POSSIBLE STATES OF AFFAIRS AND POSSIBLE OBJECTS

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"Possibilism" is the view that among the things that there are, or which have been, are included individual objects which do not exist, although they conceivably could have existed, and would have existed if certain possible-but-unrealized states of affairs had obtained. In this paper I try to develop a plausible ontological context from which the possibilist thesis could be deduced. Among the assumptions that are required for the argument is the idea that a state of affairs is a complex entity individuated by its constituents and their arrangement in that state of affairs. This is contrasted with Chisholm's strategy for individuating states of affairs. If one also assumes that possible states of affairs have their status as possibilities as a matter of logical necessity, then it is shown how a possibilist could argue that non-existent objects would have being as constituents of possible-but-non-obtaining states of affairs. In particular, possibilism could be seen as the view that the being of non-existent objects is required as an ontological ground of the possibility of there having existed objects other than those things that do actually exist.
Possible States of Affairs and Possible Objects

I. Introduction

In contemporary philosophy it is a commonly held view that the only things that there are, or that have being, are the things that exist, and that in no sense are there things that lack existence. On this view, it is logically necessary that each item that is, or has being, is a thing that exists. Following Robert Adams, I will refer to this ontological doctrine as "actualism." Actualism may be contrasted with the view that among the things that there are, or that have being, are individual objects that do not exist, although they could conceivably have existed, and would have existed if certain possible-but-unrealized circumstances had obtained. Following Adams, I will refer to this latter view as "possibilism."

Is there a plausible set of assumptions from which possibilism can be deduced in a way that is not obviously circular? This is the question that I take up in this paper. I am trying to show how a possibilist ontology might be developed and the responses that could be provided to various actualist gambits.

I want to examine how a possibilist might argue that the being of non-existent objects is required as an ontological presupposition of unrealized possibilities. In particular, I think that a possibilist could argue that the being in reality of objects that do not exist is an ontological ground of the possibility of there having existed objects distinct from all of the objects that do in fact exist. In other words, if you consider all of the objects that exist in actuality, it seems clearly logically possible that there should have existed an object distinct from those very objects. I want to show how it could be argued that this possibility implies that there actually is an object that is non-existent.

II. Constituent Ontology

A central notion in the argument is the idea of a constituent. The relevant idea of a "constituent" is not the concrete, everyday notion involved when one points out that a certain brick is a "constituent" of the west facade of Milwaukee's city hall, or when one indicates that an egg is a "constituent" of Aunt Mabel's carrot cake. Rather, the relevant notion of a "constituent" is one according to which the things that

pre-eminently have "constituents" are certain complex abstracta: states of affairs and complex attributes. For example, it seems intuitively plausible to hold that Socrates and the attribute of being wise are each a "constituent" of the state of affairs of

(1) Socrates' being wise;

similarly, Plato and the relation of identity could be regarded as constituents of the attribute of

being identical with Plato.

This notion of a constituent carries with it a certain way of approaching ontology. Following Nicholas Wolterstorff, we may refer to this approach as "constituent ontology." On this view, the things that are can be exhaustively divided into complexes—things that have constituents—, on the one hand, and simples—things that do not have constituents—, on the other hand. Complexes simply consist of their constituents, but it is also part of what it is to be a given complex that its constituents are arranged in a certain way. In other words, complexes necessarily have an internal structure or logical form, and the logical form of a complex is that which unites the constituents to form that complex. Exemplification is the logical form of (1), for part of what it is to be (1) is that it can obtain only if Socrates exemplifies being wise. On the view we are considering, then, there are such things as "logical forms." However, exemplification is not a constituent of (1), for it is what unites the constituents in (1). But, exemplification is a constituent of

(2) Socrates' exemplifying the attribute of being wise.

(1) and (2) are logically equivalent but distinct.

Now, there are two aspects of the relation of constituency, or being a constituent of, that I want to stress. First, is it plausible to think that something could be an accidental constituent of a complex? Is it merely contingent that it is Socrates, and not Plato, that (1) has as a constituent whenever there is such a thing as (1)? I do not think so. It seems to me that, if an item, X, is a constituent of a complex, Y, then it will be logically necessary that Y have X as a constituent so long as there is such a thing as Y at all. In other words, being a constituent of is an "internal" relation. It seems to me that there could not possibly be such a thing as

Socrates' being wise

without it having Socrates as a constituent. More generally:

(IC) If an item, X, is a constituent of a thing, Y, then it is not

logically possible that there should be such a thing as \( Y \) without it being the case that \( X \) is a constituent of \( Y \).

We may refer to this as the "Principle of the Internality of Constituency" (IC).

Second, I think we might distinguish two strategies for individuating states of affairs, an "external" and an "internal" strategy. Either one attempts to individuate a state of affairs by its relations to objects "external" to it—such as its relations of entailment to other states of affairs; or, alternatively, one attempts to individuate a state of affairs "internally," by means of its constituents, and their arrangement "internal" to that state of affairs. For example, an "externalist" principle of identity for states of affairs would be this one:

\( (3) \) An item, \( X \), is identical with a given state of affairs, \( G \), if and only if every state of affairs, \( S \), is such that \( G \) entails \( S \) if and only if \( X \) does.

