

Chapter 2

ACTUALISM¹

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2.1 Slogans and refinements

Let's begin with some handwavy sloganeering. Actualism is the view that everything actually exists, that there are no mere possibilia, that *this* is all there is. It is the opposite of possibilism, the view that there are mere possibilia—things that exist but do not actually exist.

Now let's try harder. What exactly does 'everything actually exists' mean? Here are a couple of bad readings. One bad reading involves taking the quantifier to be restricted to the actual world. This renders the slogan trivial; it just says that 'every actual thing actually exists,' which everyone accepts, including those who self-identify as possibilists. So that isn't what the slogan is intended to mean. The quantifier must be read unrestrictedly, as ranging over absolutely everything there is.

That thought can prompt a second bad reading. If the quantifier ranges over literally everything, the misguided thought goes, it must range over other possible worlds, and what exists in them. So a second bad reading would take the slogan to say that anything that possibly exists also actually exists—alternatively, that it's necessary that everything is actual. I call this 'domain inclusion actualism' in Bennett (2005). The main problem with reading the slogan this way is that it commits actualists to a claim that most of them do not want to endorse—namely, that it is not even *possible* for there to be anything that doesn't actually exist. If there actually are no *F*s, *F*s are not even possible. Now, some actualists—notably Bernard Linsky, Edward Zalta, and Timothy Williamson²—do endorse that claim; I shall return to them later. My point for now is that such a view goes beyond the central core of actualism. The claim that nothing could exist that doesn't actually exist—i.e., that 'aliens' are impossible—is an extra commitment and ought not be baked into the very characterization of actualism. Again, most self-identifying actualists do think that there *could be* things that do not actually exist (see, e.g., Stalnaker 2012; Menzel 2016), so charity requires interpreting their own slogan in a way that permits that.³

My point here is not that the domain inclusion understanding of actualism is not really actualist (though I return to this question in Section 2.6).⁴ My point is rather that it is not the *only* way to be an actualist, and thus we need a reading of the slogan that is compatible with but does not entail it. And one is readily available.

The right reading is one that takes the quantifier to be unrestricted and otherwise takes the slogan at face value. Everything, absolutely everything, actually exists. The domain inclusion mistake

was to take this to mean that other possible worlds and their contents exist, too. But this is not what (typical) actualists think; not exactly. Most actualists will distinguish between other possible worlds and entities as—I reach for a general word here—devices, and as the situations and entities that would obtain if things were as that device suggests. For example, an actualist like Robert Adams (1974) who thinks that worlds are “world stories”, or maximal sets of propositions, thinks that the *propositions* actually exist, even though various things they mention do not. An actualist like Robert Stalnaker (1976, 2012) who thinks that worlds are properties thinks that the properties actually exist, but that various things that would exist if they were exemplified do not. And an actualist like Alvin Plantinga (1974) who thinks that worlds are maximal possible states of affairs thinks that the states of affairs exist, but various things that would exist if they obtained do not.

The central strategy, common to all three of those views, is to draw a certain kind of distinction. As Stalnaker puts it,

an actualist needs the distinction between existing and being exemplified in order to be able to explain the sense in which a merely possible world exists (a property the world might have had exists) and the sense in which it does not (no world that is that way exists).
(2012: 8–9)

However, this passage is specific to Stalnaker’s property-based account of worlds and isn’t quite true in full generality. Not all actualists need the distinction between existing and being exemplified. First, some actualists rely on related but different distinctions. The Adams-style view (what David Lewis calls ‘linguistic ersatzism’ (1986: §3.2)) instead needs the distinction between existing and being true; the Plantinga-style view instead needs the distinction between existing and obtaining. Second, actualists who endorse domain inclusion—or a stronger view called necessitism, on which more in Section 2.3—need no such distinction at all. Neither do actualists who don’t believe in worlds. So Stalnaker’s claim needs to be both restricted and generalized. The right claim is this: actualists who utilize possible worlds and deny domain inclusion need a distinction between existing and existing *according to a world*. To exist is, well, to exist. To exist according to a world is to be such that it would exist if that world were actual—if the set of sentences were true, or if the maximal state of affairs were to obtain, or if the world–property were exemplified.

