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INDEXICALITY AND ACTUALITY

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David Lewis has proposed the startling and ingenious thesis that 'actual', as this term is used in philosophical discussions of modality, is an indexical term. He states this thesis in *Counterfactuals* in these words:

> Our actual world is only one world among others. We call it alone actual not because it differs in kind from all the rest but because it is the world we inhabit. The inhabitants of other worlds may truly call their own worlds actual, if they mean by 'actual' what we do; for the meaning we give to 'actual' is such that it refers at any world *i* to that world *i* itself. 'Actual' is indexical, like 'I' or 'here', or 'now': it depends for its reference on the circumstances of utterance, to wit the world where the utterance is located.[1]

and in "Anselm and Actuality" in these:

> I suggest that "actual" and its cognates should be analyzed as *indexical* terms: terms whose reference varies, depending on relevant features of the context of utterance. The relevant feature of context, for the term "actual", is the world at which a given utterance occurs. According to the indexical analysis I propose, "actual" . . . refers at any world w to the world w. "Actual" is analogous to "present", an indexical term whose reference varies depending on a different feature of context: "present" refers at any time t to the time t. "Actual" is analogous also to "here", "I", "you", "this", and "aforementioned"—indexical terms depending for their reference respectively on the place, the speaker, the intended audience, the speaker's acts of pointing, and the foregoing discourse.
>
> I do not mean to say that "actual" has different meanings in the languages used in different worlds, so that for any world w, "the actual world" is a proper name of w in the native language of w. That is false. (Just as it would be false to say that "today" changes its meaning every midnight.) Rather, the *fixed* meaning we give to "actual" is such that, at any world w, "actual" refers in *our* language to w.[2]

The theory presented in these passages—I shall call it 'the indexical theory of actuality'—is, if there is any reason to think it true, very important. It is not a modification or refinement of some theory we learned about as undergraduates, but is entirely original. It offers us the possibility of a radical rethinking of many of the perennial questions of ontology, the possibility of looking at questions like 'Is existence a property?' and 'Why should

[1] (Basil Blackwell, 1973) pp. 85–86.
[2] *Noûs* 4 (1970): pp. 184–85.

anything at all exist?' from a wholly new angle. (Consider, for example, the latter question. I shall not attempt an adequate treatment of this question from the "indexical" point of view in this paper, for this would take us far afield. We may note, however, that the question 'Why should anything at all exist?' is obviously closely connected with the question 'Why is *this* world, *our* world—which is one of the worlds in which something exists—actual?', and *this* question is, according to the indexical theory, incoherent: it can be instructively compared with 'Why is *this* century, *our* century, the present century? Why isn't it *now* 1738 or 2406?'[3])

Unfortunately, the indexical theory is not true. More precisely, the words Lewis has used to state "the indexical theory" are ambiguous. There are at least three theories that someone might, with some textual justification, claim to find in the passages I have quoted. Each of these theories is either not indexical or not true.

I

The body of this paper will consist of examinations of the several candidates for the office of "indexical theory of actuality." Some groundwork is in order, however. Each of our candidates will be a theory about what it is we are doing when we apply

[3] The question 'Why should anything at all exist *now*?' is not obviously incoherent, despite the fact that 'the present time' is an indexical phrase. This fact might be thought to undermine the claim made in the text. But there is an important difference between times and worlds in virtue of which the two cases are not analogous. Every world has just the "inhabitants" it has *essentially*, while a moment or period of time has *its* "inhabitants" only accidentally. Thus it makes sense to ask why anything exists in, e.g., the twentieth century. (One might answer this question by citing the fact that something existed in the nineteenth century, together with certain conservation laws.) But the inhabitants of a given world are among its individuating conditions: one can no more ask concerning a particular world why it has the inhabitants it has than one can ask concerning a particular set of numbers why it has the members it has. (This much is true whether or not the indexical theory is correct.) Moreover, *if* the indexical theory is true, one cannot ask concerning a given world why it is actual. But surely (granting the intelligibility of the idea of a possible world) to ask why anything at all exists must either be to ask concerning a certain world (the actual one) *why* it is actual or else to ask why it has inhabitants.

the word 'actual' to a possible world. But what is a possible world? If we are not clear about possible worlds, it is not likely that we shall get clear about what it is to call one of them actual. Our answer to the question 'What is a possible world?' ought, I think, to satisfy two conditions. First, it ought to be Lewis's answer, or the sequel is liable to be an *ignoratio elenchi*. Second, it ought to be coherent. Unfortunately, these two reasonable conditions are inconsistent, for (as Stalnaker has pointed out) Lewis's account of what a possible world is is incoherent.[4] Let us see how this incoherency arises. Lewis has a pithy, one-sentence answer to the question 'What is a possible world?': A possible world is a *way things could have been*. He argues for the existence of ways things could have been in a powerful and concise passage, part of which I shall quote:

> It is uncontroversially true that things might be otherwise than they are. I believe, and so do you, that things could have been different in countless ways. But what does this mean? Ordinary language permits the paraphrase: there are many ways things could have been besides the way they actually are. On the face of it, this sentence is an existential quantification. It says that there exist many entities of a certain description, to wit 'ways things could have been'. I believe that things could have been different in countless ways; I believe permissible paraphrases of what I believe; taking the paraphrase at its face value, I therefore believe in the existence of entities that might be called 'ways things could have been'. I prefer to call them 'possible worlds'.
>
> I do not make it an inviolable principle to take seeming existential quantifications in ordinary language at their face value. But I do recognize a presumption in favor of taking sentences at their face value, unless (1) taking them at face value is known to lead to trouble, and (2) taking them some other way is known not to. In this case, neither condition is met. I do not know any successful argument that my realism about possible worlds leads to trouble, unless you beg the question by saying that it already *is* trouble. . . . All the alternatives I know, on the other hand, do lead to trouble.[5]

Like Lewis, I know of no successful argument for the conclusion that realism about "ways things could have been" leads to trouble. Moreover, I believe he adequately supports (in the paragraphs following the quoted passage) the contention that all known alternatives to such a realism do lead to trouble. If this is indeed the case, then the quoted passage and its supporting

[4] See Robert C. Stalnaker, "Possible Worlds," *Noûs* 10 (1976), particularly p. 68.

