More on Haecceitism and Possible Worlds[*]

Bradford Skow

Anti-haecceitism is the thesis that the universe could not be non-qualitatively different without being qualitatively different. Haecceitism is the denial of anti-haecceitism.[1] In "Haecceitism, Anti-Haecceitism, and Possible Worlds" I argued that there are no non-tendentious definitions of "haecceitism" and "anti-haecceitism" using possible-worlds talk. For any candidate definition of "anti-haecceitism" that uses possible-worlds talk there is some theory of possible worlds relative to which that definition is not equivalent to anti-haecceitism.

The most promising definition of "anti-haecceitism" that I discussed was

(1) For any possible worlds w1 and w2, if all the same qualitative sentences are true at w1 and w2, then all the same non-qualitative sentences are true at w1 and w2.

However, (1) is not equivalent to anti-haecceitism in David Lewis's version of counterpart theory. In that theory (1) is true but anti-haecceitism is false (in some context). Just get into a context in which I have more than one counterpart in the actual world.[2] Suppose the counterpart who is distinct from me lives in Los Angeles. He verifies the claim that things could have been just as they actually are, qualitatively,

---

[*]Forthcoming in *Analytic Philosophy*.

[1]Actually, anti-haecceitism is a necessitation of the thesis I call "anti-haecceitism" in the text: the universe could not be non-qualitatively different without being qualitatively different; and this would still have been true even if the universe had been different in any way.

[2]I am not being careful about use and mention. This should read: get into a context in which "counterpart" expresses a relation that I bear to more than one thing in the actual world. I will continue to be sloppy in the body of the paper.

while I live in Los Angeles instead of Boston. This claim entails haecceitism. But here w1 and w2 are both the actual world, and obviously the same qualitative and non-qualitative sentences are true at the actual world and itself.

Why did (1) seem so promising? A (flawed) argument that (1) entails anti-haecceitism goes like this. Assume haecceitism is true: things could have been the same qualitatively while I live in Los Angeles. Then there is a world w at which "BAS lives in LA" is true. Since "BAS lives in LA" is false it is false at the actual world. Now assume

(A) If S is true at w then S is not also false at w.

By (A) "BAS lives in LA" is not true at the actual world, and so not all the same non-qualitative sentences are true at w and the actual world. So (1) is false. This argument is bad because (A) is not true in Lewis's theory.[3] "BAS lives in LA" is both true and false at the actual world.

In "A Characterization of Haecceitism" Alessandro Torza proposes a revision to (1) that, he claims, is non-tendentious. It is designed to avoid the problems raised by (A). Here is the definition (I have changed the wording):

(2) For any possible worlds w1 and w2,

 (i) if every qualitative sentence true at w1 is true at w2 and not also false at w2, then

 (ii) every non-qualitative sentence true at w1 is true at w2 and not also false at w2.

---

[3]This is a clearer diagnosis of why the argument is flawed than the one I gave in my earlier paper. An email from Alessandro Torza helped me see that the earlier one was garbled.

I also said in the earlier paper that it feels odd to say that "BAS lives in LA" is false but true at the actual world because we are rarely in a context in which we have multiple actual counterparts. That was wrong. It feels odd because it seems definitional that nothing false is true at the actual world. This points to a bigger problem for counterpart theory: how to add an actuality operator. See [Fara and Williamson 2005] and [Fara 2009].

While (1) is true in Lewis's theory (2) is false and so is not shown by my example to be tendentious.

However, just because my argument against (1) does not work against (2) does not establish that (2) is non-tendentious. For one thing, Torza discusses only two theories of possible worlds. But to be non-tendentious (2) must be equivalent to anti-haecceitism relative to *every* theory of possible worlds. What about theories of possible worlds no one has written down yet? Maybe relative to one of those theories (2) is not equivalent to anti-haecceitism.

Let us set this point aside for now. Here is an argument that (2) is not equivalent to anti-haecceitism even in Lewis's theory.

