Theories of Actuality

ROBERT MERRIHEW ADAMS

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

I

The problem which I wish to discuss can be introduced by the following presumptuous exercise in imagination. Let us imagine ourselves in the position of Leibniz's God. In His infinite understanding, He has a perfect knowledge of infinitely many possible worlds, each of them completely determinate (presumably in infinite detail). One of them is the single world on which He has conferred actuality: the actual world. But what is it that He has conferred on that world in actualizing it? What does that world have by virtue of being actual that the other possible worlds do not have? In what does the actuality of the actual world consist?

My purpose here is to consider critically the principal solutions which have been suggested for this problem, and to try to find the best one. Most of the theories to be discussed are at least suggested by things that Leibniz says. (This is not an issue on which he held consistently to one settled view.)

I shall not begin by assuming any one theory about what a possible world is or what it is for there to be a plurality of possible worlds, because we shall see that a disagreement on this issue underlies some of the diversity of theories of actuality. I shall normally assume, however, that there is a plurality of completely determinate possible worlds. In saying that the possible worlds which we discuss are completely determinate, I mean to imply at least the following two claims. (1) For every possible world, w, and every pair of contradictory propositions, one member of the pair is true in w and the other member is false in w. (2) Each possible world, if temporally ordered at all, is a complete world history and not a momentary stage of one. The actual world, therefore, includes what has

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actually existed or happened and what will actually exist or happen, as well as what now exists or happens; and they all count as actual.

In accepting the presupposition that there is a plurality of completely determinate possible worlds, I am already ruling out one theory of actuality. According to Charles Hartshorne, the actuality of the actual world consists precisely in its complete determinateness, and there are, strictly speaking, no other possible worlds but only other possible kinds of world. The admission "that a possible world is as definite and complex as the corresponding actual one . . . reduces the distinction between possible and actual to nullity. Value is in definiteness, and definiteness is 'the soul of actuality.' Were possibility equally definite it would be redundant to actualize it" ([4]: 189f).

Another important preliminary point is the following. Problems of actuality have been discussed by philosophers very largely in terms of existence. I believe there has been a tendency to confuse two distinct issues here. If (and only if) a thing exists in the actual world, it is an *actual thing.* But the question, what it is for a thing to be actual (given that an actual thing is one that exists in the actual world) can be divided into two questions: (1) What is it for a possible world to be the actual world? (2) What is it for a thing to exist in a given possible world (whether or not it is the actual world)? I will call the first of these the *problem of actuality* and the second the *problem of existence.* It is the problem of actuality, and not the problem of existence, which I am trying to solve in this paper, though what is said here may have some implications for the problem of existence.

II

Let us begin with a couple of simple but clearly unsatisfactory theories of actuality which are strongly suggested by some fragments of Leibniz. The first of them may be called the *divine choice theory of actuality.*

> [E]ven if it is certain that what is more perfect will exist, still, the less perfect is none the less possible. Propositions of fact involve existence. But the notion of existence is such, that the existent is the sort of state of the universe which GOD chooses [*literally,* which pleases GOD]. But GOD freely chooses what is more perfect. Thus finally a free action is involved. ([5]: 405.)[1]

The theory suggested here is that for a possible world to be the actual world is for it to be the world that God chooses. (Perhaps it will be suggested that what is offered in this passage is not a theory of actuality but a theory of existence, according to which, for a thing to exist in any possible world is for it to be chosen by God *in that world.* But, I think, that is not what Leibniz intended. For according to Leibniz, what God freely chooses the more perfect of, as he is said to choose here, is complete possible worlds, and not components thereof.)

It is evidently also a part of the theory that God (who exists necessarily, according to Leibniz) chooses freely and could have chosen another possible world instead of the one he has chosen. I doubt that Leibniz or anybody else has held the alternative version of the divine choice theory, according to which the actual world is the only one God could have chosen. In any case, such a necessitarian form of the theory would be liable to objections very similar to some which I shall raise, below, against the optimistic theory of actuality.

The historic, nonnecessitarian version also faces difficulties, however. For if there is a plurality of possible divine world-choices, the actual world must be distinguished from the other possible worlds as the object of God's *actual* choice. But if that is what the divine choice theory of actuality says, it does not solve the problem of actuality. At best it merely pushes back, from worlds to divine choices, the question, in what actuality consists. (Leibniz seems to have thought of this problem; see [7]: 388.)

One way in which Leibniz did think that God's actual choice is different from all His other possible choices is that God's actual choice is the choice of the best of all possible worlds. But this brings us, in effect, to another theory of actuality. The *optimistic theory of actuality* is the theory that the actuality of the actual world consists in its being the best of all possible worlds. It is clearly suggested by Leibniz, when he says that "in fact nothing else is explicable in existence, except the entering into the most perfect series of things" ([5]: 9).

