

Unnecessary Existents

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1. Introduction

Let's begin by looking at an argument recently defended by Timothy Williamson (2002). It consists of three premises. Letting o be an arbitrarily chosen object, it may be formulated as follows:

- (1) Necessarily, if o does not exist, then the proposition that o does not exist is true.
- (2) Necessarily, if the proposition that o does not exist is true, then the proposition that o does not exist exists.
- (3) Necessarily, if the proposition that o does not exist exists, then o exist.

It follows from (1)-(3) that necessarily, if o does not exist, then o exist. Hence, if it were possible for o to not exist, then it would possibly both exist and not exist. Clearly that's not possible. So, it must be that necessarily, o exists. Moreover, since o was simply an arbitrarily chosen object, we can generalize and conclude that everything necessarily exists.

Each premise is intuitively plausible and seemingly innocuous. But, the conclusion is clearly incredible. In this essay, I assume that the conclusion is false and develop a novel response to the argument.¹ First, I present the Russellian theory of propositions along with an amendment to that theory according to which there are gappy propositions. Second, I argue for an unusual extension of that theory of propositions under the assumption that there are contingent existents and show how a defender of this unusual theory might respond to Williamson's argument. Third, I consider and respond to an objection to this

version of Russellianism. Finally, I show how the theory may be employed to defend the Linguistic Ersatzist from the problem of aliens, or contingent non-existents.ⁱⁱ

2. *Russellianism*

The Russellian theory of propositions consists of a package of metaphysical theses and a package of semantic theses. Among the metaphysical theses of Russellianism are the following

- i. There are propositions.
- ii. Propositions have as constituents various entities like individuals, properties, relations, propositional operators and quantifiers.
- iii. Any constituent of a proposition plays a particular role in that proposition.

If there are propositions, as thesis (i) claims, then presumably there is a proposition that Barack loves Michelle. That proposition, in accordance with (ii), contains as constituents the individuals Barack and Michelle along with the loving relation. Moreover, in accordance with (iii), Barack plays the lover role in the propositions whereas Michelle plays the beloved role.

The semantic package of Russellianism includes the following theses:

- iv. Declarative sentences express (in a context) propositions.
- v. The semantic contents of proper names are the things to which those names refer, the semantic contents of other words are properties, relations, propositional operators, quantifiers and other propositional constituents.

- vi. Which propositions are expressed by declarative sentences (in a context) depends on the semantic contents of their meaningful components along with their grammatical structure.ⁱⁱⁱ

Consider the sentence 'Barack loves Michelle'. In accordance with (iv), that sentence expresses a proposition, namely the proposition that Barack loves Michelle. Moreover, in accordance with (v), the semantic contents of the meaningful components of that sentence include Barack, Michelle and the loving relation. And, in accordance with (vi), that sentence expresses the proposition it does, as opposed another, at least partly because of the semantic contents of its meaningful components and its grammatical structure.

For example, the sentence 'Barack loves Michelle' expresses the proposition that Barack loves Michelle instead of the proposition that Neil Armstrong walked on the Moon at least partly because the former proposition contains as constituents the semantic contents of each of the meaningful words in the sentence whereas the latter proposition does not; the sentence 'Barack loves Michelle' expresses the proposition that Barack loves Michelle rather than the proposition that Barack loves both Michelle and cookies at least partly because the former proposition contains as constituents *only* the semantic contents of its meaningful components whereas the latter proposition contains more; finally, the sentence 'Barack loves Michelle' expresses the proposition that Barack loves Michelle rather than the proposition that Michelle loves Barack at least partly because there is an appropriate correspondence between the roles played by the meaningful components of the sentence and the roles played by their semantic contents in the former proposition but not in the latter.^{iv}

One serious problem that faces Russellianism is the problem of non-referring names or empty names. What proposition, if any, is expressed by the sentence 'Willow is a character from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*' given that 'Willow' fails to refer and hence has no semantic content? On the view I favor, if the name 'Willow' really fails to refer, then the sentence in question expresses a gappy proposition.^v That is, it expresses a proposition that has a role which fails to be filled by anything. In particular, if 'Willow' fails to refer, then the sentence 'Willow is a character from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*' expresses a proposition that has a subject role that fails to be filled. Although gappy propositions have traditionally been used to deal with the problem of empty names, I will use them to solve the problems of contingent existence and contingent non-existence.

