

# Existentialism Entails Anti-Haecceitism

DRAFT

*Abstract:* Existentialism concerning singular propositions is the thesis that singular propositions ontologically depend on the individuals they are directly about in such a way that necessarily, those propositions exist only if the individuals they are directly about exist. Haecceitism is the thesis that what non-qualitative facts there are fails to supervene on what purely qualitative facts there are. I argue that existentialism concerning singular propositions entails the denial of haecceitism and that this entailment has interesting implications for debates concerning the philosophy of language, the nature of propositions, and the metaphysics of modality.

## I. Introduction

Alvin Plantinga first brought the term ‘existentialism’ into the currency of analytic philosophy as a name for a thesis concerning the metaphysics of properties and propositions.<sup>1</sup> As characterized by him, it denotes the conjunction of two theses, one that pertains to quidditative properties (such as the property of being identical to Socrates) and another that pertains to what are often called “singular propositions”.<sup>2</sup> It is the latter of these theses that will be the focus of this paper, and in what follows, I will use the term ‘existentialism’ to refer solely to it.

Plantinga offers to help us get a grip on the distinction between singular propositions and non-singular propositions by directing us to the following pair of examples:

- (1) William F. Buckley is wise.
- (2) The Lion of Conservatism is wise.<sup>3</sup>

As Plantinga points out,

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<sup>1</sup> See (Plantinga 1979, p. 147) (the page citations for this article, both here and in subsequent citations, are from (Plantinga 2003)).

<sup>2</sup> (Plantinga 1983, pp. 1-3)

<sup>3</sup> This pair of examples, as well as the quote discussing them, are found in (Plantinga 1983, p. 3). I have corrected a misspelling of ‘conservatism’ on Plantinga’s part in (2) but have left the misspelling in place in the subsequent quote.

The first [proposition], we might think, involves Buckley in a more direct and intimate way than does the second. The second refers to him, so to say, only accidentally – only by virtue of the fact that he happens to be the Lion of Conservatism [*sic!*]. (1), on the other hand, makes a direct reference to him, or to use Arthur Prior’s term, is ‘directly about’ him.

Propositions such as (1), propositions that are directly about individuals in the way that (1) is, are singular propositions.<sup>4</sup> Existentialism about singular propositions, as characterized by Plantinga, is the thesis that singular propositions ontologically depend on the individuals they are directly about in such a way that necessarily, those propositions exist only if the individuals they are directly about exist.<sup>5</sup>

In this paper, I will argue that existentialism bears an interesting relation to another thesis concerning the nature of singular propositions, a thesis that David Lewis, following David Kaplan, called “haecceitism.” Lewis describes this thesis as follows:

The main doctrine, I take it, is the denial of a supervenience thesis. All hands agree in distinguishing two ways that [possible] worlds ... might differ. (1) Worlds might differ in their qualitative character ... Suppose we had a mighty language that lacked for nothing in the way of qualitative predicates, and lacked for nothing in its resources for complex infinitary constructions, but was entirely devoid of proper names for things; then the qualitative differences would be those that could be captured by descriptions in this mighty language. (2) Also, worlds might differ in what they represent *de re* concerning various individuals ... What is the connection between these two ways for worlds to differ? Does representation *de re* supervene on qualitative character? ... Or are there sometimes differences in representation *de re* without benefit of any difference whatever in qualitative character? If two worlds differ in what they represent *de re* concerning some individual, but do not differ qualitatively in any way, I shall call that a *haecceitistic difference*. *Haecceitism* ... is the doctrine that there are at least some cases of haecceitistic difference between worlds. *Anti-haecceitism* is the doctrine that there are none.<sup>6</sup>

Putting the matter in terms of ‘singular propositions’, we may describe haecceitism as the thesis that there are pairs of distinct possible worlds that share in common all of the

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<sup>4</sup> I intend to use the term ‘singular proposition’ with the same sense that Plantinga does. As an anonymous referee pointed out to me, however, it is worth noting that some use the term in a more narrow sense. Given Plantinga’s usage, for example, it is a conceptually open question whether there are singular propositions directly about concrete individuals that do not have concrete individuals as constituents. Contrast this usage with that of Kaplan (1975, p. 724), who reserves the term ‘singular proposition’ “for those (purported) propositions which contain [concrete] individuals as immediate constituents.”

<sup>5</sup> (Plantinga 1983, pp. 2-3)

<sup>6</sup> See (Lewis 1986, p. 221). Lewis here draws from (Kaplan 1975). As Lewis notes, Kaplan uses the term haecceitism to denote a “rather large bundle of views.” In this quote, Lewis takes himself to be distilling the main doctrine at issue from that bundle.

purely qualitative propositions that are true according to them, but which diverge when it comes to the singular propositions that are true according to them.<sup>7</sup>

One might be inclined to think that these two theses, existentialism and haecceitism, are largely independent of one another. I intend to argue that this is not so. In particular, I intend to argue that existentialism entails the denial of haecceitism. My argument, if sound, has important consequences for other debates concerning the philosophy of language, the nature of propositions, and the metaphysics of modality.

In contemporary philosophy of language, for example, existentialism has been closely associated with what is sometimes characterized as a “direct reference” view of various kinds of referring expressions (such proper names, indexical expressions like ‘I’ and ‘here’, demonstratives such as ‘that’, and the like). According to this view, the semantic contribution made by such an expression is exhausted by the supplying of its referent.<sup>8</sup> The connection between a direct reference view of various expressions and existentialism about singular propositions is perhaps most apparent when one considers views according to which propositions are structured entities. According to such views, a proposition expressed by a given sentence is built out of structural components, components which (to a first approximation) correspond to the semantic contributions of the terms found in the sentence that expresses it. If propositions are structured in this way, and a given sentence (one that expresses a proposition) contains a directly referring

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<sup>7</sup> This is how we may characterize haecceitism, at any rate, provided that we are taking it for granted (as is appropriate in the current dialectical context) that there are such entities as propositions. As an anonymous referee pointed out to me, however, a disbeliever in propositions might still endorse haecceitism while describing it, for example, as the thesis that which singular facts obtain fails to supervene on which non-singular facts obtain (where facts are conceived of as things other than propositions).

<sup>8</sup> (Kripke 1980) is often regarded the *locus classicus* for this sort of view of proper names, although there are some difficulties for that interpretation (see Kripke’s remarks on pp. 20-21). See Kaplan (1989b) for a standard expression of a direct reference view of various indexical and demonstrative expressions.

term, then it seems to follow that the proposition expressed by that sentence contains the referent of that term as one of its structural components.<sup>9</sup>

It is implausible to think, however, that propositions are structured but fail to have their structural components essentially. And it also seems implausible to think that an existing proposition could have a non-existent object as one of its components. We are thus furnished with the materials of an argument for the conclusion that a direct reference view of various expressions, in conjunction with a view according to which propositions are structured and have their structural components essentially, entails that the propositions expressed by sentences containing directly referring terms depend for their existence on the referents of those terms. And since the propositions expressed by such sentences are often cited as paradigmatic examples of singular propositions, we have an argument for the conclusion that a direct reference view of various expressions, in conjunction with the view that propositions are structured and have their structural components essentially, entails existentialism.<sup>10</sup>

Consequently, if the thesis of this paper is correct, anyone who endorses the conjunction of direct reference view of various expressions and a structured view of propositions also has an argument for the denial of haecceitism. But the denial of haecceitism has far reaching implications.

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<sup>9</sup> Kaplan (1989b, pp. 494-495) invites readers to *picture* the propositions expressed by sentences containing directly referring terms as structured entities that have the referents of those terms as constituents. But, he emphasizes, “This is *really* a picture and not a theory.” Soames (1987; 1989; 2010, chapters 3 and 4) argues from the phenomenon of direct reference to a structured view of propositions. Salmon (1986a; 1989a), among many others, is another prominent contemporary representative of the view that propositions are structured and that propositions expressed by sentences with directly referring terms have the referents of those terms among their constituents. See (King 2011) for a helpful overview and for additional references.

<sup>10</sup> See (Plantinga 1983, pp. 6-9) and (Davidson 2000, pp. 285-300) for detailed discussions of this line of argument.

Roderick Chisholm, for example, has raised a famous puzzle concerning transworld identity that turns on that denial.<sup>11</sup> The puzzle centrally invokes the claim that one can line up a series of possible worlds (from  $W_1$  to  $W_n$ ) in which two individuals (Chisholm chooses Adam and Noah for his example) gradually exchange their qualitative properties across the series so that, by the time the series terminates (in  $W_n$ ), they have completely exchanged their qualitative properties (those qualitative properties that each began with in  $W_1$ ). Note that in order for this series of worlds to be as Chisholm envisions it,  $W_n$  must be qualitatively indiscernible from  $W_1$ . Otherwise, there would be some purely qualitative property (even if a highly relational one) that Adam has in  $W_1$  but which Noah lacks in  $W_n$ , contrary to the original supposition. But from the claim that there is such a series of worlds<sup>12</sup> and the denial of haecceitism, one may derive a contradiction.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> (Chisholm 1967). For discussions of related puzzles, see (Chandler 1976), (Forbes 1986), (Salmon 1986b), (Salmon 1989b), and (Stalnaker 1986). For a helpful overview of puzzles of this sort, see (Mackie 2006).

<sup>12</sup> One way of denying that there is any such series of worlds is to maintain that necessarily, for every pair of individuals, there is some purely qualitative property had by one of the individuals that is both essential to it and not had by the other individual. With respect to Chisholm's own example, this would require maintaining that there is some purely qualitative property that Adam has in  $W_1$  that is both essential to Adam and not had by Noah in  $W_1$  (or *vice versa*). But since Adam and Noah each belong to the same natural kinds, the essential property in question would have to be a purely qualitative property that is not one that is essential to Adam merely in virtue of his belonging to a certain natural kind. Chisholm expresses skepticism that individuals have any such purely qualitative, essential properties (pp. 6-7). And Chisholm's skepticism in this regard is shared by others who do believe in transworld identity (see, for example, (Plantinga 1974, p. 61) and (Plantinga 1979, pp. 148-150); see also Simon's (1981, p. 167) discussion of Plantinga's expression of skepticism on this matter). Furthermore, Adams (1979) provides powerful arguments against the claim that it is a necessary truth that any pair of individuals differs with respect to a purely qualitative essential property.