[5] *Counterfactuals*, p. 84.

passages seem to me to demonstrate conclusively the existence of "ways things could have been." At any rate, the ontological method on display in this passage provides, I think, a paradigm of the right way to settle existence questions in philosophy, and I have never seen any argument against this *sort* of procedure that is at all convincing.

Now the incoherency. Lewis is not consistent about taking possible worlds to be ways things could have been. If we take 'x is a way things could have been' seriously as an extensional open sentence, then surely those objects that satisfy it must be *abstract* objects. But Lewis very often says things about possible worlds that show clearly that he does not think of them as abstract. Consider, for example, the following passage, in which he argues against the view that a possible world is a set of sentences: "given that the actual world does not differ in kind from the rest, [this view] would lead to the conclusion that our actual world is a set of sentences. Since I cannot believe that I and all my surroundings are a set of sentences . . . , I cannot believe that other worlds are sets of sentences either." (*Counterfactuals*, p. 86)

Yes. But neither can *I* believe that I and all my surroundings are a "way things could have been," not even that special one among them that is the way things in fact are. For one thing, it should seem that I and all my surroundings are many things, and thus not identical with *any* one thing, whether it be abstract or concrete. Of course, we might take 'I and all my surroundings' to denote some single thing—say, the cosmos. Now if there is such *a* thing as the cosmos (and perhaps some philosophers would insist that 'the cosmos' must be a disguised plural referring expression), then it must be a concrete object—this huge thing that astronomers investigate, and which we find ourselves within and parts of, as a gear is within and a part of a clock. Therefore, the cosmos, being concrete, is not a way things could have been. Indeed, it is difficult to see any important difference between "ways things could have been" and "ways the cosmos could have been." And surely the cosmos cannot itself be identical with any way the cosmos could have been: to say this would be like saying that Socrates is identical with the way Socrates is, which is plain bad grammar. (This was Stalnaker's point.) Moreover, there is only

one cosmos (or, even if there are many cosmoi—many enormous closed causal systems—they are every one of them contingent objects and it should seem that there *might* have been just one—or none), but there are, and are necessarily, many ways things could have been. Even if there were no cosmos at all, but only an "enormous vacuum," that things were this way would not be a necessary truth, and thus there would exist, despite the absence of *concreta*, *many* ways things could have been.

Lewis's account of possible worlds, therefore, contains mutually incompatible elements, and if our own account is to be coherent it cannot be wholly faithful to Lewis. I think the best we can do is this. Let us retain the notion of a possible world as a way things could have been, and let us reject any suggestion that a possible world is a concrete object; in particular, let us reject any suggestion that "the actual world"—*whatever* 'actual' may mean—is "all this." In other words, let us agree that the actual world is the way things are and carefully distinguish between the way things are and the things that are that way.

It may be that in so altering Lewis's account of possible worlds, I have altered it to the point at which he and I are no longer calling the same things 'possible worlds'. Moreover, it may be that the plausibility of thinking of 'actual' as an indexical word in some way depends on regarding worlds as concrete objects; in that case, I shall be begging the question. But I can see no way to avoid excising *some* important feature of Lewis's account, for being a concrete object and being a way things might be simply do not seem to be compatible properties. It is conceivable that, though I am right about the mutual incompatibility of the several elements of Lewis's account of possible worlds, I have removed the patient from the tumor: perhaps the more reasonable way in which to have repaired Lewis's account would have been to have retained the thesis that possible worlds are concrete objects like the cosmos and to have rejected the thesis that possible worlds are ways things could have been. But this strategy would present us with a difficulty I do not know how to surmount: Lewis's only *argument* for the existence of more than one possible world depends upon his identifying worlds with ways things could have been. I conclude, therefore, that the alteration I have made is the one that permits us to remain as close

to Lewis as possible without sacrificing internal coherence.

We can restate this "purified Lewisian" account of the nature of possible worlds in a way that is at once more precise, closer to ordinary language, and syntactically more convenient, if we replace talk of "ways things could have been" with talk of "possibilities." Such differences in sense as there may be between these two terms seem to me to be not very important, and 'possibilities' has syntactical advantages over Lewis's phrase, in that terms that denote individual possibilities (phrases of the form, 'the possibility that . . . ') lie ready to hand.[6]

Possibilities are either *realized* or *unrealized.* For example, the possibility that Socrates die in the year 399 B.C. is realized, as is the possibility that some 19th-century president of the U.S. who is not the father of any mayor of New York be impeached but not convicted. But the possibility that Plato die in 399 B.C. is unrealized, as is the possibility that every direct descendant of James II who is alive at some time or other during the 18th century rule England at some time or other during either the 18th or the 19th century. (Hereinafter, I shall use 'π' to abbreviate 'the possibility that'.) Phrases like 'π 7 + 5 = 13' are, of course, without a referent—there *is* no such possibility as π 7 + 5 = 13—and may be treated in whatever way the reader thinks is the proper way to treat improper descriptions.

