

Transworld Identity or Worldbound Individuals?

by Alvin Plantinga (excerpted from *The Nature of Necessity*, 1974)

Abstract: Chapter 6 is an attempt to show that the Theory of Worldbound Individuals (TWI)—i.e. the theory that any object exists in exactly one possible world—is false, and that there's no good reason to deny that objects exist in more than one world. First, arguments that attempt to show that a denial of TWI entails a contradiction fail, and the so-called Problem of Transworld Identity is no problem at all. Second, TWI should be rejected because it entails that all of an object's properties are essential to it. The defender of TWI may attempt to defend his view by adopting Counterpart Theory. I conclude by arguing that the Counterpart Theory is both semantically and metaphysically inadequate.

1. *The Question*

Socrates, therefore, has both essential properties and an essence. The former are properties he has in every world in which he exists; the latter meets this condition and in addition is instantiated in any given world by Socrates or nothing. Of course not nearly all of Socrates' properties are essential to him and not nearly every property unique to him is one of his essences; but then it follows that Socrates exists in many possible worlds. Initially, this supposition seems harmless enough; it is natural enough to suppose that the same individual exists in various different states of affairs. There is, for example, the state of affairs consisting in *Socrates' being a carpenter*; this state of affairs is possible but does not in fact obtain. It is natural to suppose, however, that if it *had* obtained, then Socrates would have existed and would have been a carpenter; one plausibly supposes it *impossible* that this state of affairs obtain and Socrates fail to exist. If so, however, then Socrates *exists in* this state of affairs. But of course if he exists in this state of affairs, then he exists in every possible world including it. For clearly every possible world including *Socrates' being a carpenter* also includes *Socrates' existing*; each such world is such that if it had been actual, Socrates would have existed. So Socrates exists in many possible worlds.

At any rate, as I said, it is natural to make this supposition; but it is rejected by many philosophers otherwise kindly disposed towards possible worlds. Among them, there is, for example, Leibniz, whose credentials on this subject are certainly impeccable; Leibniz apparently held that each object exists in just one world. The idealists, furthermore, in arguing for their doctrine of internal relations, were arguing in essence that an object exists in exactly one possible world—indeed, some of them may have thought that there is only one such world. More recently, the view that individuals are thus confined to one world—let us call it 'The Theory of Worldbound Individuals'—has been at least entertained with considerable hospitality by David Kaplan. Roderick Chisholm, furthermore, finds difficulty and perplexity in the claim that the same object

exists in more than one possible world. Still further, The Theory of Worldbound Individuals is an explicit postulate of David Lewis's Counterpart Theory. In this chapter I shall explore this issue. Now perhaps the most important and widely heralded argument for the Theory of Worldbound Individuals (hereafter TWI) is the celebrated PROBLEM OF TRANSWORLD IDENTITY, said to bedevil the view that the same object exists in more than one world. Accordingly these two topics will occupy centre stage: TWI and the problem of Transworld Identity.

2. *Socrates in α and Socrates in W*

What then, can be said in favour of the idea that an individual is confined to just one world—that you and I, for example, exist in this world and this world only? According to G. E. Moore, the idealists, in arguing for their view that all relations are internal, were really arguing that all relational properties are essential to the things that have them. The argument they gave, however, if both sound and plausible, establishes that *all* properties—not just relational properties—are thus essential to their owners. And if this is correct then for no object x is there a possible state of affairs in which x lacks a property that in fact it has; so x exists only in the actual world.

Now an argument for a conclusion as sweeping as this must pack quite a punch. What did the idealists come up with? A confusion, says Moore. What the idealists asserted is

- (1) 'If P be a relational property and A a term to which it does in fact belong, then, no matter what P and A may be, it may always be truly asserted of them, that any term which had *not* possessed P would necessarily have been other than, numerically different from, A . . . '

Perhaps we may put this more perspicuously as

- (1') For any object x and relational property P , if x has P , then for any object y , if there is a world in which y lacks P , then y is distinct from x

which clearly entails the desired conclusion that all relational properties are essential to their bearers. What they suggested as a reason for accepting (1), however, is

- (2) "If A has P , and x does not, it *does* follow that x is other than A ."