Unfortunately, (3) has the counter-intuitive consequence that

\( (4) \) \( 2 + 2 \)'s being 4

\( (5) \) everything's being unmarried if a bachelor

and

\( (6) \) there being no circular triangles

are all the same state of affairs, for necessary states of affairs are all mutually entailing. This intuition would seem to support an "internalist" strategy for individuating states of affairs.

III. Chisholm's Principle

But let us not be hasty. Perhaps a plausible "externalist" principle can be found. I think an "externalist" principle of identity for states of affairs is especially important for those actualists, such as Plantinga and Chisholm, who accept an ontology of states of affairs and view them as abstracta that have being necessarily. Actualists of this persuasion should agree with Chisholm:

States of affairs...are in no way dependent for their being upon the being of concrete, individual things.\(^3\)

\( ^3 \) We can understand "entails" here as follows: A state of affairs, \( S_1 \), entails a state of affairs, \( S_2 \), if and only if it is not logically possible for \( S_1 \) to obtain while \( S_2 \) fails to obtain.

For, if contingently existing concrete things, like you and I, are constituents of states of affairs, and states of affairs have being necessarily, then it would seem to follow that concrete individual objects would also have being necessarily, if states of affairs were dependent for their being upon the being of their constituents. And, on an "internalist" view of states of affairs, states of affairs will have being only if their constituents do. Hence, concrete individual things would have being necessarily even if they exist only contingently. This would not be a welcome consequence to an actualist, and an externalist principle of individuation for states of affairs would be helpful to the actualist in avoiding it. Chisholm proposed the following as a principle of identity for states of affairs:

\[
\text{(CP)} \quad \text{For any state of affairs, } S_1, \text{ a state of affairs, } S_2, \text{ is such that } S_2 \text{ is identical with } S_1 \text{ if and only if both}
\]

\begin{enumerate}
\item it is necessarily the case that both \( S_1 \) entails \( S_2 \) and whoever accepts \( S_1 \) also accepts \( S_2 \), and
\item it is necessarily the case that both \( S_2 \) entails \( S_1 \) and whoever accepts \( S_2 \) also accepts \( S_1 \).\footnote{Chisholm, \textit{Person and Object}, p. 118.}
\end{enumerate}

We can refer to this as "Chisholm's Principle" (CP). Intuitively, it does not seem plausible to me that the belief states of people should be regarded as relevant to what it is to be a state of affairs such as 2+2 being 4 or the Statue of Liberty's being made of bronze.

And, in any case, it seems to me that CP is incompatible with the sort of misapprehension and misidentification of states of affairs that can actually occur. Let us suppose that a man is coming up the road who appears to be bald and bearded. Someone asks you if it is George coming up the road, and you deny it, for George was hairy-headed and beardless when you saw him yesterday. Unknown to you, however, George got his head shaved and is wearing a fake beard. In this situation, you accept the state of affairs of

\( (7) \) that man's coming up the road

but you do not accept the state of affairs of

\( (7') \) George's coming up the road.

But, isn't it plausible to regard \( (7) \) and \( (7') \) as the same state of affairs? After all, George simply is that very man—the one coming up the road. How could \( (7') \) not be the same as \( (7) \)?

If \( F_1 \ldots F_n \) are features that you use to identify an object as George—the sound of his voice, the familiar redness of his hair, and so on, one
might be tempted to identify (7') with

(8) there being a thing having (all or some appropriate proportion of) $F_1 \ldots F_n$ which is coming up the road.

But, this would not be plausible, for $F_1 \ldots F_n$ are accidental attributes of George—properties which he could have failed to have and yet still exist. George could conceivably have sauntered up the road even if he had not had $F_1 \ldots F_n$. Hence, (7') could have obtained even if (8) had failed to do so.

Although (7) and (7') seem to be the same state of affairs, you were able to accept (7) and reject (7') because your rejection and acceptance had an independent epistemic basis. In order to rectify the unfortunate situation of both accepting and rejecting the same state of affairs, you would have to acquire aposteriori knowledge of the identity of George with this man—the man walking in your direction with the shaved head. Since (7) is (7'), and you knew apriori that (7) is identical with (7), you, therefore, knew apriori that (7) is (7'), but this merely apriori epistemic basis was not adequate to avoid your error, for your error in rejecting (7') while accepting (7) had an aposteriori basis.

In any event, where $S_1$ is some state of affairs identical with $S_2$, it certainly seems logically possible that a person could accept $S_1$ while rejecting $S_2$, although explanations of how this is possible may differ. After all, if it is possible to mistakenly believe that a physical object, $O_1$, is not identical with an object, $O_2$, when in fact they are identical, then why shouldn't it also be possible to make this same error in regard to states of affairs? And if you mistakenly think that a state of affairs, $S_1$, is not identical with a state of affairs, $S_2$, even though they are identical, then isn't it possible that you might accept $S_1$ while rejecting $S_2$?

