

In Defense of the Contingently Nonconcrete*

Bernard Linsky
 Philosophy Department
 University of Alberta
 and
 Edward N. Zalta
 Center for the Study of Language and Information
 Stanford University

In ‘Actualism or Possibilism?’, James Tomberlin develops two challenges for actualism. The challenges are to account for the truth of certain sentences without appealing to merely possible objects. After canvassing the main actualist attempts to account for these phenomena, he then critically evaluates the new conception of actualism that we described in Linsky and Zalta [1994]. He suggests that while our conception of actualism meets the challenges he has set, it nevertheless has consequences he cannot accept. In particular, Tomberlin objects to the way in which it alters ordinary notions of existence, concreteness, and essential and contingent properties.

In this paper, we shall respond to Tomberlin’s objections. However, we must first take the time to correct his account of the way in which we would meet one of his challenges for actualism. Tomberlin’s second challenge for actualism is this: offer a credible treatment (i.e., an analysis that preserves truth and entailments) of the sentence ‘Ponce de Leon searched for the fountain of youth’ which does not require Ponce de Leon to stand in a *de re* relation to some non-actual individual.¹ Tomberlin asserts that we would analyze this claim as a relation between Ponce de Leon and a contingently nonconcrete individual. Since our view is that contingently nonconcrete individuals are actual, it would appear that we

have met his challenge. However, we would not analyze the claim in question the way Tomberlin suggests. We sharply distinguish between contingently nonconcrete objects, which we proposed for the analysis of modality, and genuine abstract objects, which we think are needed for the analysis of intentional relations. On our view, the objects needed for the analysis of modality are just the wrong kind of thing for the analysis of intentionality. In what follows, therefore, we first explain why we deny the not uncommon view that ‘possibilia’ (or actualist reconstructions thereof) are suitable as intentional objects and afterwards respond to the specific objections that Tomberlin raises against our view.

In our [1994], we proposed an interpretation of the simplest quantified modal logic that is consistent with actualism. The simplest quantified modal logic combines classical quantification theory, the propositional modal logic K (or, for philosophical applications, S5), and the Barcan formula ($\Diamond \exists x \phi \rightarrow \exists x \Diamond \phi$). Unlike Kripke semantics,² in which each world may have a different domain, our interpretation employs models with a single domain of quantification, the objects of which have different properties at different worlds.³ Using a primitive notion of concreteness (which can be given the gloss ‘spatiotemporal’), we began by classifying the objects in that single domain as either those which are concrete at the actual world or those which are not concrete at the actual world but concrete at some other possible world. We called the former ‘concrete objects’ and the latter ‘contingently nonconcrete objects’. We chose the expression ‘contingently nonconcrete’ to distinguish the objects in question from a third category of objects, namely, those which are not concrete at any possible world. In previous writings, Zalta called these necessarily nonconcrete objects ‘abstract objects’ or ‘A-objects’.⁴

On our view, contingently nonconcrete objects are actual objects. We proposed that such objects play a role in the truth of certain modal claims—they play the role possibilists typically assign to ‘possibilia’. In particular, they guarantee the truth of the consequent of the Barcan formula when it otherwise appears that no concrete object is possibly ϕ . In the example we used in the paper, where person *b* has no sister but might have had such, the Barcan formula says that there is something

²See Kripke [1963].

³The models are described in Marcus [1962] and Hughes and Cresswell [1968]. We proposed a new metaphysical interpretation of the modal language and logic having these fixed domain models.

⁴See his [1983], [1988], and elsewhere.

*Published in *Philosophical Studies* (Special Issue: Possibilism and Actualism), 84/2-3 (1996): 283–294.

¹In the manuscript version of Tomberlin’s paper, this challenge appears on p. 12.

which might have been *b*'s sister. But given certain 'Kripkean' assumptions about the essential nature of an object's origin, no concrete object could have been *b*'s sister. In such cases, we proposed that there exist contingently nonconcrete objects that could have been *b*'s sister. Any such object is actual but not concrete; at any world where such objects are *b*'s sister, they are concrete. All objects in the range of the quantifiers are actual, and so our interpretation of the simplest quantified modal logic is actualist.