Overall, then, the point is this: actualism says that absolutely everything exists. On the non-domain inclusion approach, all the representations or properties that are other possible worlds do actually exist, though various things that exist according to them do not.⁵ But that is no violation of actualism, because existence-according-to-a-world is not existence. Suppose I have a book that has pictures of dragons in it. Actualism commits me to the existence of the book, and to the existence of paper and ink, but not to the existence of dragons. Dragons exist according to the book, but they do not exist.

Actualism, then, is the view that absolutely everything actually exists. There are no mere possibilities. This is compatible with both domain inclusion (or necessitist) versions of actualism, and, as we have just seen, with more typical versions of actualism according to which, possibly, there are things that do not actually exist (see Bennett 2005 for an extended discussion of the actualist slogan).

2.2 Challenges to actualism

A number of challenges to actualism have been raised. In this section, I sketch three. All of them are primarily challenges for actualists who believe that possibly, there are things that don’t actually exist—or, more generally, who allow that different things can exist in different worlds.

First, it is claimed that actualism plus the claim that there could be things that do not actually exist turns out to be incompatible with Kripke semantics. Let me be clear about the dialectic here: Kripke (1963) initially presented his semantics precisely as a way to *allow* the possibility of things that do not actually exist. The entire point was to avoid validating the Barcan formula ($\Diamond\exists x\phi \rightarrow \exists x\Diamond\phi$, or, equivalently, $\forall x\Box\phi \rightarrow \Box\forall x\phi$), the converse Barcan formula ($\exists x\Diamond\phi \rightarrow \Diamond\exists x\phi$, or $\Box\forall x\phi \rightarrow \forall x\Box\phi$), and the claim that everything exists necessarily ($\forall x\Box\exists y(y = x)$). Kripke's technical innovation was to do the formal semantics in a way that allows different worlds to have different domains, an advance (and complication) over the kind of constant domain system that Linsky and Zalta aptly call the "simplest quantified modal logic" (1994). (Hughes and Cresswell's classic modal logic textbook (1996) initially presents the simpler semantics before complicating things à la Kripke to allow varying domains.) So what is the problem supposed to be?

The problem is that it would appear that Kripke's metalanguage is possibilist. The formal details and options for repair have been presented excellently elsewhere (e.g. Linsky and Zalta 1994; Bennett 2005; Menzel 2016); I here confine myself to the intuitive gist. The key point is that a Kripke model for a language includes a set D of individuals and a function that assigns its members to worlds, yielding a D_w for each world w — w 's domain, or what exists according to it. Let $D_{@}$ be the domain of the actual world. If things that do not actually exist are possible, there are things that exist in other worlds but not in this one—there are things in various D_w 's that are not contained in $D_{@}$. Now, because the quantifiers are defined to be world restricted, one cannot say in the object language that there are things not in the actual world. But if one lifts the lid and looks in the metalanguage, there they are!

The second and third problems both bring out the fact that actualists have trouble accommodating possibility claims about specific nonactual individuals. Take the sentence 'Possibly, Santa Claus exists'. Actualists will, of course, deny that there is a thing, Santa Claus, who has the property of possible existence. They will instead say that it is possible for there to be a jolly fat man who lives at the North Pole, delivers presents, and so forth—that there is a certain general *de dicto* possibility, but no truly *de re* possibility about the existence of a specific person. That is a perfectly reasonable thing to say; no objection to actualism here. But the next two problems are ways of trying to press this issue.

The second problem, then, twists this line of thought by considering *de re* possibility claims about *actual* things. The trick is to start with the fact that many actual things are contingent; it is possible for them not to exist. In particular, 'possibly Karen Bennett does not exist' is true. Let w be a world according to which I do not exist. Is it true in w that I could exist? That is, is 'possibly Karen Bennett exists' true at w ? If actualism is true at w , that sentence looks a lot like 'possibly Santa Claus exists' looks here in the actual world. So perhaps the actualist must say that all that is true is some general descriptive possibility? But in this case, there is greater pressure to say that 'possibly Karen Bennett exists' is true and *de re* in w —I'm right here typing, after all! In Bennett (2005), I call this an 'out-and-back world-hopping argument'; two classic discussions of issues in this ballpark are Adams (1981: 28–32) and Plantinga (1983).