I have given some reasons for rejecting CP. Perhaps an adequate "externalist" principle of identity for states of affairs could be found. On the other hand, maybe we should consider an"internalist" strategy for individuating states of affairs. A simple "internalist" principle would be the following:

(9) A state of affairs, $S$, is identical with an entity, $X$, if and only if every item, $Y$, is such that $Y$ is a constituent of $S$ if and only if $Y$ is a constituent of $X$.

Although it may seem initially plausible to hold that states of affairs are identical if they have the same constituents, this runs into problems.

(10) Al's being in love with Cynthia

and

(11) Cynthia's being in love with Al
are not the same state of affairs, for Al's love may be unrequited. But, don't (10) and (11) have the same constituents? However, I think a defender of (9) could hold that (10) and (11) do not provide a counterexample to (9), for the attribute of being in love with Cynthia could be regarded as a constituent of (10) but not (11).

Nonetheless, there are counter-examples to (9).

(12) Everything's being a cat

and

(13) something's being a cat

have the same constituents (the attribute of being a cat and the constituents of that attribute, if there are any). But (12) and (13) differ in their logical form.

(14) Existing's exemplification

and

(15) exemplification's existing

also are distinct states of affairs with the same constituents. We need to find an "internalist" principle of identity for states of affairs that takes into account not only the constituents of a state of affairs but how these constituents are arranged in that state of affairs.

I pointed out earlier that the logical form of

(1) Socrates' being wise

is not a constituent of (1), but it is a constituent of

(1') Socrates' exemplifying of the attribute of being wise.

The triadic logical form of standing in...to is a form of (1'), though not a constituent of it. However, triadic standing in...to is a constituent of

(1'') Socrates' standing in the logical form of union exemplification to the attribute of being wise.

I think we can see that (1) generates an infinite series of logically equivalent states of affairs such that a logical form of an earlier member in the series is a constituent of every later member of the series. Let us refer to the relation between any earlier member in such a series and
the immediate next member in the series as "immediate generation." Thus, (1) immediately generates (1') but not (1'').

Given this notion of immediate generation, I think we could regard the following as a plausible principle of identity for states of affairs:

\[(PI) \text{ For any state of affairs, } S_1, \text{ an entity, } X_1, \text{ is identical with } S_1 \text{ if and only if there is a state of affairs, } S_2, \text{ immediately generated by } S_1 \text{ and a state of affairs, } X_2, \text{ immediately generated by } X_1 \text{ and every item, } Z, \text{ is such that } Z \text{ is a constituent of } X_2 \text{ if and only if } Z \text{ is a constituent of } S_2.\]

\[(PI) \text{ survives the counter-examples that torpedoed (9). The state of affairs immediately generated by (14) is}\]

\[(14') \text{ existing's exemplifying exemplification}\]

and the state of affairs immediately generated by (15) is

\[(15') \text{ exemplification's exemplifying existing}.\]

And exemplifying exemplification is a constituent of (14') but it is not a constituent of (15').

Accordingly, if we accept the constituent ontology view of a state of affairs as a complex object with constituents essential to it, and an "internal" logical structure, this has the advantage of providing us with a plausible principle of individuation for states of affairs.

IV. Parthood vs. Constituency

But, we may encounter the following objection:

How can a person be a constituent of a state of affairs? Is Carter— the living person— a constituent of an abstract entity, such as Carter's being president?

Is Eisenhower forever trapped as a constituent in

\[(16) \text{ Eisenhower's having been president in 1953,}\]

an eternally obtaining abstractum? Does the attribute of

\[(17) \text{ throwing a pebble into the Pacific Ocean}\]

have as a constituent the entire Pacific Ocean?

The objection seems to rest on the assumption that concreta cannot be constituents of abstracta. However, the singleton whose only member is
the Pacific Ocean has that large body of water as a member. If concrete objects can be members of some abstract objects, why can't they be constituents of other abstract objects? Just as there is a sense in which the Pacific Ocean is "in" its singleton, so there is a sense in which the Pacific Ocean is "in" (17). And, in this latter sense, "is in" signifies the relation of being a constituent of.

Now, it may be that parts must be of the same category as the thing of which they are parts—just as the Eiffel Tower is a physical object, so are the metal beams that compose it. But there is no reason that the relation of being a constituent of may not reach across categories. Being a constituent of and being a part of, or parthood, are altogether distinct relations. While being a constituent of is an "internal" relation, this is not true of parthood. If O is a particular gear in my Big Ben clock, the clock could very well continue to exist even if O should cease to be a part of it—but (16) could cease to have Eisenhower as a constituent only if there ceased to be such a thing as (16).

