

Necessary and Essential Existence

ALVIN PLANTINGA, Calvin College

First, I wish to thank Professor Carter for his comments. They do contain some misunderstandings, however, some of which I shall try to straighten out.

1) In *The Nature of Necessity* (NN) I argued that every object has the property of existence essentially, but only some things — propositions, properties, perhaps God — have the property of necessary existence (p. 61). The first claim, that everything has existence essentially, is a consequence of the following three truths:

- (1) existence is a property and nonexistence is its complement,
- (2) an object x has a property P essentially if it is not possible that x have the complement \bar{P} of P ; that is, if there is no possible world in which x has \bar{P} ,

and

- (3) there neither are nor could have been any nonexistent objects; that is, no possible world is such that if it had been actual, there would have been some nonexistent objects.

For suppose (3) is true and let W be any possible world. In W there are (by (3)) no nonexistent objects; i.e., if W had been actual, the proposition *there are no nonexistent objects* would have been true. So in W there are no nonexistent objects that have at least one property. Hence in W there are no nonexistent objects that have the property of nonexistence. But of course in W there are also no existent objects that have nonexistence. Hence in W there are no objects at all that have nonexistence; had W been actual, there would have been no objects

at all with nonexistence. But *W* was just any possible world; so there is no possible world in which there is something that has nonexistence. So it is not possible that anything have this property, hence for any object *x* you pick, there is no world in which *x* has nonexistence; hence (by (2)) *x* has existence essentially.

That is not to say, of course, that *x* has *necessary existence*. An object has necessary existence if and only if it exists in every possible world, if and only if its failing to exist is impossible. Clearly most of us do not enjoy that distinction; there are possible worlds in which you and I do not exist. Accordingly we do not have necessary existence, although, like everything else, we do exist essentially.

Mr. Carter apparently objects (pp.95-7) to my view that every object has the property of existence essentially; his objection, however, is less real than merely verbal. As I used them, locutions of the form '*x* has *P* essentially' and '*x* has *P* necessarily' are interchangeable. Hence 'Socrates has existence necessarily' is a stylistic variant of 'Socrates has existence essentially'; and each of those sentences expresses the proposition that Socrates could not have had the complement of existence. I also (perhaps confusingly) used 'exists necessarily' as a stylistic variant of 'has necessary existence'. In this way of speaking, then, Socrates has existence essentially or necessarily, but does not have necessary existence and does not exist necessarily. Now Carter takes 'exists necessarily' not, as I do, as a synonym for 'has necessary existence', but for 'has existence necessarily' or 'has existence essentially'. So of course he takes it that when I say "Socrates does not exist necessarily" I contradict what I say when I say "Socrates (like everything else) has existence essentially or necessarily." But there is no contradiction here; the first sentence, as I use it, expresses the proposition that Socrates does not exist in every possible world, while the second says that there is no possible world in which he has the complement of existence. Mr. Carter writes at some length of the implausibility of supposing that everything 'necessarily exists' or 'exists necessarily'; but what I say does not imply either that everything exists necessarily or that everything necessarily exists — nor even that either of the sentences 'everything exists necessarily' and 'everything necessarily exists' expresses a truth. Perhaps what Carter says should be taken as a warning that it is confusing to use 'exists necessarily' as a stylistic variant of 'has the property of necessary existence' instead of, for e.g., 'has the property of existence necessarily'; and here, perhaps, he is right.

2) Several of Mr. Carter's points have to do with my attempt (in chapters II and III) to explain the *de re* by way of the *de dicto*. He correctly points out, for example, that if, as I argue, everything has existence essentially but only some things have necessary existence, then

there are at least two *de re* notions: essential existence and necessary existence. He then complains that when I explain the *de re* by way of the *de dicto*, I deal with only one *de re* notion — that of an object's having a property essentially. Here he is right; clearly there are many *de re* notions. There is the notion of an object's having a property in every world in which it exists, but also that of an object's having a property in every world *simpliciter*. And there are many more: it might be, for example, that an object *x* has *Q* in every world in which it has *P* but not conversely; we might then say that *Q* covers *P* with respect to *x*. It might also be that there is no world where *x* has *P* and *y* has *Q*; or that the cardinality of the class of worlds in which *x* has *P* exceeds that of those where *y* has *Q*, etc. And of course there is also the extremely important notion of *de re* belief. I was dealing (for the most part) with just one of these *de re* notions: that of an object's having a property essentially. And, as Carter points out, when I spoke of explaining the *de re* via the *de dicto*, I was speaking of explaining *that de re* notion, not the others. I don't see, however, that this makes difficulty for what I said; it constitutes, at most, a certain incompleteness.