If we restate (2) as the claim that

- (2') For any objects x and y , if x has P and y does not, then x is distinct from y

holds in every world, we see that (2) is just the thesis that the Indiscernibility of Identicals is necessarily true. This thesis seems accurate enough, but no reason at all for (1) or (1'). But, as Moore says, (1) and (2) are easily conflated,

particularly when put in the idealist's typically turbid and opaque prose; and the idealists seized this opportunity to conflate them.

Initially, then, this argument is unpromising. It has a near relative, however, that may conceivably be found in Leibniz and often surfaces in contemporary discussion. Leibniz writes to Arnauld as follows:

Besides, if, in the life of any person and even in the whole universe anything went differently from what it has, nothing could prevent us from saying that it was another person or another possible universe which God had chosen. It would then be indeed another individual.

This is on its face a dark saying. What Leibniz says here and elsewhere, however, may suggest the following. Suppose Socrates exists in some world W distinct from α . Taking the term 'property' in a broad sense, we shall be obliged to concede that there must be some property that Socrates has in α but lacks in W . (If we let ' π ' name the book on α , then taking the term 'property' in a *very* broad sense, one property Socrates has in α but lacks in W is that of being such that every member of π is true.) So let us suppose that there is some property—snubnosedness, let us say—that Socrates has in α but lacks in W . That is, the Socrates of α ('Socrates-in- α ', as we might call him) has snubnosedness, while the Socrates of W does not. But surely this is inconsistent with the Indiscernibility of Identicals. For according to this principle, if Socrates-in- α has snubnosedness but Socrates-in- W does not, then Socrates-in- α is distinct from Socrates-in- W . We must conclude, therefore, that Socrates does not exist both in α and in W . There may be some person in W that much resembles our Socrates, Socrates-in- α ; that person is none the less distinct from him. And of course a generalization of this argument, if successful, will show that nothing exists in more than one world.

Here, however, there is an unhappy hiatus between premiss and conclusion. We are asked to infer

(3) Socrates-in- α is snubnosed and Socrates-in- W is not

from

(4) Socrates is snubnosed in α but not in W .

But who is this 'Socrates-in- α '? More exactly, is the phrase 'Socrates-in- α ', as it turns up in this argument, a denoting phrase? If so, what is it supposed to denote? Presumably the object that *in* α is Socrates—that is, 'Socrates-in- α ' denotes Socrates. 'Socrates-in- W ', furthermore, presumably denotes the thing that is Socrates *in* W —the thing that *would have been* Socrates, had W been actual. (Of course *Socrates* is the thing that would have been Socrates, had W been actual; but let us proceed slowly and beg no questions.) And what does it mean to say that

(3') Socrates-in- W is nonsnubnosed?

That Socrates-in- W is nonsnubnosed is inferred from the supposition that in W , Socrates has the property of being nonsnubnosed. Accordingly, (3'), if it is to follow from (4), cannot be taken to imply that the thing that in W is Socrates, is *in fact* nonsnubnosed; what it must mean is that this thing is nonsnubnosed *in* W . Hence we must understand (3) as claiming that the thing that is Socrates in α is snubnosed in α , while the thing that is Socrates in W , is nonsnubnosed in W . So taken, (3) does indeed follow from (4).

But (3) (so taken) together with the Indiscernibility of Identicals by no means yield anything so startling as that Socrates-in- α is distinct from Socrates-in- W . For there is no property that (3) predicates of Socrates-in- α and withholds from Socrates-in- W . According to (3) Socrates-in- α (that is, Socrates) has the property of being snubnosed, all right, but *in* α . Socrates-in- W , however, lacks that property *in* W —that is, Socrates-in- W has the property of being such that, if W had obtained, he would not have been snubnosed. And of course this property is not the complement of snubnosedness, nor even incompatible with it; Socrates himself is snubnosed, but by hypothesis would not have been, had W been actual. So the Indiscernibility of Identicals does not apply here; there is no property that (3) predicates of Socrates-in- α but denies of Socrates-in- W . To suppose that Socrates has P in the actual world but lacks it in W is to suppose only that Socrates does in fact have P but would not have had it, had W been actual. The Indiscernibility of Identicals casts not even a hint of suspicion upon this supposition. This objection, therefore, is a snare and a delusion.