<sup>13</sup> Let 'the Adam role' denote the purely qualitative role that Adam plays in  $W_1$  and let 'the Noah role' denote the purely qualitative role that Noah plays in  $W_1$ . At  $W_n$ , the roles are reversed. There Adam plays the Noah role and Noah plays the Adam role. Since  $W_1$  and  $W_n$  are qualitatively indiscernible, it follows from the denial of haecceitism that all of the identity facts that obtain at  $W_1$  also obtain at  $W_n$ . But one of the identity facts that obtains at  $W_1$  is that Adam = the individual who plays the Adam role. So it follows that at  $W_n$ , Adam = the individual who plays the Adam role. But it is also the case at  $W_n$  that Adam = the individual who plays the Noah role. And since identity is an equivalence relation (note that this is just plain old intra-world identity here; considerations concerning transworld identity do not arise at this point), it follows that at  $W_n$ , the individual who plays the Adam role = the individual who plays the Noah role. It is also true at  $W_n$ , however, that the individual who plays the Adam role  $\neq$  the individual who

Chisholm used this puzzle to cast doubt on the claim that there is genuine transworld identity. Caroline Simon, however, has exploited Chisholm's puzzle to argue for the conclusion that the claim there is genuine transworld identity entails haecceitism.<sup>14</sup> More cautiously, we might take Chisholm's puzzle to show that the denial of haecceitism entails that either there is no such relation as transworld identity or the relation of transworld identity is not an equivalence relation (if we suppose the relation of transworld identity is not transitive, for example, then it is no longer obvious that the gradual exchange of purely qualitative properties that Chisholm envisions would terminate in Adam's being identical in  $W_n$  to the individual who plays the Noah role in  $W_1$ ).<sup>15</sup>

Alternatively, one might attempt to avoid Chisholm's paradox by positing that the relation of accessibility (i.e. of relative possibility) between worlds is not transitive. This would allow one to consistently maintain that there is a series of worlds like the one that Chisholm envisions while holding on to anti-haecceitism (by maintaining that there are no distinct but qualitatively indiscernible *possible* worlds, possible, that is, relative to the world of evaluation).<sup>16</sup> This solution, however, commits one to a view that is inconsistent with an even stronger anti-haecceitistic thesis. Even if, as this solution would have it, it is not the case that each of  $W_1$  through  $W_n$  is a *possible* world (relative

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plays the Noah role. Since  $W_n$  is (*ex hypothesi*) a possible world, what is true at  $W_n$  is consistent. But from the preceding reasoning we see that what is true at  $W_n$  is not consistent. Contradiction!

<sup>14</sup> See (Simon 1981). More precisely, what Simon argues is that Plantinga's own defense of transworld identity commits Plantinga to haecceitism. But Simon's argument is easily adopted as an argument for the more general conclusion that the claim that there is genuine transworld identity entails haecceitism.

<sup>15</sup> For a response to various puzzles involving transworld identity that involves denying that transworld identity (or at least a relation that substitutes for it) is an equivalence relation, see (Stalnaker 1986).

<sup>16</sup> See (Chandler 1976), (Salmon 1986b) and (Salmon 1989b) for proposed solutions to Chisholm-like puzzles that involve taking this route.

to the world of evaluation), each is the sort of thing that is inherently suited to be a possible world. Each is the sort of thing that could have been a possible world (or possibly could have been a possible world, or ...). Each is, we might say, a “possible world candidate.” And while the above solution does not commit one to there being distinct, qualitatively indiscernible possible worlds, it does commit one to there being distinct, qualitatively indiscernible possible world candidates.<sup>17</sup> A stronger anti-haecceitistic thesis would rule out even that much. And it just so happens (though I will not dwell on this fact in my presentation) that the argument I will offer in the final section for the conclusion that existentialism entails anti-haecceitism could easily be adapted (by replacing each occurrence of ‘possible world’ with one of ‘possible world candidate’ throughout) as an argument for the conclusion that existentialism entails this stronger anti-haecceitistic thesis.

In any case, anyone who denies haecceitism is committed to some fairly radical theses concerning the nature of modality. And, if the thesis of this paper is correct, a commitment to existentialism carries with it a commitment to those theses.

## **II. Background Assumptions**

In this section I begin by briefly laying out a few of the background assumptions upon which my argument will rely and then I spend the remainder of the section defending (what in the current dialectical context is sure to be) the most contentious of these assumptions. Though each of these background assumptions are controversial, all pertain to such a fundamental level of intuitive commitment that I doubt that much could be said

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<sup>17</sup> Salmon (1986b, pp. 106-108), who proposes a solution along these lines to a Chisholm-like puzzle, explicitly notes that this is a consequence of his proposal.

to convince those who disagree with them. Of course, if one does disagree with one or more of them, one can take my argument to show a weaker conditional claim. Although such a weaker conditional claim would not be the conclusion I hope to establish, it is still bound to be of interest, insofar as it draws out previously unknown connections between what one might have initially thought were independent theses.

For the record, I will be assuming the following: (i) that what Plantinga has labeled “serious actualism” is true, (ii) that there are contingently existing beings, and (iii) that possible worlds are necessary beings. Serious actualism is the view that necessarily, no object has a property or stands in a relation in a world in which it does not exist.<sup>18</sup> Various attempts have been made to show that serious actualism is entailed by the less controversial thesis of actualism, which is the thesis that there are not, nor could there have been, things that do not exist.<sup>19</sup> But none of these attempts have been uncontroversially successful.<sup>20</sup> Serious actualism is, nevertheless, intuitively compelling (even if it has had its challengers from time to time<sup>21</sup>), and I will hereby assume it without argument. I also see little need to defend the assumption that there are contingently existing beings (even though that thesis has been called into question by

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<sup>18</sup> According to Plantinga (1985, p. 316), “Serious actualism ... is the view that (necessarily) no object has a property in a world in which it does not exist” (see also (Plantinga 1979, p. 146), (Plantinga 1983, p. 11), and (Plantinga 1985, p. 345)). The definition provided here is more general insofar as it adds the clause ‘or stands in a relation’.

<sup>19</sup> This is how Plantinga (1976) characterizes actualism.

<sup>20</sup> Plantinga provides an argument that actualism entails serious actualism in (Plantinga 1979, pp. 145-146), one that he later acknowledges to be fallacious (see Plantinga 1983, pp. 11-12). In (Plantinga 1985, p. 319) he presents an alternative argument for that conclusion. See (Hinchliff 1989) for a response. See (Bergmann 1996) for another argument for the conclusion that actualism entails serious actualism, (Hudson 1997) for a response, and (Bergmann 1999) for a counter-response accompanied by some clarification and elaboration. For classical challenges to the thesis that this entailment holds, see Fine (1985, pp. 194-199) and Pollock (1985, pp. 126-129), together with Plantinga’s (1985, pp. 316-323, 344-347) responses. (The page numbers for the (Fine 1985) reference are, here and in all subsequent citations thereof, from (Fine 2005)).

<sup>21</sup> See the Fine and Pollock citations in the previous note for classical challenges to that thesis. It is also worth noting that Salmon (1987) endorses both actualism and existentialism but denies serious actualism. As does Soames (2002 pp. 89-95).

Timothy Williamson<sup>22</sup>). Because of the current dialectical context, however, I do need to say something in defense of the appropriateness of my reliance on the assumption that possible worlds are necessary beings – a task will occupy me for the rest of this section.

First, though I doubt it will convince anyone who is not already convinced, let me say why *I* find the thesis that possible worlds are necessary beings intuitively compelling. The reason is that it seems clear to me that what is metaphysically possible simply cannot be a contingent matter. What is metaphysically possible is supposed to be what is possible in the same sort of “bedrock” sense in which it is possible that there are material objects and in which it is not possible that there are square circles. And I simply find it incredible to think that what is possible or not possible in that sense could turn out to be a contingent matter. But possible worlds are simply distinct, maximal, metaphysically possible ways that things could be. So if what possible worlds there are is a contingent matter, then what is metaphysically possible is also a contingent matter. And since I find the latter to be incredible, I conclude that possible worlds are necessary beings.<sup>23</sup>

I recognize that the claim that what is metaphysically possible cannot be a contingent matter is a controversial one.<sup>24</sup> As I said, the above was merely an attempt to articulate my own reasons for believing that possible worlds are necessary beings, not an attempt to convince those who disagree. It is also worth noting that one need not endorse the view what possibilities there are is not a contingent matter in order to maintain that the entities that are in fact possible worlds are necessary beings. If one were to endorse,

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<sup>22</sup> See (Williamson 2002).

<sup>23</sup> Here I’ve adapted an argument given by Peter van Inwagen (in conversation) in favor of the view that metaphysical possibility is best captured by the accessibility relations associated with S5. This same sort of argument (for the conclusion that the S5 accessibility relations are those that accompany metaphysical possibility) is also given by Plantinga (1974, pp. 51-54).

<sup>24</sup> See note 16 for some references to authors who argue against this claim.

for example, the solution to Chisholm's paradox (described in Section I) of denying that the accessibility relation between worlds is transitive, one might maintain that the entities that are in fact possible worlds are necessary beings even though some of them are only contingently *possible* worlds. So one need not agree with my own intuitive motivations for believing that possible worlds are necessary beings in order to hold that view.

Even those who are inclined to agree that possible worlds are necessary beings, however, might think that the assumption that they are, intuitively compelling though it may be, is out of place in the current dialectical context. I am going to argue, after all, that existentialism (a view which is necessarily true if true) has a certain entailment. And if I do not want my argument to be trivial, I must not make assumptions at the outset that are obviously incompatible with existentialism. But some might argue that existentialists are already committed to maintaining that at least some possible worlds are contingent beings.

