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IN DEFENSE OF ARISTOTELIAN ACTUALISM

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Actualism is the metaphysical position that everything that exists, exists at the actual world; there are no merely possible objects—objects that are possible but do not exist at the actual world. Possibilism is the position that there are merely possible objects; not all the objects that exist, exist at the actual world. In this paper I defend a particular version of actualism (which I call ‘Aristotelian actualism’) against some recent objections and suggest that this version of actualism provides a plausible account of modality without the introduction of entities that strain our sense of reality.

In the first section of this paper I briefly describe the version of actualism that will be defended. Since this version of actualism is a version with which most philosophers will be familiar, I do not go into great detail nor do I attempt to provide positive arguments in favor of it. I do present the metaphysical assumptions that I am making and describe some of the features that turn out to be important in the defense. In the second section of the paper I consider the objections that David Lewis presents against this version of actualism. While Lewis does correctly describe some of the consequences of Aristotelian actualism, I argue that these results are not as counter-intuitive as Lewis holds. No consistent theory can capture all the intuitions or philosophical opinions concerning modality since many of these opinions conflict. In the third section I consider some other objections that have been raised against actualism. I argue that none of these objections are convincing. The final section contains concluding remarks.

I

I assume that there are basic simple particulars (perhaps quarks) and basic simple properties exemplified by basic particulars. They are simple in the sense that neither the properties nor the particulars can be said to be composed in any sense from other properties or particulars. (I shall use the term ‘property’ in a broad sense to include qualities and relations.) Perhaps having charge and/or having spin are examples of basic simple properties. I
allow for the possibility that there are non-basic simple properties. That is, I allow that there might be simple properties that supervene on complex states or objects (and hence are not properties of basic objects). Most ordinary properties are neither basic nor simple. The ordinary property of being a vixen, for example, is composed of the properties being female and being a fox. Of course, being a fox is itself a complex property composed of other properties. I assume that there is a principle of plenitude for properties. For any two properties, there is a third property that is composed of the two. Of course, this is not to say that any object has that property just that there is such a property. So I assume that there is such a property as being a round square, though no object has or could have that property. I do not assume that there is a principle of plenitude for physical objects.2

I also assume the universe is made up of (what are sometimes called "concrete" or Davidsonian) events and states that are themselves composed of objects and properties. States, do not involve logical relations. There is no state of Mary’s not having black hair, nor are there disjunctive, conjunctive, or conditional states. If it is true that Mary does not have black hair, then there is no state of Mary’s having black hair. Of course there is the proposition that Mary has black hair, even if that proposition does not correctly represent any state. It should be noted here that there is a difference between Mary’s not having black hair and Mary’s having non-black hair. Having non-black hair is a property that Mary either exemplifies at a given time t and place or fails to exemplify at that time and place. So there may be a state of Mary’s having non-black hair that obtains if, for example, Mary has red hair or blonde hair. But this is not a negative state in the sense of involving the logical operation of negation.3

The proposition that Mary does not have black hair is true provide that there is no state of Mary’s having black hair. While there are many different theories on the nature of propositions, the view I assume holds that propositions are structural entities similar to sentences and that they have components as states do.4 I accept the view that there are singular propositions—propositions that have individuals such as Mary (or Mary’s haecceity) as components. The proposition associated with a given use of “Mary has black hair” has at least Mary and the property of having black hair as components and the proposition Mary does not have black hair has the proposition that Mary has black hair as a component and the logical operation of negation.5 I shall use the expression ‘component of’ in such a way that the components of the components of p are themselves components of p. There are atomic propositions composed of objects and n-place properties and compound and complex propositions that are generated in the usual ways. For example, if p and q are propositions, then ‘<DIS(Neg(p),q)>’ represents a proposition that has at least p, q, negation, and disjunction as components (it also has, for example, the proposition represented by <Neg(p)> as a component). A proposition is true if it correctly characterizes the way the world is.6
Finally, I assume that there are possible worlds. According to Saul Kripke:

'Possible worlds' are total 'ways the world might have been,' or states or histories of the entire world. . . . The 'actual world'—better, the actual state, or history of the world—should not be confused with the enormous scattered object that surrounds us.7

Kripke’s statement about worlds describes the intuitive idea that most philosophers have of possible worlds including the actual world. It is clear that when Kripke uses the expression ‘state’ he has in mind abstract states of affairs. So it is natural to view possible worlds (including the actual world) as very complex states of affairs and this is one of the standard positions on the nature of possible worlds.

