuated senses.

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<sup>6</sup> For the idea that we may construe actualism as the conjunction of Anti-Meinongianism and Anti-Possibilism, see Nelson and Zalta (2009, p. 289).

<sup>7</sup> Some construe possibilism as the view that mere possibilia exist (Jubien (1996, pp. 109-111), Murray and Wilson (2012, p. 220)). This is a kind of anti-Meinongian possibilism. But classical, Meinongian possibilists say both that there are mere possibilia and that they don’t exist.

### 3. The Argument from Possible Actions

Parfit's main argument against actualism appeals to the role that possibilities play in both deliberation and regret. When we deliberate, we decide between possible courses of action. We also sometimes regret having acted in one way rather than another. According to Parfit (2011, pp. 467–468), actualism makes sense of neither. He writes:

If Actualism were true, much of our thinking would be undermined. For example, we could never choose between different possible acts, or compare their possible outcomes, since there couldn't be any merely possible acts or outcomes. Nor could we ever have reason to regret having acted as we did, since it could never be true that there was something else that we could have done instead. (2011, pp. 467–468)

For Parfit, since actualism implies that there are no mere possibilia, it also implies that there are no merely possible acts. If there are no merely possible acts, we can neither reject them in deliberation nor regret our failure to undertake one rather than another. Parfit (2011, p. 469) even claims that actualism “implies that we could have never acted differently.” Though Parfit doesn't explicitly say so, the argument generalizes to possible worlds. If nothing were merely possible, then, by Parfit's lights, our world would be the only one possible. Actualism implies necessitarianism, in other words. In other *words*, yes, but not in other *worlds*—not if Parfit is right anyway.

The argument should puzzle many actualists. Most actualists reject the necessitarian view that there are no other possible worlds. According to most actualists, the world could have gone differently in lots of ways. Each of these ways corresponds to some possible but non-actual world. And actualists would insist that these worlds are, in some important sense, merely possible. Actualists can then respond to Parfit by saying that some acts are merely possible in much the same sense that some worlds are merely possible.

What sense is that? What does it mean when an actualist says that there are possible worlds? In an early statement of actualism about possible worlds, Robert Merrihew Adams writes:

Actualism, with respect to possible worlds, is the view that if there are any true statements in which there are said to be nonactual possible worlds, they must be reducible to statements in which the only things there are said to be are things which there are in the actual world and which are not identical with nonactual possibles. (Adams 1974, p. 224)

Adams and other actualists “reduce” statements about non-actual possible worlds by identifying “possible worlds” with some actually existing abstract objects. Adams (1974) himself reduces statements about non-actual possible worlds to statements about maximally consistent sets of actual propositions. Plantinga (1976) appeals to maximally consistent and actually existent abstract states of affairs. And Stalnaker (1976) appeals to certain actually existing properties.<sup>8</sup> Each of these theorists reduces statements about non-actual possible worlds to statements about actually existing abstract objects. Since they actually exist, they are not mere possibilia in the possibilist’s sense.

In each case, the actualist intends to use an account of possible worlds to capture the various kinds of modal truths. Adams’s account says that ‘possibly,  $p$ ’ is true when the proposition that  $p$  is a member of some maximally consistent set of propositions. Plantinga’s account says that ‘possibly,  $p$ ’ is true when some maximally consistent state of affairs includes the state of affairs of being such that  $p$ . And Stalnaker, who identifies propositions with sets of possible worlds, on the one hand, and possible worlds with properties, on the other, says that  $p$  is possible when the set of worlds identical to  $p$  has at least one possible world as a member.

Although the actualist’s abstract possible worlds are not merely possible in the possibilist’s sense, actualists do want to say that they are merely possible in the sense of being possible but non-actual. For Adams (1974), whose possible worlds are certain sets of propositions, a world is “merely possible” when one of its members is false. For Plantinga (1976), whose possible worlds are certain abstract states of affairs, a world is “merely possible” when it includes a non-obtaining state of affairs. And, for Stalnaker (1976), whose worlds are properties, a world is “merely possible” when it goes unexemplified. In each case, the actualist says of some actually existing abstract object that it is “possible but not actual.”

Actualists, like the possibilists, say that some things are possible but not actual. But actualists mean something different. To clarify the difference, it will be helpful to adopt some terminology from Lewis (1986, pp. 138-140). For actualists like Adams, Plantinga, and Stalnaker, the abstract objects identified with possible worlds actually exist. They are *actual*. But, whichever kind of actualist we are, we must distinguish the actually existing abstract object which represents or characterizes reality from the actually existing abstract objects which represent or characterize other ways reality might have been. On behalf of the actualist, Lewis (1986, p. 138) calls the former *actualised* and the latter *unactualised*. For the actualist, then, there is but one actualised possible world.

