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A NEW DEFENCE OF THE MODAL EXISTENCE REQUIREMENT*

ABSTRACT. In this paper, I defend the claim that an object can have a property only if it exists from two arguments, both of which turn on how to understand Plantinga's notion of the α-transform of a property.

In this paper, I defend *the Modal Existence Requirement*: namely,

(1) For any object x, any property F, and any possible world w, if x has F in w, then x exists in w.

In Section 1, I present a recent argument, due to Yagisawa (2005), against the Modal Existence Requirement. Yagisawa's argument relies on *Strong Iterability*: namely,

(2) For any object x, any property F, and any possible worlds w and v, x has F in w if and only if x has F in w in v.

In Section 2, I argue that Yagisawa's reason for accepting Strong Iterability is unconvincing, so his argument against the Modal Existence Requirement fails. I conclude, in Section 3, by arguing that a related argument against the Modal Existence Requirement also fails.

1. YAGISAWA'S ARGUMENT AGAINST THE MODAL EXISTENCE REQUIREMENT

Meinong (1904) is famous – infamous, even – for claiming that an object's having properties (*Sosein*) is independent of its being or existing (*Sein*): that is, an object can have properties even if it does not exist.[1] A modal version of Meinong's claim entails

(3) For some object x, some property F, and some possible world w, x has F in w and x does not exist in w.

(3) entails the falsehood of the Modal Existence Requirement. But you don't have to be a crazy Meinongian to reject the Modal

Synthese (2007) 154: 335–343
DOI 10.1007/s11229-005-3491-7

Existence Requirement. Indeed, non-Meinongians have presented arguments against it. First, Kaplan (1973: 503–505) and Salmon (1981: 36–40) argue that the truth of claims like

(4) Meinong has the property *being admired* in 2005, and Meinong does not exist in 2005.

entails the falsehood of *the Temporal Existence Requirement*: namely,

(5) For any object x, any property F, and any time t, if x has F at t, then x exists at t.

Since the Temporal Existence Requirement is analogous to the Modal Existence Requirement, that the Temporal Existence Requirement is false suggests that the Modal Existence Requirement is false, too. Second, Kaplan (1989: 498) and Fine (1985: 163–168) argue that the truth of claims like

(6) For some possible world w, Meinong has the property *not existing* in w, and Meinong does not exist in w.

entails the falsehood of the Modal Existence Requirement.

But, as Yagisawa (2005: 39–40) points out, defenders of the Modal Existence Requirement can resist both of these arguments. To resist the first argument, defenders of the Modal Existence Requirement can deny that the falsehood of the Temporal Existence Requirement entails the falsehood of the Modal Existence Requirement by saying that, in this respect at least, times are not analogous to possible worlds. And, to resist the second argument, defenders of the Modal Existence Requirement can deny that (6) is true by saying either that *not existing* is not a property or that Meinong's not existing in w does not entail that Meinong has the property *not existing* in w.

To illustrate the second tack, let's suppose, following Adams (1974), that possible worlds are maximal consistent sets of propositions, that an object o has a property F at a possible world w if and only if the singular proposition (that can be represented as) $\langle o, F\rangle$ is true at w, and that a proposition P is true at a possible world w if and only if P is a member of w. In that case, defenders of the Modal Existence Requirement can say that, if Meinong doesn't exist at w, then the singular proposition ⟨Meinong, *existing*⟩ is not a member of w and hence its negation – namely, ⟨NEGATION, ⟨Meinong, *existing*⟩⟩ – is a member of w, but that it doesn't follow that ⟨Meinong, *not existing*⟩ is a member of w.

Yagisawa (2005: 40–41) offers a new argument against the Modal Existence Requirement, one that is supposed to be harder for defenders of the Modal Existence Requirement to resist. Yagisawa's argument relies on Strong Iterability: namely,

(2) For any object x, any property F, and any possible worlds w and v, x has F in w if and only if x has F in w in v.[2]

Given Strong Iterability, we can infer the falsehood of the Modal Existence Requirement. Pick some object that exists in @ (the actual world) and some property that that object has in @: say, John Kerry and the property *having lost the 2004 election*. (Given that there is an object x and a property F such that x exists in @ and x has F in @, you can pick such an object and such a property.) Instantiating (2) accordingly, we can infer

(7) For any possible world v, Kerry has the property *having lost the 2004 election* in @ if and only if Kerry has the property *having lost the 2004 election* in @ in v.

Given how we picked Kerry and the property *having lost the 2004 election*, Kerry does have the property *having lost the 2004 election* in @. So from (7) we can infer

(8) For any possible world v, Kerry has the property *having lost the 2004 election* in @ in v.

For any possible world w, Kerry has the property *having lost the 2004 election* in @ in w if and only if Kerry has the property *having lost the 2004 election in @* in w.[3] So from (8) we can infer

(9) For any possible world v, Kerry has the property *having lost the 2004 election in @* in v.

Pick some possible world in which Kerry does not exist: say, w_1. (Given that Kerry exists contingently, you can pick such a possible world.) Instantiating (9) accordingly, we can infer

(10) Kerry has the property *having lost the 2004 election in @* in w_1.

