

## ON EXISTENTIALISM

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According to Jean Paul Sartre, existentialism is the view that existence precedes essence. As I shall use the term, existentialism is the thesis that existence, even if it does not precede essence, is at any rate not preceded by it. Let me explain.

## I. EXISTENTIALISM EXPOUNDED

Suppose we begin by endorsing or at any rate not contesting the view that objects have individual essences. An individual essence  $E$  of an object  $x$  is a property that meets two conditions: (1)  $E$  is essential to  $x$ , so that it is not possible that  $x$  exist but lack  $E$ , and (2)  $E$  is essentially unique to  $x$ , so that it is not possible that there should have been an object distinct from  $x$  that had  $E$ . I believe it is obvious that there are individual essences. Consider, for example, the property of being William F. Buckley or being identical with William F. Buckley. Surely that property is essential to Buckley; he couldn't have existed but lacked it. (Of course he could have lacked the name 'William F. Buckley'; no doubt his parents could have named him 'Pico della Mirandola' if they'd wished.) But the property in question is also essentially unique to him; it is not possible that someone distinct from Buckley should have had the property of being identical with William F. Buckley. One kind of essence, then, is the property of being identical with some object — i.e. the property, for some object  $x$ , of being identical with  $x$ . Following Robert Adams and Duns Scotus, suppose we call such a property a *thisness*; the thisness of an individual is the property of being that individual. It is not necessary that we use proper names to specify or refer to thisnesses; when I use the words "the property of being I" or "the property of being identical with me", the property they denote is a thisness. And consider the meanest man in North Dakota: the property of being identical with *him* is also a thisness.

So objects have thisnesses and thisnesses are essences. One existentialist thesis – a thesis endorsed by Arthur Prior, Robert Adams, Kit Fine and others – can be stated as follows: thisnesses are ontologically dependent upon their exemplifications. Take any thisness  $t$  and the object  $x$  of which  $t$  is the thisness;  $t$  could not have existed if  $x$  had not. If Buckley had not existed, then his thisness would not have existed. Every thisness has *essentially* the property of being exemplified by the object that does in fact exemplify it. More exactly, the thesis in question is that it is *necessary* that every thisness has that property; it is not as if there could have been thisnesses that could have lacked the property in question.

This existentialist thesis can be extended. Let's say that a property is *quidditative* if it is either a thisness or involves a thisness in a certain way. We could try to spell out the way in question in formal and recursive detail; but instead let me just give some examples. *Being identical with Nero* or *being Nero* is a quidditative property; but so are *being more blood-thirsty than Nero*, *being either Nero or Cicero*, *being either Nero or wise*, *being possibly wiser than Nero*, *being believed by Nero to be treacherous*, and *being such that there is someone more bloodthirsty than Nero*. We may contrast the notion of a quidditative property with that of a *qualitative* property. Again, I shall not try to give a *definition* of this notion; but examples would be *being wise*, *being 14 years old*, *being angry*, *being learned*, *being six feet from a desk*, and the like. If  $P$  and  $Q$  are qualitative properties, then so is their conjunction, their disjunction, the complement of each, *being such that there is something that has  $P$* , and *possibly having  $P$* . And the more general existentialist thesis is that while qualitative properties may be necessary beings and exist in every possible world, quidditative properties are ontologically dependent upon the objects whose thisnesses they involve. Of course the thisness of a *necessary* being – God, perhaps, or to use a theologically less dramatic example, the number seven – exists necessarily, just as does the object of which it is a thisness; and the same goes for any quidditative property that involves only thisnesses of necessary beings. But such a quidditative property as *being wiser than Buckley* could not have existed if he had not.

The first existentialist thesis, therefore, is that quidditative properties are ontologically dependent upon the individuals whose thisnesses they involve. And a second existentialist thesis is like unto the first. Consider the propositions

(1) William F. Buckley is wise

and

(2) The Lion of Conservativism is wise.

The first, we might think, involves Buckley in a more direct and intimate way than does the second. The second refers to him, so to say, only accidentally — only by virtue of the fact that he happens to be the Lion of Conservativism. (1), on the other hand, makes a direct reference to him, or to use Arthur Prior's term, is "directly about"<sup>1</sup> him. Now it is not easy to say just what *direct aboutness* is or when a proposition is directly about an object; and for our purposes it isn't crucially important. Instead of trying to explain that notion, I shall say that a proposition directly about some object is a *singular* proposition and give some examples: *Buckley is wise*, *either Buckley is wise or  $2 + 1 = 3$* , *possibly Buckley is wise*, *it's not the case that Buckley is wise*, *someone is wiser than Buckley*, *Sam believes that Buckley is wise* and *possibly Buckley does not exist* are all singular propositions. If we think of propositions as having constituents, we may think of a singular proposition as one that has either at least one individual or at least one quidditative property as a constituent. And the second existentialist thesis — accepted again by Adams, Fine, Prior and others — is this: a singular proposition is ontologically dependent upon the individuals it is directly about. So if Buckley had not existed, then, on this view, none of the above propositions would have so much as seen the light of day.