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<sup>8</sup> Stalnaker (1976, p. 70) seems to reject Adams’s call for reduction, but he also misunderstands that call. Adams explicitly calls for reducing *statements* about possibilia to statements about actually existing things. Adams also reduces *worlds* but in another sense: Adams denies that “worlds” are metaphysically primitive and instead identifies them with sets of propositions. In the first sense of reduction, we rid ourselves of statements about mere possibilia. After we’ve reduced in the first sense, the second sense of reduction rids “possible worlds” of metaphysical primitivity. Although Adams reduces in both senses, Adams only espouses reduction in the first sense in the above passage. But in discussing this passage, Stalnaker rejects reduction in the second sense.

The rest are unactualised. But every possible world is actual—each one is an abstract object in the actual world.

Actualists can use this distinction to respond to Parfit. On the actualist's behalf, let's say that an act is *possible* when some possible world represents or characterizes the act as occurring. Then, let's say that a possible act is *derivatively unactualised* when some unactualised world represents or characterizes the act as occurring though the actualised world does not. For an agent *s* and an act *G*, an actualist like Adams could say that the act of *s*'s *G*-ing is possible but derivatively unactualised when the false proposition that *s* is a *G*-er is contained in some maximally consistent set of propositions but not contained in the maximally consistent set of true propositions. And similar responses are available to Plantinga and Stalnaker. In these ways, actualists may try to reduce statements about merely possible acts using the very resources they already use to reduce statements about merely possible worlds to statements about actually existing abstract objects.

Although Parfit does consider an actualist response to his argument from possible acts,<sup>9</sup> responses along these lines seem to elude him. And, in my view, most actualists would respond exactly along these lines—lines that Lewis (1986, pp. 138-140) traced for actualists much earlier. But this lacuna in Parfit's discussion doesn't give actualists the license to dismiss his concerns entirely. Although Parfit may not have considered the actualist's most likely response, the response may prove ineffective anyway. Soon, I'll explain why I reject it. But we'll first explore another pillar of Parfit's possibilism.

#### 4. Possibilist Discourse

Whether possibilists are right that there are mere possibilia partly depends on what it means to say that *there are* such things. According to Parfit (2011, p. 720), many actualists adopt the following view about the meanings of 'there are' and 'exist':

**Single Sense View.** The words 'there are' and 'exist' must have only the same single sense.

We don't need to specify a particular sense to see how the Single Sense View supports actualism. Mere possibilia like golden mountains and talking donkeys are not actual—they don't exist. 'Mere possibilia do not exist' is true. So if 'there are' and 'exist' share a single sense, then 'there are no mere possibilia' is also true.

However, if either 'exist' or 'there are' has a wider sense, then possibilists may claim that there are or that there exist, in a wider sense, some mere possibilia. In defending possibilism, Parfit (2011, p. 719) appeals to extra senses for this exact purpose. The thesis below plays a crucial role in this defense.

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<sup>9</sup> Parfit (2011, p. 468) instead considers actualist paraphrases of statements that quantify over possible acts as statements about how agents could have acted differently.

**Plural Sense View.** There is one wide, general sense in which we can claim that there are certain things, or that such things exist. We can also use these words in other, narrower senses. For example, if we say that certain things exist in what I call the *narrow actualist sense*, we mean that these things are, at some time, actually existing concrete parts of the spatio-temporal world.

To highlight the differences between the Single Sense View and the Plural Senses View, Parfit devotes considerable space to examining the following proposition:

- (a) There was a palace designed by Wren to replace the burnt Palace of Whitehall, but this palace was not built and never actually existed. (2011, p. 469)

This says that there was something that never actually existed. So, given the Single Sense view, (a) expresses the contradiction that

- (b) There existed such a palace designed by Wren, but this palace was not built, so that, in the same sense of ‘exist’, this palace never existed. (2011, p. 470)

Parfit (2011, pp. 469, 720) then claims “many actualists” endorse the following thesis about the particular sense that ‘there are’ and ‘exist’ share:

**Existence.** The words ‘there are’ and ‘exist’ must have only the same single sense, which means ‘actually exist’.

We should note that Parfit does not explicitly equate this single sense with the “narrow actualist sense” named in the Plural Sense View and according to which something exists if and only if it is an actually existing concrete part of the spatio-temporal world. Thus, Parfit does not say that, according to actualism, everything is a concrete part of the spatio-temporal world. After all, many actualists identify possible worlds with non-concrete abstracta. Rather, Parfit simply argues that the single sense actualist cannot endorse (a) without endorsing the contradictory (b), whether the single sense in play is the narrow actualist sense or some other sense.

Possibilists like Parfit appeal to an additional sense of ‘there is’ to avoid contradiction. According to Parfit, (a) expresses the following truth:

- (c) There was, in the wide sense, a possible palace designed by Wren, but this palace was not built and never existed in the narrow actualist sense. (2011, p. 470)

Although an extra sense of ‘there is’ would save (a) from contradiction, Parfit says little about what this extra sense consists in. Some remarks do suggest that,

in addition this wide sense, he himself endorses the narrow actualist sense.<sup>10</sup> But other than applying the wide sense to things like mere possibilia and abstract objects that elude the reach of the narrow actualist sense, Parfit says almost nothing about its meaning. Can we ever say of something in the wide sense that there is no such thing? Can we specify truth conditions for statements in the wide sense?

