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Language Games and Possible Worlds



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Kent Olson

*MLitt, Ph.D. Philosophy of Science,
University of Aberdeen, Scotland*

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ABSTRACT

Our time is a time of wonder. With personal quantum computers right around the corner, we do not know what the future holds. Hugh Everett's many worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics directs our attention to what is possible and impossible. Since the time of Thales of Miletus, the ancient Greeks have asked what there *is*. Contemporary philosophers now ask, 'what is *possible*?' In this paper, we will see why David Lewis' concretist view of a plurality of possible worlds is flawed. The counterpart theory in which an individual entity persists over worlds does not survive debates about haecism. Lewis believes talk of possible worlds will be a philosopher's paradise, and claims modal realism is fruitful. However, it eschews in problems that outweigh its utility. Talk of possible can be reduced to linguistic analysis on the level of Wittgenstein or Austin. "Necessary" and like terms can be broken down via an analysis along the lines of ordinary language. Although quantifying over possible worlds may be a powerful technique for solving e.g. the problem of counterfactual conditional sentences, we do not have to make any ontological claims about them. Worries about the status of entities we cannot epistemically access should be replaced by the notion they are merely logical tools.

I. INTRODUCTION

According to the possible worlds thesis, every way that a world could possibly be is a way that some world is. Michael Loux writes on the necessary and possible that:

Philosophers came to believe that if we take seriously the framework of possible worlds and make it part of our overall ontological theory, we have the resources for dealing with a whole host of difficult philosophical problems. That philosophers were willing to endorse a realist interpretation of possible worlds may initially strike one as puzzling. (Loux, 2017: 158)

Quantizing over sets of possible worlds has explanatory power. The most noteworthy benefit Lewis highlights is that they allow us to cash out counterfactual conditional sentences, e.g. ‘had the glass fallen, it would have shattered’. Gottfried Leibniz coined the turn of phrase ‘out of all possible worlds’ with his pronouncement that we live in the best of these. (Amsterdam, 1710) What a succinct and expeditious way in which to describe a phenomenon! This has not gone unnoticed by logicians. Lewis writes:

As the realm of sets is for mathematicians, so logical space is a paradise for philosophers. We have only to believe in the vast realm of possibilia, and there we find what we need to advance our endeavors. We find the wherewithal to reduce the diversity of notions we must accept as primitive, and thereby to improve the unity and economy of the theory that is our professional concern—total theory, the whole of what we take to be true. What price is paradise? If we want the theoretical benefits that talk of possibilia brings, the most straightforward way we gain honest title to them is to accept such talk as the literal truth. It is my view that the price is right, if less spectacularly so than in the mathematical parallel. The benefits are worth their ontological cost. Modal realism is fruitful; that give us good reason to believe that it is true. (Lewis, 2004: 333)

This looks to be a persuasive maneuver maintaining that belief in the entities will make things easier. Although philosophers have made much use of possible worlds since the time of Leibniz, they require supplemental argumentation. Modal concepts come into play, and their use of possible worlds stipulates that a contradiction is something that “cannot occur in any possible world”, i.e., such as chordates not being vertebrates. Chordate must have a spine, which

separates them from other beasts; necessarily, if an animal is a chordate, it has a spine. Kripke gives us the example of gold being AU in all possible worlds. (Kripke, 1980) So you will find a-priori truths in all possible worlds, and you will not find contradictions. As Loux points out, “at the core of modal semantics is the idea of a plurality of possible worlds.” (2017) Modal logic relies on the concepts *necessity*, *contingency*, and *possibility*. Possible worlds give us more of a handle on these concepts and how they operate. Possibility is denoted by \diamond , necessity by \square Then possibly P in logical form: $P (\diamond P) = \text{Df. Not necessarily not P written as } (\sim \square \sim P)$.

Despite our agreement that modal logic is internally consistent and has explanatory power, philosophers have argued about the ontic status of possible worlds. Lewis is concretist. Possible worlds are real, but not actual “Actual” is an indexical, like “here” or “now”. (Counterfactuals, 1973). Quine has argued that this view leads to a “bloated ontology”. It violates Occam’s razor. (Quine, 2004) In this paper, I will argue that talk of possible worlds should be seen more in terms of a language game. Possible worlds ought to be reduced to their logical role and instrumental purpose. Once we question the ontic status of these worlds, we start to see that the epistemic baggage alone is too much.



II. Counterparts, Essences, Haecceities

Counterpart theory is an excellent place to start our investigation as to why a view like this will not work. For those of us like Quine who enjoy desert landscapes, concretism about a plurality of possible worlds will never do. There isn’t agreement about how individual entities subsist across worlds amongst modal realists. It is interesting that essence crops up in discussions like these, since they have been around since the time of Plato.