Lewis thought that, in some contexts at least, haecceitism is true. This and the fact that he liked the flexibility of counterpart theory suggest that he would accept that in some contexts *extreme* haecceitism is true: the way things are qualitatively places no constraints at all on the way they are non-qualitatively. Extreme haecceitism entails that things could have been just as they are, qualitatively, while I not exist at all. This claim comes out true in Lewis's theory in a context in which I have no counterparts in the actual world. But in such a context clauses (i) and (ii) of (2) are true (when w1 and w2 are both the actual world). Without multiple counterparts no sentence is both true and false at the actual world.

It might be objected that the constraints Lewis placed on counterpart relations entail that every counterpart relation counts me as one of my counterparts. Given my earlier point it does not matter whether this is true. A non-tendentious definition still needs to be equivalent to anti-haecceitism in a version of counterpart theory that is like Lewis's except that it lacked this restriction.

A better objection is that my arguments against (1) and (2) use sentences ("BAS lives in LA" and "BAS does not exist") that are false but are not false at the actual world. Note that the flawed argument I gave earlier infers " 'BAS lives in LA' is false at the actual world" from " 'BAS lives in LA' is false." I have been taking the examples to show that this inference is not valid. But maybe the problem is not with (1) or (2) but with the theory. Maybe a theory of possible worlds that does not make this inference valid is defective.

Counterpart theory can be fixed to avoid this problem. Here is a sketch of

a fragment of a better version. Say that a *possibility* is a pair (w, f) of a possible world and a counterpart function. (The function f maps each individual to one of its counterparts in w.) The *actual* possibility is the pair (the actual world, identity). Then replace all talk of truth at a possible world with talk of truth at a possibility.[4] In this theory all false sentences are false at the actual possibility. What's more, (1) is equivalent to anti-haecceitism. Both are false when I have multiple actual counterparts.[5]

Suppose we say that a definition of "anti-haecceitism" does not need to be equivalent to anti-haecceitism in a defective version of counterpart theory to be non-tendentious. Then I have no argument against (1) (other than: there may be some as yet unarticulated theory in which it fails to be equivalent to anti-haecceitism) and so we do not need to consider revised definitions like (2). Maybe there is a non-tendentious definition of "anti-haecceitism" after all.

I am not much bothered by this. I was interested in whether there are non-tendentious definitions of "anti-haecceitism" because I think that the use of possible-worlds talk has confused the debate over haecceitism. And I said that the (supposed) fact that there are no non-tendentious definitions was the source of this confusion. But the confusion can be explained without making such a strong claim. It is enough that the definitions of "anti-haecceitism" using possible-worlds talk that have been advanced are not equivalent to anti-haecceitism in the theories of possible worlds that have been taken seriously (counterpart theory's problems with actuality have only recently come to light). That much is certainly true.[6]

References

Fara, Delia Graff (2009). "Dear Haecceitism." *Erkenntnis* 70: 285–297.

---

[4]Or: keep talk of truth at a possible world but use "Lewis world" for what Lewis called possible worlds and reserve "possible world" for what I here call possibilities.

[5]Lewis [Lewis 1986: 230] himself suggested distinguishing possibilities from possible worlds. I heard about this way of fixing counterpart theory from Robert Stalnaker and Cian Dorr (the fix avoids the objections raised by Fara and by Fara and Williamson), who discuss it (independently) in unpublished work.

[6]Thanks to Agustin Rayo for discussion.

Fara, Michael and Timothy Williamson (2005). "Counterparts and Actuality." *Mind* 114: 1–30.

Lewis, David (1986). *On The Plurality of Worlds*. New York: Blackwell.

Skow, Bradford (2008). "Haecceitism, Anti-Haecceitism and Possible Worlds." *The Philosophical Quarterly* 58: 98–107.

Torza, Alessandro (). "A Characterization of Haecceitism." *Analytic Philosophy* .