V. The Principle of Being

But, how could one argue for possibilism? It seems that any such argument would require as a premise a principle about being. And the following seems an intuitively plausible candidate:

(18) An item, X, is, or has being, if and only if X has a quality, or stands in a relation to something, or has a relation borne to it by something.

For, if X has F, then doesn't it follow that there is something having F? If X does have F, then how could it be the case that nothing exemplifies F? We may refer to (18) as the "Principle of Being" (PB). Arguments for possibilism often presuppose this principle. For example, the arguments for possibilism discussed at length by G. E. Moore in [6] involve the following version of the principle:

If the object is not— if there is no such thing, it is impossible for him or for anything else to have any kind of relation to it.

In order that a relation may hold between two things, both the two things must certainly be.

What Moore here asserts for relations certainly also holds for nomadic properties as well. So, actualism will be true if and only if none but existing items can have properties. If X were an item that has an attribute but fails to exist, then (by (PB)) X is an item that has being even though it fails to exist. Accordingly, arguments for possibilism will proceed by finding some property, F, such that an individual object

has \( P \) even though that object is not an existing item. Or, it may be argued that it is possible that an object have \( P \) even when it does not exist, for this would establish that being and existence are not necessarily equivalent. Actualism does not merely maintain that, as a matter of fact, there are not any non-existent objects; it maintains that the proposition

(19) **There are objects which are non-existent**

is necessarily false.

The possibilist strategy that I'm trying to elaborate in this paper will proceed by arguing that there are non-existent individual objects on the ground that they have being as constituents of certain possible states of affairs. In other words, I will argue that there are items that do not exist but which have to certain states of affairs the relation of being a constituent of. Hence, it will follow (by (PB)) that these individual objects must be even though they do not exist. This indicates the central role occupied by the notion of a constituent.

VI. Scotus' Law

The argument for possibilism that I want to elaborate is based on the modal aspect of states of affairs. Although Carter could have failed to be president, it could not have failed to be logically possible that Carter be president. In other words, although

(20) **Carter's being president**

could have been non-actual, it is not intuitively plausible to hold that (20) could have been a logical impossibility, like Carter's being a prime number. It is not logically possible that (20) should have failed to be a possible state of affairs.

(21) **It is being possible that Carter be president**

is a necessary state of affairs. For, (21) could only fail to be the case if (20) should fail to be a possible state of affairs. But how could (20) have failed to be possible?

This intuition about possibility supports the following principle:

(SL) If a state of affairs, \( S \), is possibly the case, then \( S \) is necessarily possibly the case.
I will refer to this principle as "Scotus' Law" (SL).  

VII. A Possibilist Argument

Now, given Scotus' Law, the Principle of Being, and the Internality of Constituency, we have the following argument for possibilism. Socrates is a constituent of

(1) Socrates' being wise.

However, it is possible that Socrates should not have existed. Therefore, there is a possible state of affairs that entails that Socrates does not exist—let M be such a state of affairs. M precludes the existence of Socrates; for, had M been the case, Socrates would have failed to exist. On the other hand, Socrates exists "in" the state of affairs of

(22) Socrates' feeling desire for Xanthippe, 

for, it is necessarily the case that he would exist if (22) were the case. In this sense of "in," an object, O, exists "in" a state of affairs, S, if and only if it is necessarily the case that if S should obtain, then O would exist. And an object, O, is non-existent in a state of affairs, S, if and only if it is necessarily the case that if S should obtain, then it would necessarily follow that O would fail to exist. Hence, Socrates is non-existent "in" M, for, had M obtained, it would also have been the case that Socrates would never have existed. And this is not the same thing as saying that Socrates does not exist "in" M. Socrates does not exist "in"

(23) Homer's swimming in the Aegean Sea, 

for, the conditional,

If (23) were the case, Socrates would exist

is not necessarily true. However, the conditional

If (23) were the case, Socrates would not exist

I call this principle "Scotus' Law" because the earliest explicit statement of the principle I know of is the following passage in John Duns Scotus, A Treatise on God as First Principle (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1966), section 3.2:

I prefer to propose conclusions and premises about the possible. For, those about the actual are contingent, though evident enough, whereas those about the possible are necessary.
is also not necessarily true; hence, Socrates is not non-existent "in" (23). Unlike M, (23) does not preclude the existence of Socrates; (23) is simply indifferent to the existence or non-existence of Socrates.

Since (1) is a possible state of affairs, (by (SL)) (1) has necessarily the attribute of being possibly the case. Therefore, (1) has this attribute "in" every possible state of affairs, in other words, every possible state of affairs, S, is such that, had S been the case, (1) would have had the attribute of being possibly the case.

But, what is it for an entity to have an attribute "in" a state of affairs? I think we can characterize this notion as follows:

An entity, X, has an attribute, F, "in" a state of affairs, S, if and only if it is logically necessary that if S obtains, then X has F.