Modality and Intentionality

Tomberlin thinks that we would employ contingently nonconcrete objects in the analysis of intentional sentences such as 'Ponce de Leon searched for the fountain of youth':

Faced with the second challenge, *L* & *Z* hold that the fountain of youth is contingently nonconcrete; in other worlds, this object is both concrete and actual; but in our world, even though nonconcrete, it nevertheless is actual. If so, however, challenge two is fully met—for (9) [Ponce de Leon searched for the fountain of youth] is indeed true, and its truth does not dictate that Ponce de Leon bears a *de re* relation to some nonactual individual. (manuscript p. 13)

It is a common view (which can be traced back to Quine) to think that possible objects just are the objects of intentional states.⁵ Tomberlin assumes that this common view applies to us, with our (actualist) contingently nonconcrete objects replacing genuinely possible objects.

But this is not our view. We offered no analyses of intentional sentences in our paper. These sentences were the subject of Zalta [1988], in which *abstract* objects (i.e., objects that couldn't possibly be concrete) serve as the objects of certain *de re* intentional relations. There are good reasons for not using 'possible objects' of any sort in the analysis of intentionality, the most important being that there are too many candidates

⁵Quine, 'On What There Is', attributes to Wyman both the view that intentional, 'subsistent' objects do not exist and that they are nothing other than possible but not actual objects. In successive paragraphs ([1963], p. 3), he uses Pegasus as an example of both categories.

to choose from as the object of a *de re* intentional attitude.⁶ Which of the many things that could have been a fountain of youth (or which of the many possible fountains of youth) was the unique object of Ponce de Leon's search? If it is possible that a fountain could confer eternal youth, then certainly many different 'possible fountains' could have. The Barcan formulas tell us that whenever it is possible that there is a fountain of youth, then there is something that possibly is a fountain of youth. There is no reason to think that there is only one thing that could have been a fountain of youth. So there is no way to analyze the English description 'the fountain of youth' as it appears in Tomberlin's target sentence (9) so that it stands for a unique 'possible' object.⁷

To achieve this uniqueness, Zalta employs objects that, in a certain respect, are indeterminate with respect to the properties that they have, and which can be theoretically identified on the basis of an incomplete (though definite) description. These are the 'abstract objects' defined earlier. Abstract objects are fundamentally different in kind from objects that are concrete at some world or other. Among other things, they *encode* as well as exemplify properties, and in particular, they can encode incomplete (and even inconsistent) groups of properties. The properties they encode are the ones by which they are uniquely identified. Each different group of properties determines a different abstract object. This makes abstract objects suitable as intentional objects; every conception, however incomplete (or inconsistent), succeeds in identifying a unique abstract object that encodes the properties involved in the conception. Different intentional acts involve different conceptions. A given definite description can be given a unique denotation by identifying the conception

⁶Another reason possible objects are not sufficient for the analysis of intentional idioms is that thinking about the round square, conceiving of the Russell set, and having attitudes towards other 'inconsistent objects' cannot be analyzed as relations to possible objects.

⁷As we point out in the next paragraph, there are ways to identify a unique *abstract* object in Zalta's theory as the denotation of 'the fountain of youth'. Moreover, there is a defined, technical sense in which certain of these abstract objects, including the fountain of youth and the golden mountain, are 'possible objects', namely, whenever it is possible that something exemplify all the properties the abstract object encodes (any abstract object that fails to encode incompatible properties is 'possible' in this technical sense). See Zalta [1983], p. 76. Thus, we acknowledge that there is a way to analyze 'the fountain of youth' in Tomberlin's target sentence so that it stands for a unique 'possible' object, but clearly, this does not undermine our objection to using possible objects as they are standardly conceived in the analysis of the intentional attitudes.

involved in the intentional act being described in a given context. So, for example, in some contexts, ‘the fountain of youth’ stands for the unique abstract object that encodes just the properties derived from the legend. In other contexts, such as in uses of the sentence ‘the fountain of youth is a fountain’, the description ‘the fountain of youth’ might just denote the abstract object that encodes the property of being a fountain that confers eternal youth and any properties implied by this property. So there are various ways to analyze the English description ‘the fountain of youth’, but on each analysis, the description denotes a unique object.

Although our paper does not present an account of Tomberlin’s sentence (9), we will take the opportunity to defend Zalta’s account against the objections Tomberlin raises against other actualist accounts earlier in his paper.⁸ His first objection would be that Zalta’s analysis places Ponce de Leon in a *de re* relation to an abstract object, but didn’t Ponce de Leon search for what he believed was a real object? Tomberlin says:

If asked, I believe, Ponce de Leon correctly would have resisted any suggestion that the object of his search was an abstract entity rather than a concrete one. (manuscript p. 11)