There are at least three arguments that can be given for the conclusion that existentialists are so committed. The first argument relies on the assertion that since existentialists are committed to thinking that what propositions there are is a contingent matter (and therefore that what propositions there are to be possibly true is a contingent matter), they are committed (even prior to considerations pertaining to the nature of the accessibility relation) to the claim that what possibilities there are is a contingent matter and, accordingly, to the claim that at least some possible worlds exist only contingently. The second argument turns on the claim that on certain conceptions of what possible worlds are, existentialists are committed to regarding at least some possible worlds as

contingent beings.<sup>25</sup> According to the third argument, the view that possible worlds are necessary beings, though perhaps not strictly inconsistent with existentialism, radically undercuts the motivation for it. I will take each of these arguments in their turn.

### *II.1: The Contingency Argument*

Here is a statement of the first argument: An existentialist will want to maintain, for example, that it is possible that Obama is the 44th President of the United States. But she will also want to maintain that Obama is a contingent being and thus there are worlds according to which Obama does not exist. But, had one of those worlds been actual, maintains the existentialist, then since Obama would not have existed, neither would the proposition that Obama is the 44th President of the United States. But, necessarily, it is possible that Obama is the 44th President of the United States only if the proposition *Obama is the 44th President of the United States* has the property of being possibly true. So, any world in which it is possible that Obama is the 44th President of the United States is a world in which the proposition *Obama is the 44th President of the United States* has the property of being possibly true. And (given serious actualism), necessarily, a proposition has the property of being possibly true only if it exists. So, given existentialism, if one of the worlds lacking Obama had been actual, the proposition *Obama is the 44th President of the United States* wouldn't have existed and therefore wouldn't have been possibly true. And so, given existentialism, it wouldn't have been possible that Obama is the 44th President of the United States. Therefore (the argument generalizes) the existentialist is committed to thinking that what metaphysical possibilities there are, and thus what possible worlds there are, is a contingent matter.

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<sup>25</sup> For developments of arguments along both of these lines, see (Adams 1981).

Call the above argument “the contingency argument.” Can the existentialist avoid its conclusion? One thing to note regarding this question is that the contingency argument closely parallels a well-known argument against existentialism put forward by Plantinga (one that I will discuss, in some detail, below). And given the close parallels between these arguments, it would appear that the contingency argument is sound only if Plantinga’s argument is. Furthermore, as I will argue below, not only do the considerations raised by Plantinga’s argument give the existentialist reason to believe that the contingency argument is unsound, they also furnish her with additional reasons to accept the claim that possible worlds are necessary beings.

Here is Plantinga’s argument (the numbering is his):<sup>26</sup>

- (3) Possibly Obama does not exist.
- (4) If (3) then the proposition *Obama does not exist* is possible.
- (5) If the proposition *Obama does not exist* is possible, then it is possibly true.
- (6) Necessarily, if *Obama does not exist* had been true, then *Obama does not exist* would have existed.
- (7) Necessarily, if *Obama does not exist* had been true, then Obama would not have existed.
- (8) *Obama does not exist* is possibly true [from (3), (4), and (5)].
- (9) Necessarily, if *Obama does not exist* had been true, then *Obama does not exist* would have existed and Obama would not have existed [from 6 and 7].
- (10) It is possible that both Obama does not exist and the proposition *Obama does not exist* exists [from 8 and 9].

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<sup>26</sup> See (Plantinga 1983, pp. 9-10). In the presentation that follows, each occurrence of ‘Obama’ replaces an occurrence of ‘Socrates’ in Plantinga’s original argument. I choose to use the name of a currently living figure in order to avoid any complications arising from the relationship between existentialism and issues surrounding the continued existence of the dead and the ontological status of wholly past objects.

In the process of evaluating the above argument, it will also prove useful to follow the example of Marian David, who considers a compressed version of it, one in which premises (4) and (5) are replaced by the following amalgamation:<sup>27</sup>

(45) If possibly Obama does not exist, then the proposition *Obama does not exist* is possibly true.

As Plantinga notes, (10), the conclusion of this argument, contradicts existentialism. So if the above argument is sound, existentialism is false.

How might the existentialist reply? A fairly common sort of strategy on the part of the existentialist for replying to Plantinga's argument turns on endorsing a distinction between a proposition's being true *in* a world (where a proposition, P, is true in a world, W, just in case, were W actual, P would both exist and be true) and a proposition's being true *at* a world (where a proposition, P, is true at a world, W, just in case P is somehow accurate with respect to W, regardless of whether or not P would exist were W actual).<sup>28</sup> I will refer to this distinction, naturally enough, as the "in-at" distinction. Whether there is such a distinction is something that anti-existentialists have been dubious about, and existentialists differ on just how to characterize it.<sup>29</sup> I do not plan to delve into these issues. Rather, I will assume, for the sake of argument, that there is such a distinction, and I will, as much as possible, avoid making my discussion depend on one particular way of characterizing it.

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<sup>27</sup> (David 2009)

<sup>28</sup> The ensuing discussion of this strategy is, for the most part, a recapitulation/amalgamation of what others have had to say concerning this topic. See (Kaplan 1989a, pp. 612-614), (Adams 1981, section 3), (Fine 1985, sections 4-5), (Pollock 1985, pp. 134-140), (David 2009) and (Speaks 2012) for some existentialist-friendly discussions concerning how the existentialist might go about employing this strategy. For some discussions of this strategy (or related strategies) that are hostile towards existentialism, see (Plantinga 1983, pp. 10-20), (Plantinga 1985, pp. 324-326, 340-344), (Crisp 2003, pp. 226-229), (Davidson 2000, pp. 288-291), and (Davidson 2007). See also Williamson (2002, pp. 237-240) for some criticisms of this sort of strategy from the point of view of someone who is an existentialist.

<sup>29</sup> See the references in the previous note for various ways of characterizing this distinction as well as for some expressions of skepticism regarding its intelligibility.

Of course, the mere making of the in-at distinction does not amount to a reply to the above argument. We still need to be told how the distinction bears on our evaluation of the truth of the premises. So let us turn to that issue. Consider the following schema:

(PW) The proposition that *p* is possible if and only if the proposition that *p* is true according to some possible world.

This schema will be endorsed by many friends and foes of existentialism alike. The advocate of the distinction suggested above, however, will say that (PW) can be read in at least two different ways, depending on whether the phrase ‘true according to some possible world’ is taken to mean the same thing as ‘true *in* some possible world’ or as ‘true *at* some possible world’. Call these two different readings “the in-reading” and “the at-reading” respectively.

Corresponding to these two readings, the existentialist might say, are two different candidate senses for what it is for a proposition to be (alethically) “possible” – an “in-sense” and an “at-sense.” Consequently, the existentialist might also claim that each of the premises of Plantinga's argument can be read in at least a couple of different ways, one in which an in-reading of (PW) is in view and one in which an at-reading of (PW) is in view. The existentialist might further claim that the availability of these two different candidate senses renders talk of various propositions being “possible” systematically ambiguous. Alternatively, she might hold that one of these candidate senses is privileged above the other (perhaps because one better comports with our modal discourse or our modal intuitions). It doesn't matter, for my purposes, which of these options is taken.

Either way, it would not be enough for the existentialist to maintain that at least one of Plantinga's premises is false on *just one* of the above readings thereof. Provided

that the conclusion of Plantinga's argument remains incompatible with existentialism on either reading, existentialism is false if all of the premises of Plantinga's argument come out true on just one of them. So, in any case, we need to look at each reading of the premises and ask ourselves which premise(s) of Plantinga's argument the existentialist ought to reject given that reading.<sup>30</sup>

I will assume that, regardless of which interpretation is at issue, (3) is to be regarded as true.<sup>31</sup> Since (7) is beyond all dispute, we are left to consider the bearing that these different readings might have on our assessment of premises (4), (5) (or their amalgamation, (45)), and (6). Given the choice between (45) and (6), it is fairly clear that it is (45) that is to be rejected by the existentialist given the in-reading of these premises. According to the in-reading of the relevant instantiation of (PW), the proposition *Obama does not exist* is possible if and only if there is a possible world in which that proposition both exists and is true. So, given the in-sense of what it is for a proposition to be possible and the truth of existentialism, the proposition *Obama does not exist* is not possible. But since (we are assuming) possibly Obama does not exist, (45) has a true antecedent but a false consequent. Of course, to say that the existentialist ought to reject (45) on the in-

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<sup>30</sup> For a similar point, see (David 2009, pp. 190-191)

<sup>31</sup> I am thinking of the in/at distinction primarily as a way of distinguishing between two different senses of what it is for a proposition to be alethically possible and not primarily as a way of interpreting sentences employing modal operators. Accordingly, I find it natural to assume that the truth of (3) is to be held fixed on either reading and to assume that, generally speaking, the truth values of sentences involving modal operators are unaffected by the availability of these two readings unless those sentences also happen to say something about which propositions are alethically possible. Of course, the in/at distinction may impact which sentences correctly translate sentences employing modal operators into a semantics for modal logic that employs the apparatus of quantification over possible worlds. But that itself doesn't entail that the translated sentences are ambiguous rather than (or in addition to) the sentences used to translate them. An alternative, however, is to regard the in-at distinction primarily as a way of distinguishing between two different senses of the modal operators. On this alternative, it is perhaps most natural to say that (3) expresses a falsehood on the in-reading but a truth on the at-reading. It doesn't ultimately matter which of these routes we take. What I will have to say concerning this distinction could be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to this alternative way of conceiving of it. Thanks to Jeff Speaks for some helpful correspondence concerning this matter.

reading is not to say how she might do so plausibly. I will have more to say about that issue below. For now, however, let's consider which premises of Plantinga's argument should be rejected given the at-reading.

First let's consider how we should think about (45) given the at-reading. Given the truth of (3), (45) expresses a truth on the at-reading if and only if its consequent does. That is, (45) expresses a truth on the at-reading if and only if the following does:

(C45) The proposition *Obama does not exist* is possibly true.

Is (C45) true given the at-reading?