I argued above that (1), (2), and (3) together imply that every object has existence essentially; Carter asks whether this conclusion is also a consequence of my explanation of the *de re* via the *de dicto*. The latter goes as follows:

- (4) *x* has *P* essentially if and only if *x* has *P* and $K(x, P)$ is necessarily false

(where $K(x, P)$ is the proposition expressed by the result of replacing '*x*' and '*P*' in '*x* has the complement of *P*' by proper names of '*x*' and '*P*'). Now if (4) commits us to the claim that everything has existence essentially, then $K(x, \text{existence})$, for any object *x*, must be necessarily false. In this connection Carter argues that such propositions as $K(\text{Quine}, \text{existence})$, i.e.

- (5) Quine has the property of nonexistence

are not, contrary to what I say, plausibly taken to be necessarily false; according to him (5) is true in those possible worlds in which Quine does not exist. Why so? Consider, says Carter, a world in which Quine does not exist and name it 'Charley'. Then (according to NN) Quine will have the world-indexed property *non-existence-in-Charley*. That property will be included in his essence; accordingly

part of what is being asserted when we assert $K(\text{Quine}, \text{existence})$ is that a person whose essence is in part *non-existence-in-Charley* has the property of nonexistence. In the context of the actual world this proposition is false However, in the context of Charley, whose domain does not include Quine, the proposition

seems to be *true*, saying, as it does, of a person whose essence includes *non-existence-in-Charley* that this person has the characteristic of nonexistence (p. 100).

To draw this conclusion, however, (as Carter himself seems to note) is to neglect the difference between the world-indexed property *non-existence-in-Charley* and the complement of *existence-in-Charley*, which we could write as *non-(existence-in-Charley)* (NN 63). The former is had only by a being that would have had the property of non-existence, had Charley been actual; if I am right neither Quine nor anything else has this property. The latter, however, is the complement of *existence-in-Charley* and is had by anything that would not have had existence, had Charley been actual; this is a property Quine clearly has. On my view, then, Quine has the second of these properties but not the first; but it is only the first whose possession by Quine would imply that $K(\text{Quine, existence})$ is true in worlds where Quine does not exist. Similarly, $K(\text{Quine, being a philosopher})$ i.e.,

- (6) Quine has the complement of the property of being a philosopher

is false in worlds where Quine does not exist. In those words, true enough, Quine does not have the property of being a philosopher. It does not follow, however, that he has the complement of that property in them; for in those worlds he has no properties at all. Quine has (in fact, in the actual world) the complement of the property *being-a-philosopher-in-Charley*; it would be erroneous to infer either that Quine has the property *being-a-non-philosopher-in-Charley* or that (6) is true in Charley. In the same way, the fact that Quine has the complement of the world indexed property *existence in Charley* implies neither that Quine has *nonexistence-in-Charley* nor that $K(\text{Quine, existence})$ is true in Charley.

Now Carter suggests that I have a reason for holding that (5) and (6) are false in worlds where Quine does not exist; my reason, he thinks, is the more general thesis that objects have no properties at all in worlds in which they do not exist. But this thesis, he says, “*is an assumption, and one that does not mesh well with the Plantingean ideas that (a) nonexistence is a genuine property, and (b) there are possible worlds in which ‘you and I do not exist’*” (p. 101). The thesis in question, however, is not an *assumption*; it follows from

- (3) in no possible world are there things that do not exist.

For suppose (3) is true and let W be any possible world and P any property. By (3), in W there are no things that do not exist. But then, in

W, there are no things that do not exist and have *P*. That is, the proposition

(7) there is at least one thing that does not exist and has *P*

is false in *W*. But now suppose that there is (in fact) an object *x* that does not exist in *W* but has *P* in *W*. Then *W* includes the state of affairs consisting in *x*'s not existing and having *P*, in which case (7) is true in *W*. So if (3) is true it follows that no objects have properties in worlds in which they do not exist. That thesis, then, is not an assumption, but a consequence of (3), for which I gave my reasons in Chapters VII and VIII.

But Carter claims also that this thesis does not mesh well with the ideas that nonexistence is a property and that there are worlds where you and I do not exist. In this case (as we have seen) he neglects the distinction between *nonexistence in W* and *non-(existence-in-W)*. Once we see this distinction we see that there is no clash between this thesis and those ideas. Nonexistence is indeed a property and indeed there are worlds in which we do not exist. In those worlds, however, we do not have the property of nonexistence; in those worlds we have no properties at all. If *W* is a world in which we do not exist, we have the world-indexed property *non-(existence-in-W)* but not *nonexistence-in-W*.