Existentialism, therefore, is the claim that quidditative properties and singular propositions are ontologically dependent upon the individuals they involve.<sup>2</sup> I don't know whether continental *Angst* would be the appropriate reaction to the truth of existentialism, if indeed it were true, but in any event I propose to argue that it is false. First, however, we must try to get a sense of what it is that leads people to accept existentialism.

## II. WHY ACCEPT EXISTENTIALISM?

I wish to consider two lines of argument for existentialism, one for each of the two characteristic existentialist theses. But first we must briefly take note of a doctrine presupposed by both lines of argument. As we have learned at our mother's knees, Meinong and his cohorts held that in addition to all the

things that exist — houses, horses, men and mice — there are some more things — golden mountains and round squares, perhaps — that do not. I've argued elsewhere<sup>3</sup> that this claim is mistaken; here let's just agree, for purposes of argument, that the claim is false. Let's agree that there neither are nor could have been any nonexistent objects; it's a necessary truth that there aren't any. This view is sometimes called 'actualism'; I shall follow this custom, but with a *caveat*. 'Actualism' is a misleading name for the view in question; it suggests the idea that whatever is, is *actual*. But that is false. There are many states of affairs — for example *London's being smaller than Los Angeles* — that don't obtain, are not actual. Of course these unactual states of affairs *exist* all right — they exist just as robustly as your most solidly actual state of affairs. But they aren't actual. So there are any number of things that aren't actual; what there aren't any of is things that don't *exist*. 'Existentialism' would be a better sobriquet for the view in question, but of course that name has already been preempted; so 'actualism' will have to do. And let's use '*serious actualism*' as a name for the claim that necessarily, no object could have had a property or stood in a relation without existing — the view, that is, that nothing has any properties in any world in which it does not exist.

Now suppose we return to existentialism. We might initially be inclined to reject it by arguing that singular propositions and quidditative properties are abstract objects and therefore exist necessarily. But not all abstract objects are necessary beings; sets with contingent members, for example are not — not, at least, if serious actualism is correct. For if it is, then if Quine had not existed, Quine's singleton would not have contained him. But surely Quine's singleton could not have existed but been empty (in which case it would have been the null set); neither could it have contained something distinct from Quine. *Containing Quine* and *containing nothing distinct from Quine* are surely essential properties of Quine's singleton; hence there is no possible world in which it exists but he does not. Quine's singleton, then, is just as contingent as is Quine himself. And of course the same goes for other sets that contain him. If Quine had not existed, the set in fact denoted by the phrase 'the set of human beings' would not have existed. Of course that phrase would have denoted a set, even if Quine had not existed — but a *different* set.

So not all abstract objects are necessary beings. Still, what about properties? It is natural to think, indeed, that a crucial difference between sets and

properties lies just here. Sets are ontologically dependent upon their members;

hence a set with a contingent member is itself contingent. But properties with contingent exemplification typically aren't ontologically dependent upon those exemplifications. The set of dogs – the set that is in fact the set of dogs – would not have existed had my dog Mischa or any other dog failed to exist; but the property *being a dog* can get by perfectly well whether or not there are any dogs at all. Why suppose it is any different with quidditative properties?

Robert Adams offers an argument: “to be the property of being identical with a particular individual is to stand in a unique relationship to that individual. ... So if there were a thisness of a non-actual individual, it would stand in a relation to that individual. But according to actualism non-actual individuals cannot enter into any relations. It seems to follow that according to actualism there cannot be a thisness of a non-actual individual.<sup>4</sup> But this statement of the issue isn't wholly accurate. The question isn't whether there are thisnesses of non-actual, i.e., non-existent individuals – of course there aren't, because there aren't any nonexistent individuals. In the same way there aren't any shapes of nonexistent individuals – i.e., no shape is the shape of a nonexistent individual. The question is rather whether any thisness could have existed if what it is the thisness of had not. The question is whether, for example, my thisness could have existed if I hadn't. Of course if I hadn't existed, the property that is *in fact* my thisness wouldn't have been my thisness; it would not have been related to me by the relation *being the thisness of*. But it doesn't follow that it couldn't have existed if I hadn't. If I hadn't existed, my brother-in-law would not have been my brother-in-law; he would not have had the property of being related to me by the brother-in-law relation. But it doesn't follow that he couldn't have existed if I hadn't. Having that property is not essential to him; he could have existed whether or not I had. And of course the question about me and my thisness is whether the property of being exemplified by me is essential to it. Since we are given that the property *being exemplified by me if at all* is essential to it, the real question is whether *being exemplified* is essential to it: and it isn't in the least obvious that it is. Adams holds that an object may have a *qualitative* essence – an essence that doesn't involve a thisness – and the qualitative essence – an essence that doesn't involve a thisness – and the qualitative essence of an object, he thinks, would have existed even if the object hadn't. Of course if I

had not existed, my qualitative essence wouldn't have been my qualitative essence; it wouldn't have been related to me by the *is-the-qualitative-essence-of* relation. But it could have existed even if I hadn't. Why suppose things are different in the case of my thisness?