As we have already seen, we (or, rather, the existentialists among us) are forced to give up the claim that the proposition *Obama does not exist* is possible if we read the sentence that expresses that claim in the in-sense. But intuition balks at *simply giving up* that claim. And since we are already forced to reject Plantinga's argument as sound given the in-reading of its premises, what good is there in introducing the in-at distinction unless it helps us salvage some of our intuitions concerning these matters? It would be nice if we could at least affirm that the sentence 'The proposition *Obama does not exist* is possible' comes out as expressing a truth when read in the at-sense. So let's suppose that we can correctly affirm this.

This commits us to regarding the following as expressing a truth (given the at-reading):

(C45\*) The proposition *Obama does not exist* is possible.

The existentialist who has gone along with us up to this point is now faced with a choice. There is some intuitive pressure to regard the proposition expressed by (C45\*) as entailing the one expressed by (C45) (i.e. there is some intuitive pressure to affirm

Plantinga's (5)). If the existentialist bows to this pressure and affirms this entailment (given the at-reading of these sentences), she is committed to the claim that (45) expresses a truth given the at-reading thereof and is thereby forced (given the choice between denying (45) and denying (6)) to deny that (6) expresses a truth (on the at-reading). Alternatively, the existentialist can deny that this entailment holds and thereby reject the claim that (C45) expresses a truth on the at-reading, which would, in turn, commit her to affirming (6) (on account of the fact that she would then hold that (6) has an impossible antecedent). Let's evaluate the merits of each of these strategies, beginning with the former.<sup>32</sup>

Before we evaluate the merits of the strategy of rejecting (6) on the at-reading of Plantinga's premises, however, let's pause to consider the implications that such a strategy might have as it pertains to how the existentialist who employs it ought to evaluate the contingency argument. Recall that a key step in that argument was the inferring of the following claim from the assumption that existentialism is true: If one of the worlds lacking Obama had been actual, the proposition *Obama is the 44th President of the United States* wouldn't have existed and therefore wouldn't have been possibly true. Presumably, however, if (6) is to be rejected given the at-reading, then this claim is to be rejected given the at-reading as well. So it must be that when all of the sentences in the contingency argument are read in the at-sense of what it is for a proposition to be

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<sup>32</sup> Among the authors cited in note 28, something along the lines of denying (6) on the at-reading is endorsed by Fine (1985) and Pollock (1985). The strategy of denying (45) on the at-reading (or something along those lines) is endorsed by Adams (1981; see especially the remarks on pp. 19-20) and Speaks (2012), as well as recommended to the existentialist by David (2009). It is less clear to me which of these strategies is most naturally in keeping with what Kaplan (1989a) says. Davidson (2000, p. 290) reads Kaplan's remarks as lending themselves to an attempt on the part of the existentialist to deny (6). But I do not see why they could not also be used to lend themselves to the sort of strategy for denying (45) that I sketch latter on in this section. Speaks (2012), for example, employs an analogy invoking a Kaplan-style distinction between contexts of utterance and circumstances of evaluation as part of a strategy for denying (45) in a way that fits quite well with what Kaplan says here.

possible, the resulting argument is unsound. Of course, that leaves us with the question of just where the argument goes wrong, given the at-reading of its premises, but I need not explore that question in any depth to have established that the existentialist has reason to believe that the contingency argument is unsound given that reading (and my purposes require that I do no more than this)

So far, so good. Unfortunately for me, however, the above reply to Plantinga's argument (as considered thus far) also threatens to undercut the motivation that I had for believing that possible worlds are necessary beings to begin with. Consider the following schema (call it, recognizably enough, "S5"):

(S5) If possibly p, then necessarily, possibly p

In addition, consider the following:

(S5\*) If there is a possibility that p, then necessarily there is a possibility that p.

Those who share my intuitions about modality will likely be inclined (at least initially) to believe that each of the above schemas is valid. However, one can consistently deny that they are equivalent and thereby reject one but not the other. Those who (for nominalist reasons or what-have-you) deny that there are such entities as possibilities, but who employ primitive modal operators and endorse (S5) as governing metaphysical possibility and necessity, for example, will deny that (S5) is equivalent to (S5\*).<sup>33</sup>

An existentialist who adheres to the above response to Plantinga's argument might also deny that (S5) and (S5\*) are equivalent, at least on the at-reading of what it is for a proposition to be possible. She might maintain, for example, that the possibility that Obama is the 44th President of the United States is simply identical to the proposition that Obama is the 44th President of the United States. Given existentialism, had Obama

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<sup>33</sup> I thank an anonymous referee for pressing me to address an objection along these lines.

not existed, the latter proposition would not have existed, and therefore neither (given the current proposal) would the “former” possibility. However, if the existentialist can consistently maintain that (in some sense at least) the proposition *Obama does not exist* could have been *true* though non-existent, why couldn’t she consistently maintain that the proposition *Obama is the 44th President of the United States* could have been *possible* though non-existent as well? And if she can consistently maintain this, perhaps she can also consistently endorse (S5) while rejecting (S5\*) (at least if these are read in the at-sense of what it is for a proposition to be possible).

But surely (one might argue) the intuitive support for (S5) is more fundamental than the intuitive support for (S5\*), and in such a way that the latter gains all of its intuitive support only insofar as it is thought to be entailed by the former. If that’s right, then my own intuitive reasons for accepting (S5\*) are just my intuitive reasons for accepting (S5) under the assumption that the two are equivalent. So my intuitive reasons for accepting the former are undermined once it becomes a live option to deny that it is equivalent to the latter.

This is all based on the assumption, however, that a denial of (6) on the at-reading of that premise is sustainable. Is it? It is not, not for those of us, at any rate, who are deeply committed to serious actualism.<sup>34</sup> Above I followed Plantinga in characterizing serious actualism as the thesis that necessarily, no object has a property or stands in a relation in a world in which it does not exist. Put solely in terms of modal operators

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<sup>34</sup> It should come as little surprise that there is a conflict between serious actualism and the denial of (6) (on the at-reading thereof). There is already the appearance of such a conflict on the surface. And in their classical discussions of this issue, both Pollock (1985) and Fine (1985) question (6) (or do something in that neighborhood of that, at least) in the context of having already called into question serious actualism.

(*sans* quantification over possible worlds), I take it to be equivalent to the following thesis:

(SA) Necessarily, for any  $x$ , necessarily,  $x$  has a property or stands in a relation only if  $x$  exists.<sup>35</sup>

Now given that necessarily, *Obama does not exist* is true if and only if *Obama does not exist* has the property of being true, the denial of 6 is equivalent to

(D6) Possibly, *Obama does not exist* has the property of being true and it is not the case that *Obama does not exist* exists.

The conjunction of (SA) and (D6), along with the uncontroversial (in the current dialectical context) claim that the proposition *Obama does not exist* actually exists, however, entails the following:<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> This is how Pollock (1985, p. 127) recommends that the thesis of serious actualism be characterized. As Plantinga (1985, p. 317) notes, there are at least two ways to understand the second occurrence of the necessity operator as it occurs in this formulation. On the first of those readings, it together with the open sentence within its scope is (roughly speaking) to be read as follows: “ $x$  is essentially such that it has properties or stands in relations only if it exists” (where an object is essentially  $F$  just in case it is  $F$  according to every possible world in which it exists). On this reading, for example, the open sentence that includes (at its leftmost) the second occurrence of the necessity operator embedded in (SA) is satisfied relative to the assignment of Obama as the value for  $x$  if and only if Obama is essentially such that he has properties and stands in relations only if he exists. On this interpretation (SA) is trivial and does not express the thesis intended by the serious actualist. The second reading, the one that *is* relevant here, may be explained as follows (this is not quite how Plantinga puts it but it is close): Let’s say (very roughly) that a “propositional instance” of an open sentence is a singular proposition that is related to that open sentence in the same way that any proposition expressed by a closed sentence resulting from uniformly replacing each of the free variables in that open sentence with a proper name is so related. According to the second of these readings (again, quite roughly), the open sentence that includes (at its leftmost) the second occurrence of the necessity operator embedded in (SA) is to be regarded as being satisfied relative to an assignment of a value to  $x$  if and only if the propositional instance of that open sentence that is directly about the value assigned to  $x$  is true. For example, on this reading the aforementioned open sentence is satisfied relative to an assignment of Obama as the value for  $x$  just in case it is true that necessarily, Obama has properties and stands in relations only if Obama exists.

<sup>36</sup> Assume that (D6) and (SA) are both true and that *Obama does not exist* actually exists. Given (SA), for any  $x$  such that  $x$  actually exists, necessarily,  $x$  has a property only if  $x$  exists. And since *Obama does not exist* actually exists, necessarily, *Obama does not exist* has a property only if *Obama does not exist* exists. It follows from (D6), however, that possibly, *Obama does not exist* has a property even though it is not the case that *Obama does not exist* exists. It follows, therefore, that possibly, both *Obama does not exist* has a property only if *Obama does not exist* exists, and *Obama does not exist* has a property even though it is not the case that *Obama does not exist* exists. (This follows from the above, at any rate, if the following modal principle, which is valid according to all standard modal logics, is valid: If  $\Box p$  and  $\Diamond q$ ,

(Absurdity) Possibly, both *Obama does not exist* exists and it is also not the case that *Obama does not exist* exists.

But since (Absurdity) is (true to its name) absurd, the conjunction of (SA) and (D6) must be rejected.

Given the in-at distinction, one might be tempted to think that the above argument trades on some sort of ambiguity and thereby commits a fallacy of equivocation. When Kit Fine makes the distinction between truth in a world and truth at a world (or, in his terminology, between a proposition's being true in an "inner sense" and its being true in an "outer sense"), for example, he presents it as a distinction between two different senses of what it is for a proposition to be true.<sup>37</sup> Accordingly, one might think that (D6) is correspondingly ambiguous and is to be given different readings depending on which of these senses of 'true' is in view. As other authors have pointed out, however, the distinction that Fine envisions (his own manner of presenting it notwithstanding) is probably best understood as giving us two different senses of what it is for a proposition's truth to be relativized to a world (that is, two different senses of what it is for a proposition to be true according to a world) and not two different senses of what it is for a proposition to be true.<sup>38</sup>

Furthermore, even if the distinction is to be understood as giving us two different senses of 'true', the previous argument still goes through. In that case, we may distinguish between a proposition's having the property of being true<sub>in</sub> and its having the property of being true<sub>at</sub> and we may disambiguate (D6) accordingly. Presumably, since

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then  $\langle \rangle(p \& q)$ .) It is also a straightforward consequence of the above, however, that possibly, both *Obama does not exist* exists and it is not the case that *Obama does not exist* exists.

