Philosophy at the Pub w/Deke Gould (goulddc@gmail.com)
Rozz-Tox, Rock Island IL
Saturday, ~~26 June 2021~~ 3 July 2021 (rescheduled due to weather)

Possibilities and Properties: An Ontological Conversation

Metaphilosophical Preface:
- a quick statement for why this matters: but stay tuned for a future metaphilosophy pub session!

The Topic and Things to be Explained:
- Some statements are possibly true, others necessarily true. Some are actually true but could have been false. Others are necessarily false. Examples:
  - (a) It is sunny outside, but it could have rained today.
  - (b) It's not impossible for talking cats to exist.
  - (c) Two bao plus two more bao is four bao.
  - (d) If it's raining outside, then it's raining outside.
  - (e) Rozz-Tox is open for business and Rozz-Tox is not open for business.
- Also, some true statements appear to be about things that are not physical, or "concrete":
  - (f) Red is the color of joy.
  - (g) Two is an even number.
  - (h) The sentence 'snow is white' has the same meaning as 'Xuě shì bái de'.
  - (i) The truth of 'snow is white' at this world has nothing to do with the fact that snow is white in some other possible world.

Definitions and Positions:
- concrete modal realism: there exists infinitely many spatiotemporally distinct concrete worlds, the existence of which is the best explanation of modality (truths about possibility and necessity)
  - note: the actual world is not special, but is just one of these infinitely many worlds (the word "actual" functions as an indexical term, referring to the world where uttered, similar to the word "here")
- abstract modal realism: those possible worlds exist, but are abstract objects, collections of information that describe ways the world might have been
  - note: the actual world is special: only one such collection of information accurately describes the actual world, and all of the other collections are "unactualized"
- platonism (with a lower-case 'p'): the view that there are abstract objects that are distinct from mere sets, where abstract objects are understood as non-spatiotemporally located, causally inefficacious entities
  - note: this is decidedly not the same view as Plato's; platonism is not committed to the existence of a distinct realm of "Forms" for big ideas such as Justice or Beauty, nor is it committed to any claim of ontological priority
- nominalism: the view that there are no abstract entities beyond mere sets, but that there are concrete objects

Guiding Questions:

(Q1) When thinking of the truth-values for sentences such as (a) through (e), what metaphysical basis are you most inclined toward? Does either concrete modal realism or abstract modal realism have any pull for you?

(Q2) Likewise, what position do you prefer between platonism or nominalism for sentences (f) through (h)? Or is there some other view that you prefer?

(Q3) Concrete modal realism is understood (by Lewis and others, see McGrath in the suggested readings below) as a conflicting metaphysical theory with platonism, even though they appear to be about different subjects: do you think that accepting concrete modal realism means we should reject platonism? Or should accepting platonism mean that we should reject concrete modal realism?

(Q4) Is sentence (i) above true? If so, does its truth count against the concrete modal realist view of propositional content? (cf. McGrath 1998, p600)

(Q5) Taking into consideration that Lewis admits the "primitiveness" of the similarity relations across worlds, does platonism have an advantage over concrete modal realism in its account of similarity of concrete objects?

Arguments:

I.   An argument for concrete modal realism:
  A. Possible worlds semantics has many benefits for our understanding of modal logic, counterfactual conditionals, dispositions, causation, properties, and propositions.
  B. The best way to account for these benefits is to accept the metaphysical basis for possible worlds semantics as literally true in the sense that they are spatiotemporally distinct concrete worlds.
  C. Therefore, we should believe that there are possible worlds that are exactly like this one only spatiotemporally distinct.

II. An argument for abstract modal realism (challenge Argument I, Premise B):
  A. (granted from Arg. I) Possible worlds semantics has many benefits for our understanding of modal logic, counterfactual conditionals, dispositions, causation, properties, and propositions.
  B. It is possible to have all of these benefits while accepting that possible worlds exist as collections of information, not as literal spatiotemporally distinct concrete worlds.
  C. Therefore, it is not true that the best way to account for these benefits is by acceptance of the metaphysical basis for possible worlds semantics as literally true in the sense that they are spatiotemporally distinct concrete worlds.
  D. Therefore, we should believe that there are possible worlds that are abstract objects, one of which is "actualized" by this concrete world, the rest of which are "unactualized".