Taken as an argument, therefore, the above considerations are inconclusive. I suspect, however, that they aren't really intended as an argument; they are more like an appeal to intuition. Isn't it just clear or obvious that the property *being Socrates* could not have existed if Socrates had not existed? What would my thisness have *been*, if I hadn't existed? But it doesn't seem to me, on reflection, to be the least bit obvious. And would my thisness have been, if I hadn't existed? It would have been an unexemplified essence that could have been the thisness of something.

I turn now to the line of argument for the second existentialist thesis – the thesis that singular propositions are ontologically dependent upon the objects they are directly about. Consider again

(1) William F. Buckley is wise

and

(2) The Lion of Conservatism is wise.

On the view in question (1) could have failed to exist, and would have done so if Buckley had not existed. (2), on the other hand, is quite impervious to the harrowing vicissitudes besetting contingent objects, and would have existed no matter what. Why the difference?

One line of argument, or at any rate one “consideration determining the intellect,” to use John Stuart Mill's phrase, goes as follows. It is plausible to join Mill in supposing that “Proper Names are not connotative; they denote the individuals who are called by them, but they do not indicate or imply an attribute as belonging to these individuals”.<sup>5</sup> Proper names, says Mill, have denotation but no connotation: a proper name denotes its referent but does not express a property. He seems to mean that the sole semantic function performed by a proper name is that of denoting its referent; its semantic function is *exhausted* in denoting its referent. The first premiss of this argument, then, is that proper names do not express properties. The second premiss is the plausible view that sentences containing proper names do in fact express propositions. And the third premiss is that a proposition is an articulated structure containing *constituents* standing in relation to each

other. It's not at all clear what a constituent of a proposition is supposed to be; but among the constituents of the proposition *all men are mortal* one would find, presumably, the properties *humanity* and *mortality*.

Now suppose you accept these three premisses: what sort of proposition will be expressed by a sentence like (1) if the proper name it contains does not express a property? What would be the constituents of such a proposition – what would be, so to speak, its subject-place constituent? What more natural than to take William F. Buckley himself, that fogleman of the right, as a constituent of the proposition expressed by (1)? On this view, singular propositions include among their constituents not just abstracta, such as Buckley's essence, but concreta, such as Buckley himself. If one holds that propositions have constituents, that proper names do not express properties, and that sentences containing them express propositions, then the view that such propositions contain concrete objects as constituents can seem quite compelling.

Now those who think that propositions have constituents, think of the constituency relation as essential to the constituttee, but not, in the general case, to the constituent; that is, if *a* is a constituent of *b*, then *b* couldn't exist without having *a* as a constituent, although it is not true in general that *b* could not have existed with being a constituent of *a*. Both William F. Buckley and Paul X. Zwier are constituents of the proposition *Paul Zwier is more conservative than William Buckley*; so if either of them had failed to exist, the same fate would have befallen that proposition. Obviously, however, Buckley could have existed even if Zwier hadn't; accordingly Buckley could have existed even if that proposition hadn't. And hence (given serious actualism) being a constituent of it is not essential to him. So the fourth premiss of the argument is: if a concrete object *O* is a constituent of a proposition *P*, then *P* is ontologically dependent upon *O*. To summarize the argument, then: sentences containing proper names express propositions that have concrete and contingent objects as constituents. But the constituency relation is essential to the constituted object; hence singular propositions – many of them, at any rate – are ontologically dependent upon contingent individuals.

Now I think this is at best a weak argument for the existentialist thesis in question; and its weakness results from the obscurity of the premisses involving the notion of *constituency*. What exactly, or even approximately, is this relationship *being a constituent of*? Do we know or have reason to suspect that propositions *have* constituents? What can we say about the