Parfit doesn't answer these questions directly. But we can piece together three claims about his position on the narrower and wider senses of 'there is' and 'exist'. We may treat them as Parfit's constraints on admissible meanings for the wider senses.

**Shared Narrow.** 'exist' and 'there is' each have a narrow sense for which 'there are no talking donkeys' and 'no talking donkeys exist' are both true.

**Shared Wide.** 'exist' and 'there is' each have a wider sense for which 'there are talking donkeys' and 'talking donkeys exist' are both true.

**No Impossibilia.** In these wider senses, 'round squares exist' and 'there are round squares' are both false.

With the narrower senses of 'there are' and 'exist', Parfit says that there are no mere possibilia and that mere possibilia don't exist. With the additional senses in Shared Wide, Parfit says that there are mere possibilia and that mere possibilia exist. Furthermore, by using the wide sense of 'there is' and the narrow sense of 'exist', Parfit can also accept the Meinongian view there are things that don't exist. Indeed, Parfit can even assert the Anti-Meinongian slogan ("everything there is, exists"), as long as he doesn't combine the wide sense of 'there is' with the narrow sense of 'exist'. However, given No Impossibilia, those senses are not so wide that Parfit would say that either 'there are round squares' or 'round squares exist' are true. So, according to Parfit, the wider senses of 'exist' and 'there is' cover the domain of all and only possible things.

We should note that possibilism as such implies neither Shared Wide nor No Impossibilia. For example, a possibilist may grant an additional wider sense to 'there are' but not to 'exist'. Such a possibilist might argue that mere possibilia fail to exist but nevertheless have a special mode of being. Possibilists may also grant that round squares and other impossibilia have that very same mode of being.

In the next section, I begin to argue that Parfit is right in an important way: it is quite difficult for certain actualists to express their commitments forthrightly without adopting a wider sense of 'there is'. However, Parfit is also wrong in an important way. I argue in Section 7 that actualism and Shared Wide are, in fact, compatible.

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<sup>10</sup> Parfit (2011, pp. 480, 722, 728).

## 5. Worldhood and Contingency

Each side in the actualist-possibilist debate strings together the same words, in the same order, to express different commitments. When actualists say, “everything there is, is actual,” possibilists may use their narrower sense of the quantifier and utter the same. Similarly, when possibilists say, “something is possible but not actual,” actualists can utter those same words to mean that something actually exists as an unactualised abstract object. Each side can easily talk past or beg the question against the other.

However, even after we fix terms, the commitments of influential actualists require that they quantify over non-existent possibilities. This doesn’t necessarily mean that actualists like Plantinga are unwitting possibilists, as Parfit claims. I’ll argue instead that actualism, properly framed, both requires and is consistent with quantifying over non-actual possibilities. Insofar as the argument succeeds, actualists can speak like possibilists without being possibilists. They can talk with the possibilists but walk with the actualists.

My argument rests on two theses. We’ll frame the first as a definition:

**Worldhood.** A *world* is the totality of all that exists.

A totality of all that exists includes everything that exists and nothing that never exists. What does it mean, then, for something to exist? Since, in my view, the concept of existence is one among many conceptual primitives, we cannot decompose that concept into more basic ones.<sup>11</sup> But perhaps it will help to say something about what I don’t assume about the nature of existence.

First, I don’t assume anything about the connection between existence, on the one hand, and notions like fundamentality, grounding, composition, substance, or concreteness, on the other. It may be that only fundamental things exist, only substances exist, only concrete things exist, and so on. But even if only objects of one such type existed, the nature of existence need not itself preclude objects of other types from existing. Numbers, properties, persons, material objects, scattered objects, temporally gappy objects, gunk, angels, God, money, genders, and countries may exist. Or they may not. But the very nature of existence doesn’t preclude their existence, as far as I can tell.

Second, I don’t assume that things in different ontological categories exist in different ways. So I don’t assume that abstract objects exist in one way and concrete objects exist in another way. I’m rather sympathetic with the view that things in different ontological categories exist in the same sense if they exist in any sense at all.

Third, I don’t assume that existence comes in degrees. If numbers or devils exist at all, they fully exist just like everything else that exists. By my lights, something exists or it doesn’t. And one thing that doesn’t exist is an ontological purgatory where objects fall on a spectrum of existence.

Some may balk at the notion of existence I’ve just circumscribed. But, as far as philosophy goes, nothing is particularly controversial about it. I suspect

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<sup>11</sup> Compare Priest (2016, p. xxvii.).

most philosophers hold similar views about existence, even if we disagree about the precise domain of existing things. As far as I can tell, we can run the argument below without any especially contentious views about existence.