Thus, Cynthia has the attribute of being conscious "in" the state of affairs of

(24) Cynthia's feeling desire for Igor,

for, (24) could not possibly obtain without Cynthia having the attribute of being conscious. But, to say that "in" (24) Cynthia has the attribute of being conscious is not to imply that Cynthia is conscious. When I say she is conscious "in" (24) I am maintaining that she would be conscious if (24) were the case. In other words, I am asserting the necessity of the conditional

If (24) obtains, then Cynthia would be conscious.

And this conditional will still be necessarily true even when Cynthia is totally unconscious.

Now, since being possibly the case is an attribute that (1) has "in" every possible state of affairs, (1) has this property in M. Therefore, (by (PB)) (1) has being in M. Consequently, since Socrates is in fact a constituent of (1), Socrates must also be a constituent of (1) in M (by (IC)). Hence, in M Socrates stands in the relation of being a constituent of to the state of affairs of Socrates' being wise. What else could Socrates' being wise consist of in M other than Socrates and being wise?

However, it now follows (by (PB)) that Socrates has being in M, even though he does not exist in M; in other words, had M been the case, there would still have been such a thing as Socrates, even though he would not have existed. Since M is a possible state of affairs, it follows that it is possible that an object should have being and yet not exist.
VIII. An Actualist Reply: The Combination Argument

I have supposed that Socrates' being wise would still be possible even if it were non-obtaining; in other words, I have been assuming that there can be a possible state of affairs that does not obtain. At this point I would like to consider an objection to this assumption; an opponent of non-obtaining states of affairs might argue as follows:

If there were such a thing as

(25) Igor's being despondent.

(25) would consist in Igor exemplifying the property of being despondent; Igor and despondency would be constituents of (25) if there were such a thing as (25). And the form of union of Igor and despondency would be that of exemplification. If there is such a thing as (25), it consists of Igor united to despondency by exemplification.

But Igor is not in fact despondent; Igor is, therefore, not united to being despondent by exemplification. Consequently, there is no such thing as (25), for, if there were, Igor would have to be united to despondency by exemplifying it. In general, there are no states of affairs that are not the case, for the things which would have to be united to form them cannot be united in the requisite way if the states of affairs are non-obtaining. Hence, if M precludes the existence of Socrates, then there cannot be any such state of affairs in M as Socrates' being wise, because Socrates will not exemplify being wise if he does not exist; and, if Socrates is not united to wisdom by exemplification in M, then in M there is no such thing as Socrates' being wise. 8

We can call this the "Combination Argument." Perhaps it is some such view as this which lies behind the following passage in Moore's Some Main Problems of Philosophy:

We are not now hearing the noise of a brass-band; and we all, I think, can understand quite clearly in one respect the nature of the fact which I express by saying that we are not. What these words imply is that there simply is no such thing in the Universe as our being now hearing that particular kind of noise. The combination of us at this moment with the hearing of that particular kind of noise is a combination which simply has no being. There is no such combination. 9

Because he does not in fact exemplify the attribute of hearing the noise of a brass band, Moore concludes that there is no such thing as the state of

8 An argument similar to this one has been put forward by Richard Aquila in "Intentionality and Possible Facts," Nous, V (1971), pp. 411-417.

affairs of

Moore's hearing the noise of a brass band;

this state of affairs is a "combination" that can only have being if exemplification in fact "combines" Moore with the attribute of hearing the noise of a brass band.

Now, it is true, of course, that there can be such a thing as

(25) Igor's being despondent

only if exemplification unites Igor with despondency in that state of affairs; and there will not be such a thing as Moore's hearing the noise of a brass band if exemplification does not unite Moore and the attribute of hearing the noise of a brass band in that state of affairs. But the Combination Argument is unsound, for it erroneously assumes that exemplification can "combine" Igor and despondency into (25) only if Igor and being despondent are in fact united by exemplification. To say that exemplification is the form of union of Igor and despondency in (25) is not to say that Igor and being despondent are in fact united by that form of union. Since Igor is not despondent, they are in actuality not united by exemplification.

Rather, they are united by that form of union in a certain possible state of affairs, viz., in Igor's being despondent. And, an object, O, can have an attribute, F, "in" a state of affairs, S, even though O does not in fact have F. Although Carter does not have the attribute of being a socialist, he has this attribute "in" the state of affairs of

(26) Carter's being a socialist vegetarian;

for, Carter would have the attribute of being a socialist if (26) were the case. Although Igor does not have the property of

(27) being united by exemplification to despondency,

he has (27) in (25), for, had (25) been the case, Igor would have had (27).

Now, a person might object to this reply as follows:

Why doesn't the proposition that Igor, and the attribute of feeling desire for Cynthia, are united by the logical form of dyadic exemplification "in" the state of affairs of

(28) Igor's feeling desire for Cynthia

entail that Igor and that attribute are in fact united by exemplification? Surely, if there is such a thing as (28), they must be so united. After all, the proposition that Igor and Cynthia were united
by the bonds of marriage "in" Reno entails that they were in fact
united by the bonds of marriage. Why doesn't the analogous entailment
hold for the uniting of constituents of states of affairs by exemplifi-
cation? 10

It seems clear to me that "in" has an entirely different sense in

(29) Igor and feeling desire for Cynthia are united by
exemplification in (28)

than it does in

(29') Igor and Cynthia were united by the bonds of marriage in Reno.

