
NOĒSIS XIX

ON DEGREE ACTUALISM

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This paper addresses the conflicting views of Serious Actualism and Possibilism in the debate on whether merely possible individuals can have properties. Advocating a view I call Degree Actualism, I propose this debate to be addressed in terms of *degrees of Being* rather than existence. I show how Degree Actualism removes property possession from its thus instated binomial categorization and introduces a fine-grain evaluation system to more accurately classify individuals. Degree Actualism presents an opportunity for both Serious Actualism and Possibilism to be correct and not contend with one another.

Key Words: actualism, possibilism, being, modality, merely possible

1 INTRODUCTION

In this paper, I will explain and argue for a view I call Degree Actualism. Degree Actualism claims that all individuals who possess a degree of Being may associate with properties. In providing justification for this claim, I will first outline the basic arguments of Serious Actualism and Possibilism as defined by Alvin Plantinga and Nathan Salmon.

Serious Actualism and Possibilism are two conflicting views in modal metaphysics. Serious Actualism states that merely possible individuals cannot attain properties since they lack existence; whereas Possibilism states that merely possible individuals can attain properties, in spite of the fact that they lack existence. Upon further investigation of these claims, I will show how Degree Actualism allows for merely possible individuals to possess properties while maintaining a position consistent with a form of Serious Actualism. I will argue that Plantinga and Salmon wrongfully assume that property possession is to be defined in terms of an individual's existence. In Degree Actualism, I propose that property possession should rather be defined in *degrees of Being*. This revision removes property possession from its thus instated binomial categorization and introduces a fine-grain evaluation system to more

accurately classify individuals. Degree Actualism disambiguates the relationship between individuals and their properties and eliminates the contention between Serious Actualism and Possibilism.

2 THE SERIOUS ACTUALIST

Formally stated, Serious Actualism is the view that, necessarily, an individual has properties only if that individual exists. Plantinga condones this position and believes that properties cannot precede an individual's existence (Plantinga, 1982, p.3). This view largely appeals to common sense for it seems illogical to attempt to describe an individual who does not presently exist. In order for an individual to have a property relative to a specific time, place or world, it ought to follow that that individual necessarily exists in that specific time, place or world, as well. For instance, if one were to propose propositions attained by Jane Goodall, one may justly state Goodall has the property of "being the world's leading primatologist", and "being an animal-human conservationist". However, if Jane Goodall was never born, thereby neither existing at this particular time nor in this particular world, the previously suggested properties would hold no relevance to any individual (Plantinga, 1982, p.3,6).

Consequently, the Serious Actualist claims that merely possible individuals cannot attain properties. Since there is no instance where a merely possible individual is presently exemplified, it necessarily follows that their properties would precede their existence in every case (Plantinga, 1982, p.3). Maintaining the logic previously established, it is nonsensical to discuss merely possible individuals since their "attained" properties are not relevant to any particular individual.

At this point, I believe it would be helpful to establish a framework for what it means to exist and for an individual to attain a property. Suppose we have a space of possible worlds W . Within this space, there is possible world 1 (W_1), possible world 2 (W_2) and so on. Among these worlds, one has the distinction of being the actual world ($W_{@}$). Let us associate with each world a domain of individuals (D_W), where D represents all of the individuals present in W . Corresponding to any property P in any possible world W , we can introduce the extension of P at W . The extension of P at W will be a subset of D_W . For instance, the extension of *being a pencil* in $W_{@}$ would reference all pencils included in $D_{@}$ (Plantinga, 1976, p.141).

Plantinga's assessment of Serious Actualism, as defined in this framework, claims that merely possible individuals are not members of $D_{@}$ and therefore cannot be an extension of any P with respect to $W_{@}$. The definition of Serious Actualism can be more formally stated as follows;

SA: Necessarily, for any individual X and any property P , if X is in the extension of P , then X exists.

Since merely possible individuals exist in merely possible worlds, it is important to understand how this framework applies to both $W_{@}$ and other possible worlds. For any object X , property P and world W , if X is the extension of P with respect to W , then X exists within W . A consequence of this claim is that individuals may only attain properties in worlds where they are members of the associated domain. Since Jane Goodall exists in $W_{@}$, she is a member of $D_{@}$ thereby granting her the ability to attain properties in $W_{@}$. In the case of merely possible individuals, where they are not members of $D_{@}$, they cannot attain properties in $W_{@}$.