However, if one has singular propositions as well as general propositions, then one can define the notion of a possible world in terms of the propositions themselves. Let $w$ be a proposition such that for every true proposition $p$, $w$ entails $p$ and for no false proposition $q$ does $w$ entail $q$. $w$ is a candidate for the actual world—that is, that possible world that corresponds to the totality of facts and truths about the universe. But the trouble is that there are lots of propositions (an infinite number of them) that entail all and only the truths.8 There does not appear to be a justifiable way to single out one of these propositions as the actual world.9

A natural response to this problem is to take worlds as equivalence classes of propositions.10 So let $\alpha$ (the actual world) be the set of logically equivalent propositions such that each one entails all and only the truths. While there is more than one set of propositions that entail all and only the truths, there is one set that contains all such propositions. In general, if $p$ is a proposition such that for any proposition $q$, either $\{p, q\}$ is inconsistent or $\{p, \neg q\}$ is inconsistent (but not both), then $p$ describes a total way things might be and the set of propositions logically equivalent to $p$ will be a possible world. On this view it is important to note that worlds are not maximal sets of propositions. As a number of philosophers have noted, there are some serious questions about whether or not there is a maximal set of propositions.11 But I know of no paradoxes that follow directly from worlds as sets of propositions (as defined above).

On this conception, possible worlds are not really worlds in the sense of universes. They are instead descriptions of possibilities or representations of how things might have turned out. But this is the intuitive idea in the phrase ‘ways the world might have been.’ A possible world on this view describes what states would have obtained, had things been different. If worlds are not states of affairs, but rather sets of propositions, then strictly speaking worlds are not actual or do not obtain, nor could they be actual or obtain. Still, we can say that a world obtains if and only if its members are
true and it would have obtained or been actual if its members would have been true. This notion of ‘obtained’ roughly means that the possibility described by the world obtains or would have obtained. Among those descriptions is one that describes how things are—the actual world and as Kripke indicates, the actual world (which is a set of propositions) should not be confused with the universe (what he calls the ‘scattered object that surrounds us’).

The metaphysical position with respect to possible worlds that I have briefly outlined is probably familiar to most philosophers. The conception of a possible world as an equivalence class of propositions is one that many philosophers can and do accept. However, given the view of propositions as structural items that may have contingent objects as components, there are at least two ways that propositions can be evaluated with respect to worlds. Consider for example a world, $w$, where there is a single basic object that is not identical to Socrates. Had $w$ obtained, Socrates would not have existed and hence could not have been a component of any proposition including the proposition $\text{Socrates does not exist}$. Thus, the proposition $\text{Socrates does not exist}$ would not itself have existed had $w$ obtained. So the proposition $\text{Socrates does not exist}$ would not have been true, since it would not have existed and hence would not have had any properties (including being true). Nonetheless, the proposition does correctly describe $w$; Socrates would not have existed had $w$ obtained. So in some sense the proposition $\text{Socrates does not exist}$ is true with respect to $w$, but it would not have been true (since it would not have existed) had $w$ obtained.

A number of philosophers have noticed that there are different ways of evaluating propositions with respect to worlds.\(^{12}\) This distinction is sometimes put as a difference between a proposition’s being true \textit{in} a world and a proposition’s being true \textit{at} a world. A proposition is true \textit{in} a world $w$ provided that if $w$ obtained, then the proposition would be true. It is true \textit{at} a world provided that it correctly describes or represents or characterizes $w$. The difference between ‘true \textit{at} a world’ and ‘true \textit{in} a world’ reflects a difference in metaphysical views concerning propositions, states of affairs, etc. On a Platonic conception these items exist necessarily, thus, for example, the proposition $\text{Socrates does not exist}$ does exist even at a world where Socrates does not. So for such views, if a proposition is true \textit{at} world, it is true \textit{in} the world. So it seems we should be able to define the notion of true \textit{at} a world in a way that all actualists would accept and the question of the modal status of particular items is left open to debate.

Roughly speaking, an atomic proposition, $p$, is true \textit{at} a world $w$ provided that $p$ would be true if $w$ were to obtain. $p$ is false at $w$ provided that if $w$ were to obtain, $p$ would fail to be true (which can happen if $p$ fails to exist if $w$ obtained). The proposition that it is not the case that $p$, $\text{<Neg(p)>}$, is true at $w$ provided that $p$ is false at $w$. The proposition that something is $\phi$, $\text{<[Some x]\phi>}$, is true at $w$ provided that it would be true, if
were to obtain. The proposition that it is possible that \( p, <\Diamond p> \) is true at \( w \) provided that there is an accessible world \( w' \) such \( p \) is true at \( w' \).

This view is best described as Aristotelian actualism. It is Aristotelian in that as Aristotle thought that existence of natural kinds, such as humans, depended on the existence of particular objects, this position holds that the existence of worlds and propositions depend on the existence of particular objects. It is a version of actualism that takes very seriously the idea that the only things that exist are basic actual objects and things composed of actual objects. It does not allow the introduction of "actual" objects whose nature seems more possibilistic than actualistic. Yet the very fact that worlds are grounded in what is actual gives rise to an number of objections. I turn now to those objections.

II

David Lewis raises two objections to what he calls ‘linguistic ersatzism’. Lewis's objections apply to Aristotelian actualism since Lewis uses the term ‘linguistic’ in a broad sense that includes propositions and worlds as described above. The first objection that Lewis makes is that modality must be taken as primitive on any such view. To this charge the Aristotelian actualist must plead guilty. There are lots of sets of (equivalent) propositions that are not worlds. Some notion of consistency, compatibility, or just plain possibility is needed to distinguish between these sets that are worlds from those that are not. Lewis sees this result as a real disadvantage, but I am not convinced that one can reasonably eliminate modal notions in favor of non-modal ones.

