DE ESSENTIA INDIVIDUA: IN DEFENCE OF POSSIBLE WORLD EXISTENTIALISM

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According to one classification, possible worlds theories may be distinguished according as they are possibilist, actualist, or existentialist. On the possibilist view of David Lewis, not only are there non-actual possible worlds, but the notion of a possible world is to be taken as primitive. In this respect it is at odds with actualism, described by Plantinga as ‘the doctrine that there neither are nor could have been non-existent objects,’ and a doctrine in which the notion of the actual world is primitive, with possible worlds being understood as logical constructions from actual entities.

One form of actualism would allow not only that abstract entities do exist, but that they may do so without ever being exemplified: it draws a distinction between their existing and their being instantiated or exemplified. Among such entities are to be counted both individual essences of individuals that have never existed and propositions about such individuals. On this view, even if Socrates had never existed, not only would his individual essence (Socrateity) exist, but so too would propositions about Socrates, e.g. ‘Socrates is wise’: both the individual essence and the proposition would be necessary entities.

Now, these are two of the issues that divide actualism from a third kind of possible worlds theory, one proposed by Arthur Prior and Kit Fine, and dubbed ‘possible worlds existentialism’ by Alvin Plantinga. On this view, there are no individuals other than those that may occur in the actual world, there are no individual essences of individuals that have not existed in the actual world, nor are there any propositions about any individuals in advance of their existing in

the actual world. Plantinga has criticised this as an untenable position,\(^2\) a claim which it is the aim of this paper to dispute — first by arguing for existentialism and against actualism, and second by defending existentialism against Plantinga's objections.

I. Against Actualism, and for Existentialism

My basic criticism of actualism is that it rests on a false premise, namely, that an individual can be referred to even before it exists. In this section, therefore, I hope first to support the claim that actualism does in fact rest on that premise, and, subsequently, to show that the premise is false.

As mentioned already, actualism affirms, and existentialism denies that there could be propositions about Socrates before he existed. To discern what underlies that affirmation, let us assume that it was *not* possible to refer to Socrates before he existed. In that case, although there could well have been the *expression* 'Socrates is wise,' the term 'Socrates' contained in it could not have referred to the Socrates that we know of. Consequently, the proposition being expressed by that form of words could have said nothing about that Socrates. That is to say, the proposition which *we* understand by 'Socrates is wise' could not have existed before Socrates did. More generally, before Socrates existed there could have been no propositions at all about him. Since this conclusion follows from the assumption that it was not possible to refer to Socrates before he existed, it is clear that underlying the actualist position is a denial of that assumption, and the affirmation that Socrates could be referred to before he existed.

Whether there was any individual essence of Socrates before he existed is closely connected with the actualist view on whether there were any propositions about him at that time. The point is that the individual essence of Socrates would obviously have had to include at least the property of being identical with Socrates. However, if there could have been no propositions about him before he existed (i.e. if literally nothing could have been said about him), he would have been inconceivable at that time. But, if Socrates had been inconceivable, then so too would have been the property of being identical with Socrates; and hence his individual essence (viz. Socrateity) would likewise have been inconceivable. So, the possibility of there being any individual essence of Socrates before he existed depends on

2. *Art. cit.*