It's Actual, so It Must Be Possible

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IN "It's Actual, so It's Possible"[1] Norwood Russell Hanson argues in the following way. Many philosophers are inclined to accept at once two "philosophical principles": one of these is the principle that all true propositions are logically possible, i.e., self-consistent; the other is the principle that "a proposition whose negation is consistent cannot entail another whose negation is inconsistent—save in that 'degenerate' case wherein a necessary proposition is said to be strictly implied by any proposition whatever" (p. 71). We may restate these two principles as follows:

A. If P is true, then P is logically possible.

B. If P is logically contingent, then P entails no necessary propositions. These two principles, Hanson argues, are prima facie inconsistent. For it can be demonstrated that:

C. If P is logically contingent, then "P is logically possible" is necessary. (And from C it follows that "P is logically possible" is either necessarily true or necessarily false.) Now consider some contingent proposition P: by the first principle P (or "P is true") entails "P is possible." By principle C however, "P is possible" is necessary; hence a necessary proposition is entailed by a contingent one, which contradicts principle B. Hanson then goes on to suggest a way out of the difficulty.

I want to point out a mistake in Hanson's argument for C; and I shall argue further that the solution he proposes to the problem arising from the incompatibility of A, B, and C is quite unacceptable. Now the fact that Hanson's piece is written in dialogue form might create certain difficulties of interpretation. I am assuming throughout that the views expressed by Socrates are Hanson's and that Socrates' argument on pages 71–72 is offered as a genuine proof of principle C.

Socrates' (or Hanson's) proof for C is a *reductio ad absurdum*; he proposes to deduce a contradiction from the negation of "P is logically possible" (where P is a contingent proposition) thereby showing that "P is logically possible" is *necessary* (again, where P is contingent). So he begins by assuming at step (1) of the proof the proposition that P is *not* logically possible and adds at step (2) the proposition that P is contingent (p. 71). He then deduces a contradiction. But the deduction of a contradiction from the conjunction of *these* two propositions is hardly astonishing, since "P is con-

tingent" obviously entails "P *is* logically possible." What Socrates has shown is that the conjunction of "P is contingent" with "P is logically impossible" is contradictory. And that's quite unexceptionable, but also quite different from the conclusion Socrates claims to prove. For what he claims to prove is that "The proposition *P is logically possible* (where P is contingent) is itself logically necessary" (p. 72)—or as I put it above, that if P is contingent, then "P is logically possible" is necessary. To show *that*, he should have deduced a contradiction from the conjunction of "P is contingent" with " 'P is logically possible' is not necessary"—a task of far greater difficulty.

What has gone wrong here? What misled Socrates into accepting this obviously unsound argument? Well, perhaps he has fallen victim to a subtle (and very popular) formal fallacy. He may be arguing in the following fashion: " 'P is contingent' entails 'P is logically possible'; so if P *is* contingently true, then it must be the case that P is logically possible. But if it *must* be the case that P is logically possible, 'P is logically possible' is necessary." The mistake involved in that sort of argument has no generally accepted name, so far as I know, but it is sometimes called "Sleigh's Fallacy."[2] That it *is* a mistake may be seen by comparing it with this manifestly fallacious inference: it's a necessary truth that if Jones is someone's husband, then Jones is a married man; Jones *is* someone's husband; therefore it is a necessary truth that Jones is a married man.

On the other hand, Socrates may be begging the issue. He has shown the necessity of the proposition that if P is contingent, then P is logically possible. And where the antecedent of this conditional is necessarily true, the consequent, of course, will also be necessary. But if Socrates is assuming, at step (2), that "P is contingent" *is* necessary, he's begging the question in a pretty flagrant fashion; for what he is then assuming at step (2) is precisely what is at issue. The upshot seems to be that either Socrates has begged the question or he's committed Sleigh's fallacy. What he has proved is that the conjunction of "P is contingent" with "P is logically impossible" is not consistent; but that is a far cry indeed from showing that "P is possible" is, if true at all, necessarily true.