Given how we picked w_1, Kerry does not exist in w_1. So from (10) we can infer (3) and hence the falsehood of the Modal Existence Requirement.

2. STRONG AND WEAK ITERABILITY

But defenders of the Modal Existence Requirement can resist Yagisawa's argument by denying Strong Iterability. What is true is, not (2), but rather

(2*) For any object x, any property F, and any possible worlds w and v, x has F in w **and x exists in v** if and only if x has F in w in v.

Or so defenders of the Modal Existence Requirement can say. Let's call (2*) *Weak Iterability*. And, although we can infer the falsehood of the Modal Existence Requirement from Strong Iterability, we cannot infer its falsehood from Weak Iterability.

In defence of Strong Iterability, Yagisawa (2005: 40, 41) says that it is widely accepted. To illustrate its wide acceptance, he discusses the following sort of case. When talking about the connection between the α-transform of a property F and modality (where the α-transform of a property F is the property *having F in @*), one might utter

(11) For any object x, any property F, and any possible world w, if x has F in @, then x has the property *having F in @* in w.[4]

Given that, for any object x, any property F, and any possible world w, x has F in @ in w if and only if x has the property *having F in @* in w, those who utter (11) should also be willing to utter

(12) For any object x, any property F, and any possible world w, if x has F in @, then x has F in @ in w.

(12) follows from Strong Iterability. Yagisawa (2005: 40) says that those who utter (12) do so because they accept Strong Iterability.

But not everyone who utters (12) accepts Strong Iterability, because not everyone who utters (12) is committed to the truth of (12). It is often convenient, when making modal claims, to ignore qualifications about existence. This convenience is harmless enough if existence isn't at issue. For example, when talking about the necessity of identity, one might utter

(13) For any object x and any possible world w, $x = x$ in w.

Still, one might be unsure whether (13) is, strictly speaking, true. One might think that the truth of (13) requires that every object bear the identity relation to itself in every possible world, including possible worlds in which it doesn't exist; and one might be unsure whether any object can bear any relation to any object (including itself) in any possible world in which it doesn't exist. One might nonetheless find it convenient to utter (13) rather than

(13*) For any object x and any possible world w, **if $\boldsymbol{x}$ exists in $\boldsymbol{w}$**, then $x = x$ in w.

This convenience is harmless enough, since what is at issue is the necessity of identity rather than existence. (Someone who uses (13) when talking about the necessity of identity wouldn't be worried about possible worlds in which an object doesn't exist; rather, they would be worried about allegedly possible worlds in which an object exists and doesn't bear the identity relation to itself.) Kripke (1980) follows something like this strategy in *Naming and Necessity*. In the preface, he says that '$\forall x \forall y(x = y \rightarrow \Box(x = y))$' follows from '$\forall x \Box(x = x)$' and Leibniz's Law; and, in doing so, he is "[w]aiving fussy considerations deriving from the fact that x need not have necessary existence."[5] One could criticise *Naming and Necessity* on a number of grounds; but to criticise it on the grounds that Kripke waives those "fussy considerations" and uses something like (13) rather than (13*) would be to miss the main philosophical point.[6]

Similarly, when talking about the connection between the α-transform of a property F and modality, one might utter

(11) For any object x, any property F, and any possible world w, if x has F in @, then x has the property *having F in @* in w.

and hence be willing to utter

(12) For any object x, any property F, and any possible world w, if x has F in @, then x has F in @ in w.

Still, one might be unsure whether (11) and (12) are, strictly speaking, true. One might think that the truth of the consequents of (11) and (12) requires that x instantiate the property *having F in @* in every possible world, including possible worlds in which x doesn't exist; and one might be unsure whether any object can instantiate any property in any possible world in which it doesn't exist. One might nonetheless find it convenient to utter (11) or (12) rather than

(11*) For any object x, any property F, and any possible world w, if x has F in @, then, **if x exists in w**, x has the property *having F in @* in w.

or

(12*) For any object x, any property F, and any possible world w, if x has F in @, then, **if x exists in w**, x has F in @ in w.

This convenience is harmless enough, since what is at issue is the connection between the α-transform of a property F and modality rather than existence. (Someone who uses (11) when talking about the connection between the α-transform of a property F and modality wouldn't be worried about possible worlds in which x doesn't exist; rather, they would be worried about allegedly possible worlds in which x exists and in which x doesn't have the property *having F in @*.) Admittedly, if one were antecedently convinced of the falsehood of the Modal Existence Requirement, one might be sure that an object can instantiate a property in a possible world in which it doesn't exist and hence one might be sure that (11) and (12), and not just (11*) and (12*), are true. But not everyone who utters (11) or (12) when talking about the connection between the α-transform of a property F and modality is antecedently convinced of the falsehood of the Modal Existence Requirement.