What can we say, then, about the nature of totalities? First, if something exists, so does a totality of everything that exists. But a totality isn't a set—paradoxes lurk down that alley. What else might totalities be? Maybe mereological sums. Or maybe pluralities. I'm content here with saying that a totality of everything that exists is something like *all* of reality. So when I ask whether the world could have been different in any way, I mean to ask whether any aspect of reality could have gone differently. Since we all need some such notion of a totality to specify a theory of modality, I won't attempt to settle more specific questions about their nature. For example, some might wonder whether a totality could exist even though nothing else does. Perhaps so. I wouldn't want to rule it out by definition even though I also believe that various necessary existents make such a totality metaphysically impossible. Nevertheless, the way I conceive of totalities permits the existence of at most one of them. I conceive of them extensionally so that a totality's identity rests completely on the things that exist, all their features included. Hence, any totality is the *only* totality.

Nothing less than the totality of all that exists is a world. So even if multiple Lewisian concrete universes were to exist, they wouldn't qualify as worlds in the relevant sense. Any such universes would, like any other existing things, simply number among the world's things. When I ask whether the world could have gone differently, I mean to ask whether the totality of all that exists could have been different in any way. With quantifiers completely unrestricted, is there something that exists that may not have, or something that exists that could have been different, or something that doesn't exist but could have? Lewis says "no" to all these questions. For Lewis, the totality of all that exists couldn't have been different in any way. As Lewis and many others have explained, pairing Lewis's ontology with the totality conception of worldhood begets necessitarianism.<sup>12</sup> And since necessitarianism implies that nothing is merely possible, actualism comes for free.<sup>13</sup>

(Of course, Lewis himself defends possibilism and non-necessitarianism, but his defenses attach very different meanings to words like 'world', 'possible', and 'actual'. To borrow one of Lewis's own examples, he is no more convincing here than those who argue that God exists because—by the way—"God" refers to the triumphal march of history.<sup>14</sup>)

A Lewisian universe would count as a world only if it were to contain all that exists. Similar remarks also apply to Adams's sets of propositions, Plantinga's states of affairs, and Stalnaker's properties. No matter what exists, something is a *world* only if it is the totality of all that exists. Does the totality of everything that exists except Pluto count as a world? No, because that is not the

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<sup>12</sup> Goldschmidt and Lebens (this volume) also make this point.

<sup>13</sup> Bennett (2005, p. 281) calls such a necessitarian an "actualist *par excellence*." But given the arguments in Section 7, the actualism that comes for free is compatible with quantifying over impossibilia as long as the actualist uses an additional sense of 'there is'.

<sup>14</sup> Lewis (1986, p. 140).

totality of *everything* that exists.<sup>15</sup> Does the totality of everything that exists plus Pegasus count as a world? No, because that is not the totality of everything that *exists*. A totality of all that exists includes everything that exists and nothing that does not exist. Or, I should say that a totality of all that exists includes everything that *ever* exists; we will ignore delicate issues about time by treating any totality as including whatever exists tenselessly. Thus, a totality of what exists is the totality of what did, does, or will exist, all their features and relations included, whatever those things were, are, or will be.

As long as something exists, a totality of things exists. And, empty totalities aside, nothing can be a totality of existing things without being both a totality of actually existing things and an actual totality of existing things. So nothing is a world unless it is an actual world. Furthermore, since there can be at most one world, nothing is *a* world unless it is *the* actual world. Hence, no matter what exists, whichever world is actual is the totality of everything that exists.<sup>16</sup>

We should note, however, that some actualists have refused to use ‘the actual world’ for all of reality, or the totality of everything that exists. Instead, they reserve that label for the actualised abstract object that plays the role of the actual world in their models of modal logic. For example, here is van Inwagen (1980, p. 169) on the meaning of ‘the actual world’:

Let us retain the notion of a possible world as a way things could have been, and let us reject any suggestion that a possible world is a concrete object; in particular, let us reject any suggestion that “the actual world” - whatever “actual” may mean - is “all this.” In other words, let us agree that the actual world is the way things are and carefully distinguish between the way things are and the things that are that way.<sup>17</sup>

Like van Inwagen, actualists such as Adams, Plantinga, and Stalnaker must distinguish the actual totality of everything that exists from the actualised abstract object which represents or characterizes that totality. Here, we will reserve ‘the actual world’ for whatever is both actual and a world. Then, following Lewis (1986, pp. 138-140), we’ll call the abstract object which characterizes or represents it the *actualised surrogate*. But, as long as we distinguish these two things, it doesn’t matter what we call them. We could have followed van Inwagen and called the actualised surrogate “the actual world.” We would then need to use something like ‘the actual totality’ for the totality of everything that actually exists. Either way, actualists must distinguish them, and we can run the argument below with either choice of terminology.