<sup>37</sup> (Fine 1985, p. 194)

<sup>38</sup> See (Plantinga 1985, pp. 341-344) and (David 2009, section 4)

we are considering the strategy of endorsing (D6) on the at-reading thereof, it is the property of being true<sub>at</sub> that is relevant here. But on either disambiguation, the argument against the conjunction of (D6) and (SA) offered above is still sound.

I conclude therefore, that the existentialist strategy of maintaining that (6) is to be denied given the at-reading of the premises of Plantinga's argument is to be rejected. Given the unavailability of that strategy, the existentialist is left with the prospect of denying the truth of (45) given the at-reading thereof. And insofar as the existentialist is committed to the truth of (3) and insofar as she wishes to maintain that (C45\*) comes out as being true (on the at-reading), this commits her to denying that (C45\*) entails (C45) (i.e. to denying premise (5)) on the at-reading of those claims. But how could it be sensible to deny that this entailment holds?

It is common in discussions concerning whether such entailments hold to consider a potential analogy between sentence tokens and propositions.<sup>39</sup> Consider, for example, the following claim:

(S\*) A sentence token of the sentence 'There are no sentence tokens' is possible.

On at least one sensible way of understanding it, (S\*) expresses a truth. Though there are in fact tokens of the sentence 'There are no sentence tokens' (here's an example of one: There are no sentence tokens), there are also possible worlds in which there are no sentence tokens. So there are possible worlds according to which what any such token says is true. But now consider the following:

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<sup>39</sup> For discussions of this and/or related analogies, see (Prior 1969), (Plantinga 1983, pp.19-20), (Plantinga 1985, pp. 325-326), (David 2009, section 5), and (Speaks 2012).

(S) A sentence token of the sentence 'There are no sentence tokens' is possibly true.

It seems clear that it is not the case that (S\*) entails (S). In any world in which there are no sentence tokens, there are no tokens of 'There are no sentence tokens' and so no such token could possibly exist in a context in which it expresses a truth.<sup>40</sup> So, it seems, no such sentence token is possibly true.

As is also frequently noted, however, there appears to be an important disanalogy between claims such as the one that (S\*) fails to entail (S) and the one that (C45\*) fails to entail (C45). In the former case, we may plausibly deny that the relevant entailment holds on account of the fact that sentence tokens are not the fundamental bearers of truth. A sentence token is true only in a derivative sense, only insofar as it expresses a proposition that is true. Accordingly, a token of the sentence 'There are no sentence tokens' is possible because *what it says* (i.e. the proposition that it expresses) is possible. And, in this case at least, it would also seem that the latter is possible only if it is also possibly true. But since propositions are the *fundamental* bearers of truth, it is often argued, there is no similar way to plausibly deny that claims such as (C45\*) entail (C45).<sup>41</sup>

For the existentialist who maintains that all possible worlds are necessary beings, however, there is, in fact, a similar way of plausibly denying that (C45\*) entails (C45).

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<sup>40</sup> I am assuming, for the sake of the analogy, that necessarily, any token of 'There are no sentence tokens' is essentially a sentence token of 'There are no sentence tokens' and that necessarily, any such token essentially expresses the proposition that there are no sentence tokens. Both of these assumptions are rather dubious. Nevertheless, the assumptions underlying the analogy needn't be correct in order for the analogy to be useful for making the points that it is intended to make. Speaks (2012, pp. 535-536, n. 13-14) further discusses issues pertaining to the assumptions regarding the modal properties of linguistic tokens that underlie these sorts of analogies.

<sup>41</sup> See the references in note 39 for discussions of objections to this analogy that run along these lines.

Suppose that, for any given proposition, we identify its "corresponding possibility" with the set of possible worlds *at* which that proposition is true. So, for example, we are to regard the set of possible worlds at which Obama does not exist as the corresponding possibility for the proposition that Obama does not exist. For the proposition that  $2+2=5$ , we'll say that its corresponding possibility is the empty set (we also won't let it bother us that our stipulative terminology has us speaking of impossible propositions as having "corresponding possibilities"). And so on. Let's also say that necessarily, a corresponding possibility for a proposition "obtains" just in case one of the worlds it contains is actual. Let's further stipulate that a proposition may be said to "express" its corresponding possibility.

Given all of the above, the existentialist who maintains that possible worlds are necessary beings can consistently maintain that even though the proposition *Obama does not exist* is not itself a necessary being, its corresponding possibility is. And the former, such an existentialist can maintain, may be said to be possible on account of the fact that it expresses the latter and the latter possibly obtains. And this is all so, she can say, in spite of the fact the former is not possibly true (because in every world in which its corresponding possibility obtains, it is not around to be true).<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> David (2009), also playing off the analogy between propositions and sentence tokens discussed above, offers a similar suggestion on behalf of the existentialist. His suggestion (applied to the current example) is that the existentialist might maintain that had Obama not existed, then even though the proposition *Obama does not exist* would not have existed, the corresponding state of affairs *Obama's not existing* would have obtained. As David (2009, section 6) himself notes, however, this suggestion is of dubious advantage to the existentialist, since it is difficult to see how considerations in favor of existentialism pertaining to singular propositions don't simply carry over as equally strong considerations in favor of existentialism pertaining to those proposition's corresponding states of affairs. Might a similar sort of objection be successfully leveled against the move suggested here? Not obviously, since (as the considerations raised in the next two subsections will suggest) it is at least doubtful that there is any connection between propositions and possible worlds as intimate as the one often thought to hold between propositions and states of affairs.

Likewise, the above strategy helps the existentialist explain how it could be plausible to deny that the proposition that Obama exists is possible in the in-sense of what it is for a proposition to be possible, in spite of the fact that (3) is true. She can accept that there is a sense (the in-sense) in which a proposition may be said to be possible only if it is possibly true. In that sense, she can maintain, what is relevant to our evaluation of whether or not a sentence such as 'Possibly, Obama does not exist' expresses a truth is not whether the proposition expressed by the sentence within the scope of the possibility operator is possibly true, but whether there are any possible worlds in which that proposition's corresponding possibility obtains.

Thus, the existentialist who maintains that possible worlds are necessary beings has a plausible way of denying that (45) expresses a truth on either then in-reading or the at-reading of that premise. But if (45) fails to express a truth, then not only does Plantinga's argument fail; the contingency argument fails as well. For one of the premises of the latter was the following claim: Necessarily, it is possible that Obama is the 44th President of the United States only if the proposition *Obama is the 44th President of the United States* has the property of being possibly true. And the very same grounds that the existentialist might have for denying (45) are also grounds for denying this claim. The upshot of this discussion is not only that the considerations raised by Plantinga's anti-existentialist argument give the existentialist reasons to believe that the contingency argument is unsound, they also afford her with additional positive reasons to adopt the position that possible worlds are necessary beings (insofar as her adopting that position affords her with plausible ways of denying some of the premises of Plantinga's argument on various readings of them).

## *II.2 The Argument from Various Conceptions of Possible Worlds*

But is there a conception of *what* possible worlds are that is (from the existentialist's perspective) consistent with the claim that they all exist necessarily? This brings me to the second argument that I mentioned toward the beginning of this section for the conclusion that existentialists are committed to the claim that at least some possible worlds are contingent beings. That argument is that, *given certain conceptions of what possible worlds are*, existentialists are already committed to the thesis that at least some possible worlds are contingent beings.

I don't see any way for the existentialist to avoid the claim that given certain conceptions of what possible worlds are, at least some of them are contingent beings. For just one example, according to one conception, possible worlds are maximal consistent sets of propositions, where, to a first approximation, a set, S, is a maximal consistent set of propositions if and only if S contains nothing that is not a proposition, the propositions that S contains are jointly compossible, and for every proposition P\*, either P\* is included in S or the denial of P\* is included in S.<sup>43</sup> But sets exist if and only if their members do. And if existentialism is true, what propositions there are, and thus what maximal consistent sets of propositions there are, is a contingent matter. Hence, on this conception of what possible worlds are, if existentialism is true, then at least some possible worlds turn out to exist only contingently.

So I agree that existentialists are committed to the conclusion that, on certain conceptions of what possible worlds are, some possible worlds turn out to be contingent

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<sup>43</sup> For an example of an existentialist who employs such a conception of possible worlds (modified in certain ways to accommodate various technicalities) and who argues for the conclusion that some possible worlds exist only contingently, see (Adams 1981).

beings. But I do not think the proper response on the part of existentialists is to conclude that some possible worlds are, in fact, contingent beings. Rather, I think the proper response on the part of existentialists is to say “So much the worse for such conceptions of what possible worlds are!” Possible worlds are theoretical entities that have been functionally characterized by the theoretical roles they play.<sup>44</sup> There may be various abstract entities that are candidates for being the entities that play those roles. And if a particular candidate class of entities fails to be suited for all the roles that a class of possible worlds ought to be suited (including conformity to our deepest modal intuitions), that is a good reason for rejecting that candidate class in favor of another one (provided that there are other candidate classes to be had).

Furthermore, it is far less clear that existentialists are committed to the thesis that not all possible worlds are necessary beings given various other standard conceptions of what possible worlds are. Consider, for example, Peter van Inwagen’s conception according to which possible worlds are possible propositions that are maximal with respect to entailment, where a given proposition, *P*, is maximal with respect to entailment just in case, for any proposition, *Q\**, *P* either entails *Q\** or *P* entails the denial of *Q\**. There is nothing in this conception of what possible worlds are that obviously commits the existentialist (who believes that there are contingent objects) to the claim that not all possible worlds are necessary beings.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> On this point, see (Van Inwagen 1986, pp. 217-218). (These and all subsequent page citations for this reference are from (Van Inwagen 2001)).