Many who utter (12) are thus committed to the truth, not of (12), but rather of (12*). (12*) follows from Strong Iterability. But (12*) also follows from Weak Iterability. And, insofar as one is going to attribute a general principle to those who are committed to the truth of (12*), it is better to attribute to them a more cautious generalization like Weak Iterability than it is to attribute to them a less cautious generalization like Strong Iterability. If anything, the sort of case that Yagisawa discusses thus illustrates the widespread acceptance, not of Strong Iterability, but rather of Weak Iterability. And, unlike Strong Iterability, Weak Iterability doesn't allow us to infer the falsehood of the Modal Existence Requirement. So defenders of the Modal Existence Requirement can resist Yagisawa's new argument.

3. α-TRANSFORMATION AGAIN

Yagisawa uses (11) and (12) to support Strong Iterability, which he then uses to argue against the Modal Existence Requirement. But opponents of the Modal Existence Requirement can use (11) to argue against the Modal Existence Requirement directly, without appealing to Strong Iterability.[7] For, if (11) is true and some object *x* that doesn't exist in every possible world has some property *F* in @, then *x* has some property – namely, *having F in @* – in every possible world, including possible worlds in which *x* doesn't exist, and hence the Modal Existence Requirement is false.[8] And, opponents of the Modal Existence Requirement might argue, a proper understanding of α-transformation reveals that (11) is true: what α-transformation does is turn a contingent truth like

(14) *o* has the property *F*

into a necessary truth like

(15) *o* has the property *having F in @*.

where a necessary truth is one that is true in every possible world.

But defenders of the Modal Existence Requirement can reply that (11) is false and that a proper understanding of α-transformation reveals that (11*) is true: what α-transformation does is turn a contingent property like *F* into a necessary property like *having F in @*, where *F* is a necessary property of an object *x* if and only if *x* has *F*, not in every possible world, but rather merely in every possible world in which *x* exists. Indeed, Alvin Plantinga, who first introduced α-transformation, understands it in this way. He says that world-indexed properties like *having F in @* are "non-contingent" in the following sense: if an object *x* has *having F in @*, then *x* has *having F in @* "essentially."[9] And he doesn't say that an object *x* has a property essentially if and only if *x* has that property in every possible world, including possible worlds in which *x* doesn't exist. Rather, he says that an object *x* has a property essentially if and only if "there is no possible world in which *x* exists but lacks" that property.[10] So defenders of the Modal Existence Requirement can resist this argument, too.

NOTES

*For comments and discussion, thanks to David Sanson and three anonymous referees. For funding in the form of a Standard Research Grant (410-2004-0702), thanks to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

[1] See Chisholm, ed. (1960: 82).

[2] Think of (2) as saying that, for any object x, any property F, and any possible worlds w and v, x has F in w if and only if in v the following is the case: x has F in w.

[3] The left-hand side of the biconditional doubly modally indexes Kerry's having a property – namely, *having lost the 2004 election* – that isn't modally indexed, whereas the right-hand side of the biconditional singly modally indexes Kerry's having a modally indexed property: namely, *having lost the 2004 election in @.*

[4] The notion of the α-transform of a property F comes from Plantinga (1978).

[5] Kripke (1980: 3).

[6] One might think that Kripke is getting the order of quantifiers and modal operators wrong and that what he should have said instead is that '$\Box\forall x\forall y(x = y \rightarrow x = y)$' follows from '$\Box\forall x(x = x)$'. But, although '$\Box\forall x\forall y(x = y \rightarrow x = y)$' does follow from '$\Box\forall x(x = x)$', and although '$\Box\forall x(x = x)$' is true even if (as Kripke says) "x need not have necessary existence," '$\Box\forall x\forall y(x = y \rightarrow x = y)$' doesn't express the philosophical point about the necessity of identity that Kripke intends. What Kripke should have said, to be more precise, is that '$\forall x\forall y\{x = y \rightarrow \Box[(\exists z(z = x)\&\exists w(w = y)) \rightarrow (x = y)]\}$' follows from '$\forall x\Box[(\exists y(y = x)) \rightarrow (x = x)]$'. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this issue.

[7] I owe this point to an anonymous referee.

[8] One might think this new argument is no more difficult for defenders of the Modal Existence Requirement to resist than is the Kaplan-Fine argument discussed above in the text. As mentioned above in the text, defenders of the Modal Existence Requirement can resist the Kaplan-Fine argument by saying that, just because Meinong doesn't exist at some possible world w and the singular proposition $\langle$Meinong, *existing*$\rangle$ is not a member of w, it doesn't follow that there is a property F – for example, *not existing* – such that the singular proposition $\langle$Meinong, $F\rangle$ is a member of w. But defenders of the Modal Existence Requirement cannot resist the new argument by saying that, just because some object x has the property *having F in @* in some possible world w and the singular proposition $\langle x$, *having F in @*$\rangle$ is a member of w, it doesn't follow that there is a property G – for example, *having F in @* – such that the singular proposition $\langle x, G\rangle$ is a member of w. Thanks to an anonymous referee for raising this issue.

[9] Plantinga (2003: 128).

[10] Plantinga (2003: 128). Thanks to an anonymous referee here.

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