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<sup>15</sup> Those who deny that Pluto exists can substitute something that they think does exist instead.

<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Stalnaker (1970, pp. 69–70) says that the actual world is the totality of everything there is. As the context should make clear, I’m not using ‘actual’ here to rigidly designate the world that actually exists.

<sup>17</sup> Compare Kripke (1980, pp. 17–20).

The second main thesis involves a rejection of necessitarianism. Necessitarianism says that our own world exists necessarily and that the way things have actually gone is the only way things could have gone. Though actualism is compatible with necessitarianism, most actualists reject necessitarianism. These actualists endorse the following:

**Contingency.** The world could have been different.<sup>18</sup>

Contingency is true if the world might have been different in any way. Since a world is a totality of everything that exists in the way that everything exists, there are exactly three ways for the world to have been different: when something that exists might have been different, when something that exists that might not have, and when something that does not exist might have existed. As long as the world could have differed in any of these ways, Contingency holds.

Actualists of various kinds have posited unactualised abstract objects to avoid quantifying over mere possibilia. I argue in the next section that if these actualists endorse both Worldhood and Contingency, then they must quantify over mere possibilia anyway.

## 6. The Argument

Discussions about actualism and possibilism often focus on possible but non-actual individuals (Adams 1981; Bennett 2005, 2006; Fine 1977; Jubien 1996; Linsky and Zalta 1994, 1996; Menzel 2020; McMichael 1983; Nelson and Zalta 2009; Plantinga 1976; Tomberlin 1996). In our semantic models, these are the things assigned to other worlds but not our own. Many actualists seem to think they can resist the possibilist’s arguments as long as their semantic models lack merely possible individuals. After all, if there are no possible but non-actual individuals, then, the thought goes, there are no mere possibilia.

However, as long as actualists like Adams, Plantinga, and Stalnaker endorse both Contingency and Worldhood, they must quantify over mere possibilia. As I’ll argue shortly, the very abstracta conscripted by actualists into helping them avoid quantifying over mere possibilia require those actualists to quantify over mere possibilia.<sup>19</sup> But these mere possibilia aren’t the possible individuals so-often discussed. What actualists like Adams and Stalnaker must quantify over are merely possible worlds—and I don’t mean the actually existing abstract objects often disguised as “possible worlds.”

The argument is simple. Given Contingency, the world could have gone differently. If the world had gone slightly differently, then a world other than our own would have been actual. Given Worldhood, that world would have been a totality of everything that exists. So it wouldn’t have been any abstract

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<sup>18</sup> I’m not using ‘the world’ to rigidly designate the totality of things that actually exists. So I’m not claiming that the world as it actually is would have been any other world had things had gone thus-and-so.

<sup>19</sup> Linsky and Zalta (1994, 1996) deserve special consideration, which I save for the end of the section.

surrogate that characterizes or represents it in the actualist's semantic models.<sup>20</sup> The totality would be neither a set of propositions (à la Adams), nor an abstract state of affairs (à la Plantinga), nor a property (à la Stalnaker). In each of these cases, we must distinguish a possibly actual world from its actually existing but unactualised surrogate. As things actually stand, the unactualised surrogate exists. But the world it represents, characterizes, or stands in for does not.<sup>21</sup>

When *I* say that another world could have been actual, *I* don't mean that some maximal consistent set of propositions with at least one false proposition actually exists. Presumably, such a maximal consistent set is such that its member propositions might have all been true. Otherwise, and as long as we accept Contingency, why would such a maximal consistent set deserve to play the role of a "possible world"? But the propositions are possibly jointly true only if some world, some totality of all that exists, could have existed such that they truly characterized or represented it. Such a world is possible but non-actual. So a maximal consistent set of propositions can play the "possible world" role only if some possible but non-actual world could have been truly represented by its members.

Or when I say another world could have been actual, I don't simply mean that there actually exists some maximally consistent abstract state of affairs that includes at least one non-obtaining state of affairs. Presumably, such a maximal consistent state of affairs could have obtained. Otherwise, and as long as we accept Contingency, why would such a maximal consistent state of affairs deserve to play the role of a "possible world"? But the state of affairs possibly obtains only if some world, some totality of all that exists, could have existed and rendered the state of affairs an obtaining rather than a non-obtaining one. Such a world is possible but non-actual. So a maximal consistent state of affairs can play the role of a "possible world" only insofar as some possible but non-actual world could exist and make the state of affairs obtain.

Or when we say another world could have been actual, we don't simply mean that some special but unexemplified property actually exists. Presumably, that unexemplified property could have been exemplified. Otherwise, and as long as we accept Contingency, why would such a property deserve to play the role of a "possible world"? But the property is exemplifiable only if some world, some totality of all that exists, could have exemplified it.<sup>22</sup> Such a world is possible but not actual. So Stalnakerian properties can play the "possible worlds" role only insofar as some non-actual worlds could have exemplified those properties.