To this we reply that Zalta’s analysis of Tomberlin’s (9) implies nothing

⁸It is important to mention that there are two ways to interpret Zalta’s formal system, for it involves both the quantifier ‘ \exists ’ and the predicate ‘ $E!$ ’ and these are *not* equivalent (i.e., ‘ $E!x$ ’ is not defined as ‘ $\exists y(y=x)$ ’). On the Meinongian interpretation, the quantified formula $\exists x\phi$ asserts *there is an x such that ϕ* (with no implication that x exists) and the predicate $E!$ denotes the property of *existence*. Since Zalta defines x is abstract ($A!x$) as $\neg\Diamond E!x$, and his axioms assert that there are abstract objects, the resulting theory is committed to necessarily nonexistent objects. This Meinongian interpretation also is possibilist: the contingently nonconcrete objects discussed in the present paper are conceived as contingently nonexistent (i.e., possible) objects. They are defined as: $\neg E!x \ \& \ \Diamond E!x$.

However, in [1983] (pp. 50-52) and in [1988] (pp. 102-104), Zalta pointed out that one may just as easily interpret the quantifier ‘ \exists ’ as asserting *existence* and interpret the predicate ‘ $E!$ ’ as the denoting the property of being concrete (i.e., the property of having a spatiotemporal location). On this interpretation, the theory asserts that abstract objects (i.e., objects x such that $\neg\Diamond E!x$) exist. This is the interpretation of the theory which naturally utilizes our actualist interpretation of the simplest quantified modal logic. On this interpretation, therefore, Zalta’s theory of objects is actualist, since everything there is, i.e., everything that exists, is actual (what is ‘actual’ is what exists at the actual world). Abstract objects, concrete objects, and contingently nonconcrete objects all exist and are actual.

Thus the objections to actualism that Tomberlin develops earlier in his paper apply to the actualist interpretation of Zalta’s formalism. It is this interpretation that we defend in the present paper.

about what attitudes de Leon has with respect to the object of his search other than the fact that he searched for it. The analysis employs the name ‘Ponce de Leon’, the two-place predicate ‘searched for’, and the description ‘the object x such that, according to de Leon’s conception, x is a fountain of youth’, which in this case denotes an abstract object. The analysis of (9) is:

Ponce de Leon searched for the object x such that, according to de Leon’s conception, x is a fountain of youth.

The truth conditions for this are given by the following:

There is an unique object x such that: (a) according to de Leon’s conception, x is a (concrete) fountain of youth and (b) Ponce de Leon searched for x .⁹

Searching for is a relation between objects; so definite descriptions that occur in atomic formulas that assert that the relation holds are not subject to scope distinctions. Thus, the fact that the object is abstract is not within the scope of the relation. So the fact that Ponce de Leon is related to an abstract object doesn’t imply that he conceives of the object as abstract. The analysis does not imply that the property of being abstract plays a role in Ponce de Leon’s conception of what he is searching for. The only properties playing a role in that conception are: being a fountain, (and hence) being concrete, conferring eternal youth, and other properties he derived from the legend. For each such property F , it is consistent with the analysis to claim that Ponce de Leon believed that the object he was searching for is F and consistent to deny this for any other property.

The fact that the definite description may denote different objects in different contexts suggests that Tomberlin’s second objection to certain actualist accounts might apply to our view as well. Tomberlin is concerned that the logical form of an intentional sentence should not depend on such contingent matters as whether the object of the intention exists or not. So, for example, Tomberlin wants a uniform analysis of the true (9) and the false (13):

13) Ponce de Leon drank from the fountain of youth.

⁹Of course, there is a similar but false reading of (9), on which the description is interpreted only with exemplification formulas: There is a unique object x such that: (a) x is a (concrete) fountain of youth and (b) Ponce de Leon searched for x .

He objects to any analysis which assigns (9) and (13) different logical forms and supposes that if the description denotes in (9) and not in (13), then (9) and (13) must have different logical forms. Tomberlin says:

...any such view requires intolerably that *logical form* turns on matters of contingent fact—to know what sort of proposition is expressed by an instance of (α) [x searched for y] I must already know whether the singular terms in question do or do not refer to concrete but contingent individuals.
(manuscript p. 12)

But the claims that the description in (9) denotes an abstract object and the description in (13) denotes nothing do not imply that (9) and (13) have different logical forms. They both involve 2-place relations, though of course, one of the relations is subject to a constraint. The *drank from* relation is subject to the constraint that if x drank from y , then y is concrete. By contrast, the relation *searched for* is not subject to an analogous constraint.

