

ACTUALITY AND TRIPLY-INDEXED SEMANTICS

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Abstract:

The indexical notion of actuality suggests that a world is only actual in a relativized sense. This does not sit well with the notion of actuality employed by anti-possibilist metaphysicians. I argue that we can appease the actualist while preserving many of the attractive features of the indexical notion by introducing a triply-indexed semantics: in addition to a circumstance of evaluation and a context of utterance, we should add a third index tracking the metaphysically privileged world. By differentiating between the privileged world and the world of utterance, we make room for a world that is actual in an unrelativized sense, while still leaving us with a parameter whose value can shift when we want to consider some other world as actual (as we may in evaluating statements concerning conceptual possibility).

§1 Two Notions of Actuality

Actuality is of philosophical interest in multiple ways. There is an *ontological* question about what exists – does actuality constitute the entirety of what exists, as metaphysical actualists believe? There are also *semantic* questions we might ask about actuality – is ‘actual’ an indexical? For those who think so (and this does seem to be the favored semantic view), the term is typically treated analogously to Kaplan’s views about ‘I’; each utterance of ‘actual’ picks out the world of the utterance, and the semantic content is just that world (for those who countenance Russellian propositions).

Kaplan-style indexicals are context-sensitive. Whether April 10, 2009 counts as ‘now’ depends on facts about the speaker. It is in a sense a matter of perspective; from certain perspectives that date can properly be termed ‘now’, and from other perspectives it does not. If ‘actual’ is an indexical, we should expect that ‘actual’ will be context-sensitive in the same way. Which world counts as ‘actual’ will depend on facts about the speaker, and it will be in a sense a matter of perspective whether or not @ can properly be termed ‘actual’.

I find this troubling. As a metaphysical actualist, I think that there is an *absolute* fact of the matter which world is actual; in claiming that this world is actual, I do not mean merely that it

is actual from my perspective, the way that Ithaca is here from my perspective. And I certainly don't think that this world counts as 'actual' because of facts about *me* or my utterance; it counts as actual because it is real, and its reality does not derive from me in any way. So I worry that the indexical view of actuality is inadequate to the absolute sense of actuality that non-possibilists desire.¹

Worries about the compatibility of the indexical analysis of 'actual' and metaphysical actualism are not new; Stalnaker (1976) responds to these worries directly by arguing that the metaphysical actualist can happily accept the indexicalist semantic thesis, but in the end his response is not entirely compelling.

§2 The Indexical Notion

The indexicalist makes 'actuality' a perspective-relative property, in that @ is actual from its own perspective, and not actual from the perspective of any other world. Stalnaker (1976, 1984), in observing that indexicalism does not entail possibilism, says things that may seem to suggest that the actualist should be content with a merely perspective-relative actuality property. This allegedly is compatible with actuality conferring an objectively privileged ontological status, because in fact there is only one perspective: that of @. To say with the indexicalist that β is actual from its own perspective does not imply that β and @ have the same ontological standing; it only implies that *if there were* such a perspective as β , β would have the ontological status that @ in fact has. Stalnaker (1984: 47) drives home this point with the helpful observation that one

¹ The worry doesn't apply to a Lewisian possibilist, of course; my objection to the indexical thesis relies on my presumption that Lewis's metaphysics is unacceptable. I think that a Lewisian and an actualist will in the end want to say very different things about what actuality amounts to, so it should be no surprise if we find that the analysis of actuality that one side favors will be unacceptable to the other. With that said, see Bricker (2006) as one who adopts a realist view of possible worlds while advocating an absolute sense of actuality.

could hold that 'I' is an indexical even if there were only one individual in existence – the thesis that 'I' is an indexical does not entail that there are a plurality of speakers who all share the same ontological status. Indexicality is a thesis that merely tells us something about how a referent would be determined by a use of the expression, whether that use is real or hypothetical. The point might be summarized in this way: 'actual' is an indexical in the sense that anyone who attributes actuality to herself would speak truly. But in fact, the only people who attribute actuality to themselves are denizens of @, so the “@-actuality property” (the property picked out by 'actual' from the perspective of @) picks out a privileged group – those who really do attribute actuality to themselves. β -denizens are hypothetical individuals who merely hypothetically attribute actuality to themselves.

There are thus two points from Stalnaker that merit emphasis. One is that indexicalism does not entail possibilism, for the same reason that holding that 'I' is an indexical is compatible with solipsism. The other is his claim that the actualist should not demand a world-independent sense of actuality; a perspective-relative sense of actuality is all the actualist should need, because (on her view) there is only one perspective (the universe A) to which actuality is relativized.

The first point is well-taken, but the actualist ought to insist, contrary to Stalnaker's second point, that we make room for an unrelativized sense of actuality. Consider the following analogy: internal realists say that ontological questions can only be answered relative to a framework. If we want to know whether mereological fusions exist, for instance, we can say that they exist relative to one framework and that they do not exist relative to another framework, but there is no sense to the question whether they exist simpliciter. “Commonsense” realists find it difficult to accept that internal realism deserves to be called 'realism', since it doesn't make room

for framework-independent ontological facts of the matter.