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<sup>20</sup> In special cases, if an abstract surrogate is all that exists, then the abstract surrogate would have to represent itself representing itself, and so on, to infinity, like a set of parallel mirrors. But we're considering cases in which the abstract surrogate is not all that exists.

<sup>21</sup> For Linsky and Zalta (1994, 1996), the surrogate *is* the world and so the world actually exists. So actualists need not always appeal to a difference in existence to distinguish a world from its abstract surrogate. I engage with the views of Linsky and Zalta at the end of the section.

<sup>22</sup> Goldschmidt and Lebens (this volume) also make this point.

Actualists like Adams, Plantinga, and Stalnaker posit abstract objects at least partly to avoid quantifying over merely possible worlds. But those abstract objects do not function as theoretically intended unless there is at least one merely possible world for each of them. For example, if an Adamsonian maximal consistent set of propositions couldn't have been such that all its members were true, then why would we think that it represents, characterizes, or stands in for a possible reality? But if such a set's members could have all been true, what would have made them true? A world—a world that isn't actual but could have been.

Or, once more for good measure, if a Stalnakerian world property couldn't have been exemplified, why should we accept that it represents, characterizes, or stands in for a possible reality? But if such a world property could have been exemplified, what would have exemplified it? Well, properties don't generally exemplify themselves. Nothing could exemplify the property of being a world except a world—a world that isn't actual but could have been. And so on. Hence, influential versions of actualism seem to require that we quantify over the very things that those theories were designed to avoid quantifying over.

To review, when we say that a world besides our own is possible, we don't typically mean that an abstract surrogate for it actually exists. If that's all actualists mean, then they account for contingency in much the same way Lewis does—by accounting for another notion and assigning it the same name. Instead, we mean that reality itself could have been different and that a world other than our own might have existed. And, in general, an abstract surrogate which might have been actualised would not have been a world if it had been actualised.

However, some versions of actualism imply that each unactualised abstract surrogate is contingently abstract and would have been the very world it characterizes if it had been actualised. Whereas the traditional actualist posits “possible worlds” that are not and could not have been worlds, Linsky and Zalta (1994, 1996) formulate a version of actualism according to which some non-concrete objects really could have been worlds. According to this kind of actualism, when we quantify over possible worlds, we quantify over actually existing non-concreta, each of which could have been a world. Does such a view save us from mere *possibilia*?<sup>23</sup>

I doubt it.<sup>24</sup> It seems to me that Linsky and Zalta's version of actualism must also quantify over mere *possibilia*. According to Linsky and Zalta, contingently non-concrete objects do not have the properties they would have

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<sup>23</sup> Others have objected to Linsky and Zalta (1994), including Tomberlin (1996) and Bennett (2006). In my view, both Linsky and Zalta (1996) and Nelson and Zalta (2009) rebut these objections successfully. If my argument here fails, it does for different reasons.

<sup>24</sup> Linsky and Zalta (1994, p. 438) explicitly assume for the sake of argument that identifying possible worlds with abstract objects does not commit the actualist to quantifying over mere *possibilia*. So, to be fair, I'm not objecting to them but instead to this undefended assumption which they may not even accept. And I suspect they may not accept it because they self-identify as *possibilists* in the essay's first page.

had if they had been concrete. A possibly talking donkey neither talks nor is a donkey.<sup>25</sup> Non-concrete objects neither walk nor speak. But a non-concrete, possible donkey is something that might have been a living, breathing—speaking—donkey. Presumably, similar remarks hold for contingently non-concrete totalities.

Suppose *beta* is a possible world like ours with one exception: Particle Pete takes a slightly different trajectory in deep space for exactly two seconds. For Linsky and Zalta, *beta* exists as a contingently non-concrete abstract object. It could have been a world, in my sense, and at least partly concrete. But it is not a world, not in the sense of being a totality of everything that exists. Only one such totality exists, the one I've called the actual world. Unlike *beta*, the actual world is a *world*. Though unactualised possible worlds are not worlds, in my sense, Linsky and Zalta's actualism implies that each of them could have been.

Now, according to Linsky and Zalta, *beta* is a contingently non-concrete object that actually exists. For Linsky and Zalta, therefore, when we quantify over possible worlds, we need only quantify over actually existing objects like *beta*. But *beta* is contingently non-concrete precisely because it could have been a world and at least partially concrete. So, in general, for each actually existing, non-concrete object in Linsky and Zalta's theory that could have been a world, in my sense, there is a non-actual possibility, namely, a non-concrete object's being a world and at least partially concrete. There's an important difference between something's being non-concrete and possibly a world, on the one hand, and that thing's being a concrete world, on the other. Though *beta* actually exists, its being a world is possible and not actual. Were *beta* to have been a world, things would have gone differently than they've actually gone. *Beta-as-a-world* is merely possible. And at least when I think about and discuss possibilities, I have in mind *beta-as-a-world* type of possibilities.

