Metaphysics of Modality Lecture 3: Abstract Modal Realism/Actualism
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1. Introduction

(P) ◊p is true iff there is some world w such that p is true at w
□p is true iff for any world w, p is true at w

• (P) not to be taken at face-value like Lewis
• Possible worlds exist but they are not concrete: they are abstract and actual representations of various ways our world might have been:
• There is only one world (unrestricted quantifier): the actual world alone is concrete
• Abstract possible worlds represent possibilities as sentences (Carnap 1947, Sider 2002), or propositions (Adams, 1974) or states of affairs (Plantinga, 1976) or properties (Stalnaker, 1976)
• Each possible world represents the actual world to be a certain way, but as things are, they misrepresent the actual world: just one abstract world is actualised (it represents correctly).

2. Analysis of modal truths

• Truth at a world for Lewis was truth of a world: a possible world w represents that a swan could be pink by it really being the case that a swan is pink in that world w
• For Abstractionism, there’s a difference between truth of and truth according to a possible world:
• Consider the works of Harry Potter
- It’s true of this book series that it contains 7 books, it’s made of paper, and it weighs 4kg.
- It’s true according to this series that there exists a character called Hermione Granger and that she’s a very intelligent witch
The books do not need to contain such a character for these things to be true according to the books

3.1. Linguistic Abstractionism (LA)

• Possible worlds are constructed out of language: sets of sentences which describe the ways the world could be (a ‘world-making language’)
• Not any set of sentences will do: it must be a maximal consistent set
• Truth-at-a-world is defined via set inclusion: a sentence s meaning p is true at a world w iff s is member of w:
  Possibility: truth at (inclusion in) some world w
  Necessity: truth at (inclusion in) every world w
• Possibilia are complete descriptions of parts of an abstract possible world

3.2. LA Evaluation

✓ Ontology: we don’t have to believe in concrete philosophizing cats to realise their possibility

? Epistemology: the world-making language consists of sets that are abstract
✓ Mathematics analogy

× Explanatory power/Fidelity to modal opinion:
  • In the world-making language everything must have a name and nothing may have 2 names
  ✓ Lagadonian language
  × What about describing possibilities about things that don’t actually exist?
  ✓ Qualitative descriptions
  × But what about describing alien properties?
**Ideology:** Modality is taken as a primitive: to distinguish consistent sentences to form a possible world is a *modal distinction*

- Define consistency without appealing to modality (syntactic surrogate)
- Falsifies the facts of modality
- Add non-logical axioms
- Still uses modality to distinguish axioms: if $p$ is a necessary truth then $p$ is an axiom

### 4.1. States-of-affairs Abstractionism (Plantinga)

- Possible worlds are possible states of affairs (they can obtain/do not obtain but still exist)
- Not any will do: must be maximal: A state of affairs $S$ is maximal iff for every state of affairs $S^*$, $S$ includes $S^*$ or $S$ precludes $S^*$
- A possible world is a state of affairs $S$ such that, for every state of affairs $S^*$, $S$ includes or precludes $S^*$, and $S$ is obtainable
- The actual world is one of the possible worlds, but it’s the only one that obtains
- Possibilia: for an individual $x$ to exist in a possible world $w$ means that if $w$ had been actual, $x$ would have existed – the abstract “individual essence” of $x$ exists at $w$, but isn’t exemplified.

### 4.2. Plantinga Evaluation

**Ontology:** Like LA, we don’t have to believe in concrete philosophizing cats to realise their possibility

- Non-obtaining states of affairs may be controversial entities
- Essences of things that don’t exist: How to understand the property of being-identical-to-$a$ where $a$ does not actually exist?

**Epistemology:** non-obtaining states of affairs and individual essences are abstract.

- Mathematics analogy
- Individual essences are difficult to believe in or understand

**Explanatory power/fidelity to modal opinion:** Plantinga struggles to deal with ordinary modal truths such as modalised comparatives (how can essences have colours?) and counterfactuals (we need a notion of ‘closeness’, but it’s unclear what kinds of intrinsic properties states of affairs have)

**Ideology:** Plantinga doesn’t offer a reductive analysis of modality: recall his definition of a possible world: *obtainability*, *inclusion*, and *preclusion*.

- Plantinga admits that he begins with notions of possibility and actuality for states of affairs, and that he therefore cannot go on to *explain* possibility as inclusion in some possible world (1976: 258).

**Reading list**

- Plantinga, Alvin, (1974) *The Nature of Necessity* (OUP) Ch. 4