If A and B are possibilities, then we say A *includes* B just in the case that it is impossible for the former to be realized and the latter unrealized. A *precludes* B just in the case that it is impossible for these two possibilities to be jointly realized. Obviously, there are many pairs of possibilities such that neither one includes or precludes the other. If A includes B and B includes A, then A and B are *identical*, are one and the same possibility. Thus, π 2 + 2 = 4 = π 2 + 6= 8, and each of these possibilities (strictly, this possibility) is identical with π iron be malleable or not malleable. This is not to say that, e. g., 'π 2 + 2 = 4' and 'π 2 + 6 = 8' are synonymous, which they are not, but only that they denote the same object, to wit, the possibility that is necessarily realized.

[6] The remainder of this section is a trivial modification of the account of possible worlds presented in chapter 4 of Alvin Plantinga's brilliant book *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford University Press, 1974).

If A is such that for every possibility b, either A includes b or A precludes b, then we say that A is a *comprehensive* possibility, or (a stylistic variant) a *possible world.* To say of a given possible world that it is *actual* is to say of it that it is realized. (This definition of 'actual' is not in competition with the indexical theory. Presumably the indexical theorist will insist on an indexical account of 'realized'.) I shall assume without argument that there is at least one such "possible world," and, moreover, that at least one of them is realized or actual. It follows that exactly one of them is actual. Possible worlds, then, make up a subclass of the class of possibilities, or possibilities as to how things might be, or, in Lewis's language, ways things could have been.

These definitions tell us what a possible world is. In order to complete our account of possible worlds, we must give meanings to the words that are customarily used to express the relations that hold between possible worlds and other objects. That is, we must explain what it is for an object to *exist in* or *at* a given world and we must explain what it is for a proposition to be *true in* or *at* a given world. I offer the following definitions:

o exists at w $=_{df}$ w includes the possibility that o exist

p is true at w $=_{df}$ w includes the possibility that p be true.

The definientia of these two definitions can easily be seen to be equivalent to

if w were actual, o would exist

if w were actual, p would be true,

and I shall generally treat 'o exists at w' and 'p is true at w' as stylistic variants on these two counterfactual sentences.[7] It may

[7] This equivalence holds because the realization of a comprehensive possibility determines the realization or nonrealization, as the case may be, of *every* possibility. Hence counterfactuals about what would be the case if a certain world were actual are equivalent to the corresponding strict conditionals. I prefer to employ the counterfactual definition of 'exists at'

well be that Lewis would not accept these definitions of 'exists in' and 'is true in'. There is certainly no evidence in his writings that he would. I can only say that I know of no other definitions, that these definitions seem eminently reasonable, and that I am not willing to take 'exists in' and 'is true in' to be clear enough to require no definitions.

We now have our account of possible worlds. I believe that this account is what one gets if one thinks carefully through the implications of the idea that a possible world is a way things could have been, and I think that it is therefore legitimate to investigate the indexical theory of actuality by trying to determine whether it is adequate to this account of possible worlds. Moreover, what I say in the remainder of this paper will be applicable to any serious account of possible worlds I know of. All accounts of possible worlds I know of are either incoherent, or so sketchy as to resist serious investigation, or else treat possible worlds as abstract objects. The theories that I know of that treat worlds as abstract objects other than special possibilities treat them as special *states of affairs* (the actual world being the one that *obtains*), as special *propositions* (the actual world being the one that is *true*), or as special *properties* (the actual world being the one that is *instantiated*). It would be easy to restate what I say in the sequel on the assumption that possible worlds are states of affairs, propositions, or properties.

I will now examine individually three theories that might be "the indexical theory of actuality."

II

I will call the following proposition the *Weak Theory*:

At each world, 'the actual world' refers to that world.

So far as I know, no one has said anything in print that commits him to the thesis that the Weak Theory *is* "the indexical theory

and 'is true at' in practice because it is easier than the official definition to grasp intuitively. But we had better let the official definition remain the official definition, in order not to rule out the possibility of a noncircular possible-worlds account of counterfactual conditionals.

of actuality," *is* the theory that Lewis means to be putting forth in the passages I have quoted above. But I have heard this thesis advanced sufficiently often in conversation that I think it deserves to be discussed. In any case, my discussion of it will be brief. I shall show first that the Weak Theory (charitably interpreted) is true, and second that it cannot properly be called an indexical theory. I think it is important to show this because I have heard people say that they accepted the indexical theory when what they really accepted (it eventually transpired) was merely the Weak Theory.

What does it mean to say that 'the actual world' *refers to* a certain world *at* a certain world? More generally, what does it mean to say that a certain expression e *refers to* a certain object x *at* a certain world w? It might be thought that our definition of 'p is true at w' provides an answer to this question. And so it does, but I do not think it is an answer that anyone would want to accept. The answer our definition provides, of course, is

e refers to x at w $=_{df}$ If w were actual, e would refer to x.

