Issues in Contemporary Metaphysics

Lecture 5: *Ersatz* Modal Realism and Anti-Realism about Possible Worlds

**1. Ersatz Modal Realism**

This is where we *accept* that possible worlds exist, but *don't* identify them with concrete physical things. They want a 'safe and sane' ontology. Moreover, some are worried about there existing things that don't actually exist. So many ersatzers are *actualists* (these are <u>two</u> oft conflated motivations for ersaztism).

So the question is whether the ersatzers/actualists can have the benefits of GMR *without* the radical ontology. Doesn't have to guarantee <u>all</u> the benefits. Remember it's all about the <u>overall</u> weighting of costs and benefits. A few extra costs might be worth a safe and sane ontology.

**2. Worlds as Sets of Propositions**

We could take possible worlds to be sets of propositions. So we have an ontology of objects, propositions and sets. Which sets of propositions? Well, we need *enough* sets (one for every possibility). We also need *not too many* sets (so we don't end up with worlds that represent *impossible* things going on)

Both are problematic. PW are meant to be *complete ways the universe could be*. That once you know what PW you have, no detail is left unexplained. So the set of propositions:

{ <Nikk Effingham is a lecturer>, <You are in a lecture> }

Won't do. As *that* set doesn't tell us, say, what my shoe size is. Some details (indeed, *many* details!) are left unexplained. So there'd be a possible world at which I exist, but it's not true that I'm shoe size 13. Nor is it true that I'm *not* shoe size 13. So it'd be possible that the proposition <Nikk is shoe size 13> is neither true or false – contra the law of bivalence.

So say that the set has to be *maximal* (a set is maximal iff for any proposition P, P is either true or false). But now there are still too *many* sets. Take a massive set that has as members:

< *x* is a circle >, < *x* is a square >

That'd be *inconsistent*. That'd be *impossible*. *x* can't be both a circle and a square! But if that was a possible world, it'd be possible. So say only *maximal and consistent* sets are possible worlds. The other sets are still there, they're just not possible worlds.

So here's the first problem. Maximal and consistent are *modal notions*.

S is consistent iff every member of S *could be true together*.

S is maximal iff any set including S is inconsistent.

Unlike GMR, we can no longer analyse modality *as any attempt to analyse modality in terms of them would be circular.*

Next, we can't identify propositions with sets of possible worlds. If possible worlds are sets of propositions, it'd be *circular* to identify propositions with sets of possible worlds.

More problems: remember *possibilia*? GMR had them – the objects that were parts of the disconnected spacetimes (the other possible worlds) were possibilia. But where are the possibilia here? We've got the worlds, but no possibilia. No possibilia means we can't identify properties with sets of them nor can we take possible world talk at face value! Yet more motivations are denied to us! With this in mind, says Lewis, this ersatz option isn't better than GMR. Go GMR!

**3. Other Alternatives?**

Yes! Possible worlds as states of affairs; or universals; or sets of properties and particulars; or *linguistic* alternatives where possible worlds are sets of sentences; and more! But for each one you must ask whether they do the job, and what benefits they have to offer.

**4. Possible Worlds as *sui generis* ('Magical Ersatzism')**

Don't identify PW with sets of propositions, or sets of sentences, or universals, or whatever. They're just *sui generis* things. Better, says the magician, to have abstract objects in your ontology (which allegedly aren't grossly counterintuitive – especially if you like abstracta) than disconnected spacetimes that intuitively don't

exist. Hell, bung in a load of *sui generis* possibilia to boot. And stipulate that those possibilia stand in 'exists at' relations to the *sui generis* worlds.

But let's pretend that you can just accept the existence of possible worlds and possibilia. And then say nothing about what they're like – they're just extra abstract entities you should believe in. If we identify propositions with sets of them, that won't be circular. Moreover, with possibilia in place we can, again, take possible world talk at face value. And identify properties with sets of possibilia.