relation that holds between an object – a concept, property, concrete individual or whatever – and a proposition, when the former is a constituent of the latter? Maybe not much. Some philosophers suggest that the sort of proposition expressed by sentences like (1) can be *represented by* or *taken as* a set-theoretical entity of some sort – an ordered pair, perhaps, whose first member is William F. Buckley and whose second is the property of being wise. Of course if this proposition *were* such an ordered pair, then perhaps we could say what its constituents were: perhaps they would be the members of its transitive closure. Presumably, however, the claim is not that such propositions *really are* ordered pairs, but only that we can fittingly *represent* or *take* them as such, in the way in which for some purposes we can take the natural numbers as sets of one kind or another. We have imbibed with our mother's milk the idea that we can 'identify' the natural numbers with any of various sequences of sets. We can also identify them with other things: for example, we could identify zero with Richard Wagner and the rest of the natural numbers with propositions about him: *Wagner has written just one opera*, *Wagner has written just two operas*, and so on. All we need for such identification is a countably infinite set of objects together with a recursive relation under which they form a progression. But of course the fact that natural numbers can be thus identified with sets of one sort or another doesn't at all imply that they really *are* sets, or have as constituents the members of the sets with which we identify them. And the same holds for propositions and ordered pairs of the sort mentioned above. Perhaps for some purposes we can identify the former with the latter; but it doesn't follow that the former have as constituents the members of the latter. It is therefore hard to see that the above suggestion – the suggestion that singular propositions can be represented or taken as certain sets – throws any light on the constituency relation.

Of course there clearly is an interesting relationship between the proposition *All men are mortal* and the properties *being a man* and *being mortal* – a relationship that doesn't hold between that proposition and, say, the number 7 or the Taj Mahal or the property of being a horse. And no doubt we have something of a grasp – inchoate and groping as it may be – of this relation. So, for example, we can grasp enough of the relation in question to see that a proposition couldn't be a constituent of a person. But could a person be a constituent of a proposition? If feel as if I have a grasp of this notion of constituency when I'm told that, say, wisdom but not beauty is a

constituent of the proposition *Socrates is wise*; but when it is added that Socrates himself is also a constituent of that proposition, I begin to lose my sense of what's being talked about. If an abstract object like a proposition has constituents, wouldn't they themselves have to be abstract?

But secondly: if we're prepared to suppose something as initially *outré* as that persons can be constituents of propositions, why insist that a proposition is ontologically dependent upon its constituents? Why boggle at the idea that a proposition could exist even if one of its constituents didn't? Perhaps the proposition expressed by (1) has Buckley as a constituent but would have existed even if he had not. If it had, perhaps it would have been slightly ill-formed or even maimed; but couldn't it exist nonetheless?

This argument, therefore, is inconclusive. It's not at all clear what is being claimed when it's claimed that propositions have constituents. Insofar as we have a grasp of that notion, however, it is very hard to see how a person could be a constituent of a proposition. And even if propositions do contain persons as constituents, why suppose that containing a given person as constituent is *essential* to a proposition?

### III. AN ANTI-EXISTENTIALIST ARGUMENT

I want to propose an argument against existentialism — specifically, an argument against the existentialist thesis that singular propositions are ontologically dependent upon contingent objects. The argument begins from an obvious fact. Surely it's possible that Socrates should not have existed; unlike God and the number seven, Socrates is not a necessary being. So the proposition *possibly Socrates does not exist* is true, and the proposition *Socrates does not exist* is possible, that is, possibly true. But that proposition could not have been true without existing. Furthermore, if it *had* been true, Socrates would not have existed. If it had been true, therefore, it would have existed but Socrates would not have existed. It is therefore possible that the proposition *Socrates does not exist* exist when Socrates does not — contrary to the claims of existentialism, according to which that proposition has Socrates as a constituent and hence is ontologically dependent upon him.

Tidying up the argument a bit, we can see it as proceeding from the following five premisses:

- (3) Possibly Socrates does not exist

- (4) If (3) then the proposition *Socrates does not exist* is possible.
- (5) If the proposition *Socrates does not exist* is possible, then it is possibly true.
- (6) Necessarily, if *Socrates does not exist* had been true, then *Socrates does not exist* would have existed.

and

- (7) Necessarily if *Socrates does not exist* had been true, then Socrates would not have existed.

From (3), (4) and (5) it follows that

- (8) *Socrates does not exist* is possibly true,

i.e., that proposition could have been true; from (6) and (7) it follows that

- (9) Necessarily, if *Socrates does not exist* had been true, then *Socrates does not exist* would have existed and Socrates would not have existed;

and from (8) and (9) follows that

- (10) It is possible that both Socrates does not exist and the proposition *Socrates does not exist* exists,

which contradicts existentialism.

Now I take it that premisses (3) and (7) are relatively uncontroversial; so the controversial premisses, if any, are (4), (5) and (6). (4), I think, is the next least controversial premiss. It has been denied, however by Lawrence Powers.<sup>6</sup> *Powersian Existentialism*, accordingly, is the sort of existentialism that rejects (4). What can be said for that rejection? Now of course we must grant that “possibly” in (3) is an operator rather than a predicate; and we must also grant that certain natural ways of formalizing the attempt to construe the modal operators as predicates of sentences, rapidly come to grief. Still (4) is surely not properly rejectable. Suppose we agree that there are such things as propositions and that propositions are the things that are true or false. (We can say that a *sentence* is true if it expresses a true proposition.) Then surely we will regard truth and falsehood as properties of propositions. Furthermore, such a proposition as *It’s true that all men are mortal* is true if and only if the proposition *all men are mortal* is true – despite the fact that

“It’s true that” is an operator, not a predicate. Now surely the same goes for

(11) Possibly Socrates does not exist.