Here Carter turns to a new complaint: if I say that an object has no properties at all — not even nonexistence — in a world where it does not exist, “we then can no longer specify the conditions under which an object has the alleged property of nonexistence. Nonexistence does not qualify as a well-defined property” (p. 101). Now, if I am right there are no *possible* conditions under which an object has the property of nonexistence; it isn't possible that an object have this property. And in saying that nonexistence, on my view, is not well defined, perhaps Carter means only that it is an impossible property. Or, perhaps, he believes there are no impossible properties — properties that couldn't be had by anything. But of course in saying that non-existing is a property, I was taking it for granted that there are impossible properties — that, for example, the complement of a trivially essential property (one had essentially by everything) is just such a property. Further, the fact that a property is impossible does not mean that we cannot specify conditions under which an object has it; *x* has the property of being a round square, for example, if and only if *x* is a square and *x* is round. Similarly for nonexistence; an object *x* has this property if and only if there is such a thing as *x* and *x* does not exist — or, equivalently, if and only if *x* does not exist and, for any property *P*, has either *P* or its complement.

3) In NN(p. 80) I said that proper names typically express essences, so that a name like 'Quine' expresses Quine's essence (call it 'Q'). Carter thinks this implies that sentences containing proper names must express propositions about these essences rather than their bearers:

The role played by the names appearing in sentences which express kernel propositions whose subject is Quine cannot be merely that of expressing property Q. Were this the case, the proposition K(Quine, logician) would be a proposition which attributed to a *property* and not to the *person* W.V. Quine the complement of the property of being a logician (p. 99).

But in saying that the name 'Quine' in

(8) Quine is often to be found in Massachusetts

expresses Quine's essence, I am not, of course, asserting that it denotes Quine's essence, or denying that it denotes Quine. A singular term typically expresses a property and denotes an object — the object (if any) that has the property (See NN 78-81). Thus 'the tallest man in Boston' in the sentence

(9) the tallest man in Boston is unhappy

expresses the property of being the tallest man in Boston and denotes the person (if there is one) that has that property. And the proposition expressed, of course, attributes unhappiness not to the property but to the man. Similarly, then, with (8); 'Quine', in (8), expresses Quine's essence and denotes Quine; and the proposition expressed by (8) ascribes a property not to Quine's essence but to Quine himself. Accordingly, the proper name 'Quine' is semantically equivalent to such descriptions as, 'the thing that is Quine', 'the bearer of Quine's essence', 'the thing identical with Quine' and the like; they all express the same property. Carter apparently believes it follows that sentences containing these locutions in subject place do not express singular propositions; but here he is wrong. What is crucial is not whether a singular term has descriptive force (i.e. expresses a property) but whether the property expressed is an essence.

4) Finally, Carter has difficulty seeing what I mean when I deny

(10) there are some things that do not exist.

What is puzzling here, he says, is the fact that I deny (10) but affirm

(11) there are some possible worlds in which there exist objects that do not exist in the actual world.

i.e.,

(11*) there is at least one possible world which is such that if it had been actual, then there *would have existed* an object that does not *in fact* exist.

Carter concludes that in denying (10) I must mean to deny that there are any unexemplified essences. This, however, was the thing most far from my mind; I believe there are unexemplified essences and didn't mean for a moment to suggest that there weren't any. Indeed, the proposition that there are unexemplified essences is equivalent to (11); I heartily endorse them both.

Perhaps Carter's puzzlement here arises because he fails to see the distinction between (10) and (11). In fact, however, there is a great difference between these propositions; indeed, if I am right one is true and the other is necessarily false. According to (10) there are, in addition to all the things that exist — houses, horses, people, numbers, propositions and the like — some more things that do not. This seems to me to be false; there *aren't* any things in addition to the things that exist. According to (11), on the other hand, there could have been a thing distinct from each of the things that does exist. It's not that *there is* a thing distinct from each of the things that does exist — it's only that there *could have been*. This, I think, is true. I could have had five children instead of four; so there could have been a child of mine distinct from each of the people who are in fact my children. This is true; but it doesn't follow that there is a thing — perhaps a nonexistent person — that is not a child of mind, but could have been. Similarly for (10) and (11). (10) falsely asserts that a complete list of all the things there are would include some things that do not exist. (11) says, more modestly, that there could have been some objects that aren't on the list; it says only that there is a possible world which is such that if it had been actual, there would have been a thing distinct from each of the things that does in fact exist. It doesn't follow that in fact *there is* a thing — a nonexistent thing — distinct from each thing that exists.

October 1975