The optimistic theory treats actuality as a value property; and that may seem somewhat strange. Perhaps, indeed, the theory is not as optimistic as it seems. What is so wonderful about the tidings that the best of all possible worlds is actual, if its actuality just is its being best?

It may be suggested that the wonderful thing about the

actual world's being the best is that the actual world is after all *our* world. But that may be doubted. Unfortunately, the optimistic theory leaves us without a reason for believing that *we* are in the actual world. Maybe our world is indeed the best of all possible worlds. And if it is, God is doubtless in a position to know it. But we are not in a position to know it. Unlike God, we cannot survey all possible worlds as wholes in order to see whether ours is the best. Perhaps it will be replied that the goodness of God guarantees that our world is the best possible. But it is difficult to see any reason why the goodness of God would imply the bestness of our world, unless it is first assumed that our world is the *actual* world in some sense other than that of being the best world—that is, in some sense other than the only sense allowed by the optimistic theory of actuality.[2] If we adopt the optimistic theory of actuality, we do not have any reason that I can discern for believing that we are in the actual world. And in this way, I think, the theory fails one of the most basic tests for adequacy of a theory of actuality. We do know that we are actual. Surely a satisfactory theory of actuality must not render unintelligible our possession of this knowledge.

III

According to the *indexical theory of actuality*, "the actual world", "actual", and "actually" are indexical expressions. An indexical expression is one whose meaning is given by the way in which its reference varies systematically with variation of relevant features of the context of use. The relevant feature of the context of use in this case is which possible world the use takes place in. On any occasion of its use in any possible world *w*, "the actual world" refers to that world *w*, if it is used on that occasion in the sense in which the indexicalist thinks we use it. On this view, "the actual world" means only "*this* world", "the world *we* are in", or "the world in which *this* act of linguistic utterance occurs". And "actual" means only "occurring in *this* world". According to the indexical theory of actuality, the actuality of the actual world consists in its being *this* world—that is, the world in which *this act of linguistic utterance occurs.*

The indexical theory is suggested by some things said in a fragment by Leibniz ([5]: 271f),[3] although I do not know

that Leibniz ever really held the theory. The theory has found a contemporary sponsor, however; it has recently been defended by David Lewis, in [8].

The indexical theory does not have the difficulty that the optimistic theory of actuality has in accounting for our knowledge of our own actuality. The argument that Lewis has given for the indexical theory is based on this fact:

> The strongest evidence for the indexical analysis of actuality is that it explains why skepticism about our own actuality is absurd. How do we know that we are not the unactualized possible inhabitants of some unactualized possible world? . . . The indexical analysis of actuality explains how we know it: in the same way I know that I am me, that *this* time is the present, or that I am here. All such sentences as "This is the actual world," "I am actual," "I actually exist," and the like are true on any possible occasion of utterance in any possible world. That is why skepticism about our own actuality is absurd. ([8]: 186.)

I shall argue in Sections IV and VI, however, that the indexical theory is not the only theory by which the certainty of our own actuality can be explained. And the indexical theory is liable to important objections which render it unacceptable, in my opinion. I will discuss two of these objections here.

(i) The first and most fundamental is this. According to the indexical theory, actuality is a property which the actual world possesses, not absolutely, but only in relation to us, its inhabitants. Absolutely considered, the actual as such does not have a different status from the possible as such. Lewis's purpose in introducing the indexical theory in [8] depends on this point.

This indexicalist doctrine seems very implausible to me. It is greatly at variance with our normal way of thinking about actuality, which I am very reluctant to give up. We normally believe that actuality as such is, absolutely considered, a special metaphysical status—that the actual is, absolutely considered, more real than the merely possible. We do not think that the difference in respect of actuality between Henry Kissinger and the Wizard of Oz is just a difference in their relations to us.

Our normal belief in the absoluteness of actuality is reflected in our value judgments too. We may be moved by the joys and sorrows of a character known to be fictitious; but we do not really believe it is bad that evils occur in a non-actual possible

world, or good that joys occur in a non-actual possible world, though of course it would be bad and good, respectively, for them to be actual. I think that our very strong disapproval of the deliberate actualizing of evils similarly reflects a belief in the absolutely, and not just relatively, special status of the actual as such. Indeed, if we ask, "What is wrong with actualizing evils, since they will occur in some other possible world anyway if they don't occur in this one?", I doubt that the indexical theory can provide an answer which will be completely satisfying ethically.

(ii) Another grave objection to the indexical theory has to do with problems about the identify of persons and events in different possible worlds. I believe that it leads to the conclusion that the indexical theory does not provide a correct analysis of actuality concepts which we normally use in making predictions.