For, "in" has its spatial sense in (29'); Reno is a place, and an object
has a property "in" a place only if it in fact has that property. But,
a state of affairs is not a place, so "in" does not have its spatial
sense in (29). For example, Carter has the property of being conscious
"in" the non-obtaining state of affairs of

(30) Carter's feeling a desire for a vacation on the shores of
Lake Baikal.

For, the proposition

(31) Carter has the property of being conscious in (30)
is simply logically equivalent to

(31') It is logically necessary that if (30) were the case,
then Carter would have the property of being conscious.

(31) does not imply that (30) is a place; and (31') could be true even
when Carter is entirely unconscious; it does not entail that he is in
fact united to the property of being conscious by exemplification.
Similarly, (29) can be true even when Igor does not have the attribute
of feeling desire for Cynthia.

Igor has the property of exemplifying despondency "in"

(25) Igor's being despondent

if and only if he would have that property if (25) were to be the case.
And, even if Igor did not possess the property of being despondent, it
would still be the case that he would exemplify that property if (25)
were the case.

10 This objection was suggested to me by Robert Adams in
correspondence.
IX. Non-Existence in Reality

Now, it might be objected that the argument for possibilism that I have given only establishes—at best—that it is possible that an individual object should have being but lack existence and that it does not establish that there are in reality individual objects that are but fail to exist. In other words, it might be objected that the preceding argument only shows that if M had been the case, then there would have been an individual object that has being but lacks existence; and this is not the same as showing that there are in reality objects that are but do not exist.

However, it seems to me that the proposition

(19) There are objects which are non-existent

is not one that could be contingently false—it is either necessarily true or necessarily false; but, in any case, the objection is to no avail, for the premises that entailed that it is possible for there to be non-existent individual objects will also yield the conclusion that there are in reality individual objects that have being but not existence, if we also assume that it is logically possible that there should have existed an individual object distinct from all of those objects that do actually exist—an intuitively plausible assumption.

We might say that the real world is that state of affairs such that it entails no non-obtaining states of affairs but entails every actual state of affairs. Let us use "Cosmos" as a proper name of this state of affairs. An object exists "in" Cosmos if it is necessarily the case that it would exist if this world—Cosmos—obtains. For, if an object, \( O \), exists, then

0's existing

is an actual state of affairs, and is, therefore, entailed by Cosmos. However, being the real world is an accidental feature of Cosmos, for, if anything had been other than as it is, Cosmos would have been a merely possible state of affairs. Since Cosmos entails every actual state of affairs, it entails the non-existence of any object that in fact fails to exist. Therefore, since it is possible that there should have existed an object other than the ones that do exist, it is possible that there should have existed an object having the property of

(32) not existing in Cosmos.

In other words, it is possible that there should have existed an object such that it would have failed to exist if Cosmos were the case.

(32) is a situation-indexed property; a situation-indexed property is a property that consists in the having of a property "in" a state of
is a situation-indexed property. A characteristic of situation-indexed properties is that nothing can have one accidentally; if an object has a situation-indexed property in a possible state of affairs, then it must have that property so long as there is such a thing as that object. In other words, we have the following principle about situation-indexed properties:

(A) If an item, $X$, has in a possible state of affairs, $S_1$, a situation-indexed property, $P$, then every possible state of affairs, $S_2$, is such that if $X$ has being in $S_2$, then $X$ has $P$ in $S_2$.

Entities do not vary in their situation-indexed properties from one state of affairs to another so long as they continue to have being.

For example, Igor exemplifies (33), for, it is necessarily the case that he would have the attribute of being conscious if (25) were to obtain. Could Igor fail to have (33) and yet still be? In other words, is it logically possible that there be such a thing as Igor without him having (33)? If Igor has being, then he must also have (33), if (34) is a necessary conditional:

(34) If (25) obtains, then Igor has the property of being conscious.

Therefore, Igor could only have being without (33) if (34) could fail to be a necessary proposition. In other words, it is only possible for Igor to have being without (33) if it is possible that (25) not entail

(35) Igor's being conscious.

A state of affairs, $S_1$, entails a state of affairs, $S_2$, if and only if it is not logically possible for $S_2$ to obtain while $S_1$ fails to obtain. Hence, it is possible for Igor to be and yet not have (33) only if it is possible that it be possible that (25) obtain without (35) obtaining.

