Metaphysics // Fall 2016

Handout 6

Modality: Lewis

Modal realism. Things could have been different from the way they are. So:

> Obama could have been a sailor (6-1)

is true. But if it is true, then it is not true not because of how our universe is. It is true because of how our universe could have been. But this *means* that it is true because of how another, a merely possible universe, is. So we have:

> Obama could have been sailor if and only if there is a possible world in which Obama is a sailor. (6-2)

But what are those merely possible worlds? The answer depends on how we understand our own actual world. Suppose we understand it as a collection of things unified by a spatiotemporal relation. So to say that some thing is actual is to say that it is somewhere in our space and time. Other possible worlds, then, just are spatiotemporal universes isolated spatiotemporally from our universe. As Lewis says, they are of the same kind as ours. They are like distant galaxies, except that they cannot be reached in principle from within our universe.

Actuality. Some things are actual, other are not. What does this mean? For some, this means that some things exist, other do not. For a modal realist, it means that some things are in *our* spacetime, other are not in our spacetime. Thus the talk about actuality should be relativized to the occasion of utterance. When I say:

> There are no actual unicorns, (6-3)

I say that there are no unicorns in my world. But there is more. When I say:

> There are no unicorns, (6-4)

once again, the quantifier in my statement should be relativized to the actual world—i.e. to the spatiotemporal universe *I* inhabit. The correct rendering of both (6-3) and (6-4) is:

> In the actual world there are no unicorns,

where 'the actual world' designates the world of the speaker. 'Actual' functions in the same way as usual indexicals, such as 'here' and 'now'.

Counterpart theory. If possible worlds are isolated universes, then possible histories of actual individuals cannot contain those very individuals themselves: no individual can be a denizen of more than one world. They must contain counterparts of those individuals. Consider (6-1). For it to be true, there must be a possible world in which an Obama-counterpart Obama* is a sailor. What makes Obama* a counterpart of Obama? Nothing but extreme similarity: his properties match Obama's more than the properties of any other possible individual. Thus, strictly speaking, (6-2) is false. There is no possible world in which Obama is a sailor. In fact there is no possible world distinct from the actual one in which Obama exists: Obama is bound to our actual world. The correct rendering of (6-1) must then be:

> Obama could have been sailor if and only if there is a possible world in which Obama* is a sailor. (6-5)

Advantages of modal realism. The main argument for modal realism is its theoretical simplicity and problems with alternative views.

Reduction of modality. To be possible is just to exist in a possible world. But what is to exist in a possible world? It is just to be part of an isolated universe. That is all there is to possibility.

Question 1. Leibniz said that to be merely possible is to be thought by God. Does this offer a reductive analysis of modality, too?

Problems with alternative views. This advantage becomes clearer if we consider alternatives. You might say that to be possible is to be part of a possible property of the *actual* world. But what makes a property possible one? How to distinguish between actual and merely possible properties? One of the tasks assigned to modal semantics was to explicate the concepts of necessity and possibility. It seems that this alternative fails that task.

Another way of questioning the alternatives is to look at the concept of truth in a world. Consider again the statement (6-5). Modal realism extends the biconditional in this way:

> Obama could have been sailor if and only if there is a possible world in which Obama* is a sailor if and only if there is a spatiotemporal universe w such that Obama* is contained in w and falls under the extension of the predicate 'is tall' in w. (6-6)

This goes some way towards explicating the concept of truth in a world. If, on the other hand, possible worlds are abstract objects, as suggested by Stalnaker, then we are given no clue at all how truth in a world should be interpreted.

OBJECTIONS TO MODAL REALISM. They are many and varied.

The increduluous stare. The existence of those isolated universes discovered by a philosopher is simply incredible. You really think that there is a universe of someone like Obama being a sailor, that this universe in many regards—almost in all of them—is exactly like ours? The force of this objection is unclear, unless we supplement it with other objections, such as Epistemology (below).

Island universes. Aren't there actual universes that satisfy the identity criteria of possible worlds? Then modal realism cannot differentiate between those universes and possible worlds.

The behaviour of modal reality. The modal reality itself is composed of isolated universes. But aren't there laws governing the behaviour of those universes themselves? For example, there is a law that says that you cannot pass from one universe to another. Then there is a law that the universes cannot 'collapse' into each other. What is the status of these laws? They are necessary. Are they then features of modal super-reality? Perhaps modal realism has the capacity to deny that. A different problem though that the facts about modal reality (logical reality, in fact) become facts of physics. That is not how we ought to understand modal reality, one supposes.

Epistemology. Modal realism involves claims about physical objects. But we have canonical epistemic routes for asserting such claims. For example, they should be made from within a physical theory. And definitely not in the seclusion of one's study (a version of this objection is given by Stalnaker). The modal realist might respond: these are canonical routes for discovering truths about *actual* objects. Rejoinder: 'actual' for modal realism should mean 'in our spacetime'. Perhaps our physical theory demands the existence of other spacetimes. Yet can we accept the postulation of physical objects to satisfy one's logical or linguistic theory?

The pragmatic motivation. As we said already, a major argument in defence of modal realism is its simplicity (e.g., in giving us the modal reduction). But simplicity is just one factor. Are other factors for theory acceptance satisfied?

Possibilities. This is an objection against possible worlds analysis in general. We paraphrase 'Possibly P' as 'In a world w, P'. But cannot we deal with incomplete possibilities, rather than complete possible worlds? This seems closer to our actual linguistic practice. In talking about possibilities, we do not fix all the facts, Some statements are assigned no truth value on them. Possibilities can be related to each other by the relation of refinement: a possibility X is more refined than a possibility Y if the truth value of every statement assigned a truth value on Y has the same value on X, and if some statements not assigned a truth value on Y have a truth value on X. It turns out that semantics for such incomplete possibilities can mimic semantics for possible worlds. The theory of possibilities has no ambition of offering a reductive treatment of modality. It does claim, however, that it represents the ordinary modal discourse better than the semantics of possible worlds.

The argument from concern. This is an objection specifically against the counterpart theory (see also Rosen). We paraphrase claims about X's possible history into claims about histories of X's counterparts in another possible world (thus histories actual relative to that world). But: we care about what might have happened—i.e. about our possible histories. We do not care, however, about events in other isolated spacetimes.

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