**Metaphysics of Modality** Lecture 4: Modal Fictionalism  
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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 taken literally but as a façon de parler involving no commitment to worlds of any sort
- **Treat modal claims as analogous to fictional claims**
- Claim that the quantifier over worlds isn’t the familiar existential quantifier but something more exotic
- Claim that modal utterances contain no quantifier over worlds at all
- Take all the benefits of possible worlds without the ontological costs

2. **Fictionalism**

- 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]

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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**