Philosophy 125 — Day 23: Overview

- 2nd Papers/Study Questions Assigned Today (see email + website)
- Handout on “De Re Modality” Posted (covered in detail today)
- Vanessa’s handout on Realism about propositions now posted
- Agenda: Modality Finale
  - Handout on The Problem of De Re Modality
    - The Problem: Reconciling the Indiscernibility of Identicals with the Naive possible world semantics of de re contingency
    - Five Realist Solutions: Some actualist, some possibilist
    - Along the way, some principles and problems of actualism
    - Brief Remarks on two Non-Realist Accounts
    - An Overview/Map of the Various Accounts of De Re Modality
  - Next Topic: Causation

Handout on De Re Modality I: The Problem 2

- The problem is that (II) is inconsistent with (N), if (N) is given a literal reading. To see this, note that on a literal reading of (N), Socrates both has the property \( F \) = having five fingers on his right hand (in the actual world \( w^* \)), and lacks \( F \) (in some other possible world \( w' \neq w^* \)), which violates (II).

- Since everybody accepts (II), the challenge is to provide a non-literal reading of (N) which restores its consistency with (II). There are many ways to do this. Mainly, I will focus on solutions presupposing realist accounts of possible worlds. Among the realists, there are actualists and non-actualists.

- Non-actualists (e.g., David Lewis) believe that there exist non-actual, possible worlds. In particular, Lewis believes that there are many possible worlds that are the very same kind of thing as our own, actual world (i.e., concrete, physical mereological wholes containing flesh and blood people like us).

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Handout on De Re Modality I: The Problem 1

- The fundamental problem of de re modality is to reconcile the following two:
  1. For all \( x \) and \( y \), if \( x = y \), then \( x \) and \( y \) have all the same properties (and \( x \) and \( y \) partake in all the same relations). This is the indiscernibility of identicals (II).
  2. If \( a \) has \( F \) contingently, then (i) \( a \) has \( F \) in the actual world \( w^* \), and (ii) \( a \) lacks \( F \) in some other possible world \( w' \neq w^* \). (ii) is the tricky clause (nobody in this context is worried about providing an account of (i) – we discussed that in chapters 1 and 2). I will focus on the following concrete instance of (ii):

\[ (N) \quad \text{Socrates has 5 fingers on his right hand in the actual world } w^*, \text{ but Socrates does not have 5 fingers on his right hand in some possible world } w' \neq w^*. \]

- I call this statement (N), since it is a naive possible world semantics (PWS) rendering of “Socrates contingently has five fingers on his right hand.”

- Note: there is no such problem in cases of necessary properties. In those cases, the naive PWS account can be read literally, without contradicting (II).

- Actualists believe that there aren’t any non-actual worlds. They see “the actual world” as synonymous with “reality” or “all that is the case”. For them, nothing can exist unless it actually exists (i.e., unless it exists in the actual world \( w^* \)). This pushes them to hold that possible worlds are abstract entities.

- According to actualists, abstract entities actually exist. Presumably, this applies not only to possible worlds, but to universals, numbers, etc. The actual existence of abstract entities is supposed to be preferable to the non-actual existence of Lewis’ possible worlds. Later, we’ll ask why.

- There is another dimension of the problem which is orthogonal to the actualism/non-actualism dimension, and that is the particular/property dimension. In order to restore the consistency of (N) with (II), it seems clear that we must either postulate multiple particulars or multiple properties.

- It is interesting that nobody postulates both multiple particulars and multiple properties. I think this is because we want to get “as close to (N)” as we can, while ensuring consistency with (II). I will examine various possible realist strategies along these lines. We begin with Lewis’ Counterpart Theory.
Handout on De Re Modality II: Lewisian Counterpart Theory

- Lewis is very sensitive to the lurking inconsistency involving (II) and a naive, literal reading of (N). Lewis proposes the following non-literal reading of (N):
  
  (N₁) Socrates has five fingers on his right hand in the actual world w*, but a counterpart Socrates' of Socrates (Socrates' ≠ Socrates) does not have five fingers on his right hand in some non-actual, possible world w'.

- Since Socrates' ≠ Socrates, there's no problem with them having different properties – they're different people. So, Lewis restores consistency with (II).

- Objection: We're talking about Socrates here, right? What do properties of Socrates have to do with properties of Socrates? Answer: it is in virtue of Socrates' lacking F in w' that Socrates is contingently F. Socrates' has nothing to do with Socrates' actual properties – just his de re modal ones.

- Fact: A literal reading of the naive (N) is not an account. If our worry here is just a longing for (N), tough luck. All accounts must give up some aspect of (N). So, we need to look at alternative accounts and see how they compare.

