Singular Propositions[*]

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I. The Topic

Alvin Plantinga says:

> Consider the propositions
>   (1) William F. Buckley is wise
> and
>   (2) The Lion of Conservatism is wise.
> The first, we might think, involves Buckley in a more direct and intimate way than does the second. The second refers to him, so to say, only accidentally— only in virtue of the fact that he happens to be the Lion of Conservativism. (1), on the other hand, makes direct reference to him, or … is "directly about" him.[1]

Plantinga also says: "Let's say that a proposition directly about some object (or objects) is a *singular* proposition."[2] In this paper, I shall presuppose Plantinga's definition of 'singular proposition', which is fairly standard.[3]

[1] "On Existentialism," *Philosophical Studies* 44 (1983): 1-20, pp. 2-3.

[2] "De Essentia" in E. Sosa, ed., *Essays on the Philosophy of Roderick M. Chisholm* (Amsterdam: Ropoli, 1979), p. 109.

[3] For example, Robert Adams and Richard Cartwright define 'singular proposition' more or less as Plantinga does. See Adams, "Actualism and Thisness," *Synthese* 49 (1981): 3-41, pp. 6-7 and "Time and Thisness" in P. A. French, T. E. Uehling, Jr., and H. K. Wettstein, eds., *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, *XI*, *Studies in Essentialism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), p. 315); and Cartwright, "On Singular Propositions," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy, supplementary volume* 23 (1998): 67-83, p. 73.

Following Plantinga,[4] Saul Kripke,[5] and many others, I deny that names are disguised descriptions. So I think that when a name refers to an entity, that name refers to that entity directly, and not in virtue of the qualitative properties that that entity happens to have. As a result of this, and also in light of the examples Plantinga uses to illustrate *direct aboutness*, I think that the following is a useful rule of thumb: a proposition is singular if it is expressed by a sentence using a name. Sentences using names often express propositions. So I conclude that there are singular propositions.

Given Plantinga's definition of 'singular proposition', it is not true *by definition* that a singular proposition has the relevant individual—i.e., the individual that it is directly about—as a constituent. Rather, given Plantinga's definition, whether a singular proposition has the relevant individual as a constituent is a substantive question.

Nevertheless, the *received view* is that if a proposition is directly about some *x*, then that proposition has *x* as a constituent. Again, the received view is that each singular proposition has the relevant individual as a constituent.

There is another definition of 'singular proposition' in the literature. Mark Crimmins and John Perry and Greg Fitch and Michael Nelson, among others, define a 'singular proposition' as a proposition that has the relevant individual as a constituent. See Crimmins and Perry, "The Prince and the Phone Booth: Reporting Puzzling Beliefs," *Journal of Philosophy* 86 (1989): 685-711, p. 686; and Fitch and Nelson, "Singular Propositions," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (plato.stanford.edu). In this paper, I shall show that there are no singular propositions, thus defined.

[4] *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), pp. 137-144.

[5] *Naming and Necessity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 22-70.

Defenders of the received view include Bertrand Russell,[6] David Kaplan,[7] Jeffrey King,[8] Nathan Salmon,[9] and Scott Soames,[10] among others.

I shall argue that it is false that each singular proposition has the relevant individual as a constituent. So I shall argue that the received view is false. In fact, I shall prosecute five distinct arguments against the received view.

II. Argument One: Singular Propositions about Wholly Past Individuals

Abraham Lincoln no longer exists. Thus my first argument against the received view:

(1) Lincoln does not exist. (premise)

(2) If Lincoln does not exist, then *that Lincoln does not exist* is true. (premise)

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[6] See *Principles of Mathematics*, 2nd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1903); "Russell to Frege 12.12.1904" in G. Gabriel, H. Hermes, F. Kambartel, C. Thiel, and A. Veraart, eds., *Gottlob Frege: Philosophical and Mathematical Correspondence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 166-170; and "Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 11 (1910-1911): 108-128.

In 1903 and 1904, Russell thought that we grasp singular propositions about Mont Blanc and other familiar objects. By 1910-11, he thought that the only singular propositions we grasp are about sense data.

[7] "How to Russell a Frege-Church," *Journal of Philosophy* 72 (1975): 716-729; and "Demonstratives" in J. Almog, J. Perry, and H. Wettstein, eds., *Themes From Kaplan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

[8] *The Nature and Structure of Propositions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 76.

[9] *Frege's Puzzle* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), p. 1.

[10] "Direct Reference, Propositional Attitudes, and Semantic Content," *Philosophical Topics* 15 (1987): 47-87.

(3) *That Lincoln does not exist* is true. (1, 2)

(4) If a proposition is true, then that proposition exists. (premise)

(5) *That Lincoln does not exist* exists. (3, 4)

(6) If a proposition exists and has constituents, then its constituents exist. (premise)

(7) If the received view is true, then Lincoln is a constituent of *that Lincoln does not exist*. (premise)

(8) If the received view is true, then Lincoln exists. (5, 6, 7)

Therefore,

(9) The received view is false. (1,8)

Unfortunately, the above argument will not persuade everyone. On the contrary, nearly every premise of the above argument is controversial.

Some of those controversial premises are shared by two of the arguments below, and so will be considered below (§V). Similarly, objections pertaining to "serious actualism," which are relevant not only to this argument but also to two of the arguments below, will be addressed below (§V).

But there is one objection that applies only to this section's argument. This objection focuses on a controversial premise that is unique to this section's argument. This is the premise that Lincoln does not exist.

Eternalists will say that objects located at past times are just as real as objects located at distant places.[11] So eternalists will say that, although Lincoln is

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[11] So too will defenders of the "growing block" view of time. But I shall focus on eternalism, since I think that the growing block view should not be a live option; see my "Good-Bye Growing Block" in D. Zimmerman, ed., *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

not located at the present region of time, he is located at some other regions of time, and so he exists. So eternalists will deny the first premise—Lincoln does not exist—of the above argument.[12]

Indeed, eternalists have even turned the above argument on its head. They have said, first, that the received view is true, and, second, that there are true singular propositions about Lincoln. Therefore, they have concluded, Lincoln exists. Therefore, eternalism is true.[13]

I think that eternalism is false.[14] More to the point, I think that Lincoln does not exist. So I accept the first premise of the above argument. Moreover, I accept the other premises of the above argument, even those that are controversial. The above argument is clearly valid. So, in part because of the above argument, I reject the received view. And I shall present two more variations on the above argument, neither of which relies on the falsity of eternalism.

