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EVEN MODAL REALISTS SHOULD DO THE BEST THEY CAN

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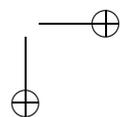
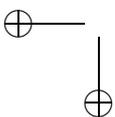
Abstract

There is an argument that David Lewis attributes to Robert Adams, and replies to on pp. 123–128 of ‘The Plurality of Worlds’, to the effect that modal realism is somehow immoral. If you fail to do good it doesn’t matter, since a counterpart in another world will do the good you do not. I shall call this argument simply ‘the moral argument’. I argue that a possible-worlds account of moral statements allows statements of obligation to be true or false in a world in advance of any consideration of what worlds are. I then show that the believer in abstract worlds is no better off.

There is an argument that David Lewis attributes to Robert Adams, and replies to on pp. 123–128 of Lewis 1986, to the effect that modal realism is somehow immoral.¹ If you fail to do good it doesn’t matter, since a counterpart in another world will do the good you do not. I shall call this argument simply ‘the moral argument’. The argument has recently been defended by Mark Heller (Heller 2003) but really it is quite bizarre. A metaphysical and semantic thesis about the nature of modality should not have any moral implications. Whether or not you have a certain obligation is a contingent matter, but whether or not modal realism is true, whatever its status, cannot be *contingent*. Suppose modal realism is true: “It is futile to want the entire system of worlds to satisfy a condition, because it is not contingent what conditions the entire system of worlds does or doesn’t satisfy.” (Lewis 1986, p. 125.) Lewis considers a prudential version of the moral argument: if you don’t get what you desire then a counterpart will. His reply to the prudential argument seems right, that we care about ourselves.² A person who wants

¹ Adams 1974. Adams’s version of the argument consists of little more than a single paragraph, and the relevant sentence (see p. 195 of Loux 1979) is, “What is wrong with actualizing evils, since they will occur in some other possible world anyway, if they don’t occur in this one?”.

² On p. 124 he maintains that what he calls the ‘argument from indifference’ rests on a false premise, which applies equally to moral and prudential versions. It forgets that the kind



to win a lottery knows very well that if they don't then someone else will. What they want is that *they* win the lottery. But this seems a strange thing to say about morality. When discussions about third-world poverty arise one sometimes hears that we are responsible for our own. While this is a common response it is still a *substantive moral response* and there are those who reject it.

I am not at all sure that this really *is* Lewis's response, but to the extent that it is I will show that its apparent egocentrism is unnecessary, and that a possible-worlds account of moral statements allows statements of obligation to be true or false in a world in advance of any consideration of what worlds are — with the consequence that modal realism has no implications for morality. To show this one needs a plausible moral position set out in possible worlds terms. An agent a is situated in a world w at a time t . Should a bring it about that a proposition α is true? Say that $O\alpha$ is true for a at t in w if a should. How do we give a semantics for O ? In the early days of deontic logic the idea was this. Assume a deontic 'accessibility' relation between worlds. Say