The cases in which we are most interested in individual identity in different possible worlds are cases in which there is a question of alternative possible continuations of the history of an individual whose identity has already been established by its past history. We normally suppose that at many junctures in my past it would have been at least logically possible for *me* (the very same person that I am) to have done something that I did not in fact do or to have omitted an act that I did. We also normally suppose that there are many future acts which it is at least logically possible for *me* either to perform or to fail to perform. These suppositions may be rather important to us; they seem to be involved in many of our attitudes and beliefs about moral rights and wrongs and responsibilities. And it seems plausible to express them by saying that *I*, identically the same person, exist in many different possible worlds—in worlds in which I do things that I have refrained, or will refrain, from doing—as well as in the actual world.

This suggests that the following would be a very plausible sufficient condition for the identity of individuals in different possible worlds:

(*C*) If (1) individual a exists in possible world w at time t, and individual a' exists in possible world w' at time t'; and (2) the whole history of w' up to and including

> t' (and no other time in w') is precisely the same, qualitatively, as the whole history of w up to and including t (and no other time in w); and (3) the whole previous history and present state of a' (and of no other individual in w') at t' is precisely the same, qualitatively, as the whole previous history and present state of a (and of no other individual in w) at t; then a is numerically identical with a'.

Several explanatory remarks about this condition are in order. It is intended to express such intuitions as, for example, that nothing which could possibly have happened after the time when I was born could have made it not to be the case that I (the very same individual I in fact am) had been born and existed. When it is said that the history and state of a and of a' at t and t' are qualitatively the same, it is implied that there is a sameness of relation to qualitatively the same previous events but not necessarily to the same future events. The uniqueness condition is attached to the times in clause (2) in order to exclude the possibly problematic satisfaction of condition (C) by individuals in possible worlds which have been, throughout an infinite past prior to the crucial time, Nietzschean perpetually repeating worlds. The uniqueness condition is attached to the individuals in clause (3) in order to avoid any implication that different individuals in one possible world might be identical with the same individuals in another possible world, which would give rise to questions about the transitivity of identity. I believe that condition (C) is sufficiently guarded that it gives rise to no problems about the transitivity or symmetry of identity such as David Lewis has suggested are apt to arise from acceptance of the strict identity of individuals in different possible worlds ([10]: 115f).

I propose condition (C) as a *sufficient* condition of individual identity in different possible worlds. Whether it ought to be taken as a necessary as well as sufficient condition, or how it might be modified to yield a necessary and sufficient condition, I will not discuss here. I would not claim that condition (C), even as only a sufficient condition, agrees precisely with all our intuitions about counterfactual identity; but I suspect that it comes as close to such agreement as is possible without excessive sacrifice of generality.

It also seems very plausible to extend (C) to provide a sufficient condition for identity of *events* in different possible worlds. If I invest some money in the stock market, for instance, we would normally suppose that it is logically possible for that event to be followed by my making a profit and logically possible for that very same event to be followed by my taking a loss instead. This view of the matter can be expressed by (C_e), which is the result of substituting "event" for "individual", "has occurred" for "exists", and "the whole history of . . . up to and including . . ." for "the whole previous history and present state of . . . at . . ." in (C). This brings us to our problem about prediction.

I now perform the inscription-act of stating in writing, "Actually, men will land on Mars by 2100 A.D."[4] Let us call that statement (S_1). I also perform the inscription-act of stating in writing, "Actually, it is not the case that men will land on Mars by 2100 A.D." Let us call that statement (S_2). It is now time T, after I have made both of these statements. It is plausible to suppose that there are logically possible worlds in which men will have landed on Mars by 2100 A.D and logically possible worlds in which men will not have landed on Mars by 2100 A.D. It is also plausible to suppose that some worlds of both types have histories precisely the same as the history of the actual world up to and including time T. If we accept (C_e), then we can reasonably assume that some worlds of both types include the events which are my acts of making statements (S_1) and (S_2).

But now let us ask, "Is (S_1) true? Is (S_2) true?". The answers depend on the interpretation of "actually". If "actually" in (S_1) and (S_2) means "in *the* possible world in which this act of linguistic utterance occurs", then neither (S_1) nor (S_2) is true. For my acts of making them occur in many possible worlds, and therefore the uniqueness of reference which is implied or presupposed by the definite description fails to obtain. On the other hand, if "actually" means "in *some* possible world in which this act of linguistic utterance occurs", then (S_1) and (S_2) are both true. Both of these interpretations make a mockery of prediction.