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[12] Substance dualists might think that Lincoln still exists as a disembodied soul. Then let '*L*' be the body Lincoln had, and run the above argument with *L* in place of Lincoln. (There are singular propositions about objects other than persons. For example, there are singular propositions about bodies, such as *L*, and also—as we shall see in §VII—about propositions.)

[13] Greg Fitch defends this sort of argument for eternalism in "Singular Propositions in Time," *Philosophical Studies* 73 (1994): 181-187. My response to this sort of argument is to reject the received view. For other responses, see Theodore Sider ("Presentism and Ontological Commitment," *Journal of Philosophy* 96 (1999): 325-347) and Ned Markosian ("A Defense of Presentism" in D. Zimmerman, ed., *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)).

Timothy Williamson ("Necessary Existents" in A. O'Hear, ed., *Logic, Thought and Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press)) defends an argument along these lines for the existence of Trajan; but Williamson does not conclude that eternalism is true; instead, he concludes that Trajan exists at the present time, but is no longer concrete.

[14] See my *Truth and Ontology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), pp. 137-142.

III. Argument Two: Singular Propositions about Individuals that Never Existed

Nathan Salmon says:

Let us name the (possible) individual who would have developed from the union of [sperm] *S* and [egg] *E*, if *S* had fertilized *E* in the normal manner, 'Noman'. Noman does not exist in the actual world, but there are many possible worlds in which he (it?) does exist.[15]

This leads to my second argument against the received view:

(A) Noman does not exist. (premise)

(B) If Noman does not exist, then *that Noman does not exist* is true. (premise)

(C) *That Noman does not exist* is true. (A, B)

(D) If a proposition is true, then that proposition exists. (premise)

(E) *That Noman does not exist* exists. (C, D)

(F) If a proposition exists and has constituents, then its constituents exist. (premise)

(G) If the received view is true, then Noman is a constituent of *that Noman does not exist*. (premise)

(H) If the received view is true, then Noman exists. (E, F, G)

Therefore,

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[15] "Existence" in J. Tomberlin, ed., *Philosophical Perspectives, I, Metaphysics* (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview Publishing Co., 1987), p. 49.

Plantinga is, as far as I know, the first person to discuss this sort of example:

Perhaps there is an unexemplified essence E, a sperm cell and an egg (an actually existent sperm cell and egg, that being the only kind there are) such that if that sperm and egg had been united, then E would have been exemplified by a person resulting from that union. ("Reply to Critics" in J. Tomberlin and P. van Inwagen, eds., *Alvin Plantinga* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1985), p. 334)

(I) The received view is false. (A, H)

This argument is not subject to any objection from eternalism. But one might raise other objections to this argument. Some of those objections are (or are easily turned into) objections to the argument in the previous section, as well as to the argument in the next section. Those objections will be considered below (§V). For now, let us focus only on objections that apply to this section's argument alone.

This section's argument is built on the stipulation that 'Noman' names the individual who would have developed from the union of S and E, had S fertilized E. Thus this argument presupposes that there is a fact of the matter about which particular individual would have developed from the union of sperm S and egg E.[16]

One objection to this argument is that there is no such fact of the matter.[17] Presumably, defenders of this objection will deny that there are *any* true counterfactuals to the effect that had some event occurred (that did not occur), then a certain individual would have existed (who never has existed and never will exist). Otherwise, we could recast the argument so that it involves some non-

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[16] Those who deny that a human person is identical with his or her body might deny that a person (as opposed to a body) would have developed from the union of S and E. Those deniers should run the above argument with a singular proposition about (not the person but) the body that would have developed from the union of S and E.

[17] Perhaps our objectors will add that "Noman" is, in this regard, no better than W.v.O. Quine's "the possible bald man in that doorway" ("On What There Is" in *From a Logical Point of View* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), p. 4).

existent entity other than Noman, an entity that would have existed, had such-and-such occurred.[18]

Unlike our imagined objectors, I think that there are some true counterfactuals of the relevant sort. In particular, I think that if there had been a union of *S* and *E*, then a particular individual would have resulted. So I endorse the aforementioned presupposition of the above argument.

According to a second objection to this section's main argument, 'Noman' *just means* the individual who would have developed from the union of *S* and *E*. So the proposition expressed by 'Noman does not exist' is not directly about anyone or anything. So 'Noman does not exist' does not express a singular proposition. So *that Noman does not exist* is not a singular proposition.

If *that Noman does not exist* were not a singular proposition, then the main argument of this section would be unsound. It would be unsound because its premise (G) would be false. Recall that premise (G) is the claim that if the received view is true, then Noman is a constituent of *that Noman does not exist*. That claim is true only if *that Noman does not exist* is a singular proposition.

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[18] Kaplan says:

> Consider, for example, the completely automated automobile assembly line. In full operation, it is, at each moment, pregnant with its next product. Each component: body, frame, motor, etc., lies at the head of its own subassembly line, awaiting only Final Assembly. Can we not speak of the very automobile that would have been produced had the Ecologists Revolution been delayed another 47 seconds? ("Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice" in J. Hintikka, ed., *Approaches to Natural Language* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1973), p. 517n19.)

Let 'Otto' be the name of the automobile that would have been produced, had the Revolution tarried. The principal argument of this section can be run with Otto in place of Noman.

I think that this objection to premise (G), and thus to the main argument of this section, is mistaken. For I deny that 'Noman' means the individual who would have developed from the union of S and E. To see why I deny this, consider the following speech:

> Let S^* and E^* be the sperm and egg whose union actually resulted in Merricks. There are distant possible worlds, however, in which the union of S^* and E^* results in someone else. Similarly, there are distant worlds in which the union of S and E results in someone other than Noman. As a result, there are worlds in which Noman is not the individual who would have developed from S and E. Nevertheless, in all the nearest worlds in which S and E unite, Noman is the result. Thus if S and E had united, Noman would have been the result.

