

Lecture 5
THE NATURE OF POSSIBLE WORLDS: LEWIS

Reading: David Lewis (1973), 'Possible Worlds', in M. J. Loux (ed.) (1979), *The Possible and the Actual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), ch. 9.

1. Lewis wants a *reductive account* of modality (necessity and possibility). That is, an account of modality in *non-modal* terms.
2. So he rejects the idea of taking our modal idioms ('It is necessary that' and 'It is possible that') to be *unanalysable* predicates – that is, he says, just a refusal to theorize.
3. He endorses the idea that we use them to quantify over possible worlds: 'It is necessary that *p*' means that in every possible world, *p*; 'It is possible that *p*' means that in some possible world, *p*.
4. If we don't use them to quantify over possible worlds, he asks, then what? Perhaps we use them as metalinguistic predicates: 'It is possible that grass is yellow' means that 'Grass is yellow' is a consistent sentence.

But then, once we say what a consistent sentence is, the account comes out either circular or false:

- a. If we say: one that is possibly true, then the account is circular (remember: Lewis wants a *reductive* account of modality – one that does not employ modal vocabulary).
- b. If we say: one whose negation is not derivable in some specified deductive system, then the account is false. For *any* sound deductive system, there are falsehoods of arithmetic (which are not consistent) whose negation is not derivable in the system (so the account *overgenerates*).
- c. If we say: one that comes out true under some interpretation, then the account is false. Some consistent sentences do not come out true under *any* interpretation (so the account *undergenerates*).
- d. If we say: one that comes out true under some *possible* interpretation (to fix the undergeneration), then the account is circular.

So Lewis takes it that we use them to quantify over possible worlds.

5. He takes it that there *are* such things as possible worlds for us to quantify over. He gives what amounts to this argument (p. 182):

There are many ways things could have been, other than the way they are. Therefore, there are many *possible worlds*, where a possible world is a way things could have been.

6. According to this argument, Lewis takes possible worlds to be *ways things could have been*. What are these things? They cannot be maximally consistent sets of sentences of some language, he claims, because then the account is, again, either circular or false, according to what we say it is for sentences to be consistent. He claims (p. 184) that possible worlds *are the same kind of thing as our world*, "differing not in kind but only in what goes on at them." He appeals to this as another reason for thinking that possible worlds are not sets of sentences: because our world is not a set of sentences!
7. This is one crucial feature of Lewis's account of possible worlds – that they are the **same kind** of thing as our world. There are two more crucial features:
8. **Indexicality**. According to Lewis, the actual world is actual, not because it differs in kind from all the rest, but because it is the world that we inhabit. 'Actual' is an indexical expression, so that 'the actual world' refers to the world in which it is uttered. So when we utter 'the actual world' we refer to our world. When people in another world utter 'the actual world' they refer to *their* world instead (assuming they use 'the actual world' with the same meaning). Their world is not the

actual world, but they use ‘the actual world’ to refer to their world. This is sometimes called the *indexical theory of actuality*.

A helpful analogy: My body is mine, not because it differs in kind from all the rest, but because it is the body that I have. ‘My’ is an indexical expression, so that ‘my body’ refers to the body of the person who utters it. So when I utter ‘my body’ I refer to my body. When you utter ‘my body’ you refer to your body (assuming you use ‘my body’ with the same meaning). Your body is not my body, but you use ‘my body’ to refer to your body.

9. **Counterparts.** Lewis denies that the one individual can be in two distinct worlds, in part because for him worlds are completely spatio-temporally disconnected (and for other reasons that we shall see later). This is contrary to common sense: I might have been different; according to the account that Lewis endorses, this means that in some possible world I *am* different; but if, as Lewis claims, I am in no world other than this world then this is false – there is *no* possible world in which I am different; so, contrary to common sense, it is just *false* that I might have been different.

Lewis wants it to come out *true* that I might have been different, so he adds the following to his account: although I am not in other worlds, I have *counterparts* in other worlds. ‘I might have been different’ means that in some world *my counterpart* (not me) is different. It is my counterparts, not me, that I am concerned about when I worry about how things might turn out, or might have turned out. More about this later.

10. Lewis considers several objections to his account, and gives replies:

11. **Objection:** This first objection is an argument, which can be put in either of the following three ways:

- a. Only our world and all its contents exist, so other worlds and their contents do not exist.
- b. Only our world and all its contents actually exist, so other worlds and their contents do not actually exist.
- c. There is only our world and all its contents, so there are not other worlds and their contents.

Reply: The domain of things that count as *existing*, *actually existing*, or *being* can vary from use to use of ‘exist’, ‘actually exist’, and ‘be’. Example: By uttering ‘There are no dogs’ right now I might mean something that is true or something that is false, depending upon the domain about which I am talking. For the arguments above not to *equivocate*, the domain must be held constant throughout the argument (compare: ‘There are only humans, therefore there are no dogs.’). But when that is done, Lewis agrees with them.

12. **Objection:** The view is far too unparsimonious.

Reply: There are two kinds of parsimony – *qualitative*, and *quantitative*. His account is only *quantitatively* unparsimonious, and he sees no reason to be concerned about that.

13. **Objection:** There are problems that arise trying to individuate individuals in possible worlds, *if* the one individual can be in different possible worlds (we will discuss this in the next two lectures).

Reply: Lewis denies that the one individual can be in different possible worlds.

14. **Objection:** We need to be told more about what other possible worlds are like, before we can believe in such things. How many are there, how can they be different, and how must they be the same?

Reply: Lewis says that since he is a *realist* about possible worlds, he cannot make up the details as he chooses – there are many things about other possible worlds knowledge of which he does not have, and does not know how to get. We must rely on science to learn about what is possible and what is not.