3 THE POSSIBILIST

While Serious Actualism seems tenable, the innate tendency to consider which properties a merely possible individual could attain exposes a fundamental error in the view. Possibilism addresses this conflict and proposes that there are individuals that do not exist and attain properties. To support this claim, Salmon proposes the counterexample of his merely possible brother, Noman. Noman is the individual who would have existed had egg E of Salmon's mother been fertilized by sperm S of Salmon's father (Salmon, 1987, p.49-50). The fact that this event did not occur, indicates that Noman is not contained within $D_{@}$. However, even though Noman is not a member of $D_{@}$, one may still be enticed to ponder what he would have looked like had he existed. In addition to the possible properties pertaining to Noman's physical appearance, he also attains the properties of:

- (a) Not existing in $W_{@}$
- (b) Being the subject of this paper
- (c) Being named *Noman*
- (d) Being the subject of propositions such as "Noman is the possible brother of Salmon".

This is peculiar when addressed in terms of Serious Actualism because, even though Noman does not exist in $D_{@}$, he is in the extension of (a)-(d) with respect to $W_{@}$. Noman complies with the first condition of Serious Actualism, however contends with the second. Generalizing a view from these considerations, we may construct the following argument for the conclusion that Serious Actualism is false:

- (P1) If non-existent individuals have properties in the actual world, then Serious Actualism is false.
- (P2) Some non-existent individuals have properties in the actual world.
- (C1) Serious Actualism is false.

While Possibilism corrects Serious Actualism's claim that merely possible individuals cannot attain properties, its rationale still seems to present a contradiction. The Possibilist has failed to explain *why* it is that a non-existent individual can attain properties. The dilemma we face now is that neither Serious Actualism nor Possibilism present satisfying solutions to the merely possible individual's property possession debate. On one hand, Serious Actualism proposes a convincing argument yet undesirable conclusion; and on the other hand, Possibilism proposes an unconvincing argument yet desirable conclusion. I believe this incompatibility is the consequence of wrongly defining property possession in terms of existence. In my view Degree Actualism, I propose property possession to be defined in terms of Being.

4 THE DEGREE ACTUALIST

Noman is a great example of an instance where it is natural to ponder about an individual who does not exist. However, as mentioned before, it remains illogical to associate properties with non-existent individuals. It would seem as if merely possible individuals have created an instance that is simultaneously logical and illogical. I attribute this contradiction to the wrongful assumption that property association is dependent on existence. If we were to redefine property association in terms of *Being*, this contradiction would disappear. This is the view I call Degree Actualism. In the remainder of this paper, I will demonstrate how the substitution of *existence* for Being reveals why it is a merely possible individual can both not exist and attain properties at the same time.

Let us begin with a principle state of Being and call it *existence*. Rather than regarding Being as a binomial, I conceive it in a matter of degrees. In other words, there are *degrees of Being*. As an individual falls away from actuality, its degree of Being diminishes. This *falling away* is what differentiates present individuals from past and future individuals. While individuals in these circumstances still have Being, they possess less of it since they no longer reside in the state of existence. Past individuals have a lesser degree of Being than present individuals because they once did, but no longer exist. Future individuals have a lesser degree of Being than past individuals because they have not, but soon will exist.

Merely possible individuals can be defined in the same way. These individuals have a lesser degree of Being than future individuals because they merely possibly could exist. On Degree Actualism, past Being, future Being and merely possible Being are all ways of Being that are less fundamental than existence. Notice here how past, future and merely possible individuals each do not exist. What differentiates their non-existence from each other is that the first individual had once existed, the second individual will soon exist and the last individual will only ever merely possibly exist. This creates the following confidence hierarchy to the degrees of Being:

Present individuals → Past individuals → Future individuals → Merely
possible individuals

An individual in the present state is *currently existing* thereby removing any ambiguity associated with its Being. Individuals of merely possible states, however, still possess multiple possibilities as to how exactly their properties may manifest. In other words, as an individual falls further away from existence, and further down the hierarchical chain, its propensity to exist lessens. This elucidates why properties of merely possible individuals are always stated as mere postulations, whereas properties of present individuals are stated with confidence. For example, all properties assigned to Noman are speculative—*perhaps* Noman has brown hair, *perhaps* Noman is taller than Salmon—whereas any properties assigned to Jane Goodall would be definitive—Jane Goodall *is* a primatologist, Jane Goodall *is* an animal-human conservationist.