3. *The Problem of Transworld Identity*

A. The Problem Stated

A more popular and more promising argument for TWI is an appeal to the *Problem of Transworld Identity* said to confront one who rashly supposes the same object to exist in more than one world. Here the claim is that there are deep conceptual difficulties in *identifying* the same object from world to world—difficulties that threaten the very idea of Transworld Identity with incoherence. These difficulties, furthermore, presumably do not arise on TWI. But what, exactly, *is* the problem of Transworld Identity?

What difficulties does it present for the notion that the same object exists in various possible worlds? Just how does this problem go? Although published statements of it are scarce, the problem may perhaps be put as follows. Let us suppose again that Socrates exists in some world W distinct from this one—a world in which, let us say, he fought in the battle of Marathon. In W , of course, he may also lack other properties he has in this world—perhaps in W he eschewed philosophy, corrupted no youth, and thus escaped the wrath of the

Athenians. Perhaps in *W* he lived in Corinth, let us say, was six feet tall, and remained a bachelor all his life. But then we must ask ourselves how we could possibly *identify* Socrates in that world. How could we *pick him out*? How could we *locate* him there? How could we possibly tell which of the many things contained in *W* is *Socrates*? If we try to employ the properties we use to identify him in *this* world, our efforts may well end in dismal failure—perhaps in that world it is Xenophon or maybe even Thrasymachus who is Plato's mentor and exhibits the splendidly singleminded passion for truth and justice that characterizes Socrates in this. But if we cannot identify him in *W*, so the argument continues, then we do not really understand the assertion that he exists there. If we cannot even identify him, we would not know whom we were talking about, in saying that Socrates exists in that world or has this or that property therein. In order to make sense of such talk, we must have a *criterion* or *principle* that enables us to identify Socrates from world to world. This criterion must consist in some property that Socrates has in each world in which he exists—and if it is to be sufficient to enable us to *pick him out* in a given world, distinguish him from other things, it must be a property that in no possible world is exemplified by something distinct from Socrates. Further, the property (or properties) in question, if it is to enable us thus to pick him out, must be, in some broad sense, 'empirically manifest': it must resemble such properties as having such-and-such a name, address, social security number, height, weight, and general appearance in that we can tell by broadly empirical means whether a given object has or lacks it. For how, otherwise, could we use it to *pick out* or *identify* him? So if it is intelligible to suppose that Socrates exists in more than one world, there must be some empirically manifest property that he and he alone has in each of the worlds in which he exists. Now obviously we do not know of any such property, or even that there is such a property. Indeed, it is hard to see how there *could* be such a property. But then the very idea of Transworld Identity is not really intelligible—in which case we must suppose that no object exists in more than one world.

The first thing to note is that this objection seems to arise out of a certain *picture* or *image*. We imagine ourselves somehow peering—through a Jules Verne-oscope, perhaps—into another world; we ask ourselves whether Socrates exists in it. We observe the behaviour and characteristics of its denizens and then wonder which of these, if any, is Socrates. Of course we realize that his physical appearance might be quite different in *W*, if he exists there at all. He might also live at a different place, have different friends and different fingerprints, if, indeed, he has fingers. But how then can we tell which one he *is*? And does it so much as make sense to say that he exists in that world, if there is no way in principle of identifying him, of telling which thing there *is* Socrates?

B. A Temporal Analogy

Now perhaps this picture is useful in certain respects; in the present context, however, it breeds nothing but confusion. For this picture insinuates that the propositions *Socrates exists in other possible worlds* or *Socrates exists in a*

world in which he is not snubnosed are intelligible to us only if we know of some empirically manifest property that he and he alone has in each world in which he exists. But why should we accept this idea? Suppose we consider an analogous temporal situation. ... [T]here are pictures of Franz Brentano at the age of 20 and of 70 respectively. The youthful Brentano looks much like Apollo; the elderly Brentano resembles, instead, Jerome Hines in his portrayal of the dying Czar in Boris Godounov. Most of us believe that the same object exists at various distinct times; but do we know of some empirically manifest property *P* such that a thing is Brentano at a given time *t* if and only if it has *P*? Surely not; and this casts no shadow whatever on the intelligibility of the claim that Brentano existed at many different times.