However, it looks *highly* unlikely that we could use it to analyse modal notions. But so what? Maybe the cost of analysing modality is worth it. Compared to the cost of all these disconnected spacetimes. Although we do now have all these abstracta…

*Problem one: This isn't a theory*

This says that there are worlds (but doesn't say what they are). There are possibilia (but won't say what they are). Doesn't say anything about how worlds represent possibilities. So, for all that's been said, *GMR could be true given magical ersatzism!* So just saying what's been said is barely a theory.

*Response*

What's important are the negative claims. There are worlds, *and they're <u>not</u> disconnected spacetimes*. There are possibilia *and they're <u>not</u> parts of those spacetimes*. Although, unlike other theories, it doesn't say anything about how worlds represent possibilities. 'According to w, P' is a primitive

*Problem two: Incredulous Stare*

Similarly, one may worry that Lewis' concrete possible worlds are weird. But then aren't these abstract objects weird? So where's the gain?

*Problem Three: Lewis' Master Argument*

Lewis reckons he has a master argument against magical ersatzism. It's to do with the nature of external and internal relations. I leave you to read *On The Plurality of Worlds* if you're interested. There are also responses knocking about in the literature.

**5. 'According to…' operators and fictions**

Anti-realists want to talk about possible worlds. But without believing in them. And there are *many* things we talk about, without believing that they exist. I mean *fictions*. We talk about fictions all the time, without committing the world being the way the fiction says.

- 'Buffy kills vampires'
- 'Gandalf fought the Balrog'
- 'Sherlock Holmes lived at 221B Baker Street'

Concentrate on that last example. In some cases we should say it is false.

*Example:* The confused criminologist.

In that scenario, he is asserting

$\exists x$ ($x$ = Sherlock Holmes & $x$ lived at 221B Baker Street )

That's *false*. But often when I assert 'Sherlock Holmes lived at 221b Baker Street' I speak truly.

*Example*: A pub quiz.

In *those cases* we don't take the surface grammar *literally*. What I say is *elliptical* for:

> *According to the fictional stories of Arthur Conan Doyle:* $\exists x$ ($x$ = Sherlock Holmes & $x$ lived at 221B Baker Street )

And that's true! The 'according to…' bit is an *operator.* Compare the operator $\Diamond$. $\Diamond$ P can be true, without implying P! It's *non-factive*. What comes after it need not be the case. The 'According to' operator is the same.

## 6. Modal Fictionalism

Roughly GMR says that

> Possibly P is true iff ∃ w (w is a disconnected spacetime & it is true of w that P is true )

Roughly MF says that

> Possibly P is true iff according to the fiction of GMR ∃ w (w is a disconnected spacetime & it is true of w that P is true )

But you can believe *that* without believing in disconnected spacetimes! Just as you can believe things about Doyle's stories without believing Sherlock Holmes exists!

*Problem One: Incompleteness*

Fictions don't have to specifically state P for P to be true according to that fiction.

*Example:* Hamlet's kidneys.

Nevertheless, even though many things are true of a fiction which aren't explicitly stated, fictions are routinely *incomplete*.

*Example:* Hamlet's shoe size.

It's true according to Hamlet that he has a shoe size, but not which one. In those cases any assertion about the truth-value is surely false. 'According to the fiction of Hamlet, Hamlet was a size 8' is false. As is 'According to the fiction of Hamlet, Hamlet was not a size 8'.

So fictions are incomplete. So what? Well the *fiction of GMR* could well be incomplete. There are a few things that Lewis' *On the Plurality of Worlds* does not figure out. He thinks there *are* answers, but his book doesn't tell you what they are or how to figure them out. But what goes on at that stage? If the theory of GMR is not explicit whether P is possible or not, what does MF say? Is it possible *and* impossible? Is it neither?

*Problem Two: Primitives*

Some people think 'According to the fiction of GMR' is a nasty, unwanted primitive. We should analyse it away. Problem is, it appears to be a *modal notion*. Recall ersatzism. Their definitions of possible worlds routinely relied upon 'consistency' and 'maximality' which were modal notions. If it turned out to be a modal notion, we'd have failed to analyse modality.