3. *On the Contingency of Existence*

It's generally accepted that propositions have their constituents essentially; or, at the very least, that for any proposition, *p*, and any constituent of that proposition, *c*, it's necessary that if *p* exists, then *p* has *c* as a constituent. But, if some things contingently exist, as I have assumed, then those generally accepted claims must be false. Although it may be a bit too quick for this context, here is an argument for that conclusion. Let *P* be some proposition about a contingently existing thing; let's say that *P* is the proposition that Barack Obama is tall. It seems that propositions generally, and hence *P* in particular, are necessary existents. But, since *P* is a necessary existent and Obama is contingent, it follows that possibly *P* exists and Obama does not. It's certainly impossible, though, for *P* to have a non-existent entity as a constituent. So, although *P* has Obama as a constituent, it is not necessary that if *P* exists, it has Obama as a constituent. Hence, it is not the case that for any proposition, *p*, and any

constituent of that proposition, *c*, it's necessary that if *p* exists, then *p* has *c* as a constituent. Hence, propositions don't have their constituents essentially.

One might plausibly respond to that quick argument by claiming that propositions with contingent existents as constituents are themselves contingent existents. Hence, the premise, in the above argument, that propositions are necessary existents is false. That's fine. Here's a second, stronger argument against the views in question. Suppose that propositions have their constituents essentially and, hence, that for any proposition, *p*, and any constituent of that proposition, *c*, it's necessary that if *p* exists, then *p* has *c* as a constituent. Let *P* be a *true* proposition that has as a constituent something that contingently exists; again, *P* can be the proposition that Barack Obama is tall. Given our supposition that propositions have their constituents essentially, *P* would not have existed if Obama had not existed. But, *P* cannot have any properties if it doesn't exist. In particular, *P* cannot be possibly true if *P* does not exist. So, *P* would not have even been possibly true if Obama had not existed. Since, Obama only contingently exists, it follows that *P* is possibly not possibly true. But, *P* is true and it cannot be that *P* is true and possibly not possibly true.^{vi} So, our suppositions are mistaken: for some proposition, *p*, and some constituent of that proposition, *c*, it's possible that *p* exists and does not have *c* as a constituent; propositions do not have their constituents essentially.

But, if some propositions, such as the proposition that Obama is tall, do not have their constituents essentially, then those propositions are possibly gappy. For, if Obama had not existed, then the proposition that Obama is tall would have had no one playing the subject role.^{vii} So, from the assumption that Williamson is mistaken and there are some contingent existents, along with a few plausible premises, we have arrived at the

conclusion that possibly, there are some contingently gappy propositions. But, it should be clear, now, that premise (3) of Williamson's argument is false. Premise (3), recall, says of an arbitrary object, *o*, that necessarily, if the proposition that *o* does not exist exists, then *o* exist. But, since propositions that contain contingent existents as constituents might have existed (as gappy propositions) without those constituents also existing, it's clear that (3) is mistaken.

4. *Identity of Propositions*

One surprising consequence of this view is that some distinct propositions are possibly structurally indistinguishable from one another, where we understand structural indistinguishability as follows:

p is *structurally indistinguishable* from *q* iff (i) *p* and *q* are both propositions with exactly the same roles to be filled, (ii) for any *c*, *c* is a constituent of *p* iff *c* is a constituent of *q* and for any role, *R*, *c* plays *R* in *p* iff *c* plays *R* in *q*.