This speech may contain some falsehoods, and perhaps even some necessary falsehoods. But it does not assert that any contradictions are possibly true. If 'Noman' means the individual who would have developed from S and E, then this speech asserts that a contradiction is possibly true. (This is because this speech asserts that there are possible worlds in which Noman is not the individual who would have developed from S and E.) So 'Noman' does not mean the individual who would have developed from S and E. More generally, 'Noman' is not a disguised definite description.

'Noman' does not mean the individual who would have developed from S and E. Thus the above "second objection" fails. That objection tried (but failed) to show that *that Noman does not exist* is not a singular proposition. Of course, the failure of that objection is not itself a reason to think that *that Noman does not exist* really is a singular proposition. But I do think that *that Noman does not exist* is a singular proposition. To begin to see why, consider the term 'Noman'.

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'Noman' is not a definite description. So what is 'Noman'? The obvious answer—which I endorse—is that 'Noman' is a name.

'Noman' is a name. But 'Noman' does not refer to anything—especially not to Noman. 'Noman' does not refer to Noman because there is no Noman to be referred to (see §V). In this regard, 'Noman' resembles 'Lincoln'. That is, both 'Noman' and 'Lincoln' are names that stand in no *referring* (or *denoting* or *rigidly designating*) relation to anything.[19]

The main argument of this section proceeds under the assumption that *S* and *E* never unite at any time. But let us suppose—just for a moment—that in the future *S* and *E* unite and result in a person. Then although 'Noman' lacks a referent, it *will have* a referent. (Then 'Noman' again resembles 'Lincoln', which lacks a referent, but *did have* a referent.) So if *S* and *E* unite in the future, 'Noman' will have a referent, and so 'Noman' is now a name. But I think that whether 'Noman' is now a name should not turn on what happens to *S* and *E* in the future. So I conclude that even if *S* and *E* will never unite, 'Noman' is a name.

Of course, expressions other than names can have referents: definite descriptions and pronouns come to mind. But 'Noman' is not, so I argued, a definite description. Nor is anyone likely to venture that 'Noman' is a pronoun. Nor does 'Noman' seem to be any other sort of expression—other than a name—that can have a referent. This is why I concluded just above that if 'Noman' *will have* a referent, then 'Noman' is a name. It is also why I shall conclude just below that if 'Noman' *can have* a referent, then 'Noman' is a name.

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[19] Here I disagree with Salmon, who says: "Noman is rigidly designated by the name 'Noman'" ("Existence," p. 94).

As noted above, if *S* and *E* will unite, 'Noman' *will have* a referent. So if *S* and *E* will unite, 'Noman' *can have* a referent. I do not think that 'Noman' has its modal properties—properties that include *being able to have a referent*—merely contingently. So I think that if 'Noman' can have a referent if *S* and *E* will unite, then 'Noman' can have a referent even if *S* and *E* never unite. So even if *S* and *E* never unite, 'Noman' can have a referent. And so 'Noman' seems to be a name.

Let us assume, as does this section's main argument, that *S* and *E* never unite. Even so, in light of the considerations raised in this section, I conclude that 'Noman' is a name. Trading on the useful rule of thumb from Section I—a proposition is singular if it is expressed by a sentence using a name—I conclude that the sentence 'Noman does not exist' expresses a singular proposition.[20] So I think that *that Noman does not exist* is a singular proposition.

Because *that Noman does not exist* is a singular proposition, premise (G) of this section's main argument is true. Indeed, I think that all of the premises of that argument are true. And that argument is valid. So, in part because of that argument, I reject the received view. Moreover, I shall present one more variation on this argument, which does not rely on the truth of a counterfactual of the sort discussed above, or the claim that 'Noman' is a name, or the falsity of eternalism.

IV. Argument Three: Possibly True Negative Existential Singular Propositions

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[20] Salmon ("Existence," pp. 94-95) would agree that 'Noman does not exist' expresses a singular proposition. But he would not agree with my argument to follow; see §V below.

I am contingent. Possibly, I fail to have ever existed. Thus my third argument against the received view:

(i) Possibly, Merricks does not exist. (premise)

(ii) Necessarily, if Merricks does not exist, then *that Merricks does not exist* is true. (premise)

(iii) Possibly, *that Merricks does not exist* is true. (i, ii)

(iv) Necessarily, if a proposition is true, then that proposition exists. (premise)

(v) Possibly, *that Merricks does not exist* exists and is true. (iii, iv)

(vi) Necessarily, if a proposition exists and has constituents, then its constituents exist. (premise)

(vii) Necessarily, if the received view is true, then Merricks is a constituent of *that Merricks does not exist*. (premise)

(viii) If the received view is true, then, possibly: *that Merricks does not exist* exists, and is true, and Merricks exists. (v, vi, vii)

(ix) Necessarily, if Merricks exists, then *that Merricks does not exist* is false. (premise)

Therefore,

(x) The received view is false. (viii, ix)

The above argument closely resembles an argument that Plantinga defends in "On Existentialism." And reactions to Plantinga's argument suggest reactions to the above argument. For example, given his reasoning in "Necessary Existents," I think that Timothy Williamson would turn the above argument on its head. (Recall that some eternalists would do the same with the argument of §II.) I think that Williamson would argue that because the received view is true, premise (i)—possibly, Merricks does not exist—is false.

Indeed, Williamson explicitly argues in "Necessary Existents" (see esp. p. 241) that the received view has the result that every existing entity exists necessarily. Williamson tries to make this result plausible. Nevertheless, in my opinion, the claim that you and I and everything else exist necessarily is not plausible. At the very least, that claim is much less plausible than the denial of the received view. So I think that it is a mistake to turn the above argument on its head.

Some defenders of the received view will say that if I did not exist, then *that Merricks does not exist* would not exist, and so would not be true. These defenders of the received view will deny the following premise of the above argument:

> (ii) Necessarily, if Merricks does not exist, then *that Merricks does not exist* is true.