An alternative indexicalist view would be that "actually" in (S_1) and (S_2) means "in this possible world", where "this possible world" ambiguously designates all the possible worlds in which my acts of making (S_1) and (S_2) occur—including,

for example, w_m, in which men land on Mars by 2100 A.D., and w_n, in which men do not land on Mars by 2100 A.D. But on this interpretation, (S_1) is ambiguous as between the truth that in w_m men will land on Mars by 2100 A.D. and the falsehood that in w_n men will land on Mars by 2100 A.D. And (S_2) is similarly ambiguous as among many truths and many falsehoods. This renders all such predictions pointless. For whatever prediction we make will be ambiguous as among many truths and many falsehoods.

It remains for the indexicalist to claim that "actually" in (S_1) and (S_2) means "in this possible world" and that in every world, w, in which my acts of making (S_1) and (S_2) occur, that world, w, and no other, is *un*ambiguously designated by "this possible world". Thus, while my act of making (S_1) occurs in both w_m and w_n, (S_1) is unambiguously true in w_m and unambiguously false in w_n. I have qualms about the plausibility of this claim that by one and the same utterance of "this possible world" I unambiguously designate many different possible worlds. But even if we accept this indexicalist account of the meaning of "actually" and "this possible world", it deprives prediction of its normal point. If the account is right, I can know in advance that if I make (S_1), it will be true in some worlds in which my act of making it occurs and false in others; and I can know in advance that (S_2) will be true in the worlds in which (S_1) is false and false in those in which (S_1) is true. But there is none of these worlds which is distinguished for me, at the time I make the statement, in such a way that I have a reason to want to assert what will be true in it rather than what will be true in another of the worlds. For I, and all of my acts and states at that time, occur in exactly the same way in all of them.

I do not see any more satisfactory way in which an indexicalist who accepted (C_e) could deal with this problem. But I believe it is clear that David Lewis will want to deal with it by rejecting (C_e) and holding that each possible event occurs in only one possible world. He certainly rejects (C). He holds that each possible individual exists or occurs in only one possible world. He does recognize, and works out a formal logical treatment of, a relation of "counterpart" which an individual in one world can bear to a sufficiently similar individual (or to more than one) in another world (as well as to itself, but to nothing else, in its own world). But he denies

that any individual in any possible world is strictly identical with any individual in another possible world (Lewis [10]). The reasons that Lewis has given for rejecting trans-world identity in favor of counterpart theory are not specifically indexicalist reasons. I do not find them convincing reasons; but this is not the place for a full discussion of them.[5] It should be clear from what I have already said, however, that Lewis's indexical theory of actuality gives him powerful additional incentives to reject strict identity of individuals, and especially events, in different possible worlds.

So long as we are willing to speak of possible worlds at all, we cannot very well deny Lewis the right to speak of his world-specific individuals and world-specific events. If we start with trans-world individuals which exist in several possible worlds, we can, as Lewis points out, construct world-specific individuals as ordered pairs, of which the first member is a trans-world individual and the second member is a possible world ([10]: 115). But neither can we be denied the right to speak of trans-world individuals and events. For even if we start with Lewisian world-specific individuals and events, we can construct the trans-world ones.[6] We might begin, for instance, by saying that a trans-world individual is a set of world-specific individuals, every member of which satisfies condition (C)[7] with respect to every other member. And similarly for events.

Both trans-world and world-specific individual concepts and event concepts are possible, then. But which kind do we normally use? The trans-world ones, I believe. We think of individuals as having alternative futures which are possible for them as the very same individuals, and we think of events as having alternative successors by which they, the very same events, could possibly be succeeded. I never use the indexical expressions "I" and "this" to pick out one world-specific individual or event from among others which belong to the same trans-world individual or event.

It therefore seems to me very implausible to suppose that when we predict that a certain event will actually occur, the chief thing that we are doing is ascribing to that event a certain relation to ourselves and our speech-acts as *world-specific* individuals and events. But that is what the indexical theorist must say is the chief thing we are doing. Otherwise I do not see how he can make sense of prediction at all.

IV

The theory that actuality is a simple, unanalyzable property of the actual world, by which it is distinguished from the other possible worlds, and that the concept of actuality therefore does not stand in need of analysis may be called the *simple property theory of actuality*. It can be found in Descartes, and I suspect its pedigree could be traced even farther back than that. Descartes claimed that the notion of existence (in the sense of actuality, I think) is one of those "notions of the simplest possible kind" which it would be confusing to try to explain by definitions (*Principles*, I, 10, in [2], Vol. I, p. 222). Leibniz says similar things about existence (again, I think, in the sense of actuality). "Existence therefore is a noncomposite, or unanalyzable (*irresolubilis*) notion" ([6], Vol. I, p. 271). "*Existent* cannot be defined . . . in such a way, that is, that some clearer notion might be shown to us" ([7]: 325).