Possibility, obviously, is a property of propositions; it is an alethic modality, a mode of truth. How could (11) be true if the proposition *Socrates does not exist* were not possible? What proposition would the sentence (11) express, if it didn’t express one entailing that *Socrates does not exist* is possible? (11), surely, is true if and only if *Socrates does not exist* is possible. So (4) should be accepted and Powersian existentialism rejected.

(6), I think, is the next least controversial premiss; according to (6), *Socrates does not exist* is such that it couldn’t have been true without existing. Another way to put the same point: ‘*Socrates does not exist*’ is true entails ‘*Socrates does not exist*’ exists. Still another way to put it: every possible world in which *Socrates does not exist* is true, is one in which it exists. This premiss has been denied, at least provisionally, by John Pollock; Pollockian Existentialism, therefore, is the sort of existentialism that denies (6).

Now (6) is really a specification of *serious actualism* – the view that no object could have had a property without existing. Stated alternatively, serious actualism is the view that necessarily, for any object  $x$  and property  $P$ , it’s not possible that  $x$  should have had  $P$  but not existed. Stated in terms of possible worlds, serious actualism is the view that necessarily no object has a property in a world in which it does not exist; that is, it is necessary that for any possible world  $W$  and property  $P$  and object  $x$ , if it is true that if  $W$  had been actual, then  $x$  would have had  $P$ , then it is true that if  $W$  had been actual,  $x$  would have existed. As our official statement of serious actualism, let’s adopt

(12) Necessarily for any object  $x$ , possible world  $W$ , and property  $P$ , if  $x$  has  $P$  in  $W$ , then  $x$  exists in  $W$ ,

where an object  $x$  has a property  $P$  in a world  $W$  if and only if it is not possible that  $W$  be actual and  $x$  fail to have  $P$ .

Now it may be tempting to suppose<sup>7</sup> that serious actualism is a corollary of actualism *tout court*. For suppose, in accord with actualism, that

(13) There are no nonexistent objects

is necessarily true and hence true in every possible world. Then the same can

be said for

- (14) For any property  $P$ , there are no nonexistent objects that have  $P$ ,

that is

- (15) Whatever has  $P$ , exists.

Now consider Socrates, and let  $P$  be any property and  $W$  be any world in which Socrates has  $P$ . Then

- (16) Socrates has  $P$

is true in  $W$ ; since (15) is also true in  $W$ , so is

- (17) Socrates exists.

But then it follows that if Socrates has a property  $P$  in a world  $W$ , Socrates exists in  $W$ ; and of course the same goes for everything else.

Now I said it was tempting thus to infer serious actualism from actualism; but the above argument represents at best a bit of flocculent thinking. We can see this as follows. If actualism is true, then

- (18) Whatever does *not* exist, exists

is true in every possible world; few would be tempted to infer, however, that if Socrates does not exist in a world  $W^*$ , then he exists in that world. The trouble with the argument, obviously, is the following: (15) is indeed true in  $W$ , as is (16). To infer that (17) is true in  $W$ , however, we must suppose that

- (19) If Socrates has  $P$ , then Socrates exists

is also true there. One thinks of (19) as following from (15) by Universal Instantiation. (15) says that everything there is – everything that exists and everything else as well, if there is anything else – has a certain property: *being such that if it has  $P$ , then it exists*. (19) (construed *de re* as *Socrates is such that if he has  $P$  then he exists*) says just that Socrates has the property (15) says everything there is has. But then clearly (19) doesn't follow from (15) alone. Another premiss is needed: the premiss that Socrates is one of the things there are. Of course this premiss is true in fact, but perhaps it isn't true in  $W$ . So from the fact that (15) is true in  $W$  we cannot properly infer that (19) is also true in  $W$ .

From actualism *tout court*, therefore, we cannot properly infer serious actualism. The latter is a separate thesis and requires separate affirmation. And isn't it just false? For consider any world  $W^*$  in which Socrates does not exist: Socrates will not have the property of being wise in  $W^*$ ; so

(20) Socrates is not wise

is true in  $W^*$ ; so Socrates has the property of not being wise in  $W^*$ . But of course it won't follow that he exists in  $W^*$ . In the same way, Socrates does not exist in  $W^*$ . But of course it doesn't follow from *that*, that he exists in  $W^*$ . To take another sort of example,

(21) If Socrates is wise, someone is wise

predicates a property of Socrates: *being such that if he is wise, someone is*. But (21) is also necessarily true; Socrates, therefore, has the property (21) predicates of him in every possible world – even those in which he does not exist.

