

Lecture 4

Modal Fictionalism

1. Review

For the last few weeks, we have looked at different types of **modal realism**—in particular, concrete and abstract realism. These views all agreed that our ontology includes **possible worlds**, though they disagreed as to the nature of these worlds. We also considered different ways of accounting for the truth of *de re* modal claims, given that there are possible worlds.

To round out this set of lectures, we'll look at a view that seeks to capitalise on possible-world *talk* without taking on any commitment to an *ontology* of possible worlds. This is no “ersatz” view of possible worlds, either. On this view—**modal fictionalism**—all claims of the sort ‘there is a world where *p*’ are **false**.

We'll look at Rosen's argument for and version of this position.

2. Truth and Fiction Operators

To understand how fictionalism works, we first need to say something about truths about fictions, as it is on this that modal fictionalism is modelled. Consider a claim like the following:

L: There is a daughter of a Sith Lord who was senator of Alderaan.

Intuitively, *L* is true. But, of course, strictly speaking, the existential claim in this proposition is false. There is no such person and no planet Alderaan of which to be senator. So, strictly speaking, *L* is false. However, one way we can salvage our intuition is to understand *L*, not as a standard existentially quantified claim, but as elliptical for:

L*: According to the Star Wars films, there is a daughter of a Sith Lord who was senator of Alderaan.

In *L**, ‘According to the Star Wars films’ is a **fiction operator** in the scope of which is the proposition *L*. Thus, in *L**, the main operator is *not* the existential quantifier. As such, its truth does not commit us to the existence of Leia Organa in our ontology.

We can understand the fiction operator ‘**according to the fiction F**’ as having truth-conditions such that ‘according to the fiction *F*, *p*’ is true iff *p* is true in *F*. (Note: there is a live question about what truth in fiction amounts to! For the moment, though, we'll assume that there is a viable answer to this question.)

3. Application to Modality

According to Rosen (1990), we should understand propositions about possible worlds the way we understand *L*. Take the following modal claim:

C: There could have been purple cats.

Once again, this seems true. Now, according to concrete realism (CR), *C* means the following:

CR-C: There is some possible world where there are purple cats.

This is an existentially quantified claim. And on CR, there really is such a world; it is a concrete object, spatiotemporally isolated from our world, and on that world, there are purple cats.

Now suppose that it is false that there are any such worlds (as Rosen thinks). In this case, Rosen argues that we should understand *CR-C* as elliptical in just the way that we understood *L* as being so. Except, of course, this time the fiction in question is different. Hence:

CR-C*: According to the Possible Worlds fiction (PW), there is some possible world where there are purple cats.

*CR-C** gives the fictionalist a way out of quantifying over possible worlds. They claim that *CR-C* is false, strictly speaking, and should rather be taken to express a claim about PW (the Possible Worlds fiction). The fictionalist's claim at this point is that *C* is true iff *CR-C** is true. Indeed, in general their position can be stated as follows:

FIC: (i) $\Diamond P$ is true iff according to PW, there is **some** possible world where *P* is true;
(ii) $\Box P$ is true iff according to PW, at **all** possible worlds *P* is true.

In other words, the fictionalist view is parasitic on CR. The idea is that the former can say anything the latter can—it is just that they would say it under the scope of a fiction operator. Thus, they get to make use of the possible world semantics for our modal claims. And all without incurring the “incredulous stare”.

So, what's the catch? Why isn't everyone a modal fictionalist? Let's look at a few potential issues.

4. Irreducible Modality?

One of Lewis' main motivations was to give a *non-modal* account of modality. I.e. to reduce modal claims to something non-modal. Indeed, this motivation informed his objections to several abstract realist views which, he argued, had to invoke some irreducible notion of modality in their accounts. So, if fictionalism is guilty of the same thing—if there is irreducible modality in the fictionalist theory—then anyone sympathetic to Lewis' aims will simply reject fictionalism on these grounds.

Recall that, earlier, we sidestepped questions about what it takes for some *p* to be true in some fiction *F*. Here are a few different ways you might consider cashing this out (Rosen 1990: 344):

p is true in F iff...

- (a) If F were true, then p would be true
- (b) If we suppose F, then p follows
- (c) It is impossible that F is true and p false

The trouble with these, of course, is that they are all expressed in *modal* terms. To cash out truth according to F in these terms would be to make 'according to F' a **modal operator** like the box or diamond. And this would preclude the fictionalist from giving a reductive account of modality.

Rosen argues that, if the fiction operator is indeed modal, then CR is no better off than fictionalism.

Consider a concrete modal realist who takes the fiction operator to be modal. In the case of ordinary fictions (e.g. the Star Wars fiction), the CR theorist would understand a claim like L^* in something like the following terms. They will first identify the content of the Star Wars story with a set of worlds W (according to, among other things, the explicit content of the fiction, the intentions of the story-teller). They will then say of L^* that it is true just in case L is true at all the worlds in W .

This works just fine for ordinary fiction, Rosen argues, because these are (in some sense) representations of how things *might have been*. But a fiction like PW is about "all of modal reality, not just our small corner of it" (345). So let's consider an analogous kind of fiction to PW. One that, by the lights of PW, would indeed be fictional. Rosen titles this *The Lonely World* (TLW):

[it is] a dystopia modelled loosely on certain anti-totalitarian fables of the thirties: in this case, a nightmare vision of the actualist's conception of reality. The reader is invited to imagine or pretend that there is only one world ours and then to contemplate the grim implications. In the story, whatever happens happens necessarily. Nothing is possible but what is actual. Thus, as the author makes quite clear, regret is misplaced [and] deliberation is pointless (345)

Now consider a claim like the following:

D*: According to TLW, deliberation is pointless.

And the corresponding:

D: Deliberation is pointless.

For CR to account for this, they would need to say that D^* is true just in case, at all the worlds in the set that corresponds to the content of TLW, D is true.

But TLW includes the proposition ‘nothing is possible but what is actual’, so the worlds in question must be worlds where that proposition is true. The trouble is, **there is no such world on CR**. As such, the CR theorist must accept that these distinctive fictions about “all of modal reality” don’t work the same way that ordinary fictions do.

As a result, fictionalism and CR are on a par with respect to their respective accounts of fiction operators. Both can account for ordinary fictions: CR in the way just described, and fictionalism in the way described, but within the scope of a fiction operator. And neither can give an account of operators like ‘according to PW’ or ‘according to TLW’.

The initial worry was that fictionalism involved irreducible modality in its account. This response amounts to agreeing with the opponent that the fiction operator is modal in ordinary cases—but arguing that these are not problematic. The response also involves observing that in the case of what you might call ‘modal fictions’ the CR theorist cannot understand fiction operators in modal terms; thus, the fictionalist can also deny that such operators are modal without incurring any disadvantage relative to CR.

5. Which Fiction?

The fictionalist view depends on having a clearly defined fiction according to which we are meant to evaluate modal claims. Rosen proposes that we take Lewis’ CR, as laid out in *On the Plurality of Worlds*, as the relevant fiction. He defines PW as the conjunction of (6a)–(6g) and all of the non-modal, intrinsic facts about our world (333, 335).

- (6a) Reality consists in a plurality of *universes* or ‘worlds’.
- (6b) One of these is what we ordinarily call *the* universe: the largest connected spatiotemporal system of which we are parts.
- (6c) The others are things of roughly the same kind: systems of objects, many of them concrete, connected by a network of external relations like the spatiotemporal distances that connect objects in our universe. (*Pl.*, pp. 2, 74–6)
- (6d) Each universe is isolated from the others; that is, particulars in distinct universes are not spatiotemporally related. (It follows that universes do not overlap; no particular inhabits two universes.) (*Pl.*, p. 78)
- (6e) The totality of universes is closed under a principle of recombination. Roughly: for any collection of objects from any number of universes, there is a single universe containing any number of duplicates of each, provided there is a spacetime large enough to hold them. (*Pl.*, pp. 87–90)¹¹
- (6f) There are no arbitrary limits on the plenitude of universes. (*Pl.*, p. 103)¹²
- (6g) Our universe is not special. That is, there is nothing remarkable about it from the point of view of the system of universes.¹³

The first concern about this position is that it has the air of being ad hoc. Why this fiction over any other? Here, the fictionalist might respond by pointing to Lewis’ objections to other possible worlds theories and argue that these give the fictionalist reason to prefer PW.

A second, perhaps more pressing concern is that it turns out that this fiction is **incomplete**. It is not the case that for every modal proposition p it will tell us whether p or $\neg p$. Now, for CR this is no problem since this can be explained as an *epistemic deficit* on our part. It amounts to our not *knowing* what all of the possible worlds are like. However, for the fictionalist, these gaps pose a more serious threat. Consider a claim that PW does not rule on. In *Plurality*, Lewis maintains that there is some size S that is the *largest* size a spatiotemporal sum (world) could be. (In particular, Lewis puts this in terms of the number of non-overlapping objects, where that number is within the infinite cardinals. You can make sense of the argument without those details though...) But, he does not say what size S is. Now consider some size T that is larger than the size of our world, and the proposition:

Inc: Our world might have been size T .

This is equivalent to the following, on CR:

Inc-CR: There is some world that is size T .

And to the following, on fictionalism:

Inc-F: According to PW, there is some world that is size T .

Now, PW doesn't tell us what size S (the maximum) is. And **Inc-CR** is only true if $T \leq S$. So, PW does not say anything about **Inc-CR**. This, of course, is fine for CR; as we said before, this just means that we don't know how big the biggest world is, and so don't know whether there is a world of size T . But for fictionalism, this raises a serious worry.

Since PW doesn't say anything about **Inc-CR**, **Inc-F** is false. And, given the Law of Excluded Middle (LEM), it follows that **\neg Inc-F** is true.

But notice that the same is true of the negated claims:

\neg Inc: Our world could not have been size T .

\neg Inc-CR: There is no world that is size T .

\neg Inc-F: According to PW, there is no world that is size T .

By parity of reasoning, **\neg Inc-F** is also false. And so by LEM, **Inc-F** is true.

Finally, recall **FIC**—the biconditionals to which the fictionalist was committed:

- FIC:** (i) $\Diamond P$ is true iff according to PW, there is some possible world where P is true;
(ii) $\Box P$ is true iff according to PW, at all possible worlds P is true.

Given these, it follows that: (**Inc** iff **Inc-F**) and (**\neg Inc** iff **\neg Inc-F**). Thus, the fictionalist is committed to:

(\perp) **Inc** and **\neg Inc**.

Here, the fictionalist can deny that LEM holds for truth in fiction. They can argue that, wherever PW does not rule on some p , p is neither true nor false. This is certainly a less damning result. Though it does threaten the truth-functionality of TFL connectives when they are applied to modal propositions.

6. **Humphrey, Again**

Recall the Humphrey Objection to CR. This was roughly the worry that spatiotemporally isolated concrete worlds and their inhabitants are just not the kinds of things that I care about, nor should I. Humphrey, for instance, cares whether *he* could have won—not someone quite like him off at another world.

A similar worry arises for the fictionalist. Indeed, you might even think it is more pressing for the fictionalist. Compare: Humphrey cares whether *he* could have won—not a fictional person that is descriptively similar to him at a fictional world. In part, this can be seen as related to the ‘which fiction?’ question. The fictionalist hasn’t told us anything about what makes this fiction rather than any other relevant to our modal claims. Relatedly, they don’t tell us anything about why modality matters on this picture. Why should I think PW is any more relevant to facts about me than, say, Star Wars?