Handout on De Re Modality III: Overlap Theory

- Overlap theory is Lewisian in the sense that it takes possible worlds to be concrete mereological wholes (like our own), which can exist even if they are non-actual. But, Overlap Theory is non-Lewisian in the way it reads (N):
  
  (N₂) Socrates has F in w*, and Socrates lacks a F' in w', where F' ≠ F.

- Since F' ≠ F, there is no problem with one and the same person having F and lacking F' – they are different properties. This restores consistency with (II).

- Objection: We're talking about Socrates being F here, right? What does F' ≠ F have to do with the property F that Socrates actually has? Answer: it is in virtue of Socrates' lacking F' that Socrates is contingently F. F'-ness has nothing to do with Socrates' actual properties – only with his contingent ones.

- Fact: A literal reading of the naive (N) is not an account. If our worry here is just a longing for (N), tough luck. All accounts must give up some aspect of (N). So, we need to look at alternative accounts and see how they compare.

• Ultimately, Lewis owes us some account of the counterpart relation. Usually, this is defined in terms of similarity. Counterparts must be sufficiently similar, but not identical to each other. If Socrates' isn't sufficiently similar to Socrates, then he'll have nothing to do with any of Socrates' properties.

• So, it isn't just any old guy in any old non-actual possible world that is a guide to Socrates' (or anyone else's) modal properties. It's certain special guys in certain special worlds that are salient to the determination of de re properties.

• Lewis is led toward his version of counterpart theory because (i) he wants (II) to come out true, (ii) he wants it to be the very same intrinsic property F that is had by Socrates, and lacked by his counterpart Socrates', and (iii) he wants non-actual, possible worlds to be the same kind of thing as the actual world.

• These three things push Lewis to the view that there is a different, non-actual, flesh and blood person Socrates' who inhabits a non-actual, concrete, physical world w', and who lacks F – the very same property Socrates has in w*. It is in virtue of this flesh and blood counterpart that Socrates has F contingently.

• On Overlap Theory, it is Socrates himself that “lacks F” in the non-actual, possible world w'. But, then, “lacks F” cannot be read literally as lacking one and the same property F that Socrates has in w*, since that would violate (II). So, it must be some other property F' ≠ F that Socrates lacks in world w'.

• The usual story the overlap theorist tells at this point is that there are really no intrinsic properties of particulars. What we think is an intrinsic property of Socrates – that he has five fingers on his right hand – is really a relation he bears to the actual world w*: having five fingers on his right hand in w*.

• In other words, it is really the relational property F-in-w* that Socrates has, and the relational property F-in-w' that he lacks. And, it is in virtue of Socrates lacking F-in-w' that he has F-in-w* contingently. That’s the story.

• More of the story: F-in-w* is just like having F-in-w' – it’s only the location at which F is exemplified that’s different. Worlds are concrete for the overlapper, and people inhabit them. So this “location” talk makes sense.

• But, Overlap Theory has Socrates leading multiple lives in many completely disconnected, concrete possible worlds “simultaneously.” This seems odd.
Handout on De Re Modality IV: Three Ersatz Theories

- The actualist prefers to think of possible worlds as abstract entities. Following Lewis, I will call these abstract entities ersatz worlds. These are not concrete wholes that contain things like us as parts. Rather, they are abstract entities that (somehow!) represent ways the world is or ways the world might be.

- On this view, the actual world w∗ is a complete and total representation of the way things are. Since worlds are complete and total representations of ways things might be, there can be only one actual world, which veridically (i.e., faithfully, accurately, truly) represents all aspects of the world as we know it.

- All other possible worlds w′ ≠ w∗ fail to veridically represent the way the world is (in some respect). That is, they misrepresent w∗ in some way.

- By making possible worlds abstract, the ersatzer remains actualist, since – on their view – abstract entities actually exist (they exist in all possible worlds). Digression: Why favor actually existing things over non-actually existing things? Is it for epistemic reasons? If so, isn’t going abstract cold comfort?

(N3) The actual world w∗ represents Socrates as having F, and some possible world w′ ≠ w∗ misrepresents Socrates as lacking F.

- This is an unsatisfying reading of our original (N). The whole idea behind (N) is that there is some sense in which it is possibly true that “Socrates lacks F”.

- For the counterpart theorist, “Socrates lacks F” is possibly true in that a counterpart of Socrates truly lacks F (in w′); and, for the overlap theorist, “Socrates lacks F” is possibly true in the that Socrates truly lacks F-in-w′.

- But, on this naive ersatz theory, the sense in which “Socrates lacks F” is possibly true is that – according to some abstract misrepresentation of Socrates – Socrates lacks F. Or so the naive ersatzist would have us believe.

- But, this is just a fancy way of saying that Socrates falsely lacks F! It’s hard to see how that could be the reason that “Socrates lacks F” is possibly true.