<sup>45</sup> See (Van Inwagen 1986, p. 201). Similar points apply to Plantinga’s (1974) conception of possible worlds as maximally inclusive possible states of affairs (where the relevant notion of inclusion is the states of affairs analog of entailment). I have chosen to focus on Van Inwagen’s conception because (in taking possible worlds to be propositions) it is more directly connected to the issues raised by existentialism concerning singular propositions than is Plantinga’s. I thank an anonymous referee for

At first glance, one might *think* that Van Inwagen's conception of what possible worlds are obviously carries along with it the implication that if existentialism is true (and there are contingent beings), it is a contingent matter as to what possible worlds there are. If so, one is likely persuaded by something like the following argument: Suppose possible worlds are in fact propositions that are maximal with respect to entailment and let ' $\alpha$ ' name the actual world. Assume for the sake of argument that existentialism is true and that Obama is a contingent being. One of the propositions that  $\alpha$  entails is the proposition *Obama exists*. Now, had it been the case that Obama did not exist, the latter proposition (given the truth of existentialism) would not have existed; but since  $\alpha$  entails that proposition, (it allegedly follows)  $\alpha$  would not have existed as well.

But this argument is too quick. In order to make it formally valid, one needs to add the claim that necessarily, if  $\alpha$  entails the proposition that Obama exists, then  $\alpha$  exists only if *Obama exists* does. And the existentialist already has reason to deny the more general claim that if one proposition entails another, then necessarily, the entailing proposition exists only if the entailed one does. I suspect, for example, that most existentialists who believe that Obama is a contingent being would also accept the claim that there is some purely qualitative property that is essential to Obama but which is also such that it is possible that nothing exemplifies it. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that *being human* is such a property. Now consider the proposition that nothing is human. Many existentialists will want to maintain that purely qualitative propositions such as *Nothing is human* exist necessarily. It also seems, however, that if Obama is essentially human, the proposition that nothing is human entails the proposition that

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suggesting that I discuss a view of this sort, as well as for suggesting the argument that I discuss immediately below.

Obama does not exist. Nevertheless, if the former proposition exists necessarily, it would exist even if the latter did not. And, according to the existentialist, there is no world in which the latter proposition both exists and is true. Thus given existentialism (and given various plausible assumptions that many existentialists would endorse), it seems that one proposition may entail another without depending, for its own existence, on the existence of the proposition that it entails.

More carefully, what the above argument does is give the kind of existentialist we are considering reason to believe that *there is at least one perfectly good sense of 'entailment'* in which one proposition might exist necessarily while entailing a proposition that exists merely contingently. And this, in turn, opens up conceptual space for the existentialist to consistently endorse the claim that possible worlds are necessarily existing, possible propositions that are maximal with respect to entailment *in that sense*. It is true that the kind of existentialist we are considering will not want to endorse the claim that *Nothing is human* entails *Obama does not exist* in the sense that the latter is true *in every world* in which the former is true (because the latter, according to her, does not exist in those worlds). Even so, there is nothing stopping her from consistently endorsing the claim that *Nothing is human* entails *Obama does not exist* in the sense that the latter is true *at every world* at which the former is true. Correspondingly, while this kind of existentialist cannot consistently regard possible worlds as necessarily existing, possible propositions that are maximal with respect to entailment in the former of the above senses of 'entailment', she can still endorse a Van Inwagenian conception of possible worlds according to which they are necessarily existing, possible propositions that are maximal with respect to entailment in the latter of those senses.

What such an existentialist does need to add to Van Inwagen's conception of what possible worlds are, however, is that in order to be a possible world, a possible proposition must not only be maximal with respect to entailment (in the relevant sense), but also such that it is not directly about contingent beings (otherwise, according to the existentialist, it too would be a contingent being). So if the kind of existentialist we are considering wants to adopt this conception of what possible worlds are and maintain *there are* possible worlds (and that necessarily, one of them is actual), she needs to maintain that necessarily, there is a true proposition that is not directly about contingent beings that nevertheless entails (in the sense at issue) every true singular proposition that is directly about contingent beings. This falls short of a commitment to anti-haecceitism (it is consistent, for example, with the claim that which singular propositions directly about contingent beings are true supervenes on which singular propositions directly about necessary beings are true while the latter fails to supervene on which purely qualitative propositions are true). Even so, this is a hefty commitment for the existentialist to take on at the outset of the discussion, merely for the sake of fixing upon a certain conception of what possible worlds are.

An existentialist can forgo undertaking such a hefty commitment at the outset of the discussion, however (while maintaining that possible worlds are necessary beings), simply by refusing to adopt any conception of what possible worlds are that obviously involves her in it. She might take a cue from Robert Stalnaker, for instance, and take possible worlds to be irreducible, *sui generis* entities.<sup>46</sup> Alternatively, she might simply forgo undertaking any position at the outset of the discussion as to what possible worlds

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<sup>46</sup> See (Stalnaker 1976). I thank an anonymous referee for the suggestion that the existentialist who wants to maintain that possible worlds are necessary beings might adopt this view.

are, committing herself to there being entities that fill the possible worlds role (and which conform to her intuitions concerning the entities that fill that role), but waiting on the outcome of further theorizing before she decides what sorts of entities might be the best candidates for filling that role.<sup>47</sup> In any case, I don't see why the existentialist should feel compelled to adopt a conception of possible worlds at the beginning of the discussion that immediately commits her to the claim that not all possible worlds are necessary beings.

### *III.3 The Argument from Motivation*

I now turn to the final argument mentioned toward the beginning of this section for the conclusion that existentialists are committed to the claim that it is a contingent matter as to what possible worlds there are. "Perhaps the existentialist can consistently endorse the denial of that claim," the advocate of this argument might concede, "but in so doing, wouldn't she be radically undercutting the motivation for her view?" Suppose, to flesh this argument out a bit more, that the set of possible worlds at which Obama does not

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<sup>47</sup> If she is convinced by the argument that I will provide in the next section for the conclusion that existentialism entails anti-haecceitism, furthermore, then, as the result of further theorizing, some more options open up for her as to what sorts of entities these might be. If anti-haecceitism is true, for example, any possible, purely qualitative proposition that is maximal with respect to the purely qualitative propositions it entails (i.e. any possible, purely qualitative proposition that is such that, for every purely qualitative proposition, it entails either that proposition or its denial) is also maximal with respect to entailment full stop (at least, as noted above, in one good sense of 'entailment') and is thereby a possible world according to Van Inwagen's (1986) conception of what possible worlds are. Similarly, if anti-haecceitism is true, then any possible, purely qualitative state of affairs that is maximal with respect to the purely qualitative states of affairs that it includes is also a maximally inclusive state of affairs and is therefore a possible world given Plantinga's (1974) conception of possible worlds (keep in mind that the relevant notion of inclusion here is a modal one – the state of affairs analog of entailment – not a constitutive one). Likewise (setting aside various difficulties with set-theoretic conceptions of possible worlds; see (Grim 1984)), if anti-haecceitism is true, a maximal consistent set of purely qualitative propositions would also do the job that a possible world is supposed to do. To loosely borrow a distinction from Lewis (1986, p. 142), such a set might not be suited to *explicitly* represent all of the truths (via including each of them), but (given the truth of anti-haecceitism) it would (if every proposition it contained were true) be suited to *implicitly* represent all of them (via its being such that all of the truths it does contain jointly entail each of the other truths). This is not to say that the existentialist should buy into anti-haecceitism at the outset of the discussion simply in order to adopt one of these conceptions of what possible worlds are (that would strike me as ill advised). It is, however, to illustrate one way in which the existentialist's adoption the "wait-and-see" attitude advocated here might pay off somewhere down the line.

exist is itself a necessary being. In that case, why not simply identify the proposition *Obama does not exist* with that set instead of with some other entity whose existence depends on the existence of Obama? That way, we don't have to say that *Obama does not exist* wouldn't have existed if Obama did not and we are thereby relieved of all of the attendant modal difficulties that come along with holding the existentialist's position. Even if those difficulties are not insurmountable, why face them (and in so doing complicate our views of modality in the various ways required to meet them) if we don't have to?

The answer that the existentialist who believes that possible worlds are necessary beings should give to this objection, I take it, is that the proposition role is distinct from the possibility role, and it may well be that these roles impose different sorts of constraints on the modal properties that can be had by the entities which fill them. As indicated in Section I, there is a consistent strand of the literature on propositions, for example, that maintains that propositions should be thought of as structured entities. One reason given for adopting this view over the view that propositions are sets of possible worlds, furthermore, is that it is argued that the latter view does not individuate propositions finely enough. Getting the right individuation conditions for propositions, as well as, perhaps, accommodating various facts about the compositionality of language, this strand of the literature would have it, requires taking propositions to be structured entities of some sort.<sup>48</sup> And (as was also noted in the first section) this view of propositions, many existentialists would maintain, in conjunction with a direct reference view of various expressions, entails (or at least strongly suggests) an existentialist view of

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<sup>48</sup> Soames (1987) is one prominent example (among many) of a philosopher who argues along these lines (see also (Soames 2010, chapters 3 and 4)). See note 9 for additional references.

singular propositions. Alternatively, instead of appealing to some theory of propositions as structured entities, the existentialist might appeal directly to our intuitions concerning aboutness, in conjunction with a direct reference view of various expressions, in order to support her position. Sentences that express singular propositions, she might maintain, express propositions that are essentially directly about certain individuals. And since (so the argument goes), had those individuals failed to exist, there would have been nothing for those singular propositions to be directly about, the propositions themselves would have also failed to exist.<sup>49</sup> But possible worlds are not the sort of things that we think of pre-theoretically as being about things in the way that propositions are.

I don't need to rehearse and defend (or even so much as endorse) any these arguments in order to note that these are considerations that existentialists often marshal in favor of the view that some singular propositions are contingent beings. And none of these considerations even so much as suggest that possible worlds are also contingent beings, not, at any rate, without some substantial assumptions concerning the relationship between propositions and possible worlds. Furthermore, as I noted above, there is reason to think that, in order for possible worlds to play *their* role, they have to be necessary beings. The considerations raised by the existentialist in support of her position and the considerations raised above in favor of the position that possible worlds are necessary beings, therefore, need not be regarded as pulling in opposite directions. Rather, they may be thought of as reasons for thinking that the modal properties of these two sorts of entities pull apart in ways that militate against too closely identifying one with the other.