Let us suppose it is possible for Igor to have being without (33). Hence, there must be a possible state of affairs, $S'$, such that, had $S'$ been the case, it would have been possible that (25) obtain without (35) obtaining. In other words,

Since Plantinga's possible worlds are possible states of affairs, his world-indexed properties are situation-indexed attributes. See Alvin Plantinga, The Nature of Necessity (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 44.
(36) (25)'s obtaining while (35) does not obtain

is a possible state of affairs in $S'$. However, (by (SL)) a state of affairs can be possible only if it is necessarily possible. Hence, (36) can be possible in $S'$ only if it is possible in every possible state of affairs—including Cosmos. Hence, (36) must be a possible state of affairs, in other words, it must in fact be possible for (25) to obtain without Igor having the property of being conscious—contradicting our original assumption that Igor actually has the attribute of

(33) being conscious in Igor's feeling despondent.

For Igor can only have (33) if it is not possible for (25) to obtain without him being conscious. Hence, the supposition that Igor could have being without having (33) is false. An analogous argument could be used to establish that any situation-indexed attribute that an object possesses is an attribute that that object must have as long as there is such a thing as that object; this principle—proposition (A)—is a logical consequence of Scotus' Law.

Another proposition that is a consequence of Scotus' Law is the following:

(B) It is not possible that there should be states of affairs having the property of being possibly the case other than those that do have this property; in other words, there could not possibly have been any possible states of affairs other than the ones that there are.

There is no possible state of affairs such that, had it been the case, there would have been a possible state of affairs not having in Cosmos—the real world—the attribute of being possibly the case.

If one were to maintain that there is a possible state of affairs, $S$, such that if $S$ had been the case, then there would have been a possible state of affairs not possible in Cosmos, this would violate the principle that a state of affairs is possible only if it is possible in every possible state of affairs. Hence, principle (B) is also a consequence of Scotus' Law.

Now, let us return to the assumption that it is possible that there should have existed an individual object other than the things existing in Cosmos. If this assumption is true, then it is possible that there should have existed an individual object having the situation-indexed property of

(32) not existing in Cosmos.

Hence, there is some possible state of affairs, $S^*$, such that in $S^*$ there exists an object having (32). But, it is impossible for an
individual object to exist without being a constituent of singular obtaining states of affairs.

However, states of affairs cannot obtain without being possible. Hence, in S* there exists an object that is, in S*, a constituent of possible states of affairs—an object that has, in S*, the attribute of not existing in Cosmos. But, if there would be certain possible states of affairs if S* were the case, then these states of affairs must also be possible in reality, by principle (B). And, as a consequence, these states of affairs will have being in reality (by (PB)). So, there is a state of affairs, C, such that

(i) C has, in fact, the property of being possibly the case, and

(ii) in S* there exists an individual object that is, in S*, a constituent of C and which, in S*, exemplifies (32).

But, if C has the property of being possibly the case in reality, then by (PB) G is, that is, has being, in reality. And, (by (IC)) it isn't possible for a state of affairs to have something as a constituent in one possible state of affairs and not in another possible state of affairs, so long as that state of affairs is—has being—on both possible states of affairs.

Therefore, there must be an individual object, X, such that

(i) X is, in reality, a constituent of C, and

(ii) in S* X has the situation-indexed attribute of not existing in Cosmos.

In other words, C must be such that it in fact has as a constituent an individual object that would have had the property of not existing in Cosmos if S* had been the case.

Let O be such an object. By the Principle of Being, O must be, for O stands in the relation of

being a constituent of

to the possible state of affairs C. But, by principle (A), an item cannot have the situation-indexed property of

not existing in Cosmos

in S* unless it has this property in any possible state of affairs where it has being. Since O has being in reality, O must have in reality the property of not existing in Cosmos. O can have this property only if Cosmos entails the state of affairs of
0's failing to exist.

Hence, since Cosmos is the real world, 0 does not exist. Therefore, there is an individual object which in fact has being though it does not actually exist.

Possibilism— the being in reality of individual objects that do not exist—is, therefore, an ontological ground of the possibility of there having existed things other than the things that do exist.

Hence, the argument I have elaborated could be used by a possibilist to support his position, if he found the initial assumptions plausible.

X. Extreme vs. Moderate Possibilism

However, there are distinct forms of possibilism. In particular, I would distinguish "extreme possibilism" from "moderate possibilism."

"Extreme possibilism" is the view that every attribute, F, is such that if F is not necessarily equivalent to existence, then it is possible for a thing to have F even though it is not existent.12 Extreme possibilism has a severe epistemological defect, however. There are ever so many things such that we know that they exist. If extreme possibilism were true, I cannot see how we could account for our having this knowledge.

For example, let us suppose that I am in the market examining a tomato. As I heft it in my hand and give it a gentle squeeze, I surely know that it exists. How could I justify my claim to know that it exists? It seems to me that my knowledge of its existence has its epistemic ground in my awareness of various facts about it—its being red, its being round, its pressing upon my palm as I hold it, its taking up space, its ability to affect my visual apparatus, and so on.

But an extreme possibilist could not justify his or her claim to know of this object's existence on this basis, for all of the properties of the tomato I referred to are ones that it could possess even if it were non-existent, if extreme possibilism were true. Now, then, do I know that this tomato is an existing object and not just a possible-but-non-existent object? I cannot refer to the effects that the tomato has on the universe, or its observable features, for, on the extreme possibilist view, these could be properties of a non-existent.