But the answer to these claims is clear; the sentences (20) and (21) are ambiguous. (20) is ambiguous as between

(20\*) Socrates is unwise,

a proposition predicating of him the complement of *being wise*, and

(20\*\*) It's not the case that Socrates is wise,

a proposition that doesn't predicate anything of Socrates but predicates falsehood of the proposition *Socrates is wise*. (20\*), we may say, is *predicative* with respect to Socrates; (20\*\*) is *impredicative* with respect to him. A similar comment is to be made about (21). The sentence (21) is ambiguous as between

(21\*) Socrates is such that if he is wise, something is,

a proposition that is predicative with respect to Socrates and predicates of him the widely shared property of being such that if he is wise, then someone is, and a proposition equivalent to

(21\*\*) The propositions *Socrates is wise* and *someone is wise* are such that if the first is true, then so is the second,

which is impredicative with respect to Socrates. (21\*) is predicative with

respect to Socrates, and contingent, being false in those possible worlds in which Socrates does not exist. (21\*\*), on the other hand, is necessary, but does not predicate a property of Socrates. Exactly similar comments apply to

(22) Either Socrates is wise or Socrates is not wise.

(23) is ambiguous as between a contingent proposition predicating of Socrates the property *being either wise or not wise*, and a necessary proposition impredicative with respect to Socrates (but predicative with respect to the propositions *Socrates is wise* and *it's not the case that Socrates is wise*). So the proffered examples certainly don't show that serious actualism is false.

Still, isn't there something arbitrary and *ad hoc*, in the present context, about insisting that *Buckley is wise* predicates a property of Buckley while *It's not the case that Buckley is wise* does not? Not really, I think, although *ad hocness* is sufficiently slippery to make it hard to be sure. In any event, let's agree that there are *conditions* as well as properties. For any property *P*, there is the condition of having *P*, and also the condition of not having *P*. Conditions are met by objects, and met by objects in possible worlds. To meet the condition of having *P* in *W*, an object must have *P* in *W*; to meet the condition of not having *P* in *W* an object must not have *P* in *W*. Furthermore, if an object fails to meet the condition of having *P* in *W*, then it meets the condition of failing to have *P* in *W*, although of course it doesn't follow that it meets the condition of having  $\bar{P}$  in *W*. Still further, there are such conditions as *having P or not having P*, a condition met by everything in every possible world. Then while it may be the case that no object has any *property* in any world in which it does not exist, an object may perfectly well meet *conditions* in worlds in which it does not exist. And while serious actualism maybe *true*, from this perspective it looks considerably less substantial.

Now this maneuver, I think, is fruitless. There *really is* an important distinction between failing to have a property *P* in a world and having its complement in that world; failing to have *P* in *W*, furthermore, is not having  $\bar{P}$ , the complement of *P* in *W*, or indeed any other property. The serious actualist claims that an object exists in any world in which it has a property *P*, but of course she doesn't claim that an object exists in every world in which it *doesn't* have *P*. Furthermore, it isn't at all easy to see what sort of thing a *condition* is, or to state the conditions under which an object meets a condition in a world.

But suppose we waive these considerations and agree that there are conditions. Among the conditions there will be *being wise* and *failing to be wise*; *being unwise* and *failing to be unwise*; *existing* and *failing to exist*. For any condition *C*, the proposition *everything that meets C exists* is necessarily true; but of course it is not true in general that if an object meets *C* in a world *W*, then it exists in *W*. Now some conditions will be *existence entailing*; they will be such that (necessarily) for any object *x* and world *W*, if *x* meets *C* in *W*, then *x* exists in *W*. Others will not; and the serious actualist will hold that any condition of the sort *has P* (where *P* is a property) is existence entailing, while those of the sort *does not have P* are not. Here the serious actualist is correct, I believe; but for present purposes we needn't argue that general point. For suppose we return to

- (6) Necessarily, if *Socrates does not exist* had been true, then *Socrates does not exist* would have existed,

the premiss of the anti-existentialist argument that occasioned our excursion into serious actualism. Our question is really whether *being true* is existence entailing. The question is whether there is a proposition *P* and a possible state of affairs *S* such that if *S* had been actual, then *P* would have been true but nonexistent – i.e., *P* would have been true and there wouldn't have been any such thing as *P*. The answer, it seems to me, is obvious. Clearly there is no such state of affairs and proposition. Clearly no proposition could have been true without existing. Clearly every state of affairs which is such that if it had been actual, *P* would have been true, is also such that if it had been true, then *P* would have existed. (6), therefore, ought to be accepted and Pollockian existentialism, like Powersian, should be rejected.