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<sup>49</sup> Williamson (2002, pp. 240-242) suggests an argument for existentialism along these lines. This way of putting the argument is similar to that found in (Speaks 2012, pp. 529-530).

### III. The Main Argument

With the above preliminaries out of the way, I am now in a position to put forward my argument for the conclusion that existentialism entails anti-haecceitism. I'll begin with a note on terminology, followed by a brief, intuitive sketch of the argument I have in mind. I will then offer a more rigorous version of that argument and defend the premises upon which it relies.

Beginning with a note on terminology: When I speak of a proposition being “true according to a world,” I intend that phrase to be read in the most reasonably inclusive way possible. If, for example, there is a distinction between a proposition's being true *in* a world and a proposition's being true *at* a world, then ‘true according to a world’ may be read as ‘either true in or true at a world’.<sup>50</sup> I'll also say that two worlds “disagree concerning a proposition” if and only if that proposition is true according to one of those worlds but it is not the case that it is true according to the other of them. I will refer to a proposition as “purely qualitative” if and only if it is not a singular proposition. And I'll say that two worlds are “qualitatively indiscernible” if and only if all and only the same purely qualitative propositions are true according to both of them.

With this terminology in hand, here's an intuitive sketch of the argument I have in mind: Assume for conditional proof that existentialism is true. Assume for *reductio* that there are two qualitatively indiscernible possible worlds, W1 and W2. Possible worlds are individuated by which propositions are true according to them. So, since W1 and W2

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<sup>50</sup> One must be careful, though, in light of the results of the previous section, about how one understands this terminology, lest one be misled into conflating some important distinctions. It should not be inferred (at least not in the current dialectical context), for example, from the claim that *Obama does not exist* is true according to a given world, W, that according to W, the proposition *Obama does not exist* is true (i.e. it should not be inferred from the former claim that *The proposition that Obama does not exist is true* is true according to W). These are distinct claims, in spite of the fact that the current terminology might tempt us to conflate them.

are distinct worlds, necessarily, there is at least one proposition concerning which W1 and W2 disagree. But since W1 and W2 are qualitatively indiscernible, necessarily, there aren't any purely qualitative propositions concerning which they disagree. So necessarily, W1 and W2 only disagree concerning singular propositions. But (given the truth of existentialism) there could have failed to exist any singular propositions directly about contingent beings concerning which W1 and W2 disagree. So it is at least metaphysically possible that W1 and W2 not only fail to disagree concerning any purely qualitative propositions, but also concerning any singular propositions directly about contingent beings. But (given a plausible supervenience thesis that I will defend below) necessarily, if two worlds fail to disagree concerning any purely qualitative propositions and concerning any singular propositions directly about contingent beings, then they fail to disagree concerning *any* propositions. So it's at least metaphysically possible that W1 and W2 fail to disagree concerning any propositions. But earlier it was established that necessarily W1 and W2 disagree concerning at least one proposition. Contradiction! We may conclude (via *reductio ad absurdum* and conditional proof) that if existentialism is true, there are no distinct but qualitatively indiscernible possible worlds.

I will now proceed to offer a more rigorous version of the intuitive argument sketched above. I'll begin by laying out the argument in premise-conclusion form, followed by an explanation of how the premises may be seen to jointly entail the conclusion. I'll then proceed to comment upon and defend the premises themselves.

In premise-conclusion form, the argument I have in mind may be stated as follows:

(P1) Necessarily, for any pair of distinct possible worlds, W1\* and W2\*, necessarily, there is some proposition concerning which W1\* and W2\* disagree.

(P2) Necessarily, for any pair of distinct possible worlds,  $W1^*$  and  $W2^*$ , if  $W1^*$  and  $W2^*$  do not disagree concerning any necessarily existing purely qualitative propositions, then necessarily,  $W1^*$  and  $W2^*$  do not disagree concerning any necessarily existing purely qualitative propositions.

(P3) Necessarily, for any pair of distinct possible worlds,  $W1^*$  and  $W2^*$ , necessarily, if  $W1^*$  and  $W2^*$  disagree concerning some proposition, then there is some purely qualitative proposition concerning which  $W1^*$  and  $W2^*$  disagree or there is some singular proposition directly about contingent beings concerning which  $W1^*$  and  $W2^*$  disagree.<sup>51</sup>

(P4) Necessarily, for any pair of distinct possible worlds,  $W1^*$  and  $W2^*$ , necessarily, for any proposition  $P^*$ , if  $W1^*$  and  $W2^*$  disagree concerning  $P^*$ ,  $P^*$  exists.

(P5) Possibly, no contingent beings exist.

(C) Therefore, necessarily, if existentialism is true, there are no distinct but qualitatively indiscernible possible worlds.

Here is an explanation of how the premises may be seen to jointly entail the conclusion:

Let ‘ $W1$ ’ and ‘ $W2$ ’ name two distinct possible worlds. Assume for conditional proof that existentialism is true. Assume for *reductio* that  $W1$  and  $W2$  are qualitatively indiscernible. (P1) entails that necessarily, there is some proposition concerning which  $W1$  and  $W2$  disagree. And this, in conjunction with (P3), entails that necessarily, there is some purely qualitative proposition concerning which  $W1$  and  $W2$  disagree or there is some singular proposition directly about contingent beings concerning which  $W1$  and  $W2$  disagree. However, (P2), in conjunction with the fact that  $W1$  and  $W2$  are qualitatively indiscernible, entails that necessarily, there are no necessarily existing purely qualitative

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<sup>51</sup> Were I to have stated this premise more cautiously, I would have written the latter clause as follows: “or there is some singular proposition directly about contingent beings (*if directly about anything*) concerning which  $W1^*$  and  $W2^*$  disagree.” Given the fourth premise of my argument (found immediately below this premise) and the assumption that existentialism is true, the added parenthetical qualification is superfluous (since according to existentialism, necessarily, no singular proposition exists unless there are things that it is directly about). But a non-existentialist might well think that possibly some singular propositions exist but fail to be directly about anything because there are no individuals for them to be directly about. The omission of this clause does not substantially affect any of the arguments that follow; it does, however, allow for a less clumsy presentation of some of those arguments.

propositions concerning which W1 and W2 disagree. So it follows that necessarily, there is either some contingently existing purely qualitative proposition concerning which W1 and W2 disagree,<sup>52</sup> or there is some singular proposition directly about contingent beings concerning which W1 and W2 disagree. Let any such proposition (i.e. any proposition that is either a contingently existing purely qualitative proposition or a singular proposition directly about contingent beings) be referred to as a “C-proposition.” From (P4) it follows that necessarily, for any C-proposition, P\*, W1 and W2 disagree concerning P\* only if P\* exists. So from the conjunction of (P4) and the previously established conclusion that necessarily, W1 and W2 disagree concerning some C-proposition, it follows that necessarily, some C-proposition exists. Now, given existentialism, it is also true that necessarily, any C-proposition is a contingent being. (To see this, let ‘P’ denote an arbitrarily selected C-proposition. By the definition of ‘C-proposition’, P is either a contingently existing purely qualitative proposition or a singular proposition directly about contingent beings. If it is the former, then it follows straightaway that P is a contingent being. If it is the latter, then it follows from existentialism that P is a contingent being.) So (given existentialism), it follows from the previously established claim that necessarily, some C-proposition exists, that necessarily, some contingent being exists. But the latter contradicts (P5)! So it follows from all of the above (by *reductio ad absurdum*, generalization from the arbitrary case, conditional proof, and necessitation) that (C) is true, i.e. it follows that necessarily, if existentialism is true, there are no distinct but qualitatively indiscernible possible worlds.

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<sup>52</sup> Of course, many people (existentialists and non-existentialists alike) will find it highly plausible to maintain that necessarily, there are no contingently existing purely qualitative propositions. But someone who, for example, maintains a principle of instantiation for properties and who holds that propositions have properties as constituents might take themselves to have reason to maintain that possibly some purely qualitative propositions are contingent beings.

I now turn to the task of defending the premises themselves. Given the background assumption that possible worlds are necessary beings, the first premise is a consequence of the intuitively compelling claim that possible worlds are individuated by which propositions are true according to them. I.e. it is a consequence of the claim that necessarily there are no two distinct possible worlds that are such that all and only the same propositions are true according to both of them. I don't expect that this latter claim will be particularly controversial. At the very least, two distinct possible worlds would have to disagree about which world is actual.

The second premise is also intuitively compelling. Surely if a proposition is true according to a given world, it is a necessary truth that if that proposition and that world both exist, that proposition is true according to that world. So if a proposition is true according to some world, then (given the background assumption that possible worlds are necessary beings) it is essential to that proposition that it is true according to that world. And, given the fact that what necessarily existing purely qualitative propositions there are does not vary from world to world, the second premise follows.

The third premise is less immediately compelling, but, I think, still intuitively compelling upon reflection. If two distinct worlds were such that they did not disagree concerning any purely qualitative propositions nor any singular propositions directly about contingent beings, then the only propositions left for them to disagree concerning would be singular propositions that are directly about necessary beings. Now, certainly two worlds could disagree concerning singular propositions directly about necessary beings. The number twelve, for instance, is a necessary being (at least given a standard kind of realist view of mathematics). And it could be the case that according to one

world it is true that twelve numbers the Apostles but not so according to some other world. Likewise, it may be true according to one world that twelve is John's favorite number but not so according to another world. In both of these examples, we have it that two worlds disagree concerning a singular proposition directly about a necessary being – namely, the number twelve. But in both of the above examples, the fact that two worlds disagree concerning the relevant singular propositions about the number twelve entails that they disagree either concerning some purely qualitative proposition (as in the first example, given that the proposition that twelve numbers the Apostles is logically equivalent to a purely qualitative proposition that could be expressed in predicate logic) or concerning some singular proposition directly about contingent beings (as in the second example, given that the proposition that twelve is John's favorite number is not only a singular proposition directly about the number twelve, but also a singular proposition directly about John<sup>53</sup>). If two worlds were to disagree concerning a singular proposition directly about a necessary being without disagreeing concerning a purely qualitative proposition or a singular proposition directly about contingent beings, however, they would have to disagree concerning what is true of various necessary beings irrespective of their disagreements concerning which purely qualitative propositions or singular propositions directly about contingent beings are true.