I would also like to propose that a merely possible individual's Being is strengthened by its attained properties. While these properties are less definitive than those of past individuals, a merely possible individual depends on their properties to remain instantiated in $W_{@}$. To better clarify this point, let's return to the example of Jane Goodall. Jane Goodall exists in $W_{@}$ regardless of whether or not others acknowledge her attained properties. Whereas a merely possible individual, such as Noman, only possess Being for as long as its properties are recognized. Recall Noman's proposed properties in Section II. Properties (b)-(d) could be revised so that Noman no longer exists in the bounds of this paper. If Noman were to be negated from this paper (and similarly negated from Salmon's paper, *Existence*) properties (b), (c), and (d) would cease to address a particular individual. Property (a) would remain, however, if the other properties of Noman are not acknowledged, (a) becomes insignificant. I highlight this particular attribute of merely possible individuals to show that not only can merely possible individual attain properties, but the integrity of their Being depends on them.

Let's take a moment and revisit the SA thesis proposed in Section I. Plantinga had originally defined Serious Actualism in terms of existence. As a Degree Actualist, we are now inclined to revise SA so that this established error is corrected. Therefore, I propose the following claim:

SA_{Degree} : Necessarily, for all individuals X and all properties P , if individual X has property P , then X has Being.

Once again, since merely possible individuals exist in merely possible worlds, it is important to understand how SA_{Degree} applies to possible worlds. Necessarily, for all individuals X , all properties P , and all worlds W , if X has P , then X has Being in D_W . The neat thing about Degree Actualism is that the variable *Being* bifurcates into four possible paths—present Being, past Being, future Being and merely possible Being. This allows for a fine-grain sorting system of all individuals. Rather than being binomially sorted as existing or non-existing, Degree Actualism further classifies the individuals a Serious

Actualist would otherwise deem as non-existing. This facilitates the disentanglement of non-existing individuals and better illuminates their relationship to their properties. As we have already discussed, the relationship between an individual and its property becomes modified as it travels along the hierarchy of Being.

At this point, I believe we have developed a strong understanding of Degree Actualism and are now prepared to see how it abolishes the contention between Serious Actualism and Possibilism. To quickly review, Serious Actualism has two clauses; (1) merely possible individuals do not exist and (2) only existing individuals can attain properties. We have just revised these two clauses to (1*) Merely possible individuals have a degree of Being and (2*) all individuals with a degree of Being attain properties. Evidently, Noman is no longer in contention with either clause. Since he is a merely possible individual, he possesses a degree of Being, and since he possesses a degree of Being, he can attain properties. Possibilism also has two clauses; (1') merely possible individuals do not exist and (2') merely possible individuals attain properties. In Section II, we had already seen that Noman is consistent with both these clauses, however we had felt there to be a contradiction. If we were to translate Possibilism into the language of Degree Actualism, the previous clauses would be revised to (1^{*}) merely possible individuals have a degree of Being less significant than existence and (2^{*}) merely possible individuals attain properties. While the overall consistency of Noman with Possibilism has not changed, the rewording of these clauses allows for a more comfortable fit.

The revised clause (1*) of Serious Actualism is quite similar to the revised clause (1^{*}) of Possibilism. In fact, the only difference is that (1^{*}) clarifies that the degree of Being possessed by merely possible individuals is less significant than that acquired by existence. Similarly, (2*) and (2^{*}) resemble one another as well. The disambiguation facilitated by Degree Actualism sorted the non-existent individuals. Plantinga and Salmon had failed to do this, and so their stances seemed to be in contention with one another. However, as demonstrated, the application of Degree Actualism to both their foundations exposed that they are, more or less, identical.

5 CONCLUSION

In summary, we have investigated the views of Serious Actualism and Possibilism as defined by Plantinga and Salmon. Upon discovering contention and discomfort in both views, I had proposed Degree Actualism as a possible alternative. Degree Actualism's ability to define property association in terms of degrees of Being was demonstrated to satisfyingly explain why it is a non-existent individual, namely Noman, is still able to attain properties. It was also understood that the bifurcating nature of Being allowed for a fine-grain sorting method of all the individuals loosely classified as non-existent by both Serious Actualism and Possibilism. By establishing a hierarchical chain to the degrees of Being, it was understood how present Being, past Being, future Being and

merely possible Being are all related to one another. Then, upon translating the views of Serious Actualism and Possibilism into the language of Degree Actualism, Plantinga's and Salmon's stances were shown to be quite similar to one another, hence nullifying the apparent contention. In conclusion, Degree Actualism proposes a strong alternative to Serious Actualism and Possibilism, and offers a solution to the merely possible individual's ability to attain properties debate that is both logically and fundamentally pleasing.

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