Wyman’s slum of possibles is a breeding ground for disorderly elements. Take, for instance, the possible fat man in that doorway; and again, the possible bald man in that doorway. Are they the same possible man, or two possible men? How do we decide? How many possible thin ones than fat ones? How many of them are alike? Or would their being alike make them one? How many of them are alike? Or would their being alike make them one? Are no two possible things alike? [. . .] These elements are well-nigh incorrigible. By a Fregean therapy of individual concepts, some effort might be made at rehabilitation; but I feel we’d do better simply to clear Wyman’s slum and be done with it” (Quine, 2004: 4).

What picks an object out among other items in a particular world W ? Haecceities are a person's or object's thisness, that which individualizes it. On most accounts of possible worlds, I have both an essence and a counterpart on world W_1 , say. In order for possible worlds to do the descriptive work they are supposed to do, we need to maintain, e.g., that an x exists in a world $\{W_1-W_3\}$ & $\sim\{W_4-W_\infty\}$. It is important to be clear about Lewis' view:

Anti-haecceitism is compatible with haecceitism; but this is not something haecceitists should be upset about [. . .] the debate about whether Lewisian anti-haecceitism is true is an interesting and important one, at least for modal realists. In that debate Lewisian anti-haecceitism is certainly the more attractive position. If facts about which non-qualitative sentences are true according to a possible world did not supervene on the qualitative features of that world (and all other worlds too), then those facts would be deeply mysterious. . . (Skow, 2007:9-10)

The above is only one facet of how involved the possible world debates become. Modal realists need something that picks out a singular entity. A seemingly essentialist view must account for an individual subsisting over possible worlds. On such views, the essential properties of an individual are those that need instantiation. Accidental properties are inessential. Yet, how to cash out this idea of essence? What philosophers are driving at in these debates violates the principle of parsimony. Very broadly, there needs to be an identifier across worlds for this view to hold, and we do not have a description that is both standardized and agreeable. We will come back to this later.

III. Wittgenstein, Ordinary Language, Words

Quine mentioned Fregean therapy in addressing this problem. I think he is on to something, although I intend to approximate the later Wittgenstein's method, primarily. The linguistic turn posed a challenge to Platonic thinking. Empirically unverifiable entities were eschewed in favor of talk about how words are used in sentences. When thinking about possibilities, concrete worlds, and the like, we might tend to think about what it *means* for them to *exist*. Ordinary language philosophers have pointed out this is not the right way to go about it. Particular words are used in various ways. Quine's example was 'Pegasus', which refers to a mythical creature in Greek lore with a horse's body and wings. On Lewis' account there is a concrete world in which Pegasus exists, although not actually in respect to the world you and I inhabit. In respect to whether or not

the mythical creature exists in a possible world, the answer, importantly, is that it isn't 'actual'. (Lewis, 1973) It is held on some accounts one could not even ask in a sensible way without Pegasus existing in some form. This is the Meinongian problem. There needs to be a referent (Russell, 1905). Plato's concerns and those of Russell's 'On Denoting' are revisited in Lewis' account of modal realism.

The price to pay for Lewis' plurality of concrete possible worlds requires abandonment of previous analytical moves in philosophy that were considered putatively sound. The logical positivists admonished that if we cannot empirically verify a claim, or it is not true a-priori, we should commit it to the flames (Ayer, 1947: 54). We aren't given a reason why modal logic requires belief in possible worlds, merely that they are expeditious. The approach I espouse mirrors roughly Austin and the later Wittgenstein.

Wittgenstein argued more or less that the meaning of a word is related to its place in a language game. For Austin the meaning of a word is how it is used in a sentence (Austin, 1961: 23-43). He uses the example of "slab". (Wittgenstein, 1986: 3-9.) Workers can use the word as a verb, or a noun. The following sentences are completely intelligible in the language game we are asked to consider:

- (1) 'Slab me.'
- (2) 'Hand me that Slab.'
- (3) 'Slab.'

Scenarios like these illustrate the flexibility of language. We can imagine workers on a line, passing the slab, one handing it over to another saying 'slab', meaning: 'here you go, this is a slab, grab it.' (3) could be a shorthand for (1) or (2) in this language game. So technically the word could be used as a verb or a noun. One could point and simply say 'slab' as they do, say. 'Pegasus' simply does not seem like it would behave like 'slab' in a sentence. It is a definite description in Russell's sense. (Russell, 1905) The rules will be completely different. Wittgenstein anticipates this. The meaning will alter depending on the game. "Pegasus" on most accounts refers to a mythical creature in Greek lore with a horse's body and wings. On Lewis' account there is a concrete world in which these things exist, although they are not actual. This is

how the concretist responds on whether this mythical creature is real. It had been held in previous philosophies that these questions could not arise in a sensible way without Pegasus existing in some form.¹ My question is whether or not we need to believe that there are an infinite number of possible worlds in order to do some higher-order logic? Importantly, it seems Pegasus both does and does not exist, although he is not superposed. The question of Pegasus' existence can be resolved in the following way.