Lewis avoids primitive modality by postulating the existence of a plurality of worlds that can be used to provide an analysis of modal discourse. He says, "There are so many other worlds, in fact, that absolutely every way that a world could possibly be is a way that some world is." Moreover, these worlds are not created or constructed by us ("The worlds are not of our own making.") So Lewis is able to avoid primitive modality by holding

(C) For every possibility there is a world that corresponds to that possibility.

and

(I) Worlds are completely independent of each other.

So a claim such as it is possible there is a million-carat diamond is understood to be the claim that there is a world where million-carat diamond exists (which contains no modal notions). But a question arises when we
consider (C) and (I) together. Since we do not construct the worlds, our concept of possibility in no way determines what worlds there are. So what assurances do we have that there is a world where a million-carat diamond exits? That is, according to our notion of possibility, it is possible that there is a million-carat diamond, but since our notion plays no role in what worlds there are, how can we be sure that there is a world where a million-carat diamond exists (which is necessary for our claim to be true)?

The fact is that (C) and (I) are not consequences of Lewis’s theory, but rather postulates or stipulations. Lewis does provide some content to (C) with what he calls the principle of recombination:

\[(R)\] For every class of individuals there is a world that contains non-overlapping duplicates of all the members of that class—size and shape permitting.\(^{18}\)

\[(R)\] does the job, assuming of course, that there is a class with a million-carat diamond as a member. But for me, and others, the basic problem still remains.\(^{19}\) If there are any worlds of the sort Lewis describes, their existence seems irrelevant to the analysis of our concept of possibility. If there is no Lewis-world with a million-carat diamond, it does not seem to follow that it is not possible that there is a million-carat diamond. And whether or not there is a Lewis-world with a million-carat diamond is not something we have any control over. Lewis seems to think that our claim that it is possible that there is a million-carat diamond provides evidence or a reason to suppose there is a Lewis-world that contains a million-carat diamond. But how could it? Or to put the point another way, on Lewis’s view what reason or evidence could we have to believe that it is possible that there is a million-carat diamond? To believe that it is possible that there is a million-carat diamond is to believe that there is an alternative spacetime containing a million-carat diamond. But it does not seem that we have any evidence or reason to believe there is an alternative spacetime of this sort and it is hard to see how we could get evidence for such a claim. Thus, even though I accept the claim that things might have been different, on Lewis’s view I see no reason why I should accept it.

The second objection that Lewis voices is one that other actualists also take to be a serious objection to the version of actualism I wish to defend. According to Lewis, a theory that has only the entities of this world—including properties and objects—with which to describe modality will ultimately conflate distinct possibilities. The problem arises in the treatment of ‘alien’ items—be they particulars or properties.

The Aristotelian actualist holds that there are basic properties. Had the world been different in certain ways, there would have been different basic properties, properties alien to us. Since there are no alien properties,
alien properties cannot be involved in any world. The best we can do is note that there are various ‘Ramsified properties’ that are involved in worlds. That is, properties such as being such that there are properties alien to us that have instances and play such-and-such a role. But a Ramsified world, would be, on Lewis’s view, only a partial description of distinct possibilities. From Lewis’s point of view, there is a basic (alien) property $P$ at world $w$ that has a certain role $r$ in $w$ and a distinct basic (alien) property $Q$ at world $w^*$ that has the role $r$ in $w^*$. Given the limited resources of this world, the best we can come up with is a world that is a partial description of both $w$ and $w^*$. The Ramsified property of being such that there is an alien property that has role $r$ will not help to distinguish between $w$ and $w^*$.

Thus, according to Lewis, there are more possibilities, more Lewis-worlds than there are possible worlds when possible worlds are defined as sets of propositions.

When I say that there are more Lewis-worlds than there are possible worlds I do not mean that Lewis-worlds outnumber possible worlds, but rather that possible worlds are not fine-grained enough to distinguish between certain Lewis-worlds—that is, distinguish between Lewis-worlds that Lewis claims are distinct. It does seem as if certain Ramsified possible worlds are incomplete. Lewis’s claim that there are many ways a Ramsified possible world can be instantiated has a certain amount of plausibility. The best we can do is describe alien properties, but according to Lewis, there could be distinct alien properties that fit our description. Of course, Lewis, himself, cannot provide an account of the distinction between alien properties since he is stuck in this world and is limited to its resources. Any description of such a distinction could be included in various possible worlds. Lewis must argue analogically that there is such a distinction to be made.

Lewis has us imagine a world simpler than ours where “protons” are indivisible particles, and there are no quarks, and hence quark properties of color and flavor are not instantiated in this simple world. Had this simpler world obtained there would be no quarks or their properties of color and flavor. A philosopher in this simpler world would have difficulty distinguishing all the possibilities. Lewis describes the problem such a philosopher would have as follows:

He has said what roles for properties are occupied, but he has not said—and he could not possibly say—which properties occupy which roles. Here we are, with names for properties that he cannot name. We can distinguish our world from one in which, say, one of the quark colours has traded places with one of the flavours. The two possibilities are isomorphic, yet different.