Linsky and Zalta might remind us that the actualist need only quantify over actually existing non-concrete objects like *beta*. Yet *beta* is *contingently* non-concrete and *could have been* a world. Even though quantifying over the contingently non-concrete amounts to quantifying over nothing but actualia, objects like *beta* would have been ill-suited for the possible world role unless they each harbored the potential of being a world, in my sense. But *beta* cannot harbor such a potential unless it is possible for *beta* to be a world. And *beta*'s being a world is one possibility that hasn't come to fruition. *Beta*'s being a world is merely possible. So for each contingently non-concrete object that could have been a world, in my sense, there is a mere possibility that we can meaningfully discuss and quantify over, namely, the possibility of a possible world's being a real world. Linsky and Zalta's actualism cannot account for real contingency in the world unless it acknowledges the mere possibilities it was designed to avoid. Therefore, the move to quantify over actually existing non-concrete objects doesn't actually save the actualist from quantifying over mere possibilities, whether those objects are necessarily or contingently non-concrete.

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<sup>25</sup> See Linsky and Zalta (1994, p. 445; 1996, p. 289) and, in a similar vein, Zalta (1993, pp. 419-420). According to Schneider (2007), Bolzano has a similar view.

## 7. Aftermath

Insofar as actualists endorse both Worldhood and Contingency, they must quantify over mere possibilia. Does this mean that actualists are unwitting possibilists, as Parfit claims? Or is actualism consistent with quantifying over mere possibilia? Although actualism is often characterized as the view that there are no mere possibilia, I believe that it is compatible with saying that there are mere possibilia.

To fix terms, let *actualism* be the conjunction of these three claims:

- (i) **Anti-Meinongianism.** Everything (there is) exists.
- (ii) **Anti-Possibilism 1.** Everything (there is) is actual.
- (iii) **Anti-Possibilism 2.** Everything that exists is actual.

Each of (i) through (iii) expresses an ontological or existential claim and not a linguistic or semantic one. But the claims expressed partly depend on the sense of ‘exists’ expressed in (i) and (iii) and the sense of ‘there is’ expressed in (i) and (ii). So if an actualist has good reason to use different senses of ‘exist’ and ‘there is’ to express claims *different* from but *compatible* with (i) through (iii), then we have no reason to suppose that she’s contradicted herself or rejected actualism.

Let the ‘there is’ in (i) and (ii) express what I’ll call the *ontological* sense of ‘there is’. In this sense, (i) amounts to saying that everything that *has being*, exists. So (i)’s negation says that something has being but doesn’t exist. This expresses something like the Meinongian view that some objects do not exist but subsist, and therefore enjoy a form of being.<sup>26</sup> Our actualist does not endorse this Meinongian claim about non-existent beings. But she does endorse (ii), which, with the ontological sense of ‘there is’, says that everything that has being, is actual. She also endorses (iii) and understands it to imply that non-actual things don’t exist.

In addition to the ontological sense of ‘there is’, our actualist also uses a *non-ontological* sense of ‘there is’.<sup>27</sup> She uses this sense to express the sorts of claims discussed in the previous section about merely possible worlds. Yes, many since Quine (1948) have held that quantifying over anything commits one to its existence. And it would be foolish to try to undermine such a distinguished school of thought here. But Priest (2016, pp. 339-342) has convinced me that Quine’s arguments wither under scrutiny. Also, if we pay close enough attention to ordinary language, we will notice that we frequently quantify over things that presumably lack being and don’t exist. If the argument in the previous section is successful, certain kinds of actualists must do the same. This doesn’t mean that actualists are committed to the existence of non-existents but instead that

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<sup>26</sup> Meinong (1904).

<sup>27</sup> I borrow the term here from Parfit (2011, p. 481) but not his application of it. Parfit says that logical truths and numbers also exist in a non-ontological sense, and I disagree. For a view similar to Parfit’s but much better developed, see Hofweber (2016, pp. 55-101). Hofweber argues that quantifiers are polysemous, and I agree. His account of the additional inferential role sense of the quantifiers is one way to fill in the details of here.

the quantifiers are polysemous. So perhaps Quine was right that, in one sense of the quantifier, quantification is existentially loaded. But there also seem to be senses of the quantifiers that aren't.

Quineans have for the most part ignored research in linguistics that describes how we use 'there is' in ways that are consistent with quantifying over non-existents.<sup>28</sup> For example, the 'there is the...' locution is often used meaningfully to list things, and we can list things that don't exist. There are also uses of 'there is' which serve to recall something to mind, count, introduce something into conversation, and help us draw appropriate inferences. We can certainly both think and draw inferences about and discuss what doesn't exist. *How* we do that is fairly mysterious and ripe for philosophical speculation. But only philosophers could deny that we do it at all.

So, in addition to (i), our actualist endorses a claim that looks like the denial of (i). But the incompatibility is only superficial because the additional claim involves a different sense of 'there is', which we'll write as 'there is'. Hence, our actualist also endorses:

(i\*) There is something that doesn't exist.