But is the above argument not available here? No doubt there was a time at which G. Cantor was a precocious baby. But if I understand that assertion, must I not be able to *pick him out, locate* him at that time? If I cannot identify him, if I cannot tell which of the things that existed at that time was Cantor, then (so goes the argument) I cannot make sense of the claim that he existed at that time. But I could identify him, at *t*, only if I knew of some empirically manifest property that he and he alone had at *t*.

Here the argument is manifestly confused. To suppose that Cantor was a precocious baby at *t* it is not necessary that I be able to pick his picture out of a gallery of babies-at-*t*. Perhaps I must know *who he is* to understand this supposition; and perhaps to know that I must know of some property that he and he alone has. Indeed, we might go so far as to concede that this property must be 'empirically manifest' in some sense. But surely it is asking too much to require that I know of such a property that he and he only has *at every time at which he exists*. No doubt I must be able to answer the question 'which of the things that existed at *t* was Cantor?' but the answer is easy enough; it is Cantor himself. If this is correct, however, why suppose otherwise in the transworld case?

But perhaps the temporal analogy is not altogether convincing. "After all", it may be said, "times are linearly ordered; and at any times *t* and *t'* such that the interval between the two is small, there will indeed be some empirically manifest property that Cantor and Cantor alone has both at *t* and at *t'*. Indeed, the objection continues, "this fact is a necessary condition of our being able to identify an object *x* at a time *t'* as the *same* object that existed at an earlier time *t*; and this ability to reidentify objects is a necessary condition of our intelligibly supposing that the same object exists at various distinct times. Nothing like this is available in the transworld case." Of course the objector is partly right; there is this difference between the transtemporal and transworld situations. I do not see, however, that this point invalidates the analogy. But let us focus our attention directly upon the transworld situation.

C. The Problem Resolved

I understand the proposition that there is a possible world in which Socrates did not teach Plato. Now let W be any such world. Why suppose that a condition of my understanding this is my knowing something about what Socrates would have looked like or where he would have lived, had W been actual? Perhaps I must know who Socrates is to understand this proposition; and conceivably this involves my knowing of some property that is empirically manifest (whatever exactly that comes to) and unique to Socrates. But what reason is there for supposing that I must know of some empirically manifest property he has *in that world W* ?

The picture suggests that all of the possible worlds (W included) are somehow simultaneously "going on"—as if each world were actual, but at a different place or perhaps (as the best science fiction has it) in a "different dimension". It also suggests that I must be able to look into W and sift through its inhabitants until I run across one I recognize as Socrates—otherwise I cannot identify him, and hence do not know whom I am talking about. But here the picture misleads us. For taken literally, of course, this notion makes no sense. There is no such thing as "looking into" another possible world to see what is going on there. There is no such thing as inspecting the inhabitants of another possible world with a view to deciding which, if any, is Socrates. A possible world is a possible state of affairs. In saying that an individual x exists or has a property P in a state of affairs S we are pointing to the impossibility that S obtain and x fail to exist or fail to have P . So, for example, consider the state of affairs consisting in Socrates' being a carpenter, and call this state of affairs 'S'. Does Socrates exist in S? Obviously: had this state of affairs been actual, he would have existed. But is there a problem of *identifying*, him, *picking him out*, in S—that is, must we look into S to see which thing therein is Socrates? Must there be or must we know of some empirically manifest property he has in this and every other state of affairs in which he exists? Surely not.

We might define *existence in a proposition* analogously to existence in a state of affairs; that is, we might say that an object x *exists in a proposition p* if and only if it is not possible that p be true and x fail to exist; and we might define ' x has property P in p ' in appropriately similar fashion. Then clearly enough both Quine and Royal Robbins exist in the proposition

- (5) Quine is America's foremost rock-climber and Royal Robbins is America's most distinguished philosopher.

But must we 'identify' Robbins and Quine in (5) in order to grasp or understand it? ... Must we be apprised of some empirically manifest property Quine alone has in every proposition in which he exists in order to understand (5)? Of course not; there is no such property and the request for one is surely based upon nothing but confusion.