Unlike the indexical theory, the simple property theory of actuality presents actuality as a property which the actual world possesses absolutely, rather than only in relation to its own inhabitants. For if there is no need to analyze actuality at all, there is no need to analyze it as an indexical property.

The certainty of our knowledge of our own actuality can also be accounted for on the simple property theory, as it cannot on the optimistic theory. For it can be maintained that actuality is a simple property which is possessed, not only by the actual world as a whole, but by every thing that exists in the actual world, and that we are as immediately acquainted with our own actuality as we are with our own thoughts, feelings, and sensations. It would be plausible, on this account of the matter, to suppose that acquaintance with our own actuality plays an important part in our acquisition of the concept of actuality, providing us with a paradigm of actuality, so that it would be reasonable to say, "If I am not actual, I do not know what actuality is."

Although it has these advantages over the indexical and optimistic theories, the simple property theory of actuality, like the divine choice theory and for very similar reasons, fails to provide a complete solution to the problem of actuality. For presumably the nonactual possible worlds could have been actual and are possibly actual. Each possible world is actual in some possible world—namely, in itself. How, then, does

the actual world differ from the other possible worlds in relation to the primitive property of actuality? It has the property actually, of course, and not just possibly. To have a property *actually* is presumably to have it in the actual world. So the actual world has the property of actuality in the actual world. But that tells us only that the actual world is actual *in itself.* And every possible world is actual *in itself.* So how is the actual world different from the other possible worlds? What is the difference between the actually actual and the possibly actual? Thus, the problem of distinguishing between the actual and the merely possible re-arises with respect to the very property of actuality by which it was supposed to be solved.

The problem could be solved by a simple property theory only if we were prepared to deny that the nonactual possible worlds are possibly actual. But that denial entails that there is no such thing as contingent actuality. We would have to conclude that the actual world, in all its infinite detail, is the only possible world that could have been actual. And we would be left to wonder in what sense the other possible worlds are possible, since they could not have been actual.

V

The problem which presents the simple property theorist with these unattractive alternatives can be generalized in an interesting way. The possible worlds are completely determinate; and therefore, for all possible worlds, w and w', and every interpretation of the notion of actuality, the proposition that w is actual is either true or false in w'. We seem to have two options.

(i) We can say that for every possible world, w, the proposition that w is actual is true in w and false in every other possible world. This preserves the intuition that each possible world could have been actual, and is actual in itself. But it has the consequence that the property of actuality is world-relative. Each world is actual, but only in itself. On these assumptions, it is difficult to see what difference there could be between being *the* actual world and being possibly actual, like all the other possible worlds, as we discovered in discussing the divine choice and simple property theories of actuality. If any possible world is to be distinguished as *the* actual world, it must be distinguished relative to some standpoint within

the system of possible worlds. The obvious standpoint to choose is that of the person who is doing the distinguishing. The indexical theory of actuality makes that choice, frankly accepting the relativity of actuality.

(ii) Alternatively, we can say that there is a world, *w*, such that the proposition that *w* is actual is true in every possible world. *w* is actual *in* every possible world, and no other world is actual in any possible world. Thus, *w* is, absolutely, *the* actual world. But then there is no contingent actuality. No other world than *w* could have been actual. The optimistic theory of actuality fits this alternative. For presumably the answer to the question which possible world is the best (if there is a best) does not vary from one world to another. We have also seen that the simple property theory, which has some advantage over the optimistic theory, can be adapted to this alternative.

On the assumptions we have been making thus far, we seem to be compelled to give up either the absoluteness or the contingency of the actual world's actuality. Both alternatives seem unacceptable to me. In order to escape from this dilemma, however, we must modify our assumptions.

One way of doing this would be by abandoning or modifying the assumption that the possible worlds are completely determinate, by saying that actuality is a property (perhaps a simple property) which possible worlds possess or lack absolutely and not *in* any possible world. For any possible world, *w*, we would hold that the proposition that *w* is actual is true or false, but we would deny that it is true or false *in w* or *in* any other possible world. We would thus not be treating actuality as a world-relative property. Neither would we have to say that the world which is actual is necessarily actual, for we would not have to say that it is actual *in* every possible world. On the other hand, I believe that the intuitive attractiveness of the notion of possible worlds is diminished by any qualification of the assumption that they are completely determinate. It would also be diminished if we were unable to apply to some cases of possibility the idea that what is possible is what is the case in some possible world. We are faced with that inability if, in following the approach now before us, we claim (as we want to) that worlds which are not actual could possibly have been actual. For that claim could not be regarded as equivalent to the claim (which would be ruled out) that each of those worlds is actual *in* some possible world.

