



On the Plurality of Worlds

David Kellogg Lewis

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This book is a defense of modal realism; the thesis that our world is but one of a plurality of worlds, and that the individuals that inhabit our world are only a few out of all the inhabitants of all the worlds. Lewis argues that the philosophical utility of modal realism is a good reason for believing that it is true.

On the Plurality of Worlds Details

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From Reader Review On the Plurality of Worlds for online ebook

Guillaume says

A must read for epistemology and metaphysics fans, the most intricate and interesting book Lewis ever wrote.

Chris says

David Lewis is an excellent metaphysician-logician, and not only that, but he holds the paradigm skill of an analytic philosopher. And, for that reason, I think the thesis in his book is largely engineered: his modal realism is like Berkeley's phenomenal idealism (in that they are both not correct, but hard to pin-point the fallacy)- it is definitely not correct, but since the authors of the theses are so clever, it is difficult to detect the fallacy in there arguments...

Martin says

David Lewis FTW

Erik Cameron says

This book is great! This and Kripke's *Naming and Necessity* are two perfect introductions to analytic philosophy. Lewis can seem completely unhinged at first glance, until you get worked into his frame of mind. It's an excellent read for anyone curious about possibility and necessity.

laura says

against all odds, i am extremely fond of this book. modal realism doesn't really do any of the work that i care most about doing, or resolve any of the questions that i care most about resolving, but i'll give this to david lewis, he seems to have done a great job of resolving the questions that HE cares most about, and with a combination of systematicity and whimsy unsurpassed in contemporary philosophy.

if your intuitions about modality, like mine, are deflationary, david lewis isn't going to change your mind. he can't justify our pre-philosophical intuition that things could have been different than they are, and he is explicit in his belief that it's not the proper role of philosophy to so justify. he's not out to justify modality, he's out to systematize it, work out a proper semantics for it, and he does an impressive job.

bertrand russell famously said that "the point of philosophy is to start with something so simple as not to seem worth stating, and to end with something so paradoxical that no one will believe it", and that's what lewis does-- fully spin out all of the zany implications of our modal talk, which is interesting no matter what your personal intuitions are. it's just good philosophy.

Phill Melton says

Insightful, brilliantly argued, and a salient warning on the dangers of following common sense principles to their logical conclusions. On Tuesdays, I agree with Lewis; every other day, I'm with everyone else in thinking him batshit insane. Lewis is a perfect model of modern philosophical writing, managing to be clear even in the most complicated of passages—which, seeing as this is a work of analytic metaphysics, are frequent. Modal realism may be crazy, but, as this book makes clear, there are good reasons for biting the bullet and disregarding the incredulous looks.

Steven says

David Lewis was crazy. Crazy like a fox, maybe, but crazy. Completely brilliant, though. He gets 9.5/10 Berkeleys on the "This argument has an insane conclusion but I can't find the flaw in the reasoning" scale.

Peter Mcloughlin says

This book by Lewis defends what is called modal realism. The idea that every logically consistent world that could possibly exist really does. Lewis does not claim to be an absolute authority on the truth of this extraordinary claim but defends it and tries to make it plausible. I came away agnostic on the proposition but it is mindblowing to entertain.

Wm Pope says

Dense going. I had to make a set of logic diagrams to keep the relations clear.

Arthur Kyriazis says

one of the most important books on philosophy ever written.

it has been enormously influential in both the academic and popular sphere. the entire notion of ontological parsimony has gone completely out the window in both academia and popular culture, to wit, the Matrix, Fringe, and the re-launch of Star Trek along a different path of time, e.g. a different possible world.

the notion of a plurality of possible worlds being ontologically and metaphysically real, and that those worlds should be given dignity, is due completely to Lewis. He struggled against the British analytic school for years.

And yet now, we see clearly what must have been clear from the outset--life presents a plurality of choices, and thus, a plurality of possible worlds.

Jesse Maurais says

When trying to explain this book to friends of mine who are not initiated into the mysteries of philosophy, they very often conflate Lewis' modal realism with some variety of quantum physics. This is, of course, to misconceive Lewis' argument. Because he is in no way making a scientific claim in which we should believe in the "existence" of other possibilities than the actual on the grounds that it best explains observations. Rather, Lewis is suggesting that we should inflate our ontology with possible worlds--which are in every way as concrete as our actual world--merely because it makes other philosophical problems more tractable. In particular we should keep in mind Lewis' other work, Counterfactuals, which I would advise anyone to read first.

We might consider this an argument for parsimony. Modal realism is not without its cost, but Lewis is to argue that the cost is worth it. I'll return to the question of this cost momentarily but I feel there is a need to critique the fitness of this style of argument.

Reading this book, my mind kept going back to a grad course I took in the metaphysics of fundamentality. Though I would only fully realize why in the book's final chapter. The course I took considered the question whether there might be some most fundamental level of reality, beyond which we couldn't decompose matter into any smaller parts. Proponents touted the virtues of this theory: that it was, in some sense, simpler than one which has turtles all the way down. I wouldn't argue that simplicity is a virtue, among others, that theories possess. And despite the fact that this course was metaphysics from a post-positivist perspective, my own pre-theoretical biases kept reminding me why I tend to dislike metaphysics.

