

Background

Actualism: Everything that there is, is actual.
Everything that exists actually exists.

Possibilism: Of all the things that there are, some of them are non-actual, i.e. merely possible.
Of everything that exists, some things do not actually exist, but are mere possible objects.

One might put this in terms of the existential quantifier:

The actualist thinks that the unrestricted existential quantifier ranges over only actual things.

The possibilist thinks that the term “actual” acts to restrict the unrestricted existential quantifier.

A tricky case for the actualist:

“There could have been more things than there actually are”.

Possibilism/actualism is a different distinction to some others in the neighbourhood:

Modalism: modal operators provide the fundamental means of expressing modal facts.

Anti-modalism: modal operators are to be analysed into quantifiers over possible worlds.

For example, an anti-modalist can be either actualist or possibilist depending on whether they take possible worlds to be irreducibly non-actual (Lewis) or ersatz actual entities (e.g. actual abstract objects).

1. Introduction

“Are there, in addition to the various actual objects that make up the world, various possible objects?”

A question about *what there is*.

What are we to make of discourse about seeming possible objects?

- (1) The discourse is unintelligible.
- (2) The discourse is intelligible but non-factual.
- (3) The discourse is factual but reducible to discourse involving no reference to possibilia.
- (4) The discourse is both factual and irreducible.

(1) offends against our robust sense of what is intelligible.

(2) offends against our robust sense of what is factual.

(4) offends against our robust sense of reality.

Fine will focus on the prospects for option (3).

2. Problems with Proxy Reduction

The first kind of reduction strategy to be considered is *proxy reduction*; reduction of possible objects to some alternative more acceptable entities.

“With each possible x is associated another entity x' , acceptable to the actualist, and any statement $\phi(a, b, \dots)$ about the possibles a, b, \dots is then understood in terms of a corresponding statement $\phi'(a', b', \dots)$ about the associated entities a', b', \dots ”

What is the relationship between a possible object and its surrogate?

- (1) Identity?
- (2) “Identification” with a distinct object?

(1) Identity:

"We have a domain of entities that is characterized in problematic terms. It is then shown how each entity from this domain is identical to an entity from a domain that is characterized in relatively unproblematic terms; and doubts about the entities, *qua* members of the problematic domain, are thereby laid to rest."

Problem: the purported possible object and its proxy have different properties, and thus cannot be identical. E.g. if a possible person is identified with a property, the possible person is possibly a person, but no property is possibly a person. Likewise for world-properties and possible worlds; a property is not possibly a world.

Response: this seems a little unfair the notion of "ways things might have been" and "ways things are". No need to call them worlds; just ways. No one thinks that an essential property could be a person, but that there could have been a person with that property. Although this does look like we leave strict identity behind then.

(2) Relation to distinct entities.

All about indiscernibility: We cannot distinguish between intuitively distinct possible worlds/objects/properties in an actualistically acceptable manner.

Four kinds of cases:

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|---------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| (1) Inworld-indiscernible possible individuals. | the possible messiahs |
| (2) Interworld-indiscernible possible individuals. | particles α and β , worlds w_1 and w_2 |
| (3) Inworld-indiscernible possible kinds/properties. | symmetric roles: +ve and -ve matter |
| (4) Interworld-indiscernible possible kinds/properties. | kind = role |

Responses:

- (1) Dispute the putative possibilities.
- (2) Deny that they involve genuine actualist indiscernibilities.

(1): we still want to explain the discourse, free from substantive metaphysical assumptions.
(2): necessarily existent haecceities. But should the actualist accept the existence of such properties and kinds just in virtue of the possibility of these properties and kinds. This is to fall back into the possibilist trap.

Response:

- (a) *What is the correct balance between discourse and metaphysical assumptions? I want to give a neutral account of what is said by and what is committing in modal discourse. But I may find the notion of merely possible objects so abhorrent that I take any account of the discourse which draws on them to be immediately incorrect.*
- (b) *What do we think about non-actually-instantiated properties and kinds? To what extent can considerations concerning individuals be carried over? Is it a mistake to bring individual-like thinking to things of a very different nature?*

3. The Possibility of Proxy Reduction

Proxy reductions need not be unique, but a story about application of a given scheme of representation, "co-ordination", must be told. Fine accordingly sketches for us how to build a "realistic proxy pluriverse".