Our reply to Tomberlin, therefore, is this. A description can either denote an abstract object, an ordinary object, or nothing at all. Which of these it denotes is determined by the kind of claim being made. The sentences ‘Ponce de Leon searched for the F ’ and ‘Ponce de Leon drank from the F ’ have the same logical form (i.e., ‘ Rxy ’), but each sentence will have two readings involving that form: a reading on which ‘the F ’ is analyzed as ‘the unique (abstract) object which, according to de Leon’s conception, is F ’, and a reading on which ‘the F ’ is analyzed as ‘the object that uniquely exemplifies F ’ (in (13), the latter description denotes nothing). On the former reading of the description, (9) is true; on both readings of the description, (13) is false. However, on all these readings, the logical form of the sentence is the same: it is an atomic sentence involving a 2-place predicate, a proper name, and a definite description.

Replies to Tomberlin’s Main Objections

In the last section of his paper, Tomberlin lists a number of consequences of our new kind of actualism which he finds unacceptable. If one were to put aside our distinctions among objects and our distinctions both among notions of modal properties and among notions of existence, such consequences might appear strange. But a full appreciation of the concept

of a contingently nonconcrete object should reveal that we agree with Tomberlin on the basic facts but simply describe them differently—we don’t propose any revision of basic modal intuitions.

Tomberlin’s first objection occurs in the following passage:

First, you, I, and the fountain of youth exist *necessarily*—although there are possible worlds where we are nonconcrete, we nevertheless populate any such world. Additionally, since the fountain of youth and the golden mountain exist necessarily, they both *actually* exist. (manuscript p. 15)

Tomberlin offers two objections here, namely, that on our view: (1) ordinary objects become necessary beings, and (2) possible objects *actually exist*. With regard to (1), the relevant facts are that ‘ $\forall x \Box \exists y y = x$ ’ is a theorem of the simplest quantified modal logic, and moreover, ordinary concrete objects (indeed all objects), fall under the range of the quantifier ‘ $\forall x$ ’. The embedded formula ‘ $\Box \exists y y = x$ ’ is true of every object in the single domain, and so, yes, strictly speaking, everything exists necessarily. But this would be objectionable only if it implied that contingent objects such as the ones Tomberlin cites were to ‘exist in’ or ‘populate’ every world. Whereas other modal metaphysicians capture the notion of ‘populating a world’ by using the idea of membership in one of the varying domains, we capture the notion of ‘populating a world’ by the idea of being concrete at that world. So objects that are concrete at some worlds but not others populate only those worlds where they are concrete, and on our view, this is the sense in which they are contingent objects. So, contra Tomberlin, it doesn’t follow from the fact that ‘ $\Box \exists y y = x$ ’ is true of every object, that ordinary (concrete and contingently nonconcrete) objects are necessary beings.¹⁰

The second half of this objection, recall, is that on our view objects such as the fountain of youth and the golden mountain *actually exist*. Note here again that Tomberlin takes the fountain of youth and the golden mountain as examples of contingently nonconcrete objects, contrary to our interpretation of them as intentional, abstract objects. But no matter

¹⁰Note that, by contrast, abstract objects are not concrete at any world, so they are not contingent by our lights. This is a substantive metaphysical view embodied in our approach—it is based on the idea that it doesn’t make sense to suppose that there are abstract objects that don’t exist but might have, that is, which ‘exist at’ some worlds but not others. Disagreement with our view, at this point, does not involve a clash of pretheoretic modal intuitions, but rather a clash of theoretical considerations.

whether you take the fountain of youth to be an abstract object or a contingently nonconcrete object, what harm results from saying that such objects actually exist? In neither case is the object concrete, so our view doesn't 'populate' the actual world with any new entities. Note that since 'it is possible that there is a golden mountain' is true, we are committed to the actual existence of contingently nonconcrete objects that might have been a golden mountain. But, contra Tomberlin, this doesn't imply that anything actually exemplifies (i.e., at this world) the property of being a golden mountain. Moreover, the fountain of youth and the golden mountain, when properly construed as abstract objects, only encode the properties by which we conceive them, and so again, our view doesn't imply that anything actually exemplifies the properties of being a golden mountain or fountain of youth. All that's left to this objection is simply the observation that we have proposed a form of actualism; but any such account that employs objects in the analysis of modality will have to employ actually existing objects. Any actualist attempt to reconstruct possible objects in terms of actual ones will in some sense be committed to the view that the proxies of possible objects actually exist.

Tomberlin's second objection is that the analysis of

Alice Waters might not have existed,

should be

There is a world where Alice Waters does not exist,

rather than our

There is a world where Alice Waters is not concrete.