It's possible, for example, for neither Obama nor Romney to ever have existed. The propositions that Obama is tall and that Romney is tall would have both been gappy if neither of them had ever existed; they both would have failed to have anything playing the subject role. But, if those propositions would have both been gappy if neither Obama nor Romney had existed, then they would have been structurally indistinguishable from one another. After all, the only thing that makes them actually structurally distinguishable is the fact that one has Obama as a constituent and the other has Romney as a constituent. If that distinguishing fact were taken away, then those propositions would be structurally indistinguishable.

But, the fact that some propositions are possibly structurally indistinguishable from one another highlights a potentially powerful objection to the view I am advocating. It seems that, for any p and q , necessarily, the fact that p is structurally indistinguishable from q grounds the fact that p is identical to q . But, it's also plausible that if one fact grounds another, then it's necessary that the first fact obtains only if the second fact obtains. It seems to follow that, for any p and q , necessarily, if p is structurally indistinguishable from q , then p is identical to q . But, if the gappy propositions view I'm advocating is true, then the propositions that Obama is tall and that Romney is tall are possibly structurally indistinguishable from one another. So, since structural indistinguishability entails identity, if the view I'm advocating is true, then those propositions are possibly identical to one another. But, since, those propositions are actually distinct from one another, they can't be possibly identical to one another. So, the objection goes, the view in question must be mistaken.

Although this is a potentially powerful objection, I do think there is a plausible response. I deny that, for any p and q , necessarily, the fact that p is structurally indistinguishable from q grounds that p is identical to q . Of course, one might legitimately wonder what does ground the identity of propositions if not structural indistinguishability. My preferred view is that nothing grounds the identity of propositions; those identity facts are brute facts. This doesn't mean, of course, that there aren't informative conditions under which those identity facts obtain. One might, for example, adopt the following identity conditions:

For any propositions p and q , necessarily, p is identical to q iff p and q would be structurally indistinguishable were they both non-gappy.

These conditions, though, do not allow for the possibility of certain distinct yet structurally indistinguishable propositions that are necessarily gappy. Suppose that merely fictional characters can't even possibly exist and consider the propositions that Buffy kills vampires and that Holmes kills vampires.^{viii} These propositions seem distinct. After all, the former is true according to the television series *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* whereas the latter is not. But, given that Buffy and Holmes can't even possibly exist, those two propositions are necessarily gappy. According to the standard semantics, counterfactuals with impossible antecedents are vacuously true. So, those two propositions would be structurally indistinguishable were they non-gappy even though they seem to be distinct.

Perhaps, instead, we could adopt the following restricted identity conditions:

For any propositions p and q , if p and q are possibly non-gappy, then necessarily, p is identical to q iff p and q would be structurally indistinguishable were they both non-gappy.

Given these restricted identity conditions, if p and q are non-gappy and structurally indistinguishable, then they must be identical. Some people might think, though, that if there can be structurally indistinguishable gappy propositions, then there can be structurally indistinguishable *non*-gappy propositions as well. The following merely necessary condition of identity allows for such a possibility:

For any propositions p and q , necessarily, if p is identical to q , then p and q would be structurally indistinguishable were they both non-gappy.

The truth of this necessary condition can be explained in one of two plausible ways. First, one might claim that for any propositions p and q , the fact that p is identical to q grounds the fact that p and q would be structurally indistinguishable were they both non-gappy.

Given that grounding connections imply necessary connections, the above necessary condition of identity immediately follows. Alternatively, one might claim that for any p and q , the fact that p and q would be structurally distinguishable were they both non-gappy grounds the fact that p is distinct from q . Again, given that grounding connections imply necessary connections, it follows that necessarily, if p and q would be structurally distinguishable were they both non-gappy, then p and q are distinct. The above necessary condition of identity immediately follows by simple modal logic. Although both explanations are plausible, the first explanation is preferable to the second primarily because it seems that identity facts generally ground indistinguishability facts (both actual and counterfactual). Moreover, it seems that non-modal facts ground modal facts rather than the other way around. Both of these intuitive claims support the first explanation over the second.