They might also attempt to accommodate some of the intuitions that seem to support (ii), thereby making the denial of (ii) more plausible than it would otherwise be. The standard attempt at such accommodation turns on the distinction between truth *in* a world and truth *at* a world.[21]

To understand this distinction, consider that the sentence token 'No sentence tokens exist' actually correctly describes how things would be if a world

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[21] Adams ("Actualism and Thisness," p. 22-23) introduces the distinction between "truth *in* a world" and "truth *at* a world," and uses truth *at* a world to explain how a possible world that does not include Adams, or any singular propositions about him, "represents [Adams's] possible non-existence." Kit Fine ("Plantinga on the Reduction of Possibilist Discourse" in J. Tomberlin and P. van Inwagen, eds., *Alvin Plantinga* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1985), p. 163) puts the same distinction to similar work, but uses the labels "inner truth" and "outer truth."

in which there are no sentence tokens were actual.[22] We can articulate this point in

terms of truth *at* a world, as follows:

> (*) The sentence token 'No sentence tokens exist' is true *at* all worlds in
> which no sentence tokens exist.

Of course, if a world in which no sentence tokens exist were actual, then

no sentence tokens would exist. And so no sentence tokens would be true.[23] And

so the sentence token 'No sentence tokens exist' would not be true. We can

articulate this point in terms of truth *in* a world:

> (**) The sentence token 'No sentence tokens exist' is not true *in* any
> world in which no sentence tokens exist.

(*) and (**) illustrate the distinction, with respect to sentence tokens, between

truth *at* a world and truth *in* a world.

Some deny (ii). So they deny that *that Merricks does not exist* is true *in*

worlds in which I do not exist. But even they recognize that the proposition *that*

Merricks does not exist actually correctly describes how things would be, if such a

world were actual. So they will endorse:

> (X) *That Merricks does not exist* is true *at* all worlds in which Merricks
> does not exist.

In this way, the distinction between truth *in* a world and truth *at* a world applies

not just to sentence tokens, but also to propositions.

Those who reject (ii) but endorse (X) are likely to think that (X)

accommodates at least some of the intuitions that seem to lead to (ii). Thus they

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[22] Cf. Plantinga, "On Existentialism," p. 19.

[23] I assume that a sentence token must exist to be true. (Cf. premises (4), (D), and (iv).)

are likely to think that (X) makes the denial of (ii) more plausible than it would otherwise be. But I shall argue that, on the contrary, (X) itself leads to (ii).

I begin this argument by considering:

(***) Necessarily, if no sentence tokens exist, then *that no sentence tokens exist* is true.

I think that (***) is true. And defenders of the received view should agree. After all, defenders of the received view typically grant that general (i.e., non-singular) propositions exist necessarily. So they grant that *that no sentence tokens exist* exists necessarily. And so they grant that that proposition exists in worlds without sentence tokens. And, surely, if that proposition exists in those worlds, it is true in those worlds.

Moreover, I think not only that (***) is true, but also that (***)'s truth explains the truth of:

(*) The sentence token 'No sentence tokens exist' is true *at* all worlds in which no sentence tokens exist.

Indeed, it would be bizarre if the proposition actually expressed by the sentence token 'No sentence tokens exist' were true *in* a possible world *W*, but that this did not explain why the sentence token 'No sentence tokens exist' was true *at W*.[24] Conversely, I think that if the proposition actually expressed by 'No sentence tokens exist' is not true *in* a world, then 'No sentence tokens exist' is not true *at* that world. I think that all of this illustrates the following general point: For any sentence token *t* that actually expresses a proposition *p*, *t* is true *at* a world if and only if *p* is true *in* that world.

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[24] Cf. Williamson, "Necessary Existents," p. 240.

With all of this in mind, return to:

> (X) *That Merricks does not exist* is true *at* all worlds in which Merricks does not exist.

(X) is true if and only if the following is true:

> (X*) The sentence token 'Merricks does not exist' is true *at* all worlds in which Merricks does not exist.

So (X) (materially) implies (X*). And, given our above "general point," (X*)

implies that the proposition *that Merricks does not exist* is true *in* all worlds in

which I do not exist. Thus (X*) implies:

> (ii) Necessarily, if Merricks does not exist, then *that Merricks does not exist* is true.

So (X) implies (X*), which implies (ii). In light of (X), I conclude that (ii) is true.

But (X) is not the main reason to accept (ii). The main reason is the nature

of truth. Consider these well-known lines from Aristotle's *Metaphysics*:

> [Thus] we define what the true and the false are. To say of what is that it is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, and of what is not that it is not, is true… (*Metaphysics*, 1011b, 25-28)[25]

I take Aristotle's definition of "the true" to gesture at this series of bi-

conditionals: *that dogs bark* is true if and only if dogs bark, *that pigs fly* is true if

and only if pigs fly, *that Merricks does not exist* is true if and only if Merricks

does not exist, and so on. And I think that Aristotle's definition is correct at least

to this extent: whatever else we know about the nature of truth, we know that it

guarantees that biconditionals like these are true.

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[25] Jonathan Barnes, ed., *The Complete Works of Aristotle: the Revised Oxford Translation* vols.1-2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 1597.

Biconditionals like these are true because of the nature of truth. Truth does not have its nature contingently. So biconditionals like these are not contingently true. Instead, they are necessarily true.[26] And so the following biconditional is necessarily true: *that Merricks does not exist* is true if and only if Merricks does not exist. Because that biconditional is necessarily true, the following is true:

> (ii+) Necessarily, *that Merricks does not exist* is true if and only if Merricks does not exist.

And, obviously, (ii+) entails:

> (ii) Necessarily, if Merricks does not exist, then *that Merricks does not exist* is true.

Thus (ii) is true because of the nature of truth itself.

V. Objections Pertaining to Serious Actualism

Nathan Salmon says:

> Socrates is long gone. Consequently, singular propositions about him, which once existed, also no longer exist. Let us call the no-longer-existing proposition that Socrates does not exist, 'Soc'... [Soc's] present lack of existence does not prevent it from presently being true.[27]

Elsewhere, Salmon adds:

> …for any possible individual *x*, the possible singular proposition to the effect that *x* does not exist is necessarily such that if it is true, it does not exist. Its truth entails its nonexistence.[28]

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[26] Cf. Paul Horwich, *Truth*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), p. 21n.5.
[27] "Nonexistence," *Noûs* 32 (1998): 277-319, p. 286.

[28] "Existence," p. 95

So Salmon thinks that some true propositions do not exist. Scott Soames,[29] John

Pollock,[30] and others agree with Salmon.