So Tomberlin is charging us with not respecting the difference between existence and concreteness. But here we note that our notion of existence, namely, being in the domain of quantification, is not a property that can vary from world to world. We take it as an advance that, in our system of modal logic, the quantifier is *not* treated like a predicate, with an extension that varies from world to world. We think this is the distinctive logical mistake of Kripke models, namely, to force the quantifier into the mold of a predicate. But, nevertheless, Tomberlin's datum, that Alice Waters might not have existed, expresses a certain modal intuition concerning the fact that she is a contingent object. We share this intuition but express it differently. For us, contingent objects are those which are

concrete at some worlds but not others. Some philosophers may insist that, for such objects, there is a difference between failing to be concrete at a world and failing to exist there. But we agree to this extent: we distinguish between being concrete and falling in the domain of a quantifier, but we don't see these as comparable contingent states that an object might be in at one world and not another.

Tomberlin's third objection is that our view denies that (18)

18) Alice Waters is essentially a person

entails (19)

19) Alice Waters is a person.

But why is this objectionable? The only reason to suppose (19) follows from (18) would be to think that to be a person essentially is to be a person at all possible worlds. But this is not the correct notion of what it is to be a person essentially, for otherwise, the truth of (18) would then entail that Alice Waters exists at all possible worlds. The latter is something Tomberlin wants to deny. Our view is that x is a person essentially just in case x is a person at every world in which x is concrete. Other actualists share this intuition, but would express it by saying that x is a person essentially just in case x is a person at every world in which x exists. But no matter whether you express the intuition our way or the traditional actualist way, being a person essentially doesn't entail being a person.

Tomberlin's fourth objection is that, on our view, something can exist in a world without having all of its essential properties. He says:

... L & Z are saddled with (20):

20) For each contingently concrete individual x , there is some possible world w such that x exists in w and has some—but *not* all—of its essential properties in w .

(manuscript p. 16)

We agree with this but deny that such an object is concrete in a world in which it lacks some of its essential properties. From remarks we made in the previous paragraph, it should be clear that, for ordinary (concrete and contingently nonconcrete) objects x , we define: x has F essentially if and only x has F in every world in which it is concrete. We distinguish these

properties from the properties that an object has necessarily, such as being self-identical. The former are essential properties in an interesting sense of ‘essential’, whereas the latter properties are ones that are ‘essential’ to an object only in a vacuous sense of ‘essential’ (if you have such a property in every possible world, you certainly have such a property in every world in which you are concrete). So in the worlds where, Tomberlin says, there are objects that have some but not all of their ‘essential’ properties (these are worlds where an ordinary object is not concrete), we respond by pointing that they only have these vacuously ‘essential’ properties.

Our reply to Tomberlin’s last objection, which he refers to as a ‘fundamental incoherence’ concerning our view, can now be anticipated. He claims that our view implies that ordinary objects are both contingently concrete and essentially concrete. We happily agree and see no incoherence. Ordinary objects are contingently concrete because they are concrete at some worlds and not others. They are essentially concrete because they are concrete at every world where they are concrete! Clearly, our distinctions undermine the traditional contrariety of ‘essential’ and ‘contingent’. ‘Contingent’ is the contrary of ‘necessary’, on our view. Being concrete is essential but not necessary to concrete and contingently nonconcrete objects. The contrary of ‘essential’ for us is ‘accidental’, where an ordinary object x has F accidentally just in case there are two distinct worlds such that x is concrete at both but has F at only one. No incoherence here, just a more discriminating set of concepts.

Bibliography

- Hughes, G., and Cresswell, M., 1968, *An Introduction to Modal Logic*, London: Methuen.
- Kripke, S., 1963, ‘Semantical Considerations on Modal Logic’, *Acta Philosophica Fennica* **16**: 83–94.
- Linsky, B., and Zalta, E., 1994, ‘In Defense of the Simplest Quantified Modal Logic’, *Philosophical Perspectives 8: Philosophy of Logic and Language*, Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview, pp. 431–458.
- Marcus, R., 1962, ‘Modalities and Intensional Languages’, *Synthese* **27**: 303–322.
- Tomberlin, J., 1996, ‘Actualism or Possibilism’, *Philosophical Studies*, **84**/2–3: 263–281.
- Quine, W. V. O., 1963, ‘On What There Is’, in *From a Logical Point of*

View, 2nd. ed., New York: Harper and Row, pp. 1–19.

Zalta, E., 1988, *Intensional Logic and the Metaphysics of Intentionality*, Cambridge, MA: MIT/Bradford

Zalta, E., 1983, *Abstract Objects: An Introduction to Axiomatic Metaphysics*, Dordrecht: D. Reidel.