5. On the Contingency of Non-Existence

According to one version of Linguistic Ersatzism, a possible world is merely a set or conjunction of maximally metaphysically consistent propositions. The propositions are maximal in the sense that for any proposition p , either p or not- p is entailed by those propositions; they are consistent in the sense that no metaphysically impossible proposition is entailed by those propositions. A proposition is true according to a possible world iff it is entailed by the conjuncts or members of that world.

One famous objection to Linguistic Ersatzism stems from the problem of contingent non-existents (a.k.a. the problem of aliens). Roughly, the objection is as follows. Possibly, there are some properties or individuals that don't actually exist. So, it seems that there

must be a world according to which those properties or individuals exist. But, if Linguistic Ersatzism is true, then there is such a world only if there is a sentence or proposition, which is true according to that world, about those actually non-existent properties or individuals. But, no sentence or proposition is about a non-existent property or individual. So, the objection goes, Linguistic Ersatzism is false.^{ix, x}

I argued above, though, that there are propositions which are actually non-gappy yet possibly gappy. My argument was based on the possibility that certain actually existing things could have failed to exist. Similarly, if certain possibly existing things fail to actually exist, as the objector to Linguistic Ersatzism assumes, then there are also actually gappy yet possibly non-gappy propositions. But, if there are such propositions, then some versions of Linguistic Ersatzism are immune to the objection. Suppose, for example, that possible worlds are maximally metaphysically consistent conjunctions of propositions. Then, some such conjunctions will entail propositions that are actually gappy yet possibly non-gappy. If one of those conjunctions had been true, then the gappy propositions entailed by that conjunction would have been non-gappy; if those conjunctions had been true, then the gappy propositions entailed by them would have been about some things (even though they aren't actually about any things).^{xi} Those conjunctions are possible worlds according to which there are some properties or individuals that don't actually exist.

The problem of contingent non-existents is often bolstered by certain embedded modal claims. For example, although I don't actually have an older sister, I certainly could have had one. Moreover, I could have had an older sister who was not a doctor, but might have been one. But, these embedded modal claims are not a problem for the gappy

propositions version of Linguistic Ersatzism. Consider two gappy propositions which we might *represent* as follows:

R1: <_____n, being an older sister of Joshua>

R2: <_____n, is a doctor>

Each of R1 and R2 contains a blank space because each represented a proposition that contains a gap in the subject position. Note that I have added subscripts to the blanks in these representations. I have added subscripts because there may be, and on my view are, many propositions that are structurally indistinguishable from the proposition represented by R1 and many propositions that are structurally indistinguishable from the proposition represented by R2. The blanks in these two representations are subscripted with the same number because necessarily, if either one of the proposition represented had been non-gappy, then the other would have been non-gappy as well and contained the same constituent in the subject position as the first. But, now suppose that there are two worlds, one of which entails the proposition represented by R1 and not the one represented by R2 whereas the other entails the proposition represented by R2. The first world is a world according to which I have an older sister who is not a doctor and the second world is a world according to which that older sister is a doctor. Hence, given that the first world is accessible from the actual world and the second is accessible from the first, I could have had an older sister who was not a doctor, but might have been one. So it seems that the strengthened problem of contingent non-existents is not a problem for this version of Linguistic Ersatzism.

6. Conclusion

The views introduced here are not without problems. For example, one might wonder what it is in virtue of which two distinct propositions that are gappy in their subject positions would have contained the same constituent in those subject positions had they been non-gappy. One might wonder what it is in virtue of which one gappy proposition is essentially gappy whereas another is not. And one might wonder what it is in virtue of which a sentence expresses a particular gappy proposition given that there are other propositions that are structurally indistinguishable from the one that sentence in fact expresses. Clearly there are many problems that one must face if one is to defend the views introduced in this paper. But, since the views introduced in this paper provide a solution to two difficult problems in modal metaphysics, the problem of contingent existents and the problem of contingent non-existents, it seems worthwhile to investigate them further and attempt to find solutions to these problems.^{xii}

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ⁱ There have been several responses to this style of argument, some of which predate Williamson's paper and others of which postdate it. Plantinga (1983) believes that a proposition can exist without the thing of which it's about existing. A defender of Plantinga's view may reject premise (3). Prior (1977), Fine (1985) and Adams (1981) believe that there are two senses of 'true' in modal contexts. A defender of Fine and Adams may claim that premises (1) and (2) equivocate. Rumfitt (2002) and Efrid (2009) believe that there are some true necessities that are not necessarily true. A defender of this view may reject premise (1). Among those who accept the conclusion of the argument, though not necessarily on the basis of the argument, are (of course), Williamson (1990), (1998), (2000), (2002), (2013) and also Linsky and Zalta (1994), (1996).