A third problem, usually called "the McMichael problem" (McMichael 1983), has to do with the actualist's ability to accommodate iterated *de re* modal claims. I don't have a sister. But it seems that I could have had one, and indeed that I could have had a sister who was a teacher. And isn't it possible for her, that very teacher, to have instead been a lawyer? After all, it seems that I could have had a sister who was torn between two career choices, who took the LSAT and applied to law school, but who ultimately chose to be a teacher instead. So isn't it possible that I have a teacher sister who—that very woman—could have been a lawyer? However, it is hard to see how an actualist can handle claims like this. They take the following form: $\Diamond\exists x(Fx \ \& \ \Diamond Gx)$.

Making sense of the embedded possibility apparently requires tracking a specific nonactual individual across worlds, which is not easy for most versions of actualism.⁶

There are solutions to these puzzles, of course. However, providing a full taxonomy of the various possible moves goes beyond the scope of this brief essay. For more discussion, I recommend Bennett (2005), Menzel (2016), and the many classic papers cited therein. All I shall say here is that two distinctions are important to have on the table when assessing the challenges: that between what I have called ‘proxy’ and ‘nonproxy’ actualism (Bennett 2006), and that between necessitism and contingentism. I shall introduce these in reverse order in the next two sections.

2.3 Should we scrap the actualism/possibilism dispute in favor of the necessitism/contingentism dispute?

The labels ‘necessitism’ and ‘contingentism’ were introduced by Timothy Williamson (2010, 2013).⁷ Necessitism is the view that everything necessarily exists—that necessarily, everything is necessarily something. Contingentism is the negation of this; it says that it is contingent what exists. And Williamson argues that the actualism–possibilism distinction should simply be abandoned in favor of this alternative distinction:

the use of [the terms ‘possibilism’ and ‘actualism’] has become badly confused . . . It is better to make a fresh start with fresh terminology and clearer distinctions. Thus the proposal is to abandon that debate as hopelessly muddled, and to get on to the clearer necessitism–contingentism debate.

(Williamson 2013: 23–24; reproduced from Williamson 2010: 662–663)

Why does he think this? He says that on standard formal treatments of the ‘actually’ operator, it makes a difference only to the truth value of a sentence when it is within the scope of a modal operator. So, he claims, ‘everything actually exists’ is equivalent to ‘everything exists,’ and actualism is thus trivially true. Similarly, ‘there exist things that do not actually exist’ is equivalent to ‘there exist things that do not exist,’ rendering possibilism trivially false. Williamson goes on to say that “the actualist needs another reading of ‘actual’ than the one well understood in modal logic,” a reading on which “being actual had better be . . . something harder than just being” (Williamson 2013: 23; see also Williamson 2010: 662–663; Williamson 1998: 259 for similar discussion). He does not think such a reading is easily available and thus proposes to consign discussions of actualism and possibilism to the rubbish bin.

However, this line of thought fails for dialectical reasons. I will bring this out in two related ways. First, let’s grant for the sake of argument that standard formal treatments of ‘actually’ treat it as inert when not in the scope of a modal operator.⁸ What follows is not that it is trivial that everything is actual, but rather that standard formal treatments *assume actualism*. David Lewis, the most well-known contemporary possibilist, certainly does not agree that ‘actually’ adds nothing to sentences without a modal operator.⁹ Speaking unrestrictedly, he thinks it true that there are talking donkeys even though there actually are no talking donkeys. That’s because he does have the requested reading of ‘actual’ on which being actual is harder than merely existing—for Lewis, to be actual is to be spatio-temporally connected to the speaker. For him, then, the earlier sentence amounts to the claim that while there are (unrestrictedly) talking donkeys, none of them are spatio-temporally connected to me. The upshot is that it is not legitimate to rule out possibilism on the basis of formal treatments of the ‘actually’ operator that possibilists would not accept. (Here is another way to put the point. If actualism is true, then maybe the correct modal

logic will render the actualist slogan trivial. But even if so, it doesn't follow that the *dispute* is trivial, because it is unclear whether actualism *is* true.)