Lewis’s position, if I understand him correctly, is that quark colors and flavors are basic qualities. This means that although we may have discov-
While there is some intuitive plausibility with Lewis's example, some of that plausibility rests on Lewis's conception of a world. We can, for example, imagine a world, \( w^* \), where Socrates and Plato traded places. But consider a world \( w \) such that had \( w \) obtained then neither Socrates nor Plato would have existed but other philosophers would have existed. It seems as though a philosopher that would have existed if \( w \) obtained would be unable to distinguish between the actual world and \( w^* \). Indeed such a philosopher could not distinguish between these possible worlds any more than we could distinguish between a world where Green Lantern and Superman trade places from one where they don't trade places. The reason we are unable to make such a distinction is because there is no distinction to make—in fact, there are no such possible worlds. If \( w \) obtained there would be no such possible worlds to distinguish.

From the point of view of Lewis's philosopher in his simple universe, there is only one possible world to consider, not two as Lewis holds. But that does not mean that the isomorphic possibilities Lewis wants us to consider are not possible possibilities. Such a philosopher might think that had a different world been actual different possibilities would arise. Hence a single world can represent different possibilities. Lewis is not happy with such a response. He says:

I am not content. This sounds better than it is. It sounds as if he is meeting me half-way: when I demand many possibilities he does not offer me that, but at least he offers me many possible possibilities. Then I could very well say: call them what you will, at least we have many of something. Not so. He has gone no part of the way toward granting what I took to be plainly true. I say there are many ways that something might have happened. He denies that there are many of anything relevant, though he grants that there might have been.21

While Lewis rejects possible possibilities, he does allow that a single world can represent distinct possibilities. Consider his own example of the possibility that he is a twin:

I might have been one of a pair of twins. I might have been the first-born, or the second-born one. These two possibilities involve no qualitative difference in the way the world is . . . They are two possibilities within a single world. The world in question contains twin counterparts of me, under a counterpart relation determined by intrinsic and extrinsic qualitative similarities (especially, match of origins). Each twin is a possible way for a person to be, and in fact is a possible way for me to be. I might have been one, or I might have been the other. There are distinct possibilities for me. But they involve only one possibility for the world: it might have been the world inhabited by two such twins.22
According to Lewis a single world can represent two distinct possibilities—the possibility that Lewis is a first-born twin and the possibility that Lewis is a second-born twin. Lewis has this result in virtue of using the counterpart relation. The counterpart relation is, in effect, what Lewis uses to explain the *de re* possibility relation. The actualist will not use the counterpart relation to explain *de re* possibility (at least not for most cases) since there is no need. The point here is that Lewis uses the counterpart relation to distinguish possibilities within a single world. From an actualist point of view these are possible possibilities (if they are possible at all). The philosopher in Lewis's simple world realizes that different properties might play the role of a given quark color (assuming this is possible), but he cannot distinguish the properties because there would be no such properties if his world were actual. Lewis holds that it is acceptable to use Ramsey sentences to describe possibilities with respect to alien objects, but not acceptable with respect to alien properties. The Aristotelian actualist holds that both individuals and properties are ontological items governed by the same general modal conditions. If it is acceptable to describe possibilities with respect to alien objects using Ramsey sentences, then it is acceptable to describe possibilities with respect to all alien items using Ramsey sentences.

In addition to concerns over alien properties, Lewis also raises concerns over questions of indiscernibility. Lewis claims that there could be distinct indiscernible individuals that cannot be distinguished by linguistic ersatzism. Lewis gives the following example:

Imagine a full description of a world of eternal recurrence, with a certain role—say, that of a conqueror rather like Napoleon—filled once in every indiscernible epoch. There are infinitely many indiscernible possibilities for filling the Napoleonic role in such a world. Or so it surely seems. But no: there is only the one ersatz individual, only one linguistic description of a filler of the role.23

Let \( r \) be the Napoleonic role in question. While many individuals can satisfy \( r \), we assuming that only one object can satisfy it at a given time. That is, unlike the role of being a baseball player which many different people can have at a given time, the role of being a Napoleon is a role more like the role of being the president of the United States—only one person can have that role at a given time. In fact, only one person can satisfy this role at a non-recurrence world. However, at a world of eternal recurrence \( r \) can be satisfied more than once. Let \( t \) and \( t^* \) be two times (intervals of time) that \( r \) is satisfied (at the world in question). The problem, according to Lewis, is that there are two possibilities here that cannot be distinguished by Aristotelian actualism. First, the object that satisfied \( r \) at \( t \) may not be the object that satisfied \( r \) at \( t^* \), and second it may be the same object. This problem arises for each recurrence.
Yet, I fail to see the problem for Aristotelian actualism if one allows (as Lewis does) infinitary connectives. There is a world \( w \) at which

\[ \exists x [ x \text{ satisfies } r \text{ at } t \text{ and } x \text{ satisfies } r \text{ at } t^* ] \]

is true, and a distinct world at which

\[ \exists x \exists y [ x \text{ satisfies } r \text{ at } t \text{ and } y \text{ satisfies } r \text{ at } t^* \text{ and } \neg (x = y) ] \]

is true. Of course, there will be lots of different combinations in different worlds where recurrence occurs including different worlds of infinite recurrence. Another way to put the point is that the object that satisfies \( r \) at \( t \) is not completely indiscernible from the object that satisfies \( r \) at \( t^* \). The objects satisfy the role at different times and hence they differ in their external relations. This must be the case otherwise the role is not recurring.