Similarly, then, for the possible worlds case. To understand the suggestion that there is a world W in which Socrates did not teach Plato, I need know nothing about which other persons exist in W or—except for his essential properties— which other properties Socrates has in that world. Indeed, how could I know more? All I have been told about W is that it is one of the many worlds in which Socrates exists but does not teach Plato; and for any property P Socrates has inessentially (except for those entailing the property of teaching Plato) there is a world that meets that description and in which Socrates has P . The claim that I must somehow be able to identify Socrates in W —pick him out—is either trivial or confused. Of course I must know which of the persons existing in W —the persons who would have existed had W been actual—I am talking about. But the answer, obviously and trivially, is Socrates. And to be able thus to answer I need know nothing further about what Socrates would have been like had W been actual.

4. *Objections to TWI*

The arguments for the Theory of Worldbound Individuals, then, are based upon error and confusion; but are there positive reasons for rejecting this theory? It certainly seems so. The theory's basic thrust is that no object exists in more than one possible world; this implies the outrageous view that—taking 'property' in as wide a sense as you like—no object could have lacked any property that in fact it has. Had the world been different in even the tiniest, most irrelevant fashion, Socrates would not have existed. On this theory, if God created both Socrates and n electrons, then it was absolutely impossible that he create both Socrates and $n + 1$ electrons. TWI thereby fails to distinguish the relation in which Socrates stands to inconsistent attributes—being both married and unmarried, for example—from the relationship in which he stands to such an attribute as *fleeing to Thebes* or *being such that there are $n + 1$ electrons*. It is as impossible, on this view, that Socrates should have had the latter as the former. *Every* attribute of Socrates is one that he has in every world in which he exists—there being only one such world; so no attribute he lacks is such that there is a possible state of affairs in which he has it. Accordingly, on this view each of Socrates' properties is essential to him.

Consider, furthermore, a proposition like

(6) Socrates is foolish,

a proposition which predicates of Socrates a property he lacks. Now presumably (6) is true, in a given possible world, only if Socrates exists in that world and has the property of being foolish therein. But on TWI there is no such world; accordingly, (6) is necessarily false. So on TWI any proposition predicating of Socrates a property he does not have will be necessarily false. Further, consider any proposition p that is false but contingent; since *Socrates exists* is true only in α , where p is false, there is no world in which p and *Socrates exists* are both true; the latter, therefore, entails the denial of the

former. Accordingly, *Socrates exists* entails every true proposition. And surely all of this is clearly false. If we know anything at all about modality, we know that some of Socrates' properties are accidental to him, that *Socrates is foolish* is not necessarily false, and that *Socrates exists* does not entail every true proposition.

5. Counterpart Theory

But here we must consider an exciting new wrinkle to this old theory. Embracing the Theory of Worldbound Individuals, David Lewis adds to it the suggestion that a worldbound individual typically has *counterparts* in other possible worlds: The counterpart relation is our substitute for identity between things in different worlds. Where some would say that you are in several worlds, in which you have somewhat different properties and somewhat different things happen to you, I prefer to say that you are in the actual world and no other, but you have counterparts in several other worlds. Your counterparts resemble you closely in content and context in important respects. They resemble you more closely than do the other things in their worlds. But they are not really you. For each of them is in his own world, and only you are here in the actual world. Indeed we might say, speaking casually, that your counterparts are you in other worlds, that they and you are the same; but this sameness is no more a literal identity than the sameness between you today and you tomorrow. It would be better to say that your counterparts are men you would have been, had the world been otherwise.

Fortified with Counterpart Theory, TWI seems no longer obliged to hold that each of Socrates' properties is essential to him; instead, a property is essential to him if and only if each of his counterparts (among whom is Socrates himself) has it: "In short, an essential attribute of something is an attribute it shares with all its counterparts. All your counterparts are probably human; if so, you are essentially human" (ibid., p. 122). So while indeed there is no world in which Socrates, *our* Socrates—the object that in our world is Socrates—lacks the property of being snubnosed, there are no doubt worlds containing *counterparts* of Socrates—counterparts that are not snubnosed. Hence the property of being snubnosed is not essential to him.

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