Second, consider Williamson's claim that the actualist needs a reading of 'actual' on which being actual is harder than merely existing. I can see three interpretations of this claim, but none are dialectically acceptable. They differ on what exactly it is that requires that being actual be harder than merely existing. The first interpretation—and least likely to be the intended one—says that it is the *truth of actualism* that requires that being actual be harder than merely existing. But actualism is precisely the view that there is no difference between existing and being actual! So the first interpretation is incoherent (and, again, unlikely what Williamson means). The second interpretation says that it is the *non-triviality of actualism* that requires that being actual be harder than merely existing. This is not much of an improvement over the first interpretation; it amounts to saying that if actualism is a substantive position, it is false. The third interpretation says that it is the *worthwhileness of the actualism-possibilism debate* that requires that being actual be harder than merely existing. But this cannot be correct either. After all, that is the very question at issue. Quite generally, it cannot be the case that the tenability or worthwhileness of a dispute about *q* requires that both sides agree that *q*! Again, we are led back to the thought that there can be a substantive debate about the truth of a thesis that might be such that *if* it is true, it is trivial.

2.4 On the relations between actualism, possibilism, necessitism, and contingentism

So we have not been given adequate reason for abandoning the actualism-possibilism debate in favor of the necessitism-contingentism debate. But, of course, I have not said anything to suggest that we ought not to think about the necessitism-contingentism debate *also*. They are just two distinct debates. That means that we face the question of what the relationship is between the two debates, or at least between the two pairs of positions. There are two main connections—or one, depending on how you count; the 'two' are contrapositives. First:

- Necessitism entails actualism, in letter if not in spirit.

I shall explain what I mean by 'the letter' and 'the spirit' of actualism later. For now, just note the basic point: if everything exists necessarily, everything exists actually, too. In terms of worlds, the idea is that if everything is in every world, *a fortiori* everything is in the actual world.¹⁰ So necessitism entails the domain inclusion version of actualism. (The converse does not hold; domain inclusion does not entail necessitism. A domain inclusion actualist could think that some actual things exist contingently, even though she denies that anything could exist that doesn't actually exist. In terms of worlds: she could think the actual world is the biggest world.) Second:

- Possibilism entails contingentism.

If there exist things that do not actually exist, then there are things that do not necessarily exist.¹¹

With these claims in hand, it is useful now to revisit the challenges to actualism that I laid out in Section 2.2: they can be understood as providing reason for actualists to be necessitists. Certainly Linsky and Zalta (1994, 1996) deploy them that way. (Williamson, in contrast, rejects the label 'actualist', and the considerations in Section 2.2 do not play a large role in his defense of necessitism.) If everything necessarily exists, there is no need to worry about possibilia hiding in Kripke's metasemantics; every world has the same domain, namely *D*. Further, there is no

need to worry about contingent existence claims entailing otherworldly *de re* possibilities about actual entities; there are no true contingent existence claims. And there is no difficulty with iterated modal claims that ascribe *de re* possibilities to merely possible things. If everything exists necessarily, everything is available in every world. Now, of course those arguments provide at best defeasible reason for actualists to be necessitists; contingentist strategies are available, and necessitist actualism faces objections too (e.g. Hayaki 2006).

2.5 Yet another distinction

At this point it is necessary to introduce yet another distinction—between proxy and non-proxy actualism, views I briefly mentioned earlier. The proxy/non-proxy actualism distinction crosscuts the necessitist/contingentist distinction in that proxy actualists can be either necessitists or contingentists (though all necessitists are proxy actualists as I characterize the view).

What is proxy actualism? It is the view that anything that possibly exists has a proxy or trace in every world. (For a more careful characterization, see Bennett 2006: especially 272.) Some proxy actualists take the proxy relation to be identity—i.e., they take the proxy for an entity *E* to be *E* itself. Such proxy actualists—notably Linsky and Zalta (1994, 1996)—are necessitists. Indeed, every necessitist is a proxy actualist. But not every proxy actualist is a necessitist; contingentist proxy actualism is possible too, and indeed, so is the view naturally suggested by the word ‘proxy’. A contingentist proxy actualist takes the proxy relation to be something other than identity, and thus takes the proxy for an entity *E* to be something other than *E*. Plantinga (1974), for example, thinks that entities like me exist contingently, but that I have an individual essence that exists necessarily, and which—in my terms, not his—serves as my proxy in every world. So proxy actualism crosscuts the necessitism-contingentism distinction, but it should be clear from even this quick sketch that contingentist proxy actualism will share many of the virtues and problems of necessitist actualism. It is, after all, structurally isomorphic to it. See Bennett (2006) for extended discussion, though I do not use the label ‘necessitist’.