Lewis would not agree. There are worlds, according to Lewis, that exhibit two-way eternal recurrence, “there is no last epoch and no first, the epochs are ordered like the integers rather than the natural numbers.” In such a case, Lewis says the inhabitants of the different epochs are indiscernible.

Still, there are different epochs and these different epochs occur over different intervals of time. Otherwise, there is no recurrence. If each epoch occurs over the same interval of time, then there is only one occurrence of the epoch, not many. Hence, the inhabitants are discernible with respect to their external relations to the various times at which the epochs occur. This is all that is needed to distinguish the various worlds and the occurrence of the roles in such worlds.

Lewis, however, is correct that on Aristotelian actualism no two worlds are truly indiscernible. Consider a world \( w \) exactly like \( \alpha \) except that two quarks of the same type trade places at a certain time (and all that follows from this). The only difference between \( w \) and \( \alpha \) is a difference that cannot be detected. For all the world, the two worlds do not appear to be distinguished. But the worlds are not really indiscernible in that quark \( \alpha \) is in place \( p \) at \( t \) in \( w \) and this is not the case for \( \alpha \). It doesn’t seem possible that there could be distinct indiscernible worlds, so this does not appear to me to be a major objection to Aristotelian actualism.

Before I turn to other “problems,” there is an issue concerning possible properties that is related to Lewis’s concern over alien properties. Peter van Inwagen presents a version of Lewis’s argument to show that Linguistic Abstractionism, his term for Lewis’s linguistic ersatzism, is mistaken. Van Inwagen writes:
Lewis argues that Linguistic Abstractionism is defective because it cannot coherently formulate the thesis that the actual world is impoverished in a way in which it probably is impoverished. If Linguistic Abstractionism is right, then all possible uninstantiated properties are ones that would be instantiated if objects of types that actually exist were sufficiently numerous and properly arranged.25

Perhaps this is true for Linguistic Abstractionism as defined by van Inwagen, but it is not true for Aristotelian actualism (understood in a certain way). It is certainly possible that there are basic alien objects with basic alien properties. Thus, it is possible that there are properties that are not properties of any object composed of actual objects. So it is certainly coherent to think that the actual world is impoverished in this way. Aristotelian actualism holds that there might have been properties distinct from any actual property just as there might have been objects distinct from any actual object. In fact, this is one difference between Aristotelian actualism and other forms of actualism such as the form that Plantinga adopts and that van Inwagen seems to agree with. On Plantinga's view this world cannot be impoverished with respect to properties—indeed, no world can. Of course, to say that it is possible that there is property distinct from any actual property is not to say there exists a possible property distinct from any actual property anymore than to say that it is possible that there is a basic object distinct from any actual basic object is to say there is a possible basic object distinct from any actual object. This distinction is just the difference between actualism and possibilism (as it applies to objects or properties).

It should be pointed out that the example that van Inwagen presents is one that seems to involve possible properties. He says:

Consider some property possessed in our world only by quarks: having an R-G color-charge of -1/2, say. This is a possible property, since it is instantiated in some world: the actual one. But it is not instantiated in any world that contains only things composed of things of kinds that exist in the simple world we have imagined.26

Assuming that having an R-G color-charge of -1/2 is a basic property, Van Inwagen's point is that this particular property (call it 'R') is clearly a possible property since it is an actual property. However, had a world without quarks been actual, then on Aristotelian actualism, there would be no such property and hence it would not even be possible. Since R clearly is a possible property, Aristotelian actualism must be defective. Notice that the same sort of argument can be made with respect to Socrates. Socrates is clearly a possible object since he is an actual object. Had a world without Socrates been actual, there would be no Socrates, and hence Socrates
would not even be possible. But since Socrates clearly is possible, such a view must be mistaken.

The issue that van Inwagen raises concerns what would be possible, if another world were actual. Aristotelian actualism holds that there are no merely possible objects, nor could there have been any. This means that neither Socrates nor \( R \) would have been a possible object, had a world of the sort that van Inwagen describes been actual. While van Inwagen clearly thinks that such a view is implausible with respect to properties, he does not think that it is implausible with respect to individuals. As I understand his view, he does not hold that Socrates could have been a merely possible object nor does he hold that \( R \) could have been a merely possible property. Van Inwagen and the Aristotelian actualist agree on this. What they disagree about is whether or not \( R \) would exist, if a world of the sort described were actual. And this is the crux of the issue between an actualist such as van Inwagen or Plantinga and an Aristotelian actualist. Properties are necessary objects according to a Platonic actualist, not contingent objects as Aristotelian actualism claims. This is a very old issue in philosophy that cannot be resolved here (if it can be resolved at all). But when van Inwagen says that ‘Linguistic Abstractionism thus gives the wrong result’ with respect to a world so described, the Aristotelian actualist must disagree. It is the right result as far as Aristotelian actualism is concerned since \( R \) would not have existed had such a world been actual.