But if this definition is accepted, then the Weak Theory is trivially false. There are certainly worlds in which 'the actual world' has a different meaning from its actual meaning. That is to say, there are certainly worlds in which 'the actual world' does not mean what it does in @, where '@' is a proper name for the world that is in fact actual. There is, for example, a world W in which 'actual' means 'present' (like *actuel* in French) and 'world' means 'age' (which it once meant in @). Then, I should think, if W were actual, 'the actual world' would refer not to W but to the present age. Clearly, however, the words I used above to express the Weak Theory are not *supposed* to be interpreted in such a way that this undoubted fact about the meaning 'the actual world' might have had is the *sort* of fact that could refute the Weak Theory. We may solve this problem (rather programmatically) as follows. Let us relativize reference not only to worlds but to languages (cf. the suggestive but unclear claim that 'pain' refers-in-English to pain, but refers-in-French to bread), and think of a *language*, for present purposes, as a set-theoretic object of some

sort, after the manner of formal logicians. Let 'E' designate that "language" whose structure is instantiated in the actual usage of English speakers. Thus, in worlds where the natural language English is at all different, E is simply not "spoken," not instantiated in anyone's linguistic practice. Then we may define 'e refers at w to x' to mean 'If w were actual, e would refer-in-E to x'. If this definition is acceptable, then, I think, we avoid the problem posed by our earlier definition, for if W were actual, then, though 'the actual world' would refer *tout court* to the present age, it would *refer-in-E* to W. And, in general, for any world w, if w were actual, then 'the actual world' would refer-in-E to w. Therefore the Weak Theory is true.

But is the Weak Theory in any interesting sense "indexical"? It is hard to see how this could be. Consider the following statement.

> There are many possible worlds. All of them *exist*, though, of course, only one of them is actual. Its actuality consists in its having a certain property—actuality—that the others all lack, though each of them *might have* had it. This is strictly comparable to the following assertion: 'There are many people who entered the race. All of them exist, though only one of them is *the winner*. His being the winner consists in his having a certain property—having won—that the others all lack, though each of them *might have* had it'.

Surely if any statement is incompatible with any theory that could properly be called an indexical theory, this one is. But this statement is compatible with the Weak Theory. In fact, I should think that anyone who accepted this statement would regard the Weak Theory as a trivial consequence of it: surely *everyone* will agree that if some nonactual world *had* been actual, it would have been denoted (-in-E) by 'the actual world'. Therefore, since the Weak Theory is compatible with a proposition that is incompatible with any theory that is the, or an, indexical theory, the Weak Theory is not the, or an, indexical theory.

III

If the Weak Theory is not an indexical theory, this is not because it is incompatible with the proposition that 'the actual world' is an indexical phrase, but because it leaves out something essential to the idea of indexicality: it does not say the *wrong* things, but it does not say enough of the right ones. The most cursory inspection of the passages I have quoted in which Lewis expounds the indexical theory will show that *one* feature of Lewis's exposition that is unrepresented in the Weak Theory is this: a possible world (like a place or a time) is a *context* or *circumstance of utterance*. This suggests that Lewis's theory may be what I shall call the *Augmented Weak Theory* (AWT):

> At every world w, 'the actual world' refers to w, and to specify the world in which an utterance is spoken is to specify a circumstance under which that utterance is spoken.

AWT, unlike the Weak Theory, does appear to be an indexical theory. For what is an indexical term but one whose reference depends upon the circumstances in which it is uttered? And obviously if AWT is true, then the reference of 'the actual world' depends upon the circumstances in which it is spoken. ('The actual world', according to AWT, is what might be called a reflexive indexical, like 'I', 'here', and 'now', and unlike 'you', 'there', and 'then': its reference depends upon the circumstances of its utterance because its reference is *to* those circumstances, or, at least, to some part or feature of those circumstances.)

But if AWT has the consequence that 'the actual world' is an indexical phrase, it has this consequence only at the expense of having a much more far-reaching consequence: that *every* definite description (with the possible exception of "rigid" definite descriptions like 'the even prime') is an indexical phrase. Take, for example, 'the originator of the Theory of Relativity'. Though Einstein in fact enjoys the distinction of being the referent of this phrase, he might not have. There are worlds in which, e.g., Calvin Coolidge is the originator of the Theory of Relativity. It is easy to see that it follows from this fact together with the second conjunct of AWT that the phrase 'the originator of the

Theory of Relativity' is an indexical phrase. Consider a world W in which Coolidge was the originator of the Theory of Relativity. Suppose someone in W utters the sentence, 'The originator of the Theory of Relativity was a man of few words'. Then that person refers to Coolidge by saying 'the originator of the Theory of Relativity'. And thus (a possible world being a circumstance of utterance), 'the originator of the Theory of Relativity' depends for its reference upon the circumstances in which it is uttered, as does any other "nonrigid" description. It is true that, according to AWT, 'the actual world' is a *reflexive* indexical and 'the originator of the Theory of Relativity' is not, but I cannot see that this fact does anything to make the consequences of AWT any less counterintuitive. An irreflexive indexical is nevertheless an indexical, and 'the originator of the Theory of Relativity' ought not to be any sort of indexical.

Well, why not? Why *shouldn't* 'the originator of the Theory of Relativity' be an indexical? Upon examining the intuitions that underlie this conviction, I find that they may be embodied in the following principle:

> (P) If R is a referring phrase, and if it is not possible that there be distinct occasions of utterance A and B such that, on occasion A, R refers to some object O, and, on B, R does *not* refer to O, then R is not indexical.