Then, in the same, non-ontological sense of 'there is', our actualist endorses,

(2\*) There is something that isn't actual.

Finally, our actualist continues to endorse (3) in the same sense as before.<sup>29</sup> As a result, here we have someone who endorses actualism in the form of (i)-(iii). She also accepts (1\*) and (2\*). But since these are compatible with (i)-(iii), she hasn't reneged on her actualism or endorsed an inconsistency. So she remains an actualist even though she sometimes quantifies over things that have no being or existence. In other words, she is an actualist but also a *noneist*, someone who quantifies over things that lack both being and existence.<sup>30</sup>

This particular combination of actualism and noneism gives rise to *ostrich actualism*. Ostrich actualists share certain metaphysical commitments with other actualists. But they quantify over non-existents that lack all being whatsoever. They are actualists, then, but often sound like possibilists. As the view's name

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<sup>28</sup> See Ward and Birner (1995) for an important paper neglected by philosophers, McNally (2019) for an overview, and Hofweber (2016, pp. 55-101) for one way to situate research in linguistics on 'there is' within a broader philosophical project.

<sup>29</sup> But our actualist may also grant an additional, *non-existential* sense to 'exist'. For example, when our actualist says that such-and-such a possibility exists, she doesn't necessarily mean that the possibility exists in the same sense that my chair exists, or that it exists as an abstract object. She means little more than that there is such a possibility, in the non-ontological sense of 'there is'. In this sense of 'exist', to say that 'there exists the possibility that *p*' basically means that 'it is possible that *p*.' Compare Hofweber (2016, p. 87). Schneider (2007) attributes a similar view, one about the ambiguity of 'exists', to Bolzano. Thanks to Jacob Zimelman for raising this point.

<sup>30</sup> Priest (2016). But our actualist needn't say that abstract objects don't exist, as Priest (2016, p. 106) does. Our actualist thinks that some abstract objects both exist and have being.

suggests, ostrich actualism shares certain structural features with ostrich nominalism.<sup>31</sup> Ostrich nominalists grant that objects have certain features in common but refuse to explain this commonality. So although they sometimes speak like realists about universals, they nonetheless endorse nominalism. Adherents of both ostrich views use language that seemingly commits them to entities that they otherwise deny to exist.

In certain circles, ostrich nominalism has a shady reputation. Despite some similarities, however, ostrich actualism deserves better. We can reasonably charge ostrich nominalists with an explanatory deficit because they refuse to explain something that seems to require an explanation. But the ostrich actualist pays her explanatory debts. How could anyone quantify over mere possibilia without attributing to them some sort of being? Instead of refusing to answer, the ostrich actualist appeals to polysemy. She sticks her head back in the sand not to avoid her explanatory debt, but to retire in peace after successfully discharging it.

## 8. Conclusion

Parfit contends that actualism implies necessitarianism because actualism implies that there are no non-actual possibilia. However, Parfit's case leaves an opening for traditional actualists to argue that in some sense they, too, can say that there are possible but non-actual possibilia. When it comes to possible worlds, they can borrow a suggestion from Lewis (1986, pp. 138-141) and say that "merely possible" worlds are actually existing but unactualised abstract objects.

However, this response doesn't succeed, not if the actualist thinks that things really could have gone differently. If the actualist thinks that reality really could have been different and that an abstract object is actualisable in the sense that it could have been actualised, then we can ask about what would have to happen for it to be actualised. Then, we're off to the races doing the very thing these abstract objects were supposed to help us avoid—discussing and quantifying over mere possibilia. Does this mean that actualism is inconsistent in that it both precludes and requires quantification over mere possibilia? And if actualists must quantify over merely possible worlds anyway, why should they bother with these actually existing abstracta at all?

I've argued that actualism allows for a certain kind of noneist quantification over mere possibilia. As long as the actualist uses an additional, non-ontological sense of 'there is', she's in the clear. But if the actualist can quantify over merely possible worlds in this way, why should she believe in unactualised abstract objects in the first place? Unactualised abstract objects may continue to play a crucial role for the actualist in an account of intentionality. When I think about a possible world in which, say, the Reds soon win the World Series, I'm not thinking *about* a set of propositions. I'm thinking about the Reds,

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<sup>31</sup> For ostrich nominalism, see Armstrong (1980), Devitt (1980), and, more recently, Pickel and Mantegani (2012). For ostrich presentism, see Torrenco (2014).

not propositions about the Reds. So even if unactualised abstract objects often aren't the targets of our thoughts of mere possibilia, these abstract objects may be the lenses through which we think about them. Propositions may serve as intermediaries between us and what they represent and the windows into possible reality. If some represent what's merely possible, we may think about what's merely possible by grasping them. If I'm right, certain actualists may not have to do anything to their metaphysical systems except repurpose them.

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