Had such a world been actual, what would have been possible would have been different from what is possible. Some find such a claim, and I think van Inwagen is one of them, simply incredible. But the Aristotelian actualist holds that while the proposition that Socrates is a basketball player is possible (i.e. possibly true), it would not have been possible had a world without Socrates been actual. This is because had such a world been actual, there would have been no such proposition to be possibly true. This issue is connected to another sort of objection to actualism that has been raised by Alan McMichael and repeated by others.\(^{27}\)

McMichael offers the following example of a true claim that does not come out true on actualism:

\[(M) \text{ John F. Kennedy could have had a second son who becomes a Senator, although he might have chosen to become an astronaut instead.}\]

The “standard” way of understanding (M) using possible worlds is that there is a world \( w \) such that according to \( w \) JFK had a second son who becomes a Senator, and there is a world \( w' \) according to which he (JFK’s second son) is an astronaut. The problem is how can it be true according to \( w' \), that \( he \) is an astronaut? There is no such object and hence there are no propositions that have JFK’s second son as a component, and so there is
nothing to be true according to \( w' \). There is no problem, it is often thought, with the claim that JFK could have had a second son who becomes a Senator. This claim will be true just in case the proposition that JFK has a second son who becomes a Senator is true at some world \( w \). This proposition does not have any component that is not actual since a “second son” is not a component of that proposition. But, the objection claims, this is not the case when we turn to \( w' \). For the relevant proposition to be true according to \( w' \) it needs to have a component that is JFK’s second son. The reason is because we need an object that in one world is a Senator, but in another an astronaut. Or so it is claimed.

The idea of the example is that it is possible that there is an object that has a property \( P \) and possibly has \( Q \) (where having \( P \) and \( Q \) is not possible). We can represent the logical form of (M) as follows:

\[
(M') \diamond \exists x[Px \& Qx]
\]

\( (M') \) is true just in case ‘\( \exists x[Px \& Qx] \)’ is true at some (accessible) world \( w \). But, we are assuming, there is no object in the domain of \( w \) that satisfies ‘\( Px \& Qx \)’. So, the objectors claim, how can ‘\( \exists x[Px \& Qx] \)’ be true at \( w \)? The answer is that truth-at-a world for quantified sentences depends on what would exist if that world were actual. Thus, if \( w \) were actual then ‘\( \exists x[Px \& Qx] \)’ would be true. Of course, ‘\( \exists x[Px \& Qx] \)’ would be true if there were an object that would satisfy ‘\( Px \& Qx \)’, but that does not mean that there exists an object in the domain of \( w \) that in fact satisfies ‘\( Px \& Qx \)’. But how do we understand ‘\( Qx \)’ in this context? The answer is clear. If \( w \) were actual there would be an object such that it would satisfy ‘\( Qx \)’ at a world accessible to \( w \). Again, there is no need to invoke merely possible objects, if one is not attempting to reduce or define modality. The Aristotelian actualist already agrees with Lewis that such a position does not eliminate modal notions in favor of non-modal notions. In fact, the iteration of the modal operator is really not the issue. The basic issue arises for any property that no actual object could have. But again, the claim that it is possible that an object has \( P \) does not imply that there is a possible object that has \( P \).

I turn now to a different sort of objection that is raised against actualism. There is, it is claimed, no hope of providing an actualist semantics for intentional verbs. The following is the sort of example that is often given as reason to adopt possibilism and reject actualism:28

(1) Ponce de Leon searched for the fountain of youth.

This is indeed a difficult case as are all such sentences. Even if (1) is true, it does not follow that there is an actual object that de Leon searched for, since there is no actual fountain of youth. Yet it appears that (1) expresses a
relationship between de Leon and some object, namely, the fountain of youth. Since there is no actual fountain of youth, the object in question—the object that de Leon stands in the *searched for* relation—must be a merely possible object. Or at least this is the suggestion of those who claim actualism cannot provide a semantics for sentences such as (1).