It is easy to see that both 'the originator of the Theory of Relativity' and 'the actual world' are nonindexical according to (P). It is possible that there be an occasion of utterance on which 'the originator of the Theory of Relativity' refers to Einstein and possible that there be an occasion on which it refers to Coolidge. It is possible that there be an occasion of utterance on which 'the actual world' refers to @ and possible that there be an occasion on which 'the actual world' refers to W. But we cannot infer from these conjunctions alone that either term is indexical, for the argument-form:

$$\begin{array}{l} \Diamond p \ \& \ \Diamond q \\ \therefore \ \Diamond(p \ \& \ q) \end{array}$$

is a notorious fallacy.

To this argument the defender of AWT has an obvious reply: "But you are simply begging the question. Your application of Principle (P) evidently depends on the assumption that an 'occasion of utterance' is something like a speaker-place-time triple. You are ignoring the fact that, according to AWT, a possible world is a circumstance of utterance. Therefore, according to AWT, an occasion of utterance must be thought of as something like a speaker-place-time-world quadruple. Hence it does not follow that there cannot be distinct occasions of utterance on which 'the actual world' refers to different objects. In fact, it follows that there *are* distinct occasions of utterance on which it refers to different objects. I must concede that it *also* follows that there are distinct occasions of utterance on which 'the originator of the Theory of Relativity' refers to different objects. But I will grasp the nettle with my fist: 'the originator of the Theory of Relativity' *is* an indexical phrase. I will admit that 'the originator of the Theory of Relativity' is not quite like 'I' or 'over there' or 'the first president of this country'. These are (as one might call them) *intramundane* indexicals, while 'the originator of the Theory of Relativity', like 'the actual world', is a *transmundane* indexical. That is, while the referent of, e.g., 'I' can differ from occasion to occasion of utterance *within* a given world, the referent of 'the originator of the Theory of Relativity' differs on two occasions only if these occasions are in different worlds. I'll grant that when philosophers have talked about indexicals in the past they have probably been thinking only of intramundane indexicals. But transmundane indexicals *are* indexicals, albeit their indexicality has hitherto escaped our attention."

Now it seems to me that if this defense of AWT is coherent at all, it requires us to understand 'indexical' in a new and extended sense, comparable to the new and extended sense logicians gave to 'predicate-letter' when they began to treat sentence-letters as "0-place predicate-letters." This new usage did not, of course, represent a discovery by logicians (the discovery that closed sentences had all along been predicates), but a stipulation. If this is the case, then AWT begins to appear less exciting. It is exciting to suppose that 'the actual world' is a description like 'the present time'; less exciting to suppose it is a description like 'the originator of the Theory of Relativity'. In fact that seems to be what

we believed in the first place: that a certain world, @, is distinguished from all other worlds by being the actual world in the same sense of *distinguished* in which a certain man, Einstein, is distinguished from all other men by being the originator of the Theory of Relativity.

One more point needs to be made about AWT. I have suggested that if AWT is coherent, its content is not very interesting, since that content seems to consist mainly of a device for applying the word 'indexical' in a new and misleading way. But it is not at all clear that AWT is coherent because it is not at all clear that this device (that of interpreting 'occasion of utterance' in such a way that possible worlds are among the ingredients that individuate occasions of utterance) is coherent.

According to AWT, there must be such a thing as *the* world in which an utterance containing 'the actual world' is spoken. This is evident from the very wording of AWT, and it should be clear intuitively why this is so. (Consider, for example, 'now'. Each utterance of this word must take place at exactly one time. If there were many different times at which a given utterance of 'now' took place, then it is very hard to see how this utterance could refer to *any* time.) But it does not seem to be the case that each utterance of 'the actual world' takes place in a single world. Last week, talking to my class in the philosophy of religion, I said, "There is much evil in the actual world." This utterance of 'the actual world' was, I suppose, a particular event, and, I would suppose, *this very event* took place in many distinct possible worlds. It seems evident, for example, that if any given electron in the Andromeda galaxy had failed to exist, this event (my utterance of 'the actual world') would nevertheless have taken place. But if this is the case, if events in general, and utterances of 'the actual world' in particular, are not what Plantinga has called "world-bound individuals," then AWT is incoherent (just as a theory that held that an utterance of 'now' referred to the time at which it was spoken would be incoherent if every utterance of 'now' *necessarily* was spoken at many different times).

I can think of no reason to suppose that concrete events like utterances are confined to single worlds that would not also be a reason for thinking that *all* particular objects are confined to single worlds. And no reason I know of for thinking *that* is a good

reason. It is well known that Lewis has devised a theory called "Counterpart Theory" that embodies just this assumption.[8] (I doubt it is an accident that Lewis is the originator of both Counterpart Theory and the indexical theory.) Some philosophers, most notably Plantinga, have attempted to show that Counterpart Theory has absurd semantical and metaphysical consequences.[9] Other philosophers have denied this. This is not the place for me to enter that debate, and I will close this section with three observations that do not commit me to taking any particular position about the semantical or metaphysical adequacy of Counterpart Theory.

(i) Counterpart Theory is *prima facie* wrong, which is not of course to say that it is wrong.

(ii) There are no known good reasons for trying to see whether the *prima facie* objections to Counterpart Theory can be met. The only motivation that has ever been suggested for Counterpart Theory is this: it solves, or, perhaps, avoids, the "problem of trans-world identity." But, as Plantinga has shown, there are no intelligible statements of this "problem."[10]

(iii) Few philosophers other than Lewis are attracted to Counterpart Theory. Any theory of actuality that presupposes the truth of Counterpart Theory (as AWT would seem to) is too special and too partisan to be of much interest to the generality of philosophers.