- Naive ersatzism is analogous to overlap theory, in the sense that it takes the abstract misrepresentation w′ to be a representation of Socrates (not a veridical representation of some “abstract counterpart” of Socrates – see below).

(Na) The actual world w∗ represents Socrates as having F-in-w∗, and a possible world w′ ≠ w∗ represents Socrates as lacking F-in-w′ (F-in-w′ ≠ F-in-w∗).

- This is an unsatisfying reading of our original (Na). The whole idea behind (Na) is that there is some sense in which it is possibly true that “Socrates lacks F-in-w∗”.

- But, here, it can’t be the “location at which Socrates exemplifies F” that differs between F-in-w′ and F-in-w∗. Talk of “location” makes no sense for the ersatzer, since possible worlds are abstract entities – w′ has no location!

- There is a third and final version of ersatzism that is analogous to counterpart theory. I call it C-ersatzism, and it reads (N) in the following non-literal way:

(NC) The actual world w∗ represents Socrates as having F, and some possible world w′ ≠ w∗ represents an ersatz counterpart of Socrates (Socrates’ ersatz counterpart) as lacking (the very same property) F.

- On the one hand, C-ersatzism is like counterpart theory in that (i) it has a counterpart of Socrates being veridically represented by w′ ≠ w∗, and (ii) it has Socrates’ lacking the very same intrinsic property in w′ that Socrates has.

- On the other hand, C-ersatzism differs from counterpart theory in that the counterpart of Socrates is not a flesh and blood human being like Socrates is. This ersatz counterpart is merely a fictional character which (in the “fictional story of his life” w′) lacks the property F that the real person Socrates has.
On this view, it is in virtue of the ersatz counterpart (perhaps a fictional character named “Socrates” in some story – if ersatz worlds represent via linguistic means) in \( w^* \) lacking \( F \) that Socrates contingently has \( F \) in \( w^* \).

It’s hard to see how this ersatz version of counterpart theory is an improvement on the Lewisian, non-actualist counterpart theory. Most ersatzists (e.g., Plantinga) defend a version of O-ersatzism, not C-ersatzism.

Nobody seems to defend Overlap Theory or C-ersatzism, and naive ersatzism seems to be a non-starter (here for logical completeness). The two main contenders in the literature seem to be Lewis’ Counterpart Theory, and Plantinga’s O-ersatzism [is O-ersatzism better than Overlap Theory? Why?].

Both presuppose realism about possible worlds. Their main differences are on: (i) whether anything non-actual exists, and (ii) whether a 2-property or a 2-person reading of \( (N) \) is a better way to restore its consistency with \( (II) \).

The accounts discussed above are realist about possible worlds. I’ll now make a few brief remarks about nominalism concerning possible worlds & modality.

This leads to fictionalized versions of PWS translation schemas. For instance:

- “Necessarily, \( p \)” \( \mapsto \) “According to the fiction of PW, \( p \) is true in all poss. worlds.”
- “Possibly, \( p \)” \( \mapsto \) “According to the fiction of PW, \( p \) is true in some possible world.”

In this way, Rosen can accept everything Lewis’ says about possible worlds (and their applications) as true, but only in the sense that it is true that Sherlock Holmes is a detective or that Santa Claus has a beard, etc.

The stories of possible world theory are literally false, but they are still “true in fiction”. And, if the fictions of possible world theory are useful enough, that alone warrants its use even if we eschew its ontological commitments.

Rosen thinks that in this way he can get all the benefits of the theory’s application, without its ontological commitments. But, modal fictionalism has many problems (see Nolan’s SEP entry). I won’t discuss them here.

Some fictions are better than others. Rosen thinks Lewis’ version of possible world theory is the most useful. But, couldn’t we fictionalize any discourse and remain neutral on its ontological commitments? This is non-Quinean.

Linguistic nominalists about modality would say that there is no such thing as metaphysical modality (i.e., modality in the world) – all modalities are verbal in nature, having to do only with the import and use of linguistic expressions.

John Stuart Mill was an advocate of this view. On his account, claims like “Bachelors are unmarried” are “necessary” only in the sense that they are true simply by virtue of our verbal conventions. And, all “necessities” are like that.

Mill’s linguistic theory and philosophy of language were somewhat primitive. This opened the door to troublesome cases that he could not adequately cope with. Modern linguistic modal nominalists (e.g., van Fraassen) developed more sophisticated versions of the theory that are not so easily refuted.

Modal fictionalists (e.g., Rosen) take Lewis’ theory of possible worlds as a fictional story about “worlds just like ours”. Rosen takes Lewis’ theory and prefixes it with a fiction operator (“According to the fiction of possible worlds . . . ”). This allows us to talk about PW as if it were true, without commitment.

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