I prefer, therefore, a different approach, which I call an *actualist* theory of actuality, as opposed to the theories discussed in Sections II–IV above, which I call *possibilist*. They begin with the whole system of possible worlds and see the actual world first of all as a possible world, a member of that system. I propose to begin, instead, with the actual world, to treat talk about the system of possible worlds as a way of talking about a proper part of the actual world, and thus to gain, so to speak, a standpoint outside the system of possible worlds from which judgments of actuality which are not world-relative may be made. *Actualism*, with respect to possible worlds, is the view that if there are any true statements in which there are said to be nonactual possible worlds, they must be reducible to statements in which the only things there are said to be are things which there are in the actual world and which are not identical with nonactual possibles.[8] The actualist will not agree that there are nonactual possible worlds, if the notion of possible worlds is to be regarded as primitive. *Possibilism*, with respect to possible worlds, is the view that there are nonactual possible worlds and that the notion of a possible world is not to be analyzed in terms of actual things. The difference between actualism and possibilism may be seen in some cases as a difference in order of analysis, but it is not a trivial difference. As we shall see, it may involve the difference between an absolute and a world-relative concept of truth.

Some philosophers who would agree with me in rejecting the possibilist theories of actuality may be inclined to say that the way to avoid such theories and their implausibilities is simply to deny that there are any merely possible worlds. *Hard actualism* is the position expressed by this denial. The hard actualist can still use what he regards as the fiction of a plurality of possible worlds as a heuristic device in thinking about theories and problems in modality; but the possible worlds will not figure in any theory which he asserts at the conclusion of his deliberations. According to *soft actualism*, on the other hand, there are nonactual possible worlds, but they are logically constructed out of the furniture of the actual world; truths in which they are said to exist are reducible in the way demanded by actualism. It might seem that the difference between hard and soft actualism is merely verbal, but in fact it can be quite substantial. For the soft actualist is committed, as the hard actualist is not, to ascribe to the actual world furniture which

is rich enough for the logical construction of a plurality of completely determinate possible worlds. This is a large commitment, as will appear. I find it an attractive commitment, because it maintains our ability to assert the intuitively very plausible thesis that possibility is holistic rather than atomistic, in the sense that what is possible is possible only as part of a possible completely determinate world. I therefore prefer soft actualism to hard and will sketch a soft actualist theory of actuality.

VI

More than one type of soft actualist analysis of the notion of a possible world may be possible. For example, the reduction of statements about possible worlds to statements ascribing dispositional properties to actual objects, which is suggested by Nelson Goodman ([3]: 49–57), might be seen as a soft actualist analysis. But the analysis which I have in mind is a reduction of talk about possible worlds to talk about sets of propositions.

Let us say that a *world-story* is a maximal consistent set of propositions. That is, it is a set which has as its members one member of every pair of mutually contradictory propositions, and which is such that it is possible that all of its members be true together. The notion of a possible world can be given a contextual analysis in terms of world-stories. Of the following statement forms, for example, (1), (3), and (5) are to be analyzed as equivalent to (2), (4), and (6), respectively.

(1) There is a possible world in which *p*.
(2) The proposition that (*p*) is a member of some world-story.[9]
(3) In every possible world, *q*.
(4) The proposition that (*q*) is a member of every world-story.
(5) Let *w* be a possible world in which *r*. In *w*, *t*.
(6) Let *s* be a world-story of which the proposition that (*r*) is a member. The proposition that (*t*) is a member of *s*.

A similar contextual analysis can now be given to the notion of actuality. "In the actual world, *p*" is to be analyzed as "The proposition that (*p*) is true." In accordance with this analysis, we can say that the actual world differs from the other possible worlds in that all the members of its world-story (the set of all the propositions that are true in it) are true, whereas the

stories of all the other possible worlds have false propositions among their members. This soft-actualist analysis may therefore be called the *true-story theory of actuality.*

It is free of the chief disadvantages of the possibilist theories that we have considered. It presents the actuality of the actual world as a distinction which it possesses absolutely and not just in relation to itself. And it does so without implying that the actual world is one which is actual in every possible world and therefore necessarily rather than contingently actual.

Unlike the optimistic theory of actuality, moreover, the true-story theory does not make it impossible to understand how we can know that we are actual. To begin with, we must simply assume that we recognize the truth of some very ordinary propositions about ourselves. Suppose, for example, that I feel a pain. In that case, I know that it is true that I feel a pain. Knowing that, and accepting the true-story theory of actuality, I can infer that I feel a pain in the actual world. In a similar way, I can know that I have many other experiences in the actual world. Hence, I can infer that I exist in the actual world—though this last inference takes us beyond the theory of actuality to a theory of existence.