Problems:

- (1) "The resulting reduction is highly inelegant. It requires enormous expressive resources in order to capture a relatively modest extension in expressive power."
- (2) Cardinality problems: There needs to be a one-one correspondence between all the possible individuals and worlds on the one hand, and actual things on the other.
Can we safely assume that in the pluriverse is a world of the same "size" as the pluriverse itself?

The communicating egos:

- (1) There is at least one possible ego.
- (2) Given any possible world containing one or more egos, there is a possible world in which those egos exist and in which, for any subclass of those egos, there is an ego which is in telepathic communication with just those of the given egos that are members of the subclass.
- (3) Given any class of possible egos, there is some possible world in which they all exist.
- (4) There is a possible world (call it Descartes's world) in which all possible egos exist. (*From (3)*).
- (5) Descartes's world contains some egos. (*From (1)*).
- (6) Given any possible world which contains some egos, there is a possible world which contains more egos. (*From (2)*).

(4) and (6) are incompatible.

Response:

Give up one of (1)-(3). Natural choice is (3). But then we have to explain why worlds are limited as to size, and given a size limitation no world, let alone the actual world, could contain as many things as the pluriverse.

Response: How many egos can there be? Take the world which contains a countably infinite number of egos. Does (6), and therefore (2), hold for this world? Could there be one more ego? Compare with asking if there could be more natural numbers? Presumably not. So why not reject (2)?

The main problem seems to be the idea that however many things there could be, there could always be more. It makes it very difficult to understand how many actual things we need. But need there be any limit on how many actual things there are?

Tricky case: "There could have been more things than there actually are."

4. Reduction without Proxies

The second kind of reduction strategy provides a reduction of the discourse without invoking proxies. Classic example: Russell's theory of descriptions.

The view:

The possibilist quantifier "there is a possible object x " is equivalent to an actualist quantifier "possibly there is an object" where this ranges only over actual objects.

Problem case: "There is a possible object that is not actual." \neq
"Possibly there is an (actual) object that is not actual."

Need some kind of back-reference to the actual world:

"The actual world is such that it is possible that there is an object whose non-existence is compatible with that world being actual."

But this looks like the claim is there is an actual object that could have failed to exist. That is a completely different claim to the claim that there is an object that exists that nevertheless is not actual (although it could have been).

The transformation appears to depend upon taking "there is a possible object..." as "there is an object that could have...". Is this something we want to accept? Maybe, but we no longer seem to be taking the discourse neutrally.

"To say that some possible object ϕ s is to say that the actual world is such that it is possible that there is an object whose ϕ ng is compatible with that world being actual."

Minimal assumptions:

- (1) necessarily there is a world
- (2) necessarily, for any world and true propositions, the truth of the proposition is implied by the existence of the world

Problem: how can we quantify over sets of possibles?

- possible sets: can only consist of compossibles
- plural quantification
- *quasi-classes*

5. Fictionalism

Another kind of non-proxy reduction.

Modal Fictionalism: ϕ iff it is true in PW that ϕ^*
Where ϕ is a modal claim, ϕ^* its possibilist possible world translation, and PW the fictional account of possible worlds.

Initial problem: Modal claims whose truth value is not settled by PW. PW is not an exhaustive fiction.

Other problems:

- (1) The notion of what it is to be true in a fiction is problematic.
- (2) How can we specify an adequate fiction PW, which will deliver all the right truth-values, without already presupposing the truth-value of the modal statements in question?
- (3) The account does not adequately represent the *content* of modal statements.

A better version, which saves the modal idioms and only gets rid of the possibles:

Possible worlds semantics is itself the fiction:

It is true in the fiction that (ϕ iff ϕ^*).

The fiction:

- (1) A statement is true iff it is true in the actual world.
- (2) Possibly A is true in a world iff A is true in some world.
- (3) Something ϕ s is true in a world w iff some individual of w ϕ s in w .

Problem: how should we treat claims about the nature of possible worlds? Are they part of the fiction or part of the discourse treated?

- (1) Part of the fiction: then objection regarding the content of claims applies.
- (2) These claims follow from actualist modal truths: makes fictionalist story redundant.

Round-up

- (i) How to understand “ways things might have been” and “haecceities that might have been instantiated”.
- (ii) Balance between giving a neutral account of a discourse and allowing any metaphysical assumptions.
- (iii) What to make of non-actually-instantiated properties and kinds.
- (iv) How many things could there actually be? Could there be more?
- (v) Does Fine’s favoured non-proxy reduction (a) bring metaphysical assumptions to the treatment of possibilist discourse; (b) fall foul of his change of content criticism of fictionalism?