But it is hard to see how this could be so. Most (if not all) of the denizens of the realm of necessary beings are abstract objects. And, presumably, the properties and relations that abstract objects bear to one another independently of any qualitative facts or singular facts involving concrete entities is not a contingent matter. The only plausible,

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<sup>53</sup> Provided, at least, that John exists and is thereby available for this proposition to be directly about him (see note 51).

purported counterexample to the claim that all necessary beings are abstract objects is the Anselmian claim that God is a necessary being.<sup>54</sup> But it seems likely, if an Anselmian conception of Deity is correct, that those qualities that God has, independently of how God is related to contingent beings and independently of which purely qualitative, contingent propositions are true, are qualities of perfection that God has essentially. And for that reason, it also seems likely, given an Anselmian conception of Deity, that any disagreements between worlds concerning God's characteristics involve disagreements between those worlds concerning what God's relationships to various contingent beings are like or concerning which purely qualitative propositions are true.

The fourth premise seems to follow immediately from serious actualism, which is one of the background assumptions. Here's an argument that it does: By definition, what it is for two worlds to disagree concerning a proposition is for it to be the case that that proposition is true according to one of those worlds but not the case that it is true according to the other of those worlds. So, in order for two worlds to disagree concerning a proposition, it must be the case that that proposition is true according to one of those worlds. But a proposition's being true according to a world (whether this involves the proposition's being true in that world or its being true at that world) involves its standing in a relation to that world whereby it is accurate with respect to that world. And, given serious actualism, a proposition can stand in such a relation to a world only if it exists.

It is worth pausing here to note what this argument from serious actualism to the fourth premise *does not* establish (even if it is successful). It does not establish that two

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<sup>54</sup> Williamson's (previously alluded to) thesis that everything is a necessary being notwithstanding.

worlds, W1 and W2, disagree concerning a proposition, P, only if P exists according to both of these worlds. Suppose, for example, that P exists and is true according to W1 but P does not exist according to W2. Still, the serious actualist can sensibly maintain that P is true according to W1 and it is not the case that P is true according to W2 (provided that P exists in the actual world), in the same way that a serious actualist can maintain that Obama is the forty fourth President of the United States according to the actual world but that it is not the case that Obama is the forty fourth President of the United States according to worlds in which he does not exist.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, the above argument does not even establish that P must exist in *either* W1 or W2 in order for W1 and W2 to disagree concerning P. The above argument leaves room for the claim discussed in the previous section that a proposition can be true at a world in spite of the fact that it does not exist in that world. And so it might be (for all the above argument establishes), for example, that there is some proposition that exists in the actual world that is true at W1 but not at W2 (or *vice versa*), but which does not exist in either W1 or W2. But provided that a proposition's being true at a world involves its standing in some relation to that world (even if it wouldn't exist to stand in that relation were that world actual), it is still a consequence of serious actualism that that proposition is true at a given world only if (in fact) exists.

The above considerations do bring to mind a certain objection, however, that can be raised against my argument for the conclusion that (P4) is entailed by serious actualism. Many serious actualists (especially the non-exentialists among them) will want to maintain, for example, that it would have been true according to  $\alpha$  (where ' $\alpha$ ' names the actual world) that Obama is the 44th President of the United States even if

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<sup>55</sup> I thank Michael Rea for pressing me to clarify this point.

Obama had not existed. But, being serious actualists, they will want to find a way to maintain this without conceding that it is possible Obama not exist and yet stand in some relation to  $\alpha$ . And whatever strategy the serious actualist employs in order to consistently maintain this, one might think, could also be used to consistently maintain that it is possible for a given proposition, P, to be true according to some world, W, even though P does not exist and is thereby not available to stand in any relation to W.<sup>56</sup>

But this objection rests on *de re/de dicto* confusion. It is one thing for the proposition *Obama is the 44th President of the United States* to stand in a relation to  $\alpha$  whereby that *proposition* is true according to  $\alpha$ . It is another for Obama, the man himself and not any proposition about him, to stand in a relation to  $\alpha$  whereby *he* is, according to  $\alpha$ , the 44th President of the United States. The serious actualist who is not an existentialist can consistently maintain that the former could transpire even if Obama did not exist. She can maintain this on account of the fact that she (not being an existentialist) can affirm that the proposition *Obama is the 44th President of the United States* would be around to stand in a relation to  $\alpha$  even if Obama himself were not. She can even maintain, furthermore, that Obama (the man himself) stands in various relations to worlds in which he does not exist whereby those worlds represent certain things of him *de re*. She can maintain, for example, that he stands in the *does not exist according to* relation to any such world.

What she cannot properly maintain as a serious actualist, however, is that Obama would have stood in such a relation to a world had he not existed. She cannot maintain, for example, that Obama (the man himself) could have stood in a relation to  $\alpha$ , had he not existed, whereby *he* is, according to  $\alpha$ , the 44th President of the United States. Rather,

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<sup>56</sup> I thank Michael Rea for inviting me to consider this objection.

had Obama not existed, he would not have been around to stand in any such relation to  $\alpha$ . Similarly, the serious actualist cannot properly maintain that, had Obama not existed, he would have stood in the *does not exist according to* relation to any world.<sup>57</sup> Likewise, the existentialist who is a serious actualist can properly maintain that propositions that in fact exist stand in all sorts of relations to worlds in which they do not exist (including the relevant *being true according to* relation), but she cannot properly maintain that those propositions would have stood in those relations had they not existed. Thus I take (P4) to have emerged unscathed from this objection.

The last premise, (P5), I take it, is not likely to be *all that* controversial (although some have denied it<sup>58</sup>). In any case, a weaker premise could have been used in its place (at the cost of some complication in the initial setup). Let's say that two worlds "directly disagree concerning a being", B, just in case there is a singular proposition directly about B concerning which those worlds disagree. With this notion in hand, we can replace P5 with

(P5\*) For any pair of distinct possible worlds, W1\* and W2\*, possibly there exists no contingent being such that W1\* and W2\* directly disagree concerning that being.

This premise is weaker than P5 in that (while P5 entails it) it is consistent with the claim that necessarily, there exist some contingent beings or others. And it is easy enough to show that this premise, in conjunction with P1 through P4, also entails the conclusion that existentialism entails the denial of haecceitism.

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<sup>57</sup> A similar point is made by Plantinga (1985, pp. 320-323) in his reply to Pollock's (1985) objections to serious actualism. There Plantinga argues that while an existing object may satisfy conditions at (or with respect to) worlds in which it does not exist, it can do so only if it in fact exists.

<sup>58</sup> See, for example, (Armstrong 1989, pp. 63-64).

The explanation of how this entailment follows is exactly the same as the one offered above, up to the point at which it is established that (P1) through (P3) (together with the reductio assumption that the two arbitrarily selected worlds, W1 and W2, are qualitatively indiscernible) jointly entail that necessarily there is either some contingently existing purely qualitative proposition concerning which W1 and W2 disagree, or some singular proposition directly about contingent beings concerning which they disagree. It remains to be shown that the conjunction of (P4) and (P5\*) contradict this claim. I take it to be sufficiently obvious that (P5\*), in conjunction with (P4) and existentialism, entails that possibly there are no singular propositions directly about contingent beings concerning which W1 and W2 disagree. So if, as many existentialists would agree, all purely qualitative propositions exist necessarily, it follows that possibly, there are no contingently existing purely qualitative propositions concerning which W1 and W2 disagree nor any singular propositions directly about contingent beings concerning which they disagree, thereby supplying us with the needed contradiction.

But even without taking it for granted that all purely qualitative propositions exist necessarily, we can see that necessarily, if there are no singular propositions directly about contingent beings concerning which W1 and W2 disagree, then there are also no contingently existing purely qualitative propositions concerning which W1 and W2 disagree. In order to see this, suppose that there is a contingently existing, purely qualitative proposition concerning which W1 and W2 disagree and let 'P' name some such proposition. Since W1 and W2 disagree concerning P, it must either be the case that P is true according to W1 but not the case that P is true according to W2, or *vice versa*. Suppose, arbitrarily, that the former is the case. If we could simply take it for granted

that its being the case that P is true according to W1 also entails that *P is true* is true according to W1, we could stop here. For the proposition *P is true* would itself be a singular proposition directly about a contingent being (namely, P) concerning which W1 and W2 disagree, and we would have established (via generalization from the arbitrary case) that necessarily, if there is a contingently existing purely qualitative proposition concerning which W1 and W2 disagree, there is also a singular proposition directly about contingent beings concerning which W1 and W2 disagree.

Unfortunately, however, given the results of the discussion in the previous section, we are not entitled to take it for granted that the above entailment holds. For it might be (given all that we have said) that though P is true according to W1, it is also the case that P does not exist according to W1, and therefore also not the case that *P is true* is true according to W1. Fortunately, there is a way around this difficulty. Consider the following proposition (call it “P<sub>@</sub>”): *For any world, W\*, such that W\* is actual, necessarily, if P exists, then P is true according to W\**. Note that P<sub>@</sub> is a singular proposition directly about P that is true according to W1 and that this is so even if P does not exist according to W1. Note also that, since P<sub>@</sub> is not true according to W2, P<sub>@</sub> is a singular proposition directly about a contingent being concerning which W1 and W2 disagree. So we may take ourselves to have established that necessarily, if there is a contingently existing purely qualitative proposition concerning which W1 and W2 disagree, there is also a singular proposition directly about contingent beings concerning which W1 and W2 disagree.

Given that all of the above premises are either intuitively compelling by themselves or entailed by other intuitively compelling claims, I take their truth to be

sufficiently well-supported. And given that it follows from them that existentialism entails the denial of haecceitism, I conclude that is, in fact, the case.<sup>59</sup>

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