If someone asks how I know that I'm not just feeling a pain in some possible (but nonactual) world, the answer is that feeling a pain in the actual world and just feeling a pain in some possible world are very different things, and it will not be easy to mistake one for the other if we understand the difference between them. For me to feel a pain in some possible world is just for a proposition, to the effect that I feel a pain, to be a member of a certain kind of set of propositions (namely, of some world-story).[10] But for me to feel a pain in the actual world is for me to feel a pain. And if I understand, even nearly as well as I think I understand, what it is to feel a pain, then when I feel a pain, I normally know that I feel one.

Anticipating certain objections to my theory, I will conclude by discussing two ways in which the order of analysis which is followed in the true-story theory differs from the order that is apt to be preferred by possibilists.

(i) We must distinguish between the notion of truth and the world-relative notion of truth *in* a possible world. In the true-story theory of actuality, the notion of truth is presupposed, if not as primitive,[11] at least as prior to the notion of actuality,

since the latter is analyzed in terms of the former. This order of analysis is a central feature of the theory and is very natural for a soft actualist. Because he regards the merely possible worlds as constructed rather than primitive entities, the problem of distinguishing the actual world from other possible worlds does not arise for him except at a conceptual level much less fundamental than that to which the notion of truth belongs.

Some possibilists may wish to take the crucial concepts in a different order, treating the notions of truth *in* a possible world and actuality as prior to the notion of truth and defining truth as truth *in* the *actual* world. (David Lewis seems to be following a strategy somewhat similar to this in [9]: 173f.) From the possibilist point of view, truth in a possible world may be thought of as a relation between a proposition or sentence and an object (the possible world) whose ontological status is quite independent of the ontological status of the sentence or proposition, and truth may be thought of as just a special case of that relation, distinguished from other cases only by the actuality of the world involved in it. The true-story theorist, however, regards a merely possible world as logically constructed out of the set of propositions that are true in it, and he sees the truth of a proposition *in* a possible world as basically a matter of relations of consistency among propositions, rather than of correspondence with an independent object. From such a point of view, it is much less natural to try to understand the notion of truth as just a special case of the notion of truth *in* a possible world.

It is to be expected that possibilists will find the notion of absolute truth as difficult to understand as the notion of absolute actuality. It will be difficult for them to see how *any* property possession can be absolute rather than world-relative; if anything, x, has any property, f, it must have it relative to some possible world, *in* which x has f. We have already noted this difficulty for the case in which x is a possible world and f is actuality. Similar considerations apply to the case in which x is a proposition and f is truth.

But in the true-story theory, both absolute and world-relative property ascriptions can be made, and neither crowds out the other. This is because having f, and having f in a possible world in which p, are *not* thought of as essentially the same sort of thing, differing only with respect to something like a location. The true-story theorist can say that x has f absolutely,

meaning just that x has f. He can also say that x has f in a possible world in which p, meaning just that the proposition that (x has f) is a member of some world-story of which the proposition that (p) is also a member. And this applies in the case in which x is a proposition and f is truth.

(ii) The possibilist's order of analysis is apt to differ from that of the true-story theory in yet another respect. If the possibilist countenances the notion of a proposition at all, he very likely cherishes the project of analyzing it in terms of possible worlds—perhaps as the notion of a function from possible worlds to truth values (as in Montague [11]: 163). There is a not unfamiliar trade-off here, between non-actual possibles and intensions (such as propositions); given either, we may be able to construct the other or to do the work that was supposed to be done by talking about the other.

Is it better, then, to begin with possible worlds and construct propositions out of them, or to begin with propositions and construct possible worlds out of them? If possibilism and the true-story theory are the alternatives we are weighing, this is a crucial question. And I am not in a position to say that *all* the advantages lie on the side of beginning with propositions rather than possible worlds. For there are problems about the notion of a proposition; it is the weakest point in the true-story theory. What is a proposition? If we are to have an ontology of propositions rich enough for the construction of completely determinate possible worlds, we must not suppose that propositions are linguistic signs or utterances, nor that they are all expressible in any one language, nor even that there are only a countable infinity of them. We might take the notion of a proposition as primitive and suppose that propositions are self-subsistent objects; but we need not do so. We might try to construct them logically out of some other feature of the (actual) world. Liebniz, for example, held (in [6], Vol. V, p. 429, Vol. VI, pp. 226f., 229; in Sections 43–44 of his "Monadology"; and elsewhere) that the ontological status ("reality") of essences, necessary truths, and possibles depends on their being actually thought by God. This is an actualist strand in Leibniz's philosophy which contrasts strikingly with the possibilist tendencies of his thought. And if we were to say that propositions are reducible to thoughts in the mind of God, that would be consistent with the true-story theory of actuality. But the development of an adequate answer to the question, what a

proposition is, must be left here as an unfinished task for the true-story theorist.