These philosophers would deny the following premises:

(4) If a proposition is true, then that proposition exists.

(D) If a proposition is true, then that proposition exists.

(iv) Necessarily, if a proposition is true, then that proposition exists.

As a result, these philosophers would reject all three of the main arguments from

Sections II through IV.

I endorse (and Salmon et al. reject) *serious actualism*. Serious actualism is

the claim that, necessarily, an entity exemplifies a property or stands in a relation

only if that entity exists.[31] And I claim that, necessarily, a proposition is true if and

only if that proposition exemplifies the property of *being true*.[32] These two claims

imply the truth of (4), (D), and (iv). So I conclude that (4), (D), and (iv) are true.

I endorse serious actualism. That is why I claimed that 'Noman' and

'Lincoln' do not refer to anything (§III). But I also claimed that 'Noman does not

exist' and 'Lincoln does not exist' express singular propositions (§§II-III). The

former claim might seem to undermine the latter. But the argument of Section IV

will help us to see how (for example) 'Noman does not exist' expresses a singular

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[29] "Truthmakers?" *Philosophical Books* 49 (2008): 317-327, p. 319.

[30] "Plantinga on Possible Worlds" in J. Tomberlin and P. van Inwagen, eds., *Alvin Plantinga* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1985), pp. 134-140.

[31] In arguing against the existence of true negative existential singular propositions, Salmon assumes that an existing proposition cannot have *x* as a constituent if *x* does not exist. But, given his rejection of serious actualism, I am not sure why Salmon assumes this.

[32] Merricks, *Truth and Ontology*, pp. 187-191.

proposition even though 'Noman' does not refer to anything.

Given the premises of Section IV's main argument, the singular proposition *that Merricks does not exist* exists in a possible world in which I never exist. And because that proposition exists in such a world, serious actualism does not preclude its being expressed in such a world. Similarly, because that proposition exists in such a world, serious actualism does not preclude its being used in an argument in such a world. None of this is undermined by serious actualism's implication that 'Merricks' does not refer to me in such a world.

Some might object that—serious actualism aside—no one in a world in which I never exist could grasp the proposition *that Merricks does not exist*, much less express it and then use it in an argument. But this objection is mistaken. The sperm S^* and egg E^*, whose union actually produced me, exist in some world W in which I never exist. Suppose that, in W, if S^* and E^* had been united, I would have developed from that union. Then philosophers in W could say: "let 'Nonman' be whoever would have developed from the union of S^* and E^*." Then they could say: "Nonman does not exist," thereby expressing the proposition *that Merricks does not exist*. (If they were especially clever, these philosophers would then use that proposition in an argument against the received view.)

Serious actualism is true. So in worlds in which I never exist, 'Merricks' does not refer to me. Similarly, in worlds in which I never exist, 'Nonman' does not refer to me. But, as we have just seen, this is consistent with the claim that, in a world in which I do not exist, 'Nonman does not exist' expresses the singular proposition *that Merricks does not exist*.

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Likewise, in worlds—such as the actual world—in which Noman does not exist, 'Noman' does not refer to Noman; but this is consistent with the claim that 'Noman does not exist' actually expresses the singular proposition *that Noman does not exist*. Similarly, that 'Lincoln' does not refer to Lincoln is consistent with the claim that 'Lincoln does not exist' actually expresses the singular proposition *that Lincoln does not exist*.

There is another serious-actualism based objection to the main arguments of Sections II and III. This objection has nothing to do with 'Noman' or 'Lincoln' lacking a referent. The idea behind this objection is that, necessarily, serious actualism precludes the existence of all singular propositions about non-existent entities. So serious actualism precludes the existence of propositions such as *that Lincoln does not exist*, *that Noman does not exist*, and *that Noman would have developed from the union of S and E*. And if those propositions do not exist, then the main arguments of Sections II and III fail in a variety of ways.

This same objection purports to undermine the main argument of Section IV as well. For suppose that, necessarily, serious actualism precludes the existence of all singular propositions about non-existent entities. This supposition implies that, necessarily, if I do not exist, then *that Merricks does not exist* does not exist. And this implication in turn implies that the main argument of Section IV fails.

Again, the idea behind this objection to all three of the main arguments above is that, necessarily, serious actualism precludes the existence of all singular propositions about non-existent entities. Thus Robert Adams:

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…[a serious] actualist must deny that there are singular propositions about non-actual individuals. A singular proposition about an individual *x* is a proposition that involves or refers to *x* directly, and not by way of *x*'s qualitative properties or relations to another individual… But according to [serious] actualism a proposition cannot bear such a relation to any non-actual individual.[33]

And here is Timothy Williamson:

A proposition about an item exists only if that item exists…how could something be the proposition that that dog is barking in circumstances in which that dog does not exist? For to be the proposition that that dog is barking is to have a certain relation to that dog, which requires there to be such an item as that dog to which to have the relation. The argument is quite general…[34]

Adams and Williamson are endorsing the same argument. Here is their argument, recast in the language of "direct aboutness" (see §I): Necessarily, if a proposition is directly about an entity, then that proposition stands in a relation to that entity; given serious actualism, a proposition cannot stand in a relation to an entity that does not exist; thus a proposition cannot be directly about an entity that does not exist; therefore, Adams and Williamson conclude, there cannot be singular propositions about entities that do not exist.

I reject their conclusion. And I think that their argument for that conclusion fails. For I think that the following premise of their argument is false:

Aboutness Assumption: Necessarily, if a proposition is directly about an entity, then that proposition stands in a relation to that entity.

I shall now present two distinct arguments for the falsity of the Aboutness Assumption.

E is an *essence* of an individual *x* if and only if, necessarily, if *x* exists,

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[33] "Actualism and Thisness," p. 12. Adams means by 'actualism' what I mean by 'serious actualism'—hence my insertion of 'serious' in square brackets.

[34] "Necessary Existents," pp. 240-241.

then *x* exemplifies *E*; and, necessarily, if an entity exemplifies *E*, then that entity is *x*. Let *Lincolnicity* be an essence of Lincoln. And suppose—along with Plantinga and others—that *Lincolnicity* exists necessarily.[35]

Lincoln himself does not exist necessarily. So there are worlds in which *Lincolnicity* exists but is not exemplified. So there are worlds in which *that Lincolnicity is not exemplified* is true. But surely the truth of the proposition *that Lincolnicity is not exemplified* is sufficient for the truth of the proposition *that Lincoln does not exist*.[36] So in worlds in which *Lincolnicity* exists but is not exemplified, *that Lincoln does not exist* is true. So there are worlds in which *that Lincoln does not exist* is true.