Yet we need to be careful about what (1) implies. Consider the sentence

\[(2) \text{ Ponce de Leon searched for a friendly native.}\]

There are two readings for (2). One, which we can call the *de re* reading, is where there is a particular friendly native that de Leon is searching for and the other, which we can call the *de dicto* reading, is where de Leon is simply searching for some friendly native or other. So (2) admits of

\[(2,1) \text{ There is friendly native such that Ponce de Leon searched for her/him.}\]

and

\[(2,2) \text{ Ponce de Leon searched for some friendly native or other.}\]

We can partially represent the logical form of (2,1) as

\[(2,1^*) \exists x (Fx \& \text{ de Leon searched for } x),\]

But it is not completely clear how we represent the form of (2,2). On the surface it appears that we should represent it as

\[(2,2^*) \text{ De Leon searched for } \exists x (Fx).\]

Yet the formula ‘\(\exists x (Fx)\)’ is usually understood to mean ‘there is a friendly native’ and of course (2,2) should not be understood to mean that de Leon searched for the proposition that there is a friendly native. This is a general problem for verbs that take non-sentential noun phrases as complements although usually we need not distinguish the *de re* reading from the *de dicto* reading since they are logically equivalent as in

\[(3) \text{ There is a woman such that John loves her.}\]

and

\[(4) \text{ John loves some woman or other.}\]
Still, an assertion of (3) carries a suggestion that an assertion of (4) does not. (3) suggests that the utterer knows or believes who it is that John loves whereas (4) carries no such suggestion.

There are different methods for providing the logical form of (2), but my preferred method is to treat (2) as the attribution of a complex property to de Leon as opposed to the attribution of a relation that holds between de Leon and an undetermined object. Thus (2) should be understood along the lines of

\[(2') \text{ de Leon exemplifies } \lambda y [y \text{ searches for some friendly native}].\]

This allows us to understand the true reading of (1) as

\[(1') \text{ de Leon exemplifies } \lambda y [y \text{ searches for the fountain of youth}].\]

Of course a full account of these verbs requires an account of the complex properties, but just as (2') does not imply the existence of a friendly native, (1') does not imply that there is a merely possible object that is the fountain of youth.29

IV

Aristotelian actualism holds that there are no merely possible items—be they individuals, propositions, states of affairs, or properties. Our talk of what might have been the case or what is possible is understood in terms of our describing alternative possible worlds and alternative ways those worlds might have obtained. When we consider a proposition of the form ‘∃xPx’ that is possible even though it is not possible that any actual object have P, we realize that such a proposition might have had different “truth-makers.” That is, had ‘∃xPx’ been true, then some object would satisfy ‘Px’, though there might have been others that would satisfy it. But that is all we can say. We cannot point to the object (or objects) that would have satisfied ‘Px’ for there are no such objects. The same point applies for properties (states of affairs, etc.). If there is a possible proposition of the form ‘∃ØφØ’ such that it is not possible that any actual property have φ, then had ‘∃ØφØ’ been true, some property would satisfy ‘φØ’, though there might have been others that would satisfy it. Again, we cannot point to the properties in question, for there are no such properties. Lewis and others complain that such a view conflates possibilities. They want distinct possibilities where the Aristotelian actualist only offers possible possibilities.

The idea that there are (as opposed to the view that there might be) more possibilities than can be described makes a very important assumption. It assumes an independence of possibilities from actuality. For if what is possible depends, in part, on what is actual, then there is no reason to
suppose that there are more possibilities than we can describe. After all, no
one can describe these “possibilities.” The only reason to think that there
are such possibilities is based on the analogy that had a world with more
limited resources (than ours) obtained, certain possibilities that we accept
would not be possible. But this reasoning simply assumes that what is
possible is independent of what is actual. What justifies the claim that it is
false that there might have been fewer “possibilities” than we can describe?
If there is a dependence between certain possibilities and what is actual,
then had another world obtained, what we consider possible might not
have been possible and other things that we cannot consider at all might
have been possible. The opinion (or intuition) that had a considerably
more limited world obtained, there would have been fewer possibilities
(though not fewer in number) does not seem on the face of it ridiculous. It
is based on the idea that possibility (like other features or properties) is not
completely independent from actuality.

If what is possible does depend to some extent upon what is actual
then the metaphysical status of (some) propositions, states of affairs,
possible worlds etc., is not what is commonly assumed. Moreover, this
suggests we should not treat the accessibility relation among possible
worlds to be an equivalence relation. We should place a restriction on the
accessibility relation to the effect that a world \( w \) is accessible to a world
\( w^* \) just in case the items involved in \( w \) would exist if \( w^* \) were actual. So,
for example, if Socrates would fail to exist if \( w^* \) were actual, then \( \alpha \) is not
accessible to \( w^* \) (even though \( w^* \) is accessible to \( \alpha \)). The accessibility
relation is neither transitive nor symmetrical, and hence modal systems
whose semantics include such features do not correctly represent modal
metaphysical reality.

The idea that what is possible is dependent upon what is actual is
perhaps the central doctrine of Aristotelian actualism. It is based on the
idea that there are contingent objects in the world and while those objects
might have had certain features even though they do not, there wouldn’t
even be such possibilities if those objects hadn’t existed. Thus, these possi-
bilities seem to be dependent upon what is actual, and had a different world
obtained, there would be no such possibilities. This corresponds to my
robust sense of reality. We should not admit merely possible objects when
everything we want to say (and every thing that we can say) can be said
with what there actually is.\(^{30}\)

Notes

1. In his paper, “Existence” (Philosophical Perspectives 1, pp. 49–108) Nathan
Salmon makes the distinction between actualism and possibilism as follows
(page 56):
The doctrine that the standard quantifiers of natural language (the English words ‘everything,’ ‘something,’ etc.) are possibilist quantifiers is sometimes called ‘possibilism’, and the doctrine that they are actualist quantifiers is sometimes called ‘actualism.’

