

Metaphysics of Modality Lecture 4: Modal Fictionalism

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1. Introduction

(P) $\Diamond p$ is true iff there is some world w such that p is true at w
 $\Box p$ is true iff for any world w , p is true at w

- (P) not taken literally but as a *façon de parler* involving no commitment to worlds of any sort
- (a) **Treat modal claims as analogous to fictional claims**
- (b) Claim that the quantifier over worlds isn't the familiar existential quantifier but something more exotic
- (c) Claim that modal utterances contain no quantifier over worlds at all
- Take all the benefits of possible worlds without the ontological costs

2. Fictionalism¹

- Possible worlds discourse is to be taken akin to a game of believe
- Theories committed to the existence of possible worlds (concrete or abstract) are strictly false
- Sentences about possible worlds containing pink swans which *look* like straightforward existential generalisations should instead be understood like:
 - (3) There's a brilliant detective at 221b Baker Street
- (3) is strictly false, but it can be understood as being elliptical for:
 - (3*) *According to the Holmes stories* there's a brilliant detective at 221b Baker Street
- (3*) is true. So (3)/(3*) can be uttered without commitment to believing that such a detective exists: quantification within the scope of a fiction operator is not existentially committing
- Treat quantification over worlds as quantification within the scope of a (silent) fiction operator
 - (4) *According to the fiction F*, there's a world containing a pink swan
- (4) is true
- Take an account of possible worlds, PW, which analyses modal claims as: (modal) p iff (non-modal paraphrase of p) p^*
- Modal fictionalism takes PW as their modal fiction: (modal) p iff according to PW, p^*
Eg: (5) Swans could be pink iff according to the fiction of possible worlds PW, there is some possible world at which there are pink swans
- One can utter in one breath "There's a world where pink swans exist, but I don't really believe in possible worlds" without contradiction.

3. Which fiction?

- Rosen (1990) proposes Lewis's concrete modal realism (CR) as the fictionalist's fiction:
(modal) p iff according to CR, p^*

(6) There might've been pink swans [true]

(CR) There's a possible world containing pink swans [false] ✘

(Fictionalist) According to CR, there's a possible world containing pink swans [true] ✓

(7) If swans were pink, then ducks would talk [false]

¹ This position does not normally amount to fictionalism about the *claims of possibility and necessity* ("It's possible that there be pink swans") but about *claims about possible worlds* ("There's a possible world in which there are pink swans").

- (CR) In each world that differs from ours as little as the pinkness of swans permits, ducks talk [vacuously true] ✗
 (Fictionalist) According to CR, in each world that differs from ours as little as the pinkness of swans permits, ducks talk [false] ✓

4. Evaluation

✓ **Epistemology:** since the modal facts for the fictionalist just are reporting on what the concrete realist says, they can just *mention* what the concrete realist has to say about how we come to know about possible worlds (principle of recombination and a dash of imagination) without facing the problems.

✗ Fictions are abstract objects – faces same problem as the Abstractionist

✓ Mathematics analogy

✗ **Fidelity to modal opinion:** *the problem of concern* (adapted Kripke-Humphrey objection: how can Cameron feel regret that in someone's theory, someone resembling him didn't help cause Brexit?)

✓ Fiction is important – you must care!

✗ **Explanatory power:** *the incompleteness problem* – there are some modal claims that the fictionalist cannot explain or acceptably analyse:

(8) There might have been **K** non-overlapping physical objects

(8CR) There's a world containing **K** non-overlapping physical objects (determinate but unknown truth-value)

(8F) According to CR, there's a world containing **K** non-overlapping physical objects

- (8F) is either false or truth-valueless
- Causes problems for the fictionalist's fiction operator

✗ **Ideology:** the fictionalist's fiction operator is a modal notion

✓ Take the fiction operator as a primitive, not to be further analysed in modal or non-modal terms

✗ This is an unsatisfying and unclear primitive (doesn't feel primitive and departs from paradigm fiction operators)

✓ Endorse *timid* fictionalism: a theory that merely links the modal facts with facts about the modal fiction but is not a theory of possibility *per se*: embrace the biconditional analysis without regarding it as an *analysis*

✗ Doesn't address the issue of offering a theory of modality!

? **Ontology:** we don't have to believe in concrete or abstract philosophizing cats to realise their possibility

✗ Theory is committed to stories and theories

✓ We already believe in these entities so we're not inflating our ontology

✗ Threat from Abstractionism

Reading list

- Armstrong, D. M., (1989) *A Combinatorial Theory of Possibility*, CUP
 Divers, John, (1999) 'A Modal Fictionalist Result' *Noûs* 33, 317–346.
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 Yablo, Stephen, (1996) 'How In the World?' *Philosophical Topics* 24, 255–286