Notoriously, the development of a satisfactory logical theory of propositions (or of intensions generally) is also beset by formal problems and threats of paradox. One such threat particularly concerns the true-story theory of actuality. The theory seems to imply that there are *consistent* sets composed of one member of *every* pair of mutually contradictory propositions. Furthermore, it follows from the theory, with the assumption that every possible world is actual *in* itself, that every world-story, *s*, has among its members the proposition that all the members of *s* are true. Here we are teetering on the brink of paradox. Only on the brink, because we have not formulated definitions and axioms of the theory precisely enough to determine that paradoxes can be derived in it. But if we replaced "proposition" by "sentence" throughout these apparent consequences of the true-story theory, understanding "consistent" as a semantical predicate, the resulting claims about sentences would be incompatible with the stratification into object- and metalanguages which is commonly used as a means to avoid semantical paradoxes. This may give rise to a suspicion that the true-story theory could not be precisely formulated without engendering some analogue of the semantical paradoxes. This suspicion can be laid to rest only by a satisfactory precise formulation, which I am not in a position to give here. I have some hope that such a formulation can be found. Perhaps it would involve a modification of the notion of world-stories, restricting membership in them to certain types of propositions. There is some plausibility to the suggestion that a maximal consistent set of *nonsemantical* propositions would be sufficient for the construction of a completely determinate possible world. If our world-story includes the proposition that there exist giraffes, we do not need to add the proposition that it is *true* that there exist giraffes. We could say that the latter proposition is true in the constructed possible world by virtue of being implied by a proposition which is a member of the world-story, even if it is not itself a member. It is much less easy, however, to see how we should handle the putative proposition that (someone believes that some propositions are true). Perhaps it can safely be a member of a world-story; perhaps it does not need to be. I do not know whether a satisfactory solution is possible along these lines. The attempt to formulate a solution

should probably be part of a more comprehensive development of a logical theory of propositions.[12]

These unresolved problems must certainly be counted, at least for the time being, as disadvantages of the true story theory of actuality. The theory also has two important advantages, however. The first advantage is that it embodies the soft actualist view that there are in some sense many completely determinate possible worlds but that they are logically constructed out of features of the actual world. I think that actualism in general, and soft actualism in particular, have great intuitive appeal. The second advantage is that as I hope I have shown, if the difficulties about the theory of propositions can be resolved, that the true-story theory provides a very satisfying solution of the problem of actuality—more satisfying, I think, than any of the possibilist solutions.[13]

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[12] Russell, Bertrand, "Meinong's Theory of Complexes and Assumptions," *Mind* N.S. 13 (1904): 204–19, 336–54, 509–24.
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NOTES

[1] I am responsible for all the translations from Leibniz in this paper.

[2] I do not believe that the goodness of God implies the bestness of the actual world in any case, but that is a different issue. See Adams [1].

[3] Leibniz says here that what "the adjective 'existent' always means" is that

"this series of things is posited." Part of what he is saying is quite trite and leaves many theories of actuality open to him: an actual (existent) *F* is an *F* that is found (exists or occurs) in the actual world. What concerns us here is the way in which Leibniz identifies, or refers to, the actual world. He refers to it indexically, as "*this* series of things."

[4]Cf. Lewis's example in [8]: 186.

[5]Lewis seems to be much influenced by the view that trans-world identity is apt to give rise to problems about the transitivity and symmetry of identity. I have already suggested that there are ways of avoiding such problems without rejecting trans-world identity.

[6]I owe this point to John Perry.

[7]Here, I am, for convenience, treating (*C*) as a necessary as well as sufficient condition of trans-world identity. If a more adequate necessary and sufficient condition is developed, it can be substituted here.

[8]The word "actualism" has already been used by Donald Williams, in [13]. His actualism is a form of what I would call actualism, since it rejects possible worlds as primitive entities. But I would also recognize as forms of actualism theories which are considerably less restrictive in their ontologies than his. His excludes forces, for example, and appears to exclude intensions.

[9]I use parentheses to indicate the scope of the oblique-context-forming expression "that" in cases where I fear that some confusion might otherwise arise.

[10]In saying that a proposition, to the effect that *I* feel a pain, is included in some world-story, we may commit ourselves to a modality *de re* which some may find objectionable, although it is not objectionable to me. But in any case exactly the same commitment to a modality *de re* is involved in the claim that *I* feel a pain *in some possible world.*

[11]As Russell once took it to be (in [12]: 523f). It was surely a notion of absolute, rather than world-relative, truth which he believed to be unanalyzable. Indeed, I do not think there have been many philosophers who have thought that the notion of truth must be based on a prior notion of truth *in* a possible world.

[12]I am indebted to Tyler Burge for pointing out to me this problem about the true-story theory, and for much helpful discussion of it.

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