#### IV. PRIORIAN EXISTENTIALISM

Now suppose we turn our attention to

- (5) If the proposition *Socrates does not exist* is possible, then it is possibly true,

the most controversial premiss of the anti-existentialist argument. Among those who deny (5) are Arthur Prior<sup>8</sup>, Kit Fine<sup>9</sup> and Robert Adams<sup>10</sup>. *Priorian Existentialism*, therefore, is the brand of existentialism that denies (5); the Priorian Existentialist believes that a proposition can be *possible*

without being *possibly true*. This is initially puzzling – *very* puzzling. If possibility, for a proposition, isn't possible truth, what is it? If a proposition could not have been true, how can it be possible? If someone held that there are many possible worlds, but only the actual world could have been actual, then according to Robert Adams, "we would be left to wonder in what sense the other possible worlds are possible, since they couldn't have been actual". But doesn't the same hold for possibility and possible truth when it is propositions that are the topic of discussion? Indeed, it looks as if there aren't *two* concepts here, but only one; it looks as if '*Socrates does not exist* is possible' (in the broadly logical sense) and '*Socrates does not exist* is possibly true' express the very same proposition. Possibility and necessity, after all, are *alethic* modalities – modalities of *truth*. It looks initially as if 'possible' just *means* 'possibly true'; what else *is* there for it to mean? What can Prior, Fine, Adams *et al.* be thinking of?

One way we can understand this alleged contrast between possibility and possible truth has been suggested (perhaps a bit obscurely) by Arthur Prior: possibility, as opposed to possible truth, is *possible non-falsehood*. To get a grasp of this notion, we must turn to the idea of essential attribution. An object *x* has a property *P* essentially if and only if it is impossible that *x* exist and lack *P* – alternatively (given serious actualism), if and only if it is impossible that *x* have the complement of *P*. Socrates, for example, has essentially the properties *being a person* and *being self-identical*; it is impossible that Socrates should have existed and lacked these properties, and impossible that he should have had either of their complements. On the other hand, there could have been no such thing as Socrates at all, in which case Socrates would not have had these or any other properties. Accordingly, it is possible that Socrates should not have had these properties.

Now suppose we agree, for purposes of argument, that the number nine is a necessary being; it could not have failed to exist. (If you think numbers are contingent beings, substitute your favorite necessary being for the number nine.) Like Socrates, the number nine has some of its properties essentially – *being a number*, for example, and *being composite*. In contrast to Socrates, however, nine could not have failed to exist; and hence it is not possible that nine should have lacked these properties. We might mark this difference by saying that Socrates has the property of being a person *essentially*, but nine has the property of being a number *necessarily*. An object *x* has a property *P* necessarily if and only if it is necessary that the former have the latter –

if and only if the state of affairs consisting in  $x$ 's having  $P$  could not have failed to obtain. Alternatively,  $x$  has  $P$  necessarily if and only if  $x$  has  $P$  essentially and  $x$  is a necessary being. So Socrates has the property of being a person essentially; God, if classical theists are right, has that property necessarily. Everything, trivially, has existence essentially – i.e., nothing could have existed but failed to exist. Only such necessary beings as God, however, have existence necessarily.

But now we must not a similar distinction among propositions. If only some of them are necessary beings, we shall have to distinguish *having truth essentially* from *having truth necessarily*. A proposition  $p$  has truth essentially if and only if it is not possible that  $p$  should have existed and lacked truth – alternatively (given that no proposition can be neither true nor false) if and only if it is not possible that  $p$  exist and be false, that is (given (6)), if and only if it is not possible that  $p$  be false. A proposition will have truth necessarily or *be necessarily true*, however, if and only if it has truth essentially and furthermore exists necessarily, could not have failed to exist. So  $p$  is necessarily true if and only if it is not possible that  $p$  fail to be true. Every necessary truth is an essential truth; but if the present brand of existentialism is right, the converse does not hold. The proposition *Socrates exists*, for example, could not have been false. It could have failed to exist, however, and hence could have failed to be true; it is therefore essentially but not necessarily true. And now the claim is that to say that *Socrates does not exist* is possible, is only to say that it is possibly non-false – could have failed to be false. But of course that does not entail, say, the Priorian, that it could have been true – i.e., is possibly true.

Now I think we can see that Priorian existentialism, like the Powersian and Pollockian varieties, cannot be right. The fundamental reason is that if it were right, propositions like

(23) Socrates does not exist

would not be possible after all; and if we know anything at all about these matters, we know that (23) is possible. Let me explain.

First, the Priorian existentialist will concede or rather insist that (23) is not *possibly true*. (23) would be true only if it existed, which it could do only if Socrates also existed; but then of course it would not be true. Nor, furthermore, is (23) true in some possible world. If there were a possible world in which (23) is true, that would be a world in which Socrates does

not exist. But (23) does not exist in any world in which Socrates does not; so if (23) is true in some world, it is true in a world in which it does not exist – which, the Priorian concedes, is impossible.