Indeed, how could I know that I exist? Suppose that I know that I am conscious and that I am thinking of Dashiell Hammett. Would this entitle me to claim that I know that I exist? Not if extreme possibilism were

12 Meinong's principle of the "independence of sein from so-sein" might be interpreted as committing him to extreme possibilism.
true, for then I could have these properties even if I were non-existent.
So, I am inclined to reject extreme possibilism.

"Moderate possibilism," on the other hand, divides all of the
properties not necessarily equivalent to existence into two classes:
those that entail existence, and those that do not entail existence.
Following Nino Cocchiarella, we may refer to those attributes that
entail existence as "existence attributes." Moderate possibilism will
maintain that non-existing items may only possess attributes that are
not existence attributes. Given that one regards such attributes as
thinking of Dashiell Hammett and being red and juicy as existence
attributes, moderate possibilism is in a position to account for my
knowledge of my own existence and my knowledge of the existence of the
tomato. For, given that I know that I have the property of thinking of
Dashiell Hammett, since this property entails existence, I have sufficient
justification for claiming to know that I exist.

If an attribute, $F$, is such that you would have sufficient grounds
for believing that $C$ exists if you know that $O$ has $F$, then $F$ would seem
to be a good candidate for being an existence attribute. I would sug-
gest that a possibilist regard dispositional and causal properties, such
as being dented by a rock, being soluble in ouzo, or having shattered
Ralph's picture window, as existence attributes. How could an object
shatter a window or have the ability to change from one state to another
if it does not exist? A non-existent thing should have no causal efficacy;
it would seem that being integrated into the causal nexus of the universe
is a sufficient condition for existing.

And I think that act-properties and event-properties, such as moving
rapidly across the floor or kicking the Statue of Liberty, should also
be regarded as existence attributes. How could a thing do anything if
it did not exist? If you observe an object having an event-property,
such as crawling up your leg, isn't this sufficient grounds for claiming
to know that the object exists? If a property is one the having of
which is an exercise of a disposition, then I think it also should be
regarded as an existence attribute. If I have the attribute of seeing
Lake Michigan, it would seem that my having this property is an exercise
of my ability to see, and, like Descartes, I find it hard to see how an
object could be conscious if it did not exist.

I have only listed a few types of attributes here that I would sug-
gest as existence attributes and I suspect that a moderate possibilist
might want to lengthen the list. If any observable property of an object
is a property that could ground one's knowledge of the object's existence,
perhaps a possibilist would say that all "empirical" properties, such as
color or spatial location properties, are existence attributes.

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13 Nino B. Cocchiarella, "Some Remarks on Second Order Logic with
Existence Attributes," Nous, II (1968), pp. 165-175.
By drawing a distinction between existence attributes and properties that an object could have even if non-existent, a moderate possibilist is in a position to provide a plausible answer to a certain intuitive objection to possibilist ontologies felt by some. We can express the objection this way:

Look, if possibilism were correct, then the following dialogue would make sense:

X. There is a green dragon eating oranges in that closet.

Y. What! I just looked in that closet and I saw no such thing.

X. Oh, well, I forgot to mention that, while there is such a dragon, it is a non-existent one.

But X.'s reply here is nonsensical. Therefore, possibilism is incoherent.

I agree that X.'s reply is nonsensical but I think that this is only an objection to extreme possibilism. A moderate possibilist could easily agree that X.'s assertions are inconsistent. For, if eating oranges is an existence property, then the proposition

There is a non-existent dragon eating oranges in the closet

is necessarily false.

On the other hand, if the set of existence attributes is taken to include the types of properties that I have suggested, then it might be objected that the concept of a non-existent individual object that we arrive at is one that has a certain metaphysical "thinness" to it. A thing that does not exist might have categorial properties, like being an individual, or properties that everything necessarily has, such as being either an imbiber of ouzo or not, or modalized properties, such as possibly seeing the Empire State Building, situation-indexed properties, like weighing 225 pounds in S, properties that consist in being the object of some mental act, like being thought of by Ursula, or negative properties, like failing to dent Al's car, but what about ordinary meat-and-potatoes properties, like feeling sad, or taking out the garbage, or being flammable? I think these latter properties should be regarded as existence attributes. For, if we were to suppose that non-existents might have these properties, we might get a "richer" conception of non-existents, but, as I have argued, the price would be an inability to account for our knowledge of the existence of those things that do actually exist.

I think that we could regard that "richness" of existing things as "filling out" the distinction between being and existence that there must be if possibilism is correct. For a concrete individual thing to exist, rather than being a non-existent that merely is, is for it to have that "richness" that characterizes actually existing things.
While I have tried to elaborate a plausible ontological framework for possibilism and construct an argument for possibilism on that basis, many problematic questions remain and must be dealt with before one could claim that possibilism had been adequately defended.

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