Suppose, for reasons we need not try to envision, an internal realist suggests that there is only one framework.² In that case, it might seem the commonsense realist would have no objection; if we want to know whether Xs exist, we simply see whether they exist relative to that framework. With only one framework, we do not confront the apparent ontological indeterminacy that would come with saying that there is a framework according to which Xs exist and another framework according to which Xs do not exist.

The commonsense realist will not find this compelling, and it is here that we find the relevant analogy in the debate about actuality. The indexicalist is committed to the claim that actuality-judgments can only be made from the perspective of a universe, and the actualist will be dissatisfied by this, even in spite of Stalnaker's reassurance that there is no other universe to offer a competing perspective. Stalnaker suggests the indexicalist can say that @ is actual *from the @-perspective*, and in fact there is no other perspective from which to make judgments about actuality. But the actualist wants to say something stronger than just that @ is actual from its own perspective; she wants to say that @ is actual simpliciter.

The actualist could be satisfied if the indexicalist could offer one of two further claims: either an admission that there is an additional, perspective-independent sense in which actuality-judgments can have truth-values, or the thesis that @-perspective judgments are the *true* judgments, i.e., that actuality from the @-perspective is actuality simpliciter. The indexicalist notion of actuality leaves no room for the former, since actuality is perspective-relative. But there

² Perhaps the internal realist is suggesting that *all* realists are internal realists, and that the commonsense realist is simply an internal realist who countenances only one framework.

is no clear reason for accepting the latter thesis either; in general, truth-according-to-F does not suffice for truth-simpliciter, even if there are no other values than F to be substituted in the schema [truth-according-to-___]. The indexicalist can grant that existence-at-@ is a perspective-independent property that @-denizens exemplify, and she can grant that actuality-from-the-perspective-of-@ is existence-at-@, but she cannot posit a perspective-independent actuality-simpliciter property. It is at this point that the actualist will find indexicalism inhospitable.

§3 Index of Actuality

If we abandon the indexical semantics for ‘actual’, what view should we adopt instead? The actualist thinks that there is an absolute fact of the matter which world is actual. Rather than letting ‘actual’ designate whichever world in which the utterance occurs, we should just let ‘actual’ designate that metaphysically privileged world. In simple cases, it would suffice to simply to leave matters at that. But as the literature on two-dimensional semantics has shown, we have reasons for wanting to talk about other possible worlds in multiple ways – there is a difference between thinking of some merely possible world *as counterfactual*³ and thinking of it *as actual*.⁴ We need to be able to talk about what would happen were some other world the metaphysically privileged world, where this is distinct from simply evaluating a proposition at that world considered as counterfactual. The import of this is that although (insofar as we are sympathetic to actualism) we think that one world is absolutely actual, we want to be able to *shift* which world is treated as actual in certain situations (for instance, in reasoning about epistemic possibilities). If

³ As when we ask what is true of some other world β .

⁴ As when we ask what would be true should it turn out that *we* inhabit β . See Davies and Humberstone (1980) for the introduction of this term. Chalmers makes extensive use of it in many papers; see his (2006), for instance.

we want to shift which world is thought of as metaphysically privileged, we cannot simply stipulate that ‘actual’ designates the world that is in fact privileged; what we need is an *index* whose parameter represents the world that is treated as actual, so that we have a parameter whose value can be shifted. To satisfy the actualist’s intuitions, we can allow that there is a world that is in fact metaphysically privileged, and that the default value of this parameter is that world, but to satisfy the two-dimensionalist we can allow that this parameter-value is shifted from that default value to β in evaluating a sentence of the form [‘At world β considered as actual, . . .’].

There is a balance being struck here between the actualist and the two-dimensionalist. The two-dimensionalist requires that we be able to shift what counts as ‘actual’ in order to understand “considering a world as actual,” as we may do in evaluating conceptual possibilities. On the other hand, actualists require that what counts as actual be something absolute. The world of utterance *per se* has no metaphysical privilege, and since multiple worlds contain utterances “the world of utterance” is perspective-relative. But if we create a new parameter that designates the world we want to treat as privileged, with the default assumption that the value of this parameter is the genuinely privileged world unless we are explicitly shifting that value, then we get something capable of semantic shifting while allowing that ‘actual’ does track something of unrelativized metaphysical significance.

One might worry that on this new proposal ‘actual’ is still being relativized (to the world we choose to think of as special, for instance, where our choice is a function of our variable interests), but because the default value tracks something independent of our interests we can say that there is an absolute fact of the matter which world is actual – it is the real world. And when we shift the world designated as actual, we are not changing which world is special; we are simply

engaging in a counterfactual supposition that some other world is special.