IV

If principle (P) is true, and if 'occasion of utterance' is interpreted in some way that does not lead to all nonrigid definite descriptions being indexical terms, then 'the actual world' is not an indexical term. But I can claim no more for (P) than that I

[8] See his "Counterpart Theory and Quantified Modal Logic," *The Journal of Philosophy* 65 (1968): pp. 113–26.

[9] See *The Nature of Necessity*, pp. 102–20.

[10] See *The Nature of Necessity*, pp. 88–101.

find it plausible. I must concede that there are certain phrases (phrases which, interestingly enough, purport to denote possible worlds) that may well be counterexamples to (P). One such is a particular favorite of Lewis's: 'the world we inhabit'. Another, 'this world', is in common usage. If these phrases *are* indexical, then, clearly, (P) is false, since neither of them is such that it could refer to two different objects on two occasions of utterance. I am inclined not to regard these phrases as indexical, but I have no real reason for this other than my fondness for (P). There is certainly a not-too-bad *argument* for their indexicality: each contains a paradigmatically indexical word ('we' in the one case, 'this' in the other). Moreover, while some phrases contain indexical words but only in an adventitious way (for example, 'the man who is this man if this man is the tallest man and is the tallest man otherwise'), these two phrases do not *seem* to fall into this category.

In the sequel, I shall suppress my fondness for (P) and assume for the sake of argument that 'the world we inhabit' and 'this world' can properly be called indexical. If this is so, then it is evident that there are two propositions either of which could serve as a premise from which something that might reasonably be called an indexical theory of actuality could be derived:

(a) 'The actual world' means 'the world we inhabit'

(b) 'The actual world' means 'this world'.

Lewis nowhere, so far as I know, explicitly endorses either (a) or (b). But the passage quoted above from *Counterfactuals* ("We call it alone actual . . . because it is the world we inhabit") suggests that he might very well accept (a). And perhaps some philosophers would accept (b). At any rate, many philosophers seem to use 'the actual world' and 'this world' more or less interchangeably.

However this may be, the important question is, is either (a) or (b) *true*? I think that both (a) and (b) are false, and I shall present brief arguments for this conclusion. These arguments, unfortunately, will depend on rather special features of (a) and (b), and will contain some controversial premises. I could argue

at greater length for these controversial premises than I am in fact going to do, but I do not think the game is worth the candle. Instead of defending these arguments at length, I shall proceed to argue that no indexical theory of the *sort* that could be deduced from premises *like* (a) or (b) could possibly be right.

Let us first consider (a). What does 'the world we inhabit' mean? This phrase can mean only 'the world we exist in'. And this latter phrase is a necessarily improper description (like 'the volume of space we are within' or 'the odd prime'). This is the case since each of us might have been at least a bit different and each of us, therefore, exists in more than one possible world.

According to Counterpart Theory, of course, it is (informally speaking) neither true that anyone exists in more than one possible world nor true that our existence in more than one world follows from the proposition that each of us might have been a bit different. But, as we saw in Part III, any theory of actuality that presupposes Counterpart Theory is objectionable. Therefore (a) is objectionable.

Premise (b) is more tricky. All of us who use the language of possible worlds occasionally speak of "this world," and no one seems to be much troubled by this phrase. But I am doubtful whether it has any very clear meaning. I am doubtful about this because I am doubtful about whether it is possible to make ostensive reference to the actual world (or to any world; but, presumably, if it is possible to make ostensive reference to any world, it is possible to make ostensive reference to the actual world). The problem is this: each of us exists in many worlds and, moreover, exists in many worlds epistemically indistinguishable from the actual world. (I shall not define 'epistemically indistinguishable', but clearly there is some sense in which some worlds that contain just one more elementary particle than the actual world does are "epistemically indistinguishable" from it.) Now if it is possible to make ostensive reference to the actual world, then there must be some sense in which the actual world is salient for us, some way in which it stands out. But how could it stand out among all those worlds from which it is *indistinguishable*? (In considering this question, the reader should recall that the actual world, like the other worlds, is an abstract object;

thus neither it nor any part of it—whatever precisely 'part' might mean in this context—is present to our senses. The *causal* relations that obtain between us and the actual world are just those that obtain between us and any other world: none at all.)

One might be tempted to say that there is one property the actual world has that no other has: *actuality* (though it is not clear that the *indexical* theorist would be tempted to say this) and that actuality is sufficient for salience. I do not see this. Let us remember what a possible world is. A possible world is a possibility. The actual world is the comprehensive possibility that is realized. Let us note that a possibility's being realized does not in any obvious sense make it somehow more salient than "similar" possibilities that are not realized. Consider, for example, the possibility that there be an odd number of trees in Canada and the possibility that there be an even number of trees in Canada. One or the other of these possibilities is realized. But the one that is realized does not stand out, or the other fade into the background. Therefore, being realized is not *per se* a property that makes a possibility salient, any more than truth is a property that makes a *proposition* salient. Now this is not to say that there may not be a *certain class* of possibilities such that (i) exactly one member of that class must be realized and (ii) the member that is realized will be salient in comparison with the other members. Perhaps the class {π there be conscious beings, π there be no conscious beings} is such a class. And perhaps the class of all comprehensive possibilities is such a class. If it is, then my doubts about making ostensive reference to the actual world are unfounded. But I see no reason to think it is, since the class of possible worlds contains many members that are indistinguishable from the actual world, or are "distinguishable" only as the possibility that there be an odd number of trees in Canada and the possibility that there be an even number of trees in Canada: by the simple possession or nonpossession of the property of being realized.[11]