The non-exemplification of *Lincolnicity* is sufficient for the truth of *that Lincoln does not exist*. But the non-exemplification of a quality like *being the sixteenth president of the United States* is not sufficient for the truth of *that Lincoln does not exist*. Similarly, *that Lincoln does not exist* is true in a world if and only if Lincoln himself—as opposed to someone merely like Lincoln—does not exist in that world. All of this illustrates that in worlds in which *that Lincoln does not exist* is true, *that Lincoln does not exist* is a singular proposition about Lincoln.

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[35] Plantinga defends the necessary existence of essences in *The Nature of Necessity*, "De Essentia," "On Existentialism," "Reply to Critics," and elsewhere.

[36] Some philosophers have suggested that a singular proposition about an object *x* has *x*'s essence, rather than *x* itself, as a constituent (Adams, "Actualism and Thisness," pp. 3-4; Plantinga, "De Essentia," p. 111). Perhaps those who endorse this suggestion think that '*that Lincolnicity is not exemplified*' and '*that Lincoln does not exist*' name the same proposition. Then they will agree that the truth of *that Lincolnicity is not exemplified* is (trivially) sufficient for the truth of *that Lincoln does not exist*.

So there are worlds in which *that Lincoln does not exist* is true and is a singular proposition about Lincoln. So there are worlds in which *that Lincoln does not exist* is true and is directly about Lincoln. But, because serious actualism is true, in those worlds *that Lincoln does not exist* stands in no relation to Lincoln. Thus, in those worlds, *being directly about* does not imply *standing in a relation to*. Thus the Aboutness Assumption is false. This concludes my first argument against the Aboutness Assumption.[37]

My first argument shows that, at least given necessarily existing essences, the Aboutness Assumption is false. But that argument does not tell us anything about *being directly about*, other than that *being directly about* does not imply *standing in a relation to*. As we shall see, my second argument involves a positive characterization of *being directly about*, which characterization reveals that the Aboutness Assumption is false.

Recall that Plantinga denies that *that the Lion of Conservativism is wise* is

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[37] Presumably, if a singular proposition exists in worlds in which the relevant individual does not, then that singular proposition exists necessarily. But if there is a necessarily existing singular proposition about an individual, then there is also a necessarily existing essence of that individual. For essences can be analyzed in terms of singular propositions. For example, the property *being who that Lincoln is tall is about* is an essence. Therefore, the claim that essences exist necessarily is a corollary of the claim that there can be singular propositions about entities that do not exist. So if you wish to argue (rather than merely assert) that there cannot be singular propositions about entities that do not exist, you cannot simply assert that essences do not exist necessarily.

(The property of *being who that Lincoln is tall is about* is an essence because, necessarily, if Lincoln exists, then Lincoln exemplifies that property; and, necessarily, that property is exemplified by nothing other than Lincoln. (Cf. Plantinga, "Two Concepts of Modality: Modal Realism and Modal Reductionism" in James E. Tomberlin, ed., *Philosophical Perspectives, 1, Metaphysics* (Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview Publishing Co., 1987), pp. 194-195). A general proposition, on the other hand, might actually be about one entity, but possibly be about another. *That the sixteenth president of the United States is tall* was actually about Lincoln, but is possibly about Stephen A. Douglas. Therefore, *being who that the sixteenth president of the United States is tall is about* is not an essence.)

directly about Buckley because, says Plantinga, it seems to be about Buckley "only in virtue of the fact that he happens to be the Lion of Conservatism."[38] And recall that Adams says that a singular proposition is about an entity *x*, but not about *x* "by way of *x*'s qualitative properties or relations to another individual."[39]

With these comments from Plantinga and Adams in mind, we can see that the assertion that a proposition is *directly about* an entity seems to amount to two distinct claims. The first claim is that that proposition is *about* that entity. The second claim is that it is not the case that that proposition is about that entity *in virtue of* that entity's qualitative properties (or relations).

Presumably, if the Aboutness Assumption is correct, then the first claim— namely, the proposition is *about* an entity—implies that that proposition stands in a relation to that entity. (The second claim merely denies one explanation of the first claim; this denial does not affirm a relation between proposition and entity.) Conversely, if a proposition's being thus *about* an entity does not imply that that proposition stands in a relation to that entity, then the Aboutness Assumption is false. So let us focus on what it is for a proposition to be thus *about* something.

There is a perfectly evident way in which, for example, *that Merricks does not exist* is about me. That proposition's being thus about me is part of what differentiates it from, say, *that Plantinga does not exist*. (*That Plantinga does not exist* is about Plantinga, not me.) Moreover, *that Merricks does not exist*'s being thus about me, and denying my existence, explains why that proposition would be

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[38] "On Existentialism," p. 3.

[39] "Actualism and Thisness," p. 12.

true if I did not exist, and also why my existence makes that proposition false. In general, knowing what a proposition is about in this evident way is required for knowing what it would take for that proposition to be true, and for it to be false.

The true general proposition *that there are no carnivorous cows* is—in this same perfectly evident way—about carnivorous cows. For starters, its being thus about carnivorous cows is part of what differentiates it from, say, *that there are no hobbits*. (*That there are no hobbits* is about hobbits, not carnivorous cows.) It also explains why the non-existence of carnivorous cows results in the truth of *that there are no carnivorous cows*. Also, *that there are no carnivorous cows*'s being about carnivorous cows, and denying their existence, explains why that proposition would be false if carnivorous cows did exist. Indeed, knowing that that proposition is about carnivorous cows seems to be required for knowing what it would take for that proposition to be true, and for it to be false.