Response One: Give up on analysing modality (call it *timid modal fictionalism*) Problem: If it gives up on analysing modality *what desiderata is it meant to be meeting?* What good is this theory? What *benefits* is it providing?

Response two: Analyse it, but in non-modal terms. Problem: Give it a go!

*Problem three: The Brock-Rosen Problem*

MF says: there isn't an infinite plurality of disconnected spacetimes. Ergo, it can't be necessary either (as what is necessarily the case is the case) But *according to GMR* it is the case that *at every world* there is an infinite plurality of disconnected spacetimes. So MF says it is necessarily true. So, given MF, there actually *is* a plurality of disconnected spacetimes which was what we were meant to be avoiding!

## 7. Modal Agnosticism

Accept the semantics of GMR. So 'Possibly P iff P is true of some spacetime' etc. Accept that the actual world exists (obviously) *Don't* say the other worlds *do not* exist (how would you know?) But *don't* say that they *do* exist. Be an *agnostic* about whether they exist or not: withhold belief about other spacetimes.

The aim is this: we have the semantics of GMR, but remain agnostic about the ontology (thus avoiding the incredulous stare). We then try and see how much of our modal knowledge/beliefs we can rescue. MA works if it rescues nearly all of our modal knowledge/beliefs, and doesn't bring about radical changes (i.e. costs) in what we believe.

*Necessary and Impossible Truths*

Given MA, we can believe all the necessary truths. For instance, '2+2=4' is necessarily true given MA. If this world were the only world, it'd be true at all worlds. So it'd be necessarily true! If there were more worlds, it'd be true at all of them. So it'd be necessarily true! MA then implies that those propositions we previously thought were necessarily true are indeed necessarily true. Similarly, we get all impossibilities. It's impossible that there are spherical cubes. If this is the only world, then as there are none, it is indeed impossible. If there are more worlds, there won't be any there either, so it is indeed impossible. So no matter what, the impossibities are *definitely* impossibilities.

*True contingencies*

We can get certain *contingent* beliefs as well. We know that there are donkeys, so we can conclude that it's *possible* that there are donkeys.

*Certain untrue contingencies*

Counterpart theory will also get us some beliefs. 'I could've been a fisherman' is true iff I have a *counterpart* who is a fisherman. Recall: A counterpart is someone who is sufficiently similar to me. But whilst in GMR this can be grounded by counterparts in other worlds, it can also be grounded by people in *this* world. So some guy who did a philosophy degree and then become a fisherman is sufficiently similar to me to be my counterpart. So a 'this-worldly' counterpart can do the work. And this makes some sense. If I told you a tale about how I came to believe I could've been a fisherman, wouldn't I probably end up talking about people pretty similar to me who did?

*The belief deficit*

We still end up with a belief *deficit.* Agnostics won't be able to guarantee all of our modal beliefs.

Take the belief that 'I could line up 27 donkeys and 74 swans side by side' Folk modal beliefs say that this is possible. For PW semantics, it's true iff there is a world in which 27 donkeys and 74 swans have been lined up side by side. Presumably I've no reason to think this has *actually* taken place. So agnostics must withhold belief about its possibility.

Isn't this revisionary? Imagine I offered you a £1m if you could line up 27 donkeys and 74 swans in a row, gave you a tranq rifle, and sent you off into 'Bill n' Greg's Donkey'n'Swan sanctuary'. Should you bother doing it? YES! In the space of a day you could line up 101 slumbering animals and become a millionaire. Should the agnostic bother? Well, they're *agnostic* over whether it's possible.

And if you didn't think it was possible, why bother trying? Divers' solution is to say that we should accept different grounds for rationality. So don't say 'Only attempt P if you think it's possible' Instead say 'Only attempt P if you don't think it's impossible' And the agnostic can admit *that*. They don't believe it's *impossible* to do it.