This proposal has the virtue of satisfying both the two-dimensionalist and the actualist, and the only cost is that instead of a two-dimensional modal semantics featuring a context of utterance and a circumstance of evaluation, we have a three-dimensional modal semantics featuring those two indices and in addition an “index of actuality”: a 1-tuple whose value represents the world designated as metaphysically special, where the default value is the world that is genuinely privileged.

§4 Benefits

There are additional benefits to this proposal. Suppose that we want to consider a world without speakers as actual. Such a world contains no utterances. Nevertheless, we can coherently say that even at such a world considered as actual gold has atomic number 79. The standard indexical analysis of ‘actual’ has to finesse the question how such a world can be treated as actual if it is not the world of utterance, but the triply-indexed proposal simply says that we can designate this world as metaphysically privileged without thereby supposing that the world features any utterance or utterer.

Another benefit from the proposal concerns the statement ‘Actually, I exist’, which presents a problem for indexicalism. One of the purposes for which two-dimensionalism has been invoked is to explain why certain necessities have an air of contingency to them.⁵ For instance,

- (1) The morning star is the evening star

expresses the proposition

- (2) <Identity, Venus, Venus>

⁵ See Chalmers (1996) or Jackson (1998).

which is necessary. Nevertheless, (1) *seems* contingent. Why is that? According to some, the air of contingency to (1) is due to the contingency of an associated proposition, such as:

- (3) <Coextension, being the celestial object . . . viewed in the morning . . ., being the celestial object . . . viewed in the evening . . .>

At some worlds (such as ours), these two descriptions designate the same object. At other worlds, they do not. Hence (3) is contingent. So although the proposition expressed by (1) is necessary, there is an associated proposition that is contingent, and that gives rise to the illusion that (1) expresses something contingent.⁶

The upshot is that two-dimensionalism has been used to explain the illusion of contingency about some necessary statements such as (1). However, there are other necessary statements whose air of contingency can only be explained away if we reject the indexicalist treatment of ‘actual’ as rigidly designating the world of the utterance. Thus if the double-indexing strategy is useful in explaining the apparent contingency of (1), and we would need triple-indexing to explain other apparent contingencies, we would have some motivation to accept the triple-indexing account of ‘actual’. Consider

- (4) Actually, I exist.

(4) expresses a necessary proposition, which we might render as:

⁶ One might question my assertion at the beginning of this section that this explanation is an invocation of two-dimensionalism. Kripke (1980), after all, offers an explanation of the apparent contingency of (1) along these lines in *Naming and Necessity*, but he should not be labeled a two-dimensionalist. I do not want to worry too much about classification here, but I am inclined to say that Kripke *is* employing a two-dimensionalist strategy, though not in such a way that both dimensions are semantic. We can interpret two-dimensionalism in such a way that one dimension captures semantic content and the other dimension captures reference-determination, and so long as we say that reference-determination is not a semantic matter, I see no problem in saying that Kripke is a two-dimensionalist in *this* sense. As many have noted, the moves Kripke makes certainly resemble two-dimensionalist claims in certain respects: see Chalmers (2006), Gendler and Hawthorne (2002), and Soames (2005).

(5) <Truth-at-@, <Existence, BBB>>

(5) is necessary, because there is no world at which BBB fails to exist *at @*. Of course there are worlds where BBB fails to exist; he is not a necessary being. There are certainly worlds where

(6) <Existence, BBB>

is false. But (6) is not the same proposition as (5). No world falsifies (5), though some worlds falsify (6).

On the indexicalist view, then, (4) expresses a necessary proposition. That is not by itself a problem for the two-dimensionalist technique of explaining apparent contingency, since we might be able to fall back on the associated proposition. However, if we accept the indexical treatment of ‘actually’, the associated proposition turns out necessary as well:

(7) <At the world of utterance, <Existence, the speaker of the utterance>>

(7) is necessary, because no speaker fails to exist at her own world. Both (5) and (7) are necessary, and we have no explanation for the air of contingency to (4). The culprit is the indexical treatment of actuality – (7) is the proposition associated with (4) only if ‘Actually’ is cashed out as ‘At the world of utterance’. If we divorce the character of ‘actually’ from ‘at the world of utterance’, we can explain why (4) seems contingent. The reason is that the world designated as actual no longer has to be the world of utterance, so instead of (7), we have as an associated proposition

(8) <At the world designated as ontologically special, <Existence, the speaker of the utterance>>

Assuming that the speaker is a contingent being, there are worlds that we can designate as privileged at which the speaker doesn’t exist. This would generate the contingency of (8), so (8)

(unlike (7)) thus could explain the air of contingency in (4).

§5 Conclusion

The proposal in the end is thus that to understand the semantics of ‘actual’ in such a way that we allow the actualist her presumption that the actuality of a world confers upon it a kind of metaphysical privilege, we need to revise the two-dimensionalist understanding that fixes ‘actual’ to the world of utterance. Instead we need a three-dimensional semantics that offers a separate index of actuality that is independent of the world of utterance.

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