ⁱⁱ The views advanced here may also be employed to solve certain problems faced by the presentists, in particular, the problems of temporary existents and temporary non-existents. The gappy propositions solution to certain similar presentists problems is considered and rejected by Markosian (2004). However, Markosian's objections to the gappy propositions solution does not apply to the view I advance here.

ⁱⁱⁱ In the remainder of this essay, I will ignore the “in a context” qualification. This is merely done to conveniently simplify our discussion. This simplification should not significantly impact the main points that I wish to make.

^{iv} A fuller story must be told about how declarative sentences express particular propositions. Unfortunately that story will have to wait for another time. I will note, though, that some of the augmentations I’m going to make to the metaphysical package will throw a wrench into the standard story about how declarative sentences express particular propositions.

^v This view is introduced by Kaplan (1989) and defended by Braun (1993) and Salmon (1998).

^{vi} The claim that P is true but possibly not possibly true is practically a rejection of the modal system B, which includes as theorems any instance of $\Phi \rightarrow \Box \Diamond \Phi$. I say “practically” because some may not accept as equivalent the claim that P is possibly not possibly true and the claim that possibly, it’s not possible that P. But, I *do* accept that equivalence and believe that the plausibility of B provides further support for my argument. Especially given that B is one of the weakest normal systems of modal logic; metaphysical possibility should verify the axioms of B.

^{vii} One might claim that someone else might have played the subject role in the proposition that Obama is tall if Obama had not existed. But, there is no particular individual that it could have been. Suppose, for example, that Romney would have filled the subject role in the proposition that Obama is tall if Obama had not existed. Then if Obama had not existed, then the proposition that Obama is tall would have been the proposition that Romney is tall. But, since it’s possible both that Romney is tall and that Obama doesn’t exist, then it looks like the proposition that Obama is tall could have been true even if Obama had not existed! That’s clearly absurd. What if something that couldn’t have been tall would have filled the subject role of the proposition that Obama is tall if Obama had not existed. What if, for example, Larry the electron would have filled the subject role? Then, if Obama had not existed, then proposition that Obama is tall would have been the proposition that Larry is tall. But, the proposition that Larry is tall would have been necessarily false if Obama had not existed whereas the proposition that Obama is president of the United States would have been merely contingently false if Obama had not existed. So, the proposition that Obama is tall couldn’t have been the

proposition that Larry is tall and, so, Larry could not have played the subject role in the proposition that Obama is tall if Obama had not existed.

^{viii} The thesis that fictional characters can't possibly exist can be defended using argument similar to those advanced by Kripke in (1980) and (2013). The view that fictional characters can't possibly exist, however, is not defended by Kripke.

^{ix} This problem of contingent non-existents was first raised by McMichael (1983). Lewis (1986) presents the problem as one aimed at Linguistic Ersatzism and broadens the problem to include alien properties. Hazen (1996) and Nolan (2002) both extensively discuss the problem of contingent non-existents.

^x Solutions to this problem which do not involve rejecting the claim that there are contingent non-existents have been advanced by Heller (1998), Nolan (2002), and Sider (2002).

^{xi} I am assuming that for any proposition *p*, *p* is about *x* only if *x* is a constituent of *p*. Alternatively, one might have thoughts that *p* is about *x* only if had *p* been non-gappy, then *x* would have been a constituent.

^{xii} Thanks to Ben Caplan, Sam Cowling and Chris Tillman for discussing these issues with me.