(4) 'Pegasus is attacking me!?' Imagine the noun here refers to my room-mate Bob. Bob is wearing a costume with wings and a horse's head. It is Halloween, we are hosting a party. He is pretending to choke me because I forgot the napkins. Importantly, Halloween is a magical time. Not only can Bob be Pegasus, but I can be a MD with my stethoscope, my wife the Bride of Frankenstein with her hairdo, my neighbor a clown with the red nose and polka dots. . Instead of a guy wearing a costume with such and such properties, I just call him "Pegasus" as a playful kind of shorthand, here.

(5) 'Pegasus is attacking me!?' Yelled downtown by a derelict on Nicollet Avenue, crouching by a garbage bin. Instead of laughs at a party, he gets an angry look from a police officer. The question here is one of propriety, not of existence. Wittgenstein argues that not all words and not all games behave alike. Some won't have rules. (4) and (5) are the same sentence. Here we did not have to postulate a possible world in which there is a Pegasus. While the truth of (4) wouldn't be denied outright, (5) is the result of some sort of hallucination and is patently false.

Although (4) might not be the most spectacular example, we see that something as particular as 'Pegasus' can have a different connotation depending upon the surroundings in which it is uttered. On the one hand, claiming a Pegasus is attacking me could be tied to madness, and in a different setting, 'Pegasus' could legitimately pick something out among a set of entities at a party. We did not need to violate Occam's razor and posit an entire world which we could not empirically verify. If necessity and possibility can be explained without possible worlds, we are just left with ontological baggage. It might be wiser to stick to ordinary language philosophies in order to clarify meaning in such cases.

IV. De Dicto and De Re Objections

The thrust of my argument up until now has relied upon figures such as Frege, Russell, Plato, Meinong, Ayer, Austin and Wittgenstein. However, my reliance on the discussions of these particular individuals has a challenge to face. In support of the Platonic thinking of essences and the like, it may be objected that I am not thinking in terms of *de re*, which is really the issue when finding something e.g, that could support counterfactual conditional sentences. Quine, Alvin Plantinga and the like have made concentrated efforts to draw our attention to the distinction between *de re* and *de dicto*: cat is on the mat, versus “the cat is on the mat” is true (respectively). Lewis treats *de re* modal claims using counterpart theory. Haeccetism and essentialism have arisen in respect to *de re* modality. Our analysis of words and sentence, language use in general, is directed toward the *de dicto* side of the dichotomy.

My first problem with heccities is that counterparts can undergo a soritical reduction that seems to render them absurd. Is Hilary Rodham Clinton the same in W_2 if she is missing her head? How about W_3 in which she is composed of grains of sand? Suppose there is a stiff wind? There are countless such scenarios and rather than parse them out, it is better to accept the linguistic turn as well the methods we have of dealing with puzzling entities. Indeed, Lewis can point to the *de dicto/de re* distinction, here. The *de dicto* form of the ‘cat is on the mat’ is a propositional attitude. On this view we are not talking about the thing, the cat, but whether or not it is true. The *de re* analysis requires us to have something about the cat being there. Hence, Lewis’ belief that possible worlds are concrete objects, and how that could expedite thinking. Modal realists’ argumentation about empirically unverifiable entities seems rather exasperating, here. Philosophers of language had the tools to liquidate these types of issues.

V. CONCLUSION

Maintaining possible worlds need to be concrete in order to support counterfactual conditional sentences is putting the cart before the horse. Although possible worlds were invoked to solve problems, if we weigh the pros and cons, the results look bad for concretism. Far from an incredulous stare, we found a soritical reduction can take place in discussions of haecceities, essences, and counterparts. ‘Am I me without my arm?’ —And so on down the line. Rather than debate about this whilst using different terminologies, I urge philosophers to look toward less

troubled waters—to embrace a different approach altogether. There is too much of a resonance here with Plato’s metaphysics.

Our challenge was that Lewis is talking in terms of de re modality. The switch from Frege and Russell onward is geared toward de dicto modality: truth-predicable propositional attitudes. The Wittgensteinian approach that these terms only arise as parts in a game show us that language is flexible and even ‘Pegasus’ can connote different things. ‘The most straightforward way we gain honest title to them is to accept such talk as the literal truth.’ (Lewis, 2004: 333) What is this honest entitlement? We do not have any empirical access, and their existence does not seem a-priori certain. Should philosophers then accept this view? We end up with a brief history lesson. What I see is a tension between Plato’s philosophy of forms and Humean skepticism. If I cannot verify the plurality of possible worlds, and I have no hope of doing so, we have a tall order. Furthermore, they seem unnecessary in our dealings with modal logic. Philosophers can make sense of this kind of terminology without correspondence relations to concrete entities.

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