[11] The referee strenuously objects to this argument. The heart of his objection is contained in this example: "Why does something have to 'stand out' in some epistemically distinguishable way to be an object of ostensive reference? Suppose I am lying in bed at night, unable to sleep. Several times I say to myself, 'I wonder what time it is now?' It seems to me that I succeed

If I am right about all this, then (b) is false, since 'this world' does not mean anything in particular. An adequate defense of this thesis would have to be rather more extensive than this, however. If I were seriously to argue that 'this world' is meaningless, I should at least have to explain, or explain away, our apparently perfectly meaningful use of sentences like, 'This is the best of all possible worlds' and 'No unicorns exist in this world'. I think I could do this, but to do it would require a great deal of rather tedious argument by analogy. Fortunately this will not be necessary, since it is fairly easy to see that even if one could refer to the actual world as 'this world', (b) must nevertheless be false. Moreover, a similar argument could be used to show that even if one could refer to the actual world as 'the world we inhabit', (a) must nevertheless be false.

Plantinga has convincingly shown the falsity of (b) (on the assumption that one can refer to the actual world as 'this world') in *The Nature of Necessity*. (See pp. 49–51.) I shall not repeat his argument here. Nor shall I adapt it to the task of showing that (a) is false (even assuming that 'the world we inhabit' denotes the actual world), though this would be easy to do. I shall instead generalize the insights that underlie his argument to show that any indexical theory that could be deduced from premises like (a) and (b) must be wrong.

If 'this world' designates anything, then it designates @ rigidly. And, presumably, if some other world had been actual, 'this world' would have designated (-in-E) *that* world rigidly; that is to say, at each world, 'this world' designates *that* world rigidly. Now if 'this world' and 'the actual world' mean the same, then it seems unavoidable to suppose that at each world, 'the actual world' designates that world rigidly. And the same consequence seems to follow if 'the world we inhabit' (supposing that phrase to be capable of designating anything) and 'the actual world' mean the same, since 'the world we inhabit' would

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in referring ostensively, or demonstratively, to particular times each time I say 'now,' even if there is nothing distinctive about the times—even if I can't tell them from each other." But there *is* something distinctive about these times: each is *the* time at which certain thoughts and sensations of the insomniac occur, events which he in some sense experiences or is aware of. No world, however, is *the* world at which any event that anyone is aware of occurs.

seem to designate @ rigidly if—*per impossibile*—it designates anything at all.[12] Thus any indexical theory that could be deduced from (a) or (b) would have the consequence that, at any world, 'the actual world' designated (-in-E) that world rigidly. Now even if I am right in thinking that 'the world we inhabit' and 'this world' are incoherent phrases, it might still be true that 'the actual world' designates each world rigidly at that world. In fact, perhaps that just *is* the indexical theory. A referee for *The Philosophical Review* so interprets the indexical theory and, quite possibly, this interpretation is correct. Let us call the thesis that at each world 'the actual world' designates that world rigidly, the *Strong Theory* (ST).

Part III of this paper consisted essentially of an argument for the conclusion that the second conjunct of AWT is false. But, since ST does not claim that a world is a context of utterance, the arguments of Part III do not refute ST. The arguments presented earlier in the present section refute or purport to refute two "special versions" of ST—or, more precisely, refute two propositions each of which entails ST—but do not refute ST itself. Let us, therefore, examine ST.

There are three questions we might ask about ST: Is it Lewis's theory? Is it properly called an indexical theory? Is it true? I shall say just a bit about the first two of these questions and discuss the third at some length.

I am not sure whether Lewis's theory is AWT or ST or some third thing. Because of the stress that Lewis lays on "contexts of utterance," I am inclined to think that he accepts AWT. On the other hand, the *examples* Lewis gives of indexical terms—'I', 'you', 'here', 'now'—designate rigidly (in context), so there is something to be said for the "strong" interpretation of Lewis's words.[13] But perhaps the question is not terribly important,

[12] For example, if, *per impossibile*, there were only one possible world, 'the world we exist in' would designate it rigidly; or if, *per impossibile*, Counterpart Theory were true on its intended interpretation, 'the world we exist in' would designate the actual world rigidly.

[13] It may well be that Lewis's theory is what we might call the Augmented Strong Theory: the theory that (i) at each world 'the actual world' designates that world rigidly and (ii) a world is a circumstance of utterance. The Augmented Strong Theory is, of course, objectionable *both* for the reasons presented in the present section and for those presented in the previous section.

for ST is an interesting theory, whoever holds it.

Should ST be called an *indexical* theory? Not if (P) is true. But then perhaps (P) isn't true. Moreover, whether or not ST should be *called* indexical, it has a feature that will be attractive to those who are attracted to "indexical" theories: for any possible world, if someone applies to that world *at* that world a predicate meaning what 'is actual' in fact means, then he says something true; not merely something true *at that world*, but something true at @. Thus ST, whether or not it is properly *the*, or even *an*, indexical theory of actuality, does the job an indexical theory is supposed to do: it militates against one's tendency to think of @ as in some important sense *unique*, as being the sole possessor of a property, actuality, that all worlds strive for but only one attains. Thus, ST, whether or not it *is* the indexical theory, has the same sort of importance I earlier claimed for the indexical theory. For example, let us consider again the question, 'Why should there exist anything (contingent) at all?' This question would seem to be equivalent to the question, 'Why did one of the worlds in which something contingent exists win the competition for the possession of actuality, rather than the world (or one of the worlds, if there are more than one) in which nothing contingent exists?' And this question is obviously incoherent if ST is true.