A lot of distinctions are on the table at this point; a recap of the various versions of actualism is in order. Here are intuitive versions; more careful versions that avoid the apparent quantification over possibilia are in the footnote.

Actualism: everything actually exists.

Domain inclusion actualism: every possible thing actually exists.

Proxy actualism: every possible thing either itself necessarily exists, or else has a distinct proxy that necessarily exists.

Necessitism: every possible thing necessarily exists.¹²

With one exception, each thesis entails the one above it, but not below it. (The exception is that only the first, necessitist disjunct of proxy actualism entails domain inclusion actualism.) It is worth reiterating that this means that actualism itself does not entail any of the further claims; those are versions of actualism, but not the only versions. I myself strongly prefer contingentist non-proxy non-domain-inclusion actualism, and I am pleased to have Robert Stalnaker (2012) as an ally. But while I recognize that a serious gauntlet has been thrown by my necessitist and proxy actualist opponents, this essay is not the place to fully take it up.

Still, I would like to conclude by returning to my cryptic reference to the ‘spirit’ and ‘letter’ of actualism. Earlier, I said that necessitist actualism obeys the letter but not the spirit of actualism. I will now say the same about proxy actualism more generally. But what is that supposed to mean?

2.6 The spirit vs. the letter of actualism

In Bennett (2006), I declared that proxy actualist views—a category that includes necessitist views—were not in fact actualist at all (Section 2.7). I probably should not have said that. The prevailing usage of the term ‘actualist’ is such that acceptance of the slogan ‘everything is actual’ is necessary and sufficient for counting as an actualist, and it should be clear from this essay that proxy actualists accept the slogan. Hence I now claim that proxy actualism does obey the letter of actualism. I stand by most of my earlier discussion; it is just that I now only take it to show that proxy actualism is not in the *spirit* of actualism.

I do not intend to argue anew for this claim. But the basic idea starts with the fact that the proxy actualist postulates an awful lot of particular entities and then engages in various bits of fancy footwork to make them sound acceptable. Both Williamson and Linsky and Zalta, for example, think that there actually exist a plethora of nonconcrete entities that only instantiate modal properties (this is a slight simplification). That one is possibly a dragon, possibly spatially located, possibly nonconcrete, and so forth. Strictly speaking, it exists. But it isn’t a dragon.

Obviously, this kind of view carries heavy ontological commitments. I am not going to use that to argue against the view—I am not going to argue against the view at all—but I do want to use it to support the idea that views like this go against the *spirit* of actualism. I take it that the spirit of actualism is something like this: not only does everything actually exist, but also no special entities are needed to make sense of modal talk. There are no hidden particular actual entities that do duty for particular possible objects. There’s just, well, *this*—insert expansive gesture here. There are tables and people and properties and relations and so forth. And those ontological commitments are enough to concoct a theory of modality. That is, it is in the spirit of actualism to rely only upon ontological commitments we have, as it were, already incurred. It is true, as I explained previously, that the contingentist, non-domain inclusion, non-proxy actualist needs the notion of existence according to a world. But existence according to a world is just like existence according to a picture or a story; ‘existence according to’ is a notion we need *anyway*. It is not a special tool, and certainly not a special ontological commitment.

I recognize that this thought about the spirit of actualism is pretty nebulous. My defense of it will be even more so. It is just that most actualists resist possibilism in part because of a preference for a leaner ontology. Further, two of the main three actualist views from the renaissance of interest in modality in the 1970s and 1980s—Stalnaker’s, Adams’s, and Plantinga’s—are non-proxy views, and the one that is a proxy view—Plantinga’s—was, I think, viewed with suspicion on ontological grounds. So the thought is that contingentist, non-domain-inclusion, non-proxy views are more in the spirit of actualism than proxy views, necessitist or not. (Menzel 2016 seems sympathetic to this thought, as evidenced by his calling non-proxy actualism ‘strict’ actualism.) But at the end of the day, ‘actualism’ is just a label, and disputes about whether a view counts as actualist or not—or more actualist than another—are just verbal disputes. We can do just as well with the more specific, if more unwieldy, labels I have used throughout this essay.