Again, *that there are no carnivorous cows* is—in a perfectly evident way—about carnivorous cows. But no carnivorous cows exist. And serious actualism is true. So *that there are no carnivorous cows* does not stand in any relation to carnivorous cows. Therefore, the way in which *that there are no carnivorous cows* is about carnivorous cows does not imply that it stands in any relation to carnivorous cows.[40]

Recall that a proposition is *directly about* an entity just in case, first, that proposition is appropriately *about* that entity and, second, it is not the case that

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[40] Cf. Merricks, *Truth and Ontology*, pp. 32-33.

that proposition is thus about that entity *in virtue of* that entity's qualitative

properties (or relations).[41] I think that a proposition is thus *about* that entity if it is

about that entity in the evident way just explained, in the way in which *that*

Merricks does not exist is about me and *that there are no carnivorous cows* is

about carnivorous cows. As we have seen, being about an entity in this evident

way does not imply being related to that entity. And so being *directly about* an

entity does not imply being related to that entity. Thus the Aboutness Assumption

is false. This concludes my second argument against the Aboutness Assumption.

VI. Argument Four: Necessary Truth

A proposition is necessarily true if and only if it is true in all possible

worlds. Now consider the following singular propositions: *that Merricks exists or*

it is not the case that Merricks exists and *that if Merricks exists, then Merricks*

exists. Given the received view, those propositions do not exist in worlds in which

I do not exist. So, given the received view (and serious actualism), they are not

true in all possible worlds. Thus the received view implies that they are not

necessarily true. But they are necessarily true. This is because all instances of the

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[41] We should also add a third clause to our account of *direct aboutness*: it is not the case that the second clause is satisfied merely because the relevant entity fails to have any qualitative properties (or stand in any relations).

To see the need for this third clause, consider that, given serious actualism, entities that do not exist do not have any properties. So carnivorous cows do not have any properties. So while *that there are no carnivorous cows* is about carnivorous cows, it is not about carnivorous cows in virtue of their properties. But *that there are no carnivorous cows* is not a singular proposition.

propositional schema *p or ~p* and *if p, then p* are necessarily true. So the received view is false.

The argument just given presupposes a common view of the relation between necessary truth and possible worlds, a view which I endorse. But perhaps that view is wrong. So set that view aside. And instead suppose, at least for the sake of argument, that a proposition is necessarily true if and only if it is (actually true and) not false in any world. This supposition does not support the argument just given against the received view.

But it supports another argument against the received view. This is because the received view implies that there is no world in which the proposition *that Merricks exists* exists and is false. And so it implies that that proposition is not false in any world. Thus the received view implies that *that Merricks exists* is necessarily true. But I exist contingently. So it is false that *that Merricks exists* is necessarily true. So the received view implies a falsehood. So the received view is false.

Suppose instead, for the sake of argument, that a proposition is necessarily true if and only if it is true *at* all possible worlds. This supposition does not support either of the above arguments, in this section, against the received view. But it supports another. For suppose, for *reductio*, that the received view is true. Then worlds in which I do not exist are not worlds that we would actually describe as including the proposition *that Merricks does not exist*; and so we would not describe them as including the true proposition *that Merricks does not exist*; therefore, the proposition *that the proposition <u>that Merricks does not exist</u> is*

true is not true *at* worlds in which I do not exist. On the other hand, the proposition *that Merricks does not exist* is true *at* worlds in which I do not exist. All of this implies that some instances of the propositional schema *the proposition p is true if and only if p* are not necessarily true.[42] But all instances of the propositional schema *the proposition p is true if and only if p* are necessarily true. (Recall the closing argument of Section IV.) Thus the received view, assumed for *reductio*, has led to an absurd result.

Again, suppose, for the sake of argument, that a proposition is necessarily true if and only if it is true *at* all possible worlds. The proposition *that if Merricks exists, then Merricks exists* is true *at* all worlds. So that proposition is necessarily true. But, given the received view, if I had never existed, then that proposition would not have existed. So that proposition would not have been true *at* all worlds. So it would not have been necessarily true. But if a proposition is necessarily true, then it would have been necessarily true even if I had never existed. Therefore, the received view has a false implication, and so is false.

We have considered three different claims about the relationship between necessary truth and possible worlds. Each of those claims implies that the received view is false. So if any of those claims is true, the received view is false. Premise: One of those claims is true. So the received view is false.

VII. Argument Five: Singular Propositions about Singular Propositions

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[42] Cf. Adams, "Actualism and Thisness," p. 27.

Let 'Fred' be the name of the proposition *that 2+2=4*. Then the sentence 'Fred is true' expresses a singular proposition about *that 2+2=4*. Therefore, *that Fred is true* is a singular proposition about *that 2+2=4*. This illustrates that there are singular propositions about propositions. So there is some proposition p and some other proposition q such that p is a singular proposition about q.

Moreover, there is some proposition p and some other proposition q such that p is a singular proposition about q and q is a singular proposition about p. Here is one example. Jane uses the description 'the proposition that John entertains at t' to fix the reference of 'p'. She then goes on to entertain, at t, the proposition *that p is true*. Suppose John uses the description 'the proposition that Jane entertains at t' to fix the reference of 'q'. John then goes on to entertain, at t, *that q is true*.[43]

Here is another example. Jane uses 'the first proposition expressed by John on Tuesday' to fix the reference of 'p'. John uses 'the first proposition denied by Jane on Monday' to fix the reference of 'q'. First thing Monday, Jane denies the proposition *that John's evidence justifies p*. First thing Tuesday, John expresses the proposition *that q is about cats*. Again, p is a singular proposition about q, and q is a singular proposition about p.[44]

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[43] Compare: 'Lincoln' does not mean the sixteenth president of the United States, not even if that description fixes the reference of 'Lincoln'. The idea that descriptions can fix the reference of a name, but are not the meaning of that name, can be found in Plantinga (*The Nature of Necessity*, pp. 38-39) and Kripke (*Naming and Necessity*, p. 55), among others. The expression 'reference fixing' is due to Kripke.

[44] Suppose that Jane uses the description 'the proposition that John entertains at t' to fix the reference of 'p', and she goes on to entertain, at t, the proposition *that p is true*. Suppose that John uses the description 'the proposition that Jane entertains at t' to fix the reference of 'q', and he

Defenders of the received view standardly take constituency to be parthood.[45] So suppose constituency is parthood. Then the received view implies—in light of the above cases—that for some proposition *p* and some numerically distinct proposition *q*: *q* is a part of *p* and *p* is a part of *q*. But this implication is false. It is false because the following principle about parthood is true:

> **Antisymmetry of Parthood:** (*x*)(*y*) If *x* is part of *y* and *y* is a part of *x*, then *x=y*. [46]

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goes on to entertain, at *t*, *that q is false*. Then it seems that if *p* is true, then *q* is false, in which case *p* is false; conversely, if *p* is false, it seems that *q* is true, in which case *p* is true.