Is ST true? I think it can be shown that it is not. In order to see what is wrong with ST, let us state it more precisely and formally and examine its consequences:

> ST For any world w and any sentence-of-E s containing 'the actual world', s expresses-in-E at w a proposition necessarily equivalent to the proposition expressed-in-E at w by the sentence obtained by replacing each occurrence in s of 'the actual world' by a proper name of w.

Now consider the proposition

(1) In the actual world, Caesar was murdered.

According to ST, this proposition is equivalent to

(2) In @, Caesar was murdered,

which is necessarily true. But surely (1) is *not* a necessary truth. Or perhaps I should not say this. Perhaps this thesis, perverse as it may seem, is just what the proponent of ST wishes to accept. At any rate, perhaps he will be *willing* to accept it.

What else must he be willing to accept? A great deal. Consider the proposition

@ might not have been actual.

If ST is true, then this proposition is a necessary falsehood, being equivalent to

@ might not have been @.

More generally, since

$\forall$w, w $\neq$ @, w could not possibly have been @,

ST has the consequence

(3) $\forall$w, w $\neq$ @, w could not possibly have been actual.

Shall the proponent of ST simply *accept* this consequence? Well, perhaps so. But what, exactly, would he be accepting? I assume he thinks there are worlds other than @—if there are not, of course, then it is trivially true that no world other than @ could have been actual—for if there are not, then the true and the necessarily true and the possible coincide. Now let W be one of these worlds that is not @. Is W a *possible* world? Note that, according to ST, we have

W could not possibly have been actual.

But what could be meant by calling a world "possible" except that it is a world that might possibly be actual? Nothing that

I can see, for that just *is* what 'possible' means in the phrase 'possible world': 'possibly actual' (just as 'possible' in 'possible proposition' means 'possibly true', and 'possible' in 'possible property' means 'possibly instantiated').

So it would seem that ST is simply incoherent: it either leads to the consequence that there is only one possible world (and hence to the collapse of all modal distinctions), or else it leaves 'possible world' without any graspable sense whatever.

The reader may be inclined to think that the weak step in this *reductio* of ST is the argument for (3). After all (the reader may want to protest), consider any world other than @—say, W again. Though ST may have the consequence that W could not have been actual *from our point of view*, surely this theory also entails that W not only could be but *is* actual *from its own point of view*? Alas, no. This is not a consequence of ST. All that follows from ST is that the sentence-of-E 'W is actual' expresses at W a proposition that is true at W. In fact, it expresses at W a proposition that is true at all worlds: the proposition that W = W, or, at least, a proposition necessarily equivalent to that proposition. And we agree with *that*. "Points of view," whatever they may be, have nothing to do with the matter, since the proposition expressed at W by 'W is actual' is true from *everyone's* point of view. (That is, in every world. Of course, there is really no interesting sense in which a possible world is a "point of view," any more than there is an interesting sense in which a possible world is a context of utterance.) Moreover, what we express by '@ is actual'—that is, what these words *do* express, as opposed to what they *might* express—is, if ST is correct, something that is true "from the point of view of W." Thus, this objection comes to nothing, and our proof that no world save @ could possibly have been actual stands. It is true, of course, that in my statement of this result 'actual' has the content its meaning assigns to it "for use in @." But that's all right, isn't it? What other content could, or should, it have?

Perhaps someone will suspect that this is *not* all right. Let him, then, consider the following line of reasoning. Suppose I want to find out what property actuality is. Someone tells me that the word 'actuality' has (in the language in which I framed my metaphysical question) the following meaning: at

each world it rigidly designates the property of being identical with that world (or a property necessarily coextensive with that property). Suppose I believe him. Then I can correctly infer that actuality is the property of being identical with @ (or a property necessarily coextensive with that property), and that no world that lacks actuality could possibly have had it; that is, that @ is the only possible world. But this result is absurd, and, therefore, ST is false.[14] And, therefore, the indexical theory of actuality is false unless it is some theory other than ST or AWT.[15] But if the indexical theory is neither ST nor AWT, then it is very hard to see what it might be.[16]

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[14] Lewis and others who discuss the indexical theory are fond of drawing analogies between modal language and temporal language. While I do not generally find such analogies very convincing, I will mention in passing that I think that arguments like those used above could be constructed to show that the meaning of 'the present moment' cannot be correctly explained by saying that at each moment it rigidly designates that moment.

[15] Lewis nowhere presents what is clearly intended to be an argument for the indexical theory, unless one counts as an argument his claim in "Anselm and Actuality" (p. 186) that the "strongest evidence" for the indexical theory is that it "explains why skepticism about our own actuality is absurd." But what does 'our own actuality' mean? Or, to ask the same question in a rather more perspicuous form, what does 'I am actual' mean? I can see nothing this phrase could mean but 'I exist in the actual world'—that is, 'I exist in whatever world is actual', not 'I exist in @'—and this is equivalent to 'I exist'. And surely we do not need any recondite theory of actuality to explain why skepticism about one's own existence is absurd.

[16] I should like to thank a referee for *The Philosophical Review* for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper, and, in particular, for calling to my attention the possibility that the indexical theory may be what I have called the Strong Theory.

I owe a great debt to Alvin Plantinga. Our discussions of the indexical theory have done so much to shape my thinking that I cannot say with any confidence that any of the ideas presented in this paper is original with me.