Notes

- 1 Thanks to Ted Sider and Michael Bergmann for helpful comments.
- 2 Williamson does not self-identify as an actualist; he rejects the actualism/possibilism distinction. See Sections 2.3 and 2.4 of this chapter.
- 3 Here is another way at exactly the same point: this domain-inclusion way of understanding the actualist slogan has it stating precisely the conditions that validate the Barcan formula: $\forall x\Box\phi \rightarrow \Box\forall x\phi$. But most actualists—the exceptions have already been noted—deny the Barcan formula. They think that it is possible for there to be, say, a giant telepathic hedgehog, but do not think there is any particular actual object that could be a giant telepathic hedgehog.

- 4 I suggest otherwise at the end of my 2005 (320); Ross Cameron is right to criticize me for that (2016: 116 n. 7).
- 5 Or, more awkwardly but avoiding the apparent quantification over the things that only exist according to other worlds: other possible worlds do actually exist, though according to them there exist various things that do not actually exist.
- 6 It might be the case that actualists who do away with possible worlds altogether do not have a problem here. Thanks to Ted Sider for discussion.
- 7 I am not sure that Williamson used the *labels* before 2010, though he certainly discussed the *issues*: e.g. Williamson (1998, 1999, 2000, 2001).
- 8 I am not entirely sure this is correct. For example, Crossley and Humberstone (1977) explicitly deny that Ap is equivalent to p , saying that the closest equivalency theorem is $A(Ap \leftrightarrow p)$. But I am not a logician and will not challenge the claim here.
- 9 Williamson seems to think that discussions of the actualism–possibilism distinction ought not mention modal realism at all. I do not understand this. He is right to point out that “most participants in the actualism–possibilism debate reject modal realism, and hold that if there are such other spatiotemporal systems, they are just as actual as our own” (2013: 22), because most participants in the debate are actualists. He is also right to say that “the [actualism–possibilism] debate is not about whether there are other spatiotemporal systems” (2013: 22). This is correct, both because (as he notes) someone might believe in other actually existing spatio-temporal systems, and because a possibilist strictly speaking need not believe in worlds at all. But none of this justifies taking modal realism off the table altogether, as Williamson seems to want. Modal realism—understood on its own terms, not merely as the view that there are worlds spatio-temporally unconnected to ours—is a clear example of a possibilist view. And if one wants to deny modal realism on the grounds that these worlds spatio-temporally unconnected to ours would have to be actual, then one is denying modal realism *because it is possibilist*. And that is dialectically inappropriate when the question on the table is not whether possibilism is true or false, but whether the positions can be formulated coherently. For related discussion, though in the context of defending possibilism rather than the actualism/possibilism debate, see Lewis (1986: 97–101).
- 10 This means that Williamson is, in fact, an actualist. He does not self-identify as such because of his rejection of the actualism–possibilism distinction.
- 11 The claim that possibilism entails contingentism, plus the claim that Lewis is a possibilist, entail that Lewis is a contingentist. But both Williamson (2013: 24) and Stalnaker (2012: 1–2) suggest that Lewis is a necessitist. This isn’t the best way to classify him. By his own lights, on his own semantics, what is necessary is what is true in all worlds, and he does not think that most existence claims are true in all worlds. While it is true that the pluriverse itself—all of modal space—is fixed, that does not make him a necessitist given his own treatment of the quantifiers and modal operators. Besides, down this road lie problems of advanced modalizing that are beyond the scope of this essay. See Divers (1999) for what I believe is the first statement of those problems.
- 12 Actualism: everything actually exists.
 Domain inclusion actualism: necessarily, everything actually exists.
 Proxy actualism: either necessarily, everything is necessarily something, or necessarily, everything has a proxy that is necessarily something.
 Necessitism: necessarily, everything is necessarily something.

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