One common reaction to this familiar paradox is to deny that '*p*' and '*q*' succeed in naming propositions. Someone who reacts in this way to this paradox might think that because my examples in the text are similar, then—guilt by association!—the '*p*' and '*q*' in those examples fail to name propositions.

I have two replies.

First, if guilt by association is to have any force here, so too should innocence by association. And the descriptions at work in my examples often succeed, uncontroversially, in fixing the reference of a name like '*p*' to a proposition. For example, if John was entertaining, at *t*, *that 2+2=4*, then surely 'let *p* be the proposition that John entertains at *t*' fixes the reference of '*p*' to *that 2+2=4*.

Second, even in the familiar paradox, I think that the relevant '*p*' and '*q*' name propositions. I think that each names a contradictory—and so false—proposition. Consider:
  p: *q* is false.
  q: *p* is true.
Slavishly following James Cargile (*Paradoxes: A Study in Form and Predication* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) pp. 268ff.), I say that *p* is contradictory. For *p* says that it is false that what *p* says is true, and thereby also says that it is false that it is false that what *p* says is true. Similarly, *q* is contradictory. For *q* says that it is true that what *q* says is false, and thereby also says that it is false that it is true that what *q* says is false. (See also Eugene Mills's "A Simple Solution to the Liar," *Philosophical Studies* 89 (1998): 197-212.)

[45] For example, Jeffrey King uses 'constituents of propositions' and 'parts of propositions' interchangeably in his *Stanford Encyclopedia* article on "Structured Propositions."

[46] I believe the Antisymmetry of Parthood. And although it is not universally endorsed, it is nevertheless among the very least controversial substantive principles about parthood—see Achille Varzi's entry on "Mereology" in the *Stanford Encyclopedia*.

Because the received view has the false implication just noted, the received view itself is false. This is my fifth argument against the received view.

Some might deny that constituency is exactly the same thing as parthood. They might claim, instead, that constituency is merely analogous to parthood. A version of my fifth argument against the received view can still be run. This is because if constituency is analogous to parthood, then (so it seems to me) that analogy consists partly in the truth of the following principle:

> **Antisymmetry of Constituency:** $(x)(y)$ If x is a constituent of y and y is a constituent of x, then $x=y$.

Whether constituency is identical with parthood or instead merely analogous to parthood, the received view's implication that two numerically distinct propositions can be constituents of each other is false. And so I conclude that the received view itself is false.

Postscript

This is a partial reply to comments by David Vander Laan on the above paper. The above paper, Vander Laan's comments, and this postscript are all published in the same volume.

Entity x stands in the *identity* relation to x. Therefore—let us suppose at least for the sake of argument—there is a property that is analyzed as standing in the *identity* relation to x. Let that be the property of *being identical with x*.

Necessarily, nothing other than x exemplifies the property of *being identical with x*. Moreover, x essentially exemplifies that property. Thus *being identical with x* is an essence of x.

Let a *thisness* be any essence akin to *being identical with x*. That is, let a *thisness* be any essence that is analyzed in terms of the *identity* relation and the relevant individual.

Given serious actualism, necessarily, nothing stands in the *identity* relation to *x* if *x* does not exist. And so, necessarily, the property of *being identical with x* exists only if *x* itself exists. More generally, given serious actualism, each thisness exists only if the relevant individual exists.

Robert Adams agrees that, given serious actualism, each thisness exists only if the relevant individual exists. Here is a passage from Adams, which is discussed in David Vander Laan's comments on my paper:

> It is hard to see how [a serious] actualist could consistently maintain that there is a thisness of a non-actual individual. For if there were one, it would be the property of being identical with that individual. To be the property of being identical with a particular individual is to stand, primitively, in a unique relation with that individual. This relation between an individual and its thisness is the crux of the argument. It would be absurd to suppose that being the property of being identical with me could be a purely internal feature of my thisness, not implying any relation to *me*.[47]

I think that some essences are unanalyzable.[48] As a result, I think that some essences are not analyzed in terms of the *identity* relation and the relevant individual. For example, suppose (as I do) that *Lincolnicity* is unanalyzable. Then *Lincolnicity* is not analyzed in terms of the *identity* relation and Lincoln, and is therefore not a thisness. So although every thisness is an essence, not every essence is a thisness.

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[47] "Actualism and Thisness," p. 11.

[48] Cf. Plantinga, "De Essentia," p. 114; and "Reply to Commentators," pp. 336-340.

Adams's brief argument quoted above does not give us any reason to think that the unanalyzable *Lincolnicity* does not exist in worlds in which Lincoln does not. For that brief argument concerns only thisnesses; that is, that brief argument concerns only those essences that are analyzed as standing in the *identity* relation to the relevant individual.

Adams agrees that his argument quoted above concerns only thisnesses. But he goes on to argue that every essence is a thisness. I shall respond to only one aspect of that argument. Using 'haecceity' to mean a necessarily existing essence that is not a thisness, Adams says: "It is not easy to say what haecceities would be. That is indeed the chief objection to them."[49]

But I think it is easy to say what "haecceities" are. Consider, for example, *Lincolnicity*. We can say that it is unanalyzable. We can also say that it is such that, necessarily, if Lincoln exists, then Lincoln exemplifies it. And we can add that, necessarily, no one other than Lincoln exemplifies it. That is pretty good. Moreover, what we can say about what *Lincolnicity* is seems to be more or less on a par with what we can say about what many other properties are, including the property of *being identical with x*.

But note that much of what we can say about *Lincolnicity* can be said only by using singular propositions about Lincoln, propositions such as *that, necessarily, if Lincoln exists, then Lincoln exemplifies Lincolnicity*. So we cannot abolish singular propositions about non-existent entities and replace them with

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[49] "Actualism and Thisness," pp. 12-13.

essences and propositions about those essences—at least not if we are to say what those essences are.