My chief problem with fundamentality, as well as with modal realism, is that whatever virtues that a theory may have, it has them just the same when the theory is true as when it is false. There either is or is not a fundamental level to matter; our searching after theoretical virtue does not help us close in on the truth. Similarly there either are or are not possibilities beyond our actual, and the virtues of modal realism, whatever they be, does not help us confirm the truth of the matter; modal realism has those theoretical virtues even if the theory is false.

You may freely disagree about the uses of virtue. Perhaps you have your own pre-theoretical beliefs about what qualities the truth should have. Perhaps the truth should be beautiful? Perhaps you are more pragmatic and expect the truth to be useful? Or perhaps you think that I'm missing the point; I should follow the course of Lewis' argument and not worry about whether we can confirm the existence of other possible worlds. I would maybe even take your advice if I were not so concerned with the unity of philosophy and science both together and within themselves. This would bring me back to the cost issues I had earlier postponed.

Do we really get modal realism at a bargain price? Lewis takes linguistic ersatzism to be the chief rival of modal realism. I was taught it by the name "canonical model" in my studies in modal logic, where worlds are maximally consistent sets of propositions. Lewis attributes to it 3 problems that he says his modal realism evades: 1) Some descriptions [of worlds] are inconsistent, so we need resources to distinguish the consistent ones; whereas there is no such thing as an inconsistent world. 2) We cannot have 2 indiscernible descriptions [of worlds]; whereas maybe there are indiscernible worlds. 3) What can be described is limited by what we have words for; whereas worlds can outrun what we have words for.

It seems to me that we can knock down 2 and 3 right from the beginning. If there are no other worlds than what are described then there are no indiscernible worlds, nor are there worlds to do the outrunning of words. To think otherwise is to judge ersatzism by the presumptive use of modal realism (that there are other worlds

independent of our descriptions). There is no problem here.

A rebuttal of 1 is more complicated because one has to jump to several points in the book. Lewis believes A) that linguistic ersatzism (the canonical model) must but cannot dispel inconsistent worlds without resorting to primitive modal realism, and thus doesn't explain modality. B) His modal realism does not face this problem.

Start with A. The problem with ersatzism, he says, is that we have to explain inconsistency in modal terms. Specifically, he has us saying that it is not *possible* for all the propositions in a set to be true. However, I do not know anyone who worked with satisfiable sets of propositions who were aware that they were really doing modal logic. An assignment of truth values to propositions in a set will sometimes result in a contradiction. We can consider all combinations of truth value assignments and if there is at least one for which no contradiction is found then the set is satisfied and we call it consistent. Now, if Lewis wants to take this for possibility then I say we have defined modality in terms of all truth value assignments to propositions in a set. That is not taking modality as primitive. We certainly did not use modal terms in defining propositions, sets, or truth value assignments.

Now with B. Does modal realism evade responsibility for inconsistent worlds? The only mention of this that I could find while going back through the book (or the index) is very near the beginning. Most of the relevant discussion is found in a footnote. "To tell the alleged truth about the marvellously contradictory things that happen on the mountain is no different from contradicting yourself. But there is no subject matter, however marvellous, about which you can tell the truth by contradicting yourself. Therefore there is no mountain where contradictions are true. An impossible world where contradictions are true would be no better. The alleged truth about its contradictory goings-on would itself be contradictory... If worlds were like stories or story-tellers, there would indeed be room for worlds where contradictions were true. The sad truth about the prevarications of these worlds would not itself be contradictory. But worlds, as I understand them, are not like stories or story-tellers. They are like this world; and this world is no story."

If I am reading Lewis correctly then there are no impossible worlds because worlds are "real" things and real things cannot make contradictions, on his account. Whereas story-tellers like myself may as well admit contradictions because I can speak them. I will give this one to Lewis. If possibilities are "real" in his sense then there are none that manifest contradictions. It makes no difference to me. I do find it strange that I'm left paying the full bill, having to dispel inconsistent worlds, while Lewis eats free because modal realism dispels inconsistency by fiat. But actually I think Lewis is paying the same price for his lunch as I am. Perhaps even more. Why? Because modal realism really does weigh heavily against common sense.

This is what I meant when I alluded earlier to my concerns over the unity of philosophy. We take on the bloated ontology to evade dealing with primitive modality. Is it a deal? My suspicion is that the price works out the same, even if I thought I had to take modality as primitive, which I do not. My unity of philosophy is such that it bears the same weight no matter where weight is placed. Take a bucket of water out of one side of the pool and pour it in another. It amounts to the same. Take the burden off your semantics and put it into your ontology. Are you better off?

Jimmy says

Great book. In it, Lewis argues convincingly and defends modal realism. But no sane person can accept the ontology: infinitely many non-actual concrete possible worlds and individuals! The Lewisian account of modality is too costly to buy wholesale. Look to Kit Fine, not Plantinga, for a more grounded alternative: modal actualism. Nevertheless, this book is required reading for anyone interested in analytic philosophy.

Matthieu says

It's beautiful and rigorous and possibly (quite) wrong. Kripke attacked it because he was unable to grasp its deeper meaning(s) and implication(s)...

TheFIX says

Not for the beginner! But other than that setback, it's proof that he was the finest philosopher of the latter half of the twentieth century.

Greg says

interesting book for imaginative possibilities and associated analysis, i f n o t m o r e ... anything's possible