The distinction that Salmon makes is not exactly the distinction I am making, but they are clearly connected. Another difference in usage between Salmon in that paper and this paper is that Salmon uses the term ‘exists’ in a more narrow sense than it is used in this paper. His use of the term would correspond to my use of the phrase ‘actually, presently exists,’ while my use of the term seems to correspond to what he would say by ‘might have, had, or will have existed.’ This means that on my account of the actualism/possibilism distinction, Salmon is a possibilist, while on his account he is an actualist. Metaphysically speaking, Salmon does hold that there are merely possible objects where ‘there are’ is taken to be completely unrestricted (as to times, worlds, whatever).

A recent paper, “In Defense of the Simplest Quantified Modal Logic” (Philosophical Perspectives 8 pp. 431–458) by B. Linsky and E. Zalta implicitly suggests that many philosophers may be including more than the idea that everything actually exists in their notion of actualism. Linsky and Zalta offer a theory of objects such that all objects necessarily exist, but some are contingently concrete. While some philosophers have objected to their view on the grounds that it is not really actualism, such an objection is, in a sense, misguided. On their view there are no merely possible objects—objects that exist, but do not actually exist. But while one cannot make the actualism/possibilism distinction in the Linsky-Zalta framework in terms of the acceptance or rejection of the merely possible, a similar distinction is available. Linsky and Zalta maintain that the property of being concrete is not an essential property of anything. But it does not follow from this alone, that there exist an object that lacks the property of being concrete, but might have had it. [This is similar to the claim that there is an object that is not actual, but might have been—the sign of the merely possible.] Thus, we can ask whether or not there are any merely nonconcrete objects. While this is not the same question as whether or not there are any merely possible objects, it is similar enough within the Linsky-Zalta framework to lead some philosophers to think that the move to a Linsky-Zalta framework that contains merely nonconcrete objects is a move toward possibilism. In fact, it is simply a rejection of certain essentialist views held by most actualists. In this paper I assume that the property of being concrete is an essential property of those items that have it and that there are no merely nonconcrete objects.

2. See Michael Jubien’s Ontology, Modality, and the Fallacy of Reference (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) as an example of a philosopher who does adopt a principle of plenitude for physical objects.

3. It does involve the notion of property complement which is similar to the operation of negation. But there is an important distinction, as many philosophers have noted, between states that purport to involve negation and those that involve property complements. As Alvin Plantinga, The Nature of Neces-
sity (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1974) has said many times there is a big
difference between claiming that Socrates has the property of nonexistence
(which seems impossible) and claiming that Socrates does not exist (which
seems possible).


5. I shall use italics to indicate the proposition associated with a given use of the
sentence. Thus the phrase, “the proposition John is happy” means the proposition (semantically) associated with a given use of the sentence “John is happy.” I realize that different propositions are associated with different uses of sentences, and hence there really is no single proposition associated with all such uses. However, I am ignoring those differences when they do not impact the actualism issue.

6. I am ignoring temporal issues in this paper. So I am only considering those
propositions that are eternal—that is, propositions that are either simply true or simply false and not propositional contents that may vary over time. This simplification, does not, I believe alter the objections that have been raised against actualism that will be considered later.


8. At least on the conception of propositions I am assuming where distinct proposi-
tions can be logically equivalent.

9. This sort of objection to propositions as possible worlds has been raised by Ed Zalta in Intensional Logic and the Metaphysics of Intentionality (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press 1988) and Paul McNamara, “Does the Actual World actually Exist?” (Philosophical Studies 69:59–81).

10. In essence, this is the solution that McNamara favors op. cit.


13. I have in mind here Plantinga’s unexemplified essences (op. cit.) and Zalta’s merely nonconcrete objects (op. cit. see footnote 1).


15. Lewis, page 2.

16. Lewis, page 3.

18. Lewis, page 101. See also pages 86–92.
20. Lewis, page 162.
22. Lewis, page 231.
23. Lewis, page 158.
25. van Inwagen, page 200.
27. Alan McMichael “A Problem for Actualism about Possible Worlds” (*Philosophical Review* 92:49–66). Actually, McMichael’s complaint is not with actualism *per se*, but rather with a combination of actualism and standard modal semantics. And I think that he is correct in that respect. Still, his example is often given as an example of a problem for actualism *per se* so it is worth considering in its own right. Another version of what I take to be the same basic problem is given by James Tomberlin and Frank McGuinness in “Troubles with Actualism” (*Philosophical Perspectives* 8:459–466), pages 460–461.
29. This is a slight expansion of the view I suggested in “Non Denoting” (*Philosophical Perspectives* 7:461–486) for the same problem.
30. I would like to thank Takashi Yagisawa, Jim Tomberlin, and Frank McGuinness for their comments on an early version of this paper. I would also like to thank Steve Reynolds for his detail comments on drafts of the present paper.