The thesis of existentialism holds that if a proposition $p$ exists and predicates something of an object $a$, then in any world where $a$ does not exist, $p$ does not exist either. If “possibly, $p$” entails “in some possible world, the proposition that $p$ exists and is true,” then existentialism is prima facie incompatible with the truth of claims like “possibly, the Eiffel Tower does not exist.” In order to avoid this claim, a distinction between two kinds of world-indexed truth and two associated kinds of modality is needed. This paper embodies an attempt to develop a full account of just such a distinction.

1. PRELIMINARIES

My aim in this paper is very simple: to give an account of how a proposition could be true at (or of) a world without existing in that world. Following Alvin Plantinga (1974, p. 46; cf. van Inwagen, 1986, p. 190), I take it that, if $p$ is a proposition and $W$ a possible world, $p$ is true in $W$ if and only if, were $W$ actual, $p$ would be true, and ’$a$ exists in $W$’ means that, if $W$ were actual, $a$ would exist.\(^1\) Furthermore, I accept the thesis that, necessarily,\(^2\) a proposition $p$ is true only if it exists. From this it follows quite naturally that a proposition $p$ is true in a possible world $W$ if and only if, were $W$ actual, $p$ would exist and be true; hence, if $p$ is true in a possible world $W$, $p$ exists in that world.

This is of particular concern to those who hold the thesis of existentialism:

If a proposition $p$ exists and predicates something of an object $a$, then in any possible world $W$, if $a$ does not exist in $W$, then $p$ also does not exist in $W$.\(^3\)

(By ’$a$ does not exist in $W$’ I mean that it is not the case that $a$ exists in $W$.) Another way of stating this thesis is that there cannot be propositions which refer to (or are intuitively
“about”) things that do not exist (Adams, 1981, p. 7). Since some objects exist only contingently, it follows that some propositions – specifically, the ones “about” these objects – also exist only contingently. While there is good motivation for this position (Adams, 1981, pp. 3–6; Fine, 1985, pp. 155–160), it runs up against problems rather quickly. For surely

(1) Possibly, the Eiffel Tower does not exist.

Yet, on the standard interpretation of possibility claims,

(2) Possibly, p iff, for some possible world W, p is true in W.

By our above considerations, (2) entails

(3) Possibly, p iff for some possible world W, were W actual, p would exist and be true.

Finally, (1) and (3) imply

(4) For some possible world W, were W actual, the proposition “the Eiffel Tower does not exist” would exist and be true.5

However, if the proposition is true in W, then presumably the Eiffel Tower does not exist in W. Thus, were W actual, a proposition p “about” an object a would exist, but a would not – a flat contradiction of existentialism.

Call the above argument the “possibility argument,” since it trades on our commitment to certain intuitively obvious possibility claims. Kit Fine (1985) attempts to circumvent the possibility argument with the following distinction:

One should distinguish between two notions of truth for propositions, the inner and the outer. According to the outer notion, a proposition is true in a possible world regardless of whether it exists in that world; according to the inner notion, a proposition is true in a possible world only if it exists in that world. We may put the distinction in terms of perspective. According to the outer notion, we can stand outside a world and compare the proposition with what goes on in the world in order to ascertain whether it is true. But according to the inner notion, we must first enter with the proposition into the world before ascertaining its truth. (1985, p. 163)

If Fine is correct, the existentialist need not fear the possibility argument. By distinguishing between two kinds of world-