According to Priorian existentialism, then, (23) is neither possibly true nor true in some possible world. How, then, can it be thought of as possible? The Priorian will reply, of course, that (23) could have failed to be false. It could not have been true; but it could have failed to be false. There are possible worlds in which it is not false: the worlds in which Socrates does not exist. I said that if we know anything at all about modality, we know that (23) is possible; from the point of view of Priorian Existentialism this intuition does not require possible truth. Possible non-falseness is possibility enough.

But surely this is wrong; possible non-falseness is not possibility enough. In the first place, entirely too many propositions are possibly non-false: for example,

(24) Socrates is self-diverse,

and even such explicit contradictions as

(25) Socrates is wise and Socrates is not wise.

According to the existentialist (24) and (25) are possibly non-false; they would not have existed and hence would not have been false if there had been no such thing as Socrates. But surely there is no sensible conception of possibility at all in which (24) and (25) are possible.

Secondly, (24) and (25) imply, respectively,

(26) there is at least one thing that is self-diverse,

and

(27) there is at least one thing that is both wise and not wise

in the first order logic. But (26) and (27) aren't even so much as possibly non-false. Possible non-falseness is therefore not closed under logical implication – a crucially serious impairment for a candidate for possibility.

But the clinching point, I think, is the following. What was the alleged insight behind existentialism in the first place? That it is impossible that objects of which we might say Socrates is a constituent – singular propositions directly about him, possible worlds containing him, his essences, and the

like — should have existed if he had not. If *E* is any entity of that sort, the idea was that

(28) *E* exists and Socrates does not

is impossible. This is the central existentialist insight. But note that (28), from the Priorian perspective, is possibly non-false; it would have failed to be false if Socrates had not existed. So if possible non-falseness is possibility enough, (28) is possible after all. The Priorian existentialist is thus hoist on his own petard. His fundamental insight is that (28) is not possible; he therefore argues that propositions such as (23) are not necessary beings. This apparently conflicts with the obvious truth that such propositions are possible. The proffered resolution consists in claiming that possible non-falseness is sufficient; but then (28) is possible after all.

The moral to be drawn, I think, is that possibility, for a proposition, is possible truth; there is nothing else for it to be. The alleged distinction between possible truth and possibility is a confusion. According to Prior,<sup>11</sup> Jean Buridan distinguished the *possible* from the *possibly true*. Buridan, however, apparently drew this distinction not for *propositions*, but for *sentences* — more exactly, sentence tokens. And here Buridan is correct. A sentence token is true (or true in English) if it expresses (in English) a true proposition; it is possible (we may say) if it expresses a possible truth — if the proposition it express (in English) is possible, i.e., possibly true. The sentence token

(29) there are not sentence tokens,

then, is possible. It could not have been true (in English), however; for to be true it would have had to exist: in which case it would not have been true. We could therefore say, if we wished, that (29) is possible but not possibly true. But there is no similar distinction in the case of propositions: possibility, for a proposition is possible truth. Truth and falseness are the salient characteristics of propositions; it is therefore natural to use 'possible' to abbreviate 'possibly true' (rather than, say, 'possibly existent' or 'possibly Paul's favorite proposition'). But to argue that (23) is possible on the grounds that it could have failed to be false, is like arguing that Socrates is possibly a number or possibly self-diverse on the grounds that he could have failed to have the properties of being a non-number and being self-identical. Indeed he could have failed to have these properties; had he not existed Socrates would not have had these or any other properties. It is sheer confusion, however, to

conclude that he is possibly a number or possibly self-diverse. Similarly, then, for propositions: if some propositions – e.g. (23) – are contingent objects, then those propositions could have failed to be false. It is sheer confusion, however, to conclude that they are possible.

Priorian existentialism, therefore, is as unacceptable as the Powersian and Pollockian varieties. The conclusion to be drawn is that the anti-existentialist argument is sound and existentialism must be rejected.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Worlds, Times and Selves* (Univ. of Mass. Press, Amherst, 1977), p. 109.

<sup>2</sup> Of course the whole hearted existentialist will add that states of affairs (and hence possible worlds) are also ontologically dependent upon the individuals they involve.

<sup>3</sup> *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford, 1974), pp. 121–163.

<sup>4</sup> 'Actualism and thisness', *Synthese* 49 (1981), p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> *A System of Logic* (New York, 1846), p. 21.

<sup>6</sup> In conversation; I'm not certain Powers was altogether serious.

<sup>7</sup> As I did in 'De essentia', *Grazer Philosophische Studien* (1979), pp. 108–109. I am indebted to John Pollock who helped me see the error of my ways.

<sup>8</sup> 'Theories of actuality' in *The Possible and the Actual*, ed. M. Loux (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1979), p. 201.

<sup>9</sup> 'Postscript' in *World, Times and Selves*, pp. 116ff.

<sup>10</sup> 'Actualism and thisness' (see also Note 4).

<sup>11</sup> 'The possibly-true and the possible', in *Papers in Logic and Ethics* (University of Mass. Press, Amherst, 1976), p. 202.