

Lecture 11
STALNAKER ON POSSIBLE WORLDS

Reading: Robert Stalnaker (1976), 'Possible Worlds', in M. J. Loux (ed.) (1979), *The Possible and the Actual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), ch. 12.

1. Stalnaker identifies four theses in what he calls Lewis's *extreme realism* about possible worlds:
 - a. All possible worlds exist, even those that are not the actual world. They do not *actually* exist, but they do exist. They are all equally real.
 - b. Other possible worlds are things of the same sort as the actual world. They differ not in kind but only in what goes on at them.
 - c. The adjective 'actual' is an indexical: it refers at any world w to that world w itself (as long as it is used with the same meaning in that world).
 - d. Possible worlds cannot be reduced to something more basic.
2. Stalnaker advocates what he calls a *moderate realism* that accepts (2a), (2c) and (2d), but rejects (2b).
3. Stalnaker agrees with Lewis that there are such things as *ways things might have been*, and is happy to go along with Lewis in calling them 'possible worlds'. But he does *not* think, as Lewis does, that they are the same kinds of thing as the actual world. He believes that there is just *one* world.
4. Stalnaker argues that (2b) is inconsistent with Lewis's claim that 'possible world' is just an innocent terminological substitution for 'ways things might have been'. If possible worlds are ways things might have been, then the actual world ought to be *the way things are*, not "I and all my surroundings", as Lewis describes it. The way things are is a property or state of the world, not the world itself. There is a sense in which the world is the way it is, but only if 'is' is read as the 'is' of predication, and not the 'is' of identity (compare: 'The way the world is is the world').
5. It might be argued that if there are such properties as ways things might have been, then there must be worlds that have those properties. But Stalnaker takes it that properties can exist uninstantiated, so it may be that all these properties (ways things might have been) exist uninstantiated in the actual world – there need be no more worlds than the actual world for all these properties to exist.
6. It might be argued that (2c) entails (2b): according to (2c), from an absolute standpoint there is nothing special about the actual world in virtue of which it is actual – it is no more 'real' than any other possible world, so merely possible worlds are just as real as ours. But Stalnaker points out that just as one can accept that 'I' is an indexical while denying that there are other people (solipsism), and just as one can accept that 'now' is an indexical while denying that there are other times, one can accept that 'actual' is an indexical while denying that there are other worlds. Saying that 'actual' refers to the world in which it is uttered is consistent with saying that there is just one world.
7. But Stalnaker goes further, in claiming that we "must exclude those analogues of our universe from one's ontology" (p. 229). The claim that the actual world alone is real cannot, he thinks, be sensibly denied, because 'the actual world' means the totality of everything there is.
8. Stalnaker accepts (2d) because he takes ways things might have been to be *irreducible* properties.

9. He concludes: “All I have tried to do here is show that there is a coherent thesis about possible worlds which rejects extreme realism, but which takes possible worlds seriously as irreducible entities, a thesis that treats possible worlds as more than a convenient myth or a notational shortcut, but less than universes that resemble our own” (p. 234).