NONEXISTENT POSSIBLES AND THEIR INDIVIDUATION

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By a non-existent possible (NEP) I mean a particular individual which could exist, but which never exists in fact. In other words, a NEP is a particular concrete object which exists in some possible world but doesn’t exist in the actual world. In this paper I will argue that some NEPs can be individuated.

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Let us begin by examining the famous passage in which Quine seems to imply that NEPs cannot be individuated.2

"Take, for instance, the possible fat man in that doorway; and again, the possible bald man in that doorway. Are they the same possible man, or two possible men? How do we decide? How many possible men are there in that doorway? Are there more possible thin ones than fat ones? How many of them are alike? Or would their being alike make them one? Are no two possible things alike? Is this the same as saying that it is impossible for two things to be alike? Or, finally, is the concept of identity simply inapplicable to unactualized possibles? But what sense can be found in talking of entities which cannot meaningfully be said to be identical with themselves and distinct from one another".

One of my aims is to provide a critique of this passage. My arguments will presuppose certain forms of essentialism which are nontrivial, but nonetheless quite plausible. Specifically, I will assume that it is legitimate to speak of certain aggregates having their parts essen-

1. When I use the term ‘could’ what I mean can be rephrased by using the term ‘possible’. By possible I mean logically or metaphysically possible. As is customary, I distinguish individuals (or particulars), e.g., physical objects and persons, from abstract entities like sets, properties, etc.

tially. Yet Quine and others have presented general arguments which purport to show that nontrivial forms of essentialism, quantified modal logic, and possible worlds talk are unintelligible. Some of these arguments have been effectively answered in the literature, as Quine himself now seems to concede. The remaining arguments of note seem to boil down to this. Key modal notions like necessity, essentiality, transworld identity, etc., are unintelligible because they can’t be analyzed in a satisfactory fashion. But such arguments are inconclusive, since in general unanalyzability doesn’t entail unintelligibility. An essentialist can argue plausibly that we have intuitions relevant to the employment of these key modal notions, and hence these modal concepts are meaningful even if they are primitive or not analyzable in a way satisfactory to a Quinean.

Below, I develop the groundwork of my critique of Quinean skepticism about nonexistent objects. This groundwork presupposes the following datum. It is possible that there exist material objects which never exist in fact. Using the terminology of possible worlds, what is meant here is that in one possible world or another there exist material objects which do not exist in the actual world. In light of these possibilities, a question may be raised. Can a nonexistent possible material object be individuated? That is, can a particular nonexistent possible material object be picked out of the totality of possible objects? I shall argue that this question should be answered in the affirmative.

Notice that the datum referred to above doesn’t mention a specific possible object. Rather it uses a kind of "quantification" to talk about NEPs in purely generalized terms. According to one view of possibility or possible worlds, all discourse concerning NEPs is of this sort — involving generalized discourse about possibilia, but no reference to a particular possibilium. But my thesis that some nonexistent possible material objects can be individuated will have the controversial implication that there is such a thing as reference to a particular nonexistent object.

My argument unfolds in three main stages. First, I develop a criterion for a description’s individuating a NEP. Secondly, I examine