III. An argument for platonism over against concrete modal realism (challenge Argument I, Premise A):

    A. If concrete modal realism is true, then we should understand propositions as sets of worlds (truth is analyzed roughly as follows: proposition p is true at world w iff w is a member of the p-worlds).

    B. If we should understand propositions as sets of worlds, then (s) the truth of 'snow is white' in the actual world is explained by its membership in the set of 'snow is white' - worlds.

    C. If (s) is true, then (t) the explanation of the truth of 'snow is white' does not have to do with facts specific to this world, but includes facts about other worlds that have nothing to do with this one.

    D. However, (t) is false: the explanation that 'snow is white' is true at this world should not include reference to those other worlds.

    E. So, concrete modal realism is not true. (cf. McGrath 1998, p600)

IV. Another argument for platonism over against concrete modal realism (also challenge Argument I, Premise A) :

    A. If concrete modal realism is true, then similarity relations (between worlds for evaluating counterfactuals, and between individuals for properties) is interest-relative and cannot be analyzed (primitive for the theory).

    B. If platonism is true, then similarity relations can be analyzed.

    C. If platonism can offer an analysis of similarity relations while concrete modal realism cannot, then if platonism doesn't have any additional costs outweighed by the benefits of concrete modal realism, then platonism is preferable.

    D. It is not the case that platonism has additional costs outweighed by the benefits of concrete modal realism.

    E. Thus, platonism is preferable over concrete modal realism.[1]

Suggested Reading (in order of priority):

- Lewis, David. (1986) *On The Plurality of Worlds*. Blackwell. ISBN: 978-0631224266.
  - This is the masterpiece of metaphysics that defends the concrete modal realist view, and it serves as the driving force for my concerns about modality lately. As Lewis remarks, the most common reaction he receives to the view is the "incredulous stare", but as he notes, the incredulous stare is not a counterargument. The writing is accessible and the challenge he presents is exciting and widely regarded by most specialists in analytic metaphysics as profound. I cannot recommend this book more highly.
- Menzel, Christopher. (2017) "Possible Worlds." *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2017/entries/possible-worlds/>.
  - The SEP simply cannot be beat as a free, peer-reviewed resource on the scholarly background for just about any topic in philosophy. This entry nicely connects the dots between the general metaphysical issues and the more technical reasons for taking modal realism seriously.
- Hall, Ned, Brian Rabern, and Wolfgang Schwarz, "David Lewis's Metaphysics", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), forthcoming URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2021/entries/lewis-metaphysics/>.
  - another great SEP entry, updated 24 June 2021.
- McGrath, Matthew. (1998) "The concrete modal realist challenge to platonism." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*. 76: 4, 587-610. DOI: 10.1080/00048409812348691.
  - The direction for today's philosophy pub session is highly influenced by this paper, which overlaps quite considerably with my own, distinct research interests. The discussion questions today have much to do with some key points that McGrath focuses on here, although I want to take a slightly different angle on the conflict between these two views.
- Lewis, David. (1973) *Counterfactuals*. Blackwell. ISBN: 978-0631224259.
  - The earlier, much more technical work where Lewis lays the ground for his semantics of counterfactual (subjunctive) conditionals. There are some minor but notable differences between this and *Plurality*, though there was a slightly different focus here.
- Divers, John. (2002) *Possible Worlds*. Routledge. ISBN: 978-0415155564.
  - One of the most comprehensive surveys of the topic of possible worlds, widely respected for its careful treatment of the many competing views in the metaphysics and epistemology of modality.
- Williamson, Timothy. (2015) *Modal Logic as Metaphysics*. Oxford UP. ISBN: 978-0198709435.
  - More on the technical side, this recent book is written by one of the world's top living analytic philosophers and has many intersections with the topic for today's philosophy pub session.