Now Socrates himself holds all three of the principles between which there appears to be an inconsistency. He therefore addresses himself (p. 78) to the task of showing that the inconsistency is *merely* apparent: "the assertion that P actually obtains constitutes a triple claim, from only one part of which does it follow that P is logically possible. It is (1) the claim that some undescribed, but merely designated event has come about, making the world to that extent different from what it had been before, and (2) that although this need not have been so, the mark(s)/sound(s) 'P' does actually serve to express the proposition *P*, which in its turn describes the state of

affairs (noted in (1) to obtain), and (3) the claim that *P* is a contingent proposition." We may put the suggested equivalence as follows:

P actually obtains ≡ (1) a certain event has come about, and (2) the marks or sounds 'P' express the proposition *P* and *P* describes the state of affairs mentioned in (1), and (3) *P* is contingent. Sentence (2) consists in two assertions; we may call the first (2a) and the second (2b). Socrates next points out that it is (3) which entails that *P* is logically possible. And while the conjunction of (1), (2), and (3) is contingent (since (1) and (2) are contingent), (3) itself is logically necessary. Hence the fact that (3) (and therefore its conjunction with (1) and (2)) entails a necessary proposition isn't paradoxical in the least.

Regrettably enough, however, (2b) also entails that *P* is logically possible. For it is a necessary truth that if *P* does actually describe the state of affairs mentioned in (1) (or for that matter any state of affairs whatever), then *P* is not self-contradictory. But in many cases the proposition that *P* describes a certain state of affairs is *contingent*; hence in these cases a necessary proposition is entailed by a contingent one. Socrates' analysis of the assertion that *P* actually obtains is therefore useless, since the very difficulty it is designed to meet reappears in the analysans.

The following desperate expedient might occur to someone: if Socrates' analysis *is* correct, then (2b), if contingent, *also* consists in a tripartite claim, the third component of which is the assertion that (2b) is contingent. Now the assertion that (2b) is contingent is, if true, necessarily true. And it is that proposition—i.e., "(2b) is contingent"—which entails the proposition that *P* is possible. Hence (2b), though contingent, does entail a necessary proposition; but only because it is itself a tripartite claim one part of which is necessary and entails "P is possible." This maneuver, however, is doomed to failure. For if (2b) *is* a triple claim, the second part of *that* claim ((2b)'s (2b), so to speak) will entail that (2b) is possible; and so on indefinitely. The fundamental difficulty with the analysis Hanson suggests is the fact that (2b) *by itself* entails and is entailed by the proposition that *P* actually obtains. And hence both the modality and the entailments of (2b) will be the same as those of the proposition of which it is said to be a partial analysis. But if so, whatever difficulties arise with respect to that proposition will arise equally with respect to (2b).

The issue at stake in Hanson's article is of crucial importance for the view or family of views sometimes called The Linguistic Theory of the A Priori. Put generally and very roughly, that theory holds that the statement of the modality of a proposition is to be explained by or is equivalent to a set of *contingent* propositions describing language usage or the behavior of language users. Thus Lazerowitz: "What makes the non-verbal sentence 'A flea is an

insect' express a logically necessary truth is the fact that the corresponding verbal sentence expresses a true proposition. The fact that 'A flea is an insect' expresses a logically necessary proposition entails and is entailed by the fact that 'As a matter of usage, "insect" applies to whatever "flea" applies to' expresses a true empirical proposition."[3]

But if the statement of the modality of a proposition is itself a *necessary* proposition, then it cannot be equivalent to, or analyzed into, *contingent* propositions about linguistic behavior or linguistic habits. I am inclined to agree with Hanson that modal propositions *are* themselves either necessarily true or necessarily false; but I very much doubt that any simple *reductio ad absurdum* proof of the sort he attempts can be found. The best we can do here is to emphasize *another* of Socrates' arguments—namely that it is not by empirical investigation that we discover the modality of a proposition; a question of this sort seems to be a logical or conceptual matter. All that is required for ascertaining the truth or falsity of a modal proposition is a grasp of the concepts it involves; and this is typically the case with logically true and logically false propositions, typically not the case with contingent propositions. Such an argument requires a great deal of development and explication, however, before it can be of service. And this note is not the place for that.

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NOTES

[1] *Philosophical Studies*, 10:69 (October 1959).

[2] After R. C. Sleigh, Jr., who is expert in detecting and extirpating it.

[3] M. Lazerowitz, *The Structure of Metaphysics* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955), p. 271, quoted in A. Pap, *Semantics and Necessary Truth* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), p. 168. Notice also Contemprates' remarks in Hanson's paper.

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