Lecture 4
Modal Fictionalism

1. **Review**

   Modal Fictionalism → a view that seeks to capitalise on possible-world *talk* without taking on any commitment to an *ontology* of possible worlds.

   On this view all claims of the sort 'there is a world where *p*' are **false**.

2. **Truth and Fiction Operators**

   Consider:

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

   > *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.

3. **Application to Modality**

   Consider:

   > *C*: There could have been purple cats.

According to concrete realism (CR), *C* means:

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

According to the fictionalist, *C* means:

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

General statement of fictionalism:

> **FIC**: (i) ◇P is true iff according to PW, there is **some** possible world where P is true;
>
> (ii) □P is true iff according to PW, at **all** possible worlds P is true.

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.

   What does it take 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.

   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. Here is how they would treat *L**:

(1) 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).
(2) 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). Let's call such a fiction a **modal fiction**.

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 misplace [and] deliberation is pointless (345)

Now consider:

D: Deliberation is pointless.

And the corresponding:

D*: According to TLW, deliberation is pointless.

CR must 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', and **there is no such world on CR**. So CR must accept that modal fictions are not like ordinary fictions.

Thus, the fictionalist can agree with the opponent: the **ordinary fiction** operator is modal.

They can also consistently argue that **modal fiction** operators cannot be modal. Since both CR and fictionalism must commit to this, the commitment incurs no relative disadvantage for fictionalism.

5. **Which Fiction?**
Rosen 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]

Worry 1: Why this fiction?

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.

Worry 2: The fiction is incomplete.

It is not the case that for every modal proposition *p* it will tell us whether *p* or ¬*p*.

For CR this can be explained as an *epistemic deficit* on our part.

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.

PW doesn't tell us what size *S* (the maximum) is. And **Inc-CR** is only true if T ≤ S. So, PW does not say anything about **Inc-CR**.

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

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

> **¬Inc**: Our world could not have been size T.
> **¬Inc-CR**: There is no world that is size T.
> **¬Inc-F**: According to PW, there is no world that is size T.

By parity of reasoning, ¬**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) ◇P is true iff according to PW, there is some possible world where P is true;
> (ii) □P is true iff according to PW, at all possible worlds P is true.

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

> (⊥) **Inc** and **¬Inc**.

6. **Humphrey, Again**

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?