

*Identity Through Possible Worlds: Some Questions*

- This paper appeared in *Nous* 1967<sup>1</sup>.
- There are some difficult questions to answer if we consider how an individual in one possible world can be identical with one in another.
- Chisholm assumes possible worlds are in good order – that there is an infinity of them – and also that we have a complete description of this world.
- There is a prima facie conflict between possible worlds and Leibniz’s 1<sup>st</sup> Law (the Indiscernibility of Identicals). Given that possible worlds involve the same individual having different properties, how is this possible given Leibniz’s 1<sup>st</sup> Law, which says that all the properties of identicals are the same?
- The answer is the same as identity across time. Provided Adam’s properties when young do not contradict those of Adam when old, they do not need to be identical (as, of course, they won’t be). The same is true, by analogy, across possible worlds<sup>2</sup>.
- So, how do we know that the same individual in two possible worlds is indeed the same one?
- Chisholm imagines a gradual transformation  $W_1 \rightarrow W_2 \rightarrow \dots W_N$ , whereby one individual gradually takes on all the attributes of another (Adam and Noah gradually swap all their attributes – not just bodies – but we are to imagine that the Noah-look-a-like is Adam, and vice versa, because of the transitivity of identity across each mini-change).
- But, who in  $W_N$  is Adam? The one with the label or the one with the Adamic properties?
- How can we tell the difference between Adam in  $W_1$  and the Noah in  $W_N$ ? They look the same, and are the same if we accept Leibniz’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Law (the Identity of Indiscernibles)<sup>3</sup>.
- Can we answer by invoking essential properties?  $N$  is the set of  $x$ ’s non-essential properties,  $E$  the set of essential properties.  $x$  has  $N$  in some possible worlds, but not- $N$  in others in which it exists.  $x$  has  $E$  in all worlds in which it exists. Moreover,  $E$  is uniquely identifying. If  $y$  has  $E$  in any possible world, then  $y = x$ .
- We are to ignore analytic properties and properties that are only essential “under a certain description”<sup>4</sup>.
- We’re to imagine that “living to 930” and “having an English name ending in ‘m’” are in Adam’s  $N$  rather than  $E$ <sup>5</sup>.
- Chisholm asks why we should believe in essential properties, and what might they be<sup>6</sup>? Somewhere in the transition from  $W_1$  to  $W_N$ , Adam has lost his  $E$ <sup>7</sup>. We can’t find what are his essential properties, or even if he has any.

<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, on the first page of the first ever issue! Set this in its context. Does Kripke formally respond to this paper?

<sup>2</sup> I’m not convinced by this. We have “time-slices” of an individual, none of which are identical. However, the individual is the sum of these slices. This is why we can have two individuals sharing the same space (in the case of splitting individuals, such as the ship of Theseus). However, what is an individual across possible worlds? If would involve him being the logical sum of all the possible forms he might take (so all individuals would be identical and there would just be The One?).

<sup>3</sup> The situation seems vaguely like the 1<sup>st</sup>- versus 3<sup>rd</sup>-person perspective in Williams’s “The Self and the Future”. Does the transitivity of identity lead to Sorites-type problems, similar to the ship of Theseus again?

<sup>4</sup> Presumably, where we have names as disguised definite descriptions with the property in question.

<sup>5</sup> Chisholm says the opposite, but this seems to be a typo.

<sup>6</sup> What about sortal properties? However, what’s really wrong with the counterfactual “If Adam had been a gerbil, Cane would not have killed Abel”.

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- Example of knowing who robbed the bank. To know who, we need more than to know enough information to characterise the robber uniquely<sup>8</sup>.
- Chisholm alleges that the police will never know who robbed the bank<sup>9</sup>.
- Chisholm dislikes the move from:  
 $\Box (x) (x = x) \rightarrow (x) \Box (x = x)$   
to  
 $(x)(y) (x = y \rightarrow \Box x = y)$ <sup>10</sup>.
- Chisholm claims that this leads to the conclusion that every entity exists in every possible world<sup>11</sup>.
- Chisholm says we can deny both the *de dicto* “necessarily the evening star is identical with the evening star” and the *de re*<sup>12</sup> “the evening star is necessarily identical with the evening star”, but then seems to reaffirm something similar<sup>13</sup>.
- Chisholm gives an example. He thinks its consistent to say both (1) “it’s possible that something exists having the attributes of the Christian God” and (2) “nothing which does exist is such that it’s possible that *that* thing has the attributes of the Christian God”<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Because E is uniquely identifying, and Noah in  $W_N$  has all the properties of Adam in  $W_1$ , and Adam  $\neq$  Noah, E must be null (or else we have a contradiction).

<sup>8</sup> This passage on p. 7 seems obscure to me. It also seems to be a sceptical question, and invokes the KK principle that Nozick rejects.

<sup>9</sup> The person (the teller) who saw the thief doesn’t know who he is, and the police who know the suspect don’t know he’s the thief. If the teller is to pick him up on the ID parade, he needs to know his essential properties. Maybe we just don’t know (in any strong epistemic sense, but OK for practical purposes).

<sup>10</sup> But, this is just what Kripke argues for in the Preface of *Naming & Necessity*.

<sup>11</sup> But does it? If  $x \in W_1$  and  $y \in W_2$ , and  $x = y$ , then  $\Box (x = x)$ , but if  $y \notin W_2$  this doesn’t follow. There seems to be a difference between  $x \neq x$  and  $\neg(x = x)$ .

<sup>12</sup> Need to look up the *de re* / *de dicto* distinction yet again!

<sup>13</sup> Need to unpack his final paragraph.

<sup>14</sup> Two objections. Firstly, how do we know what exists, so how can we evaluate (2)? Secondly, Is there equivocation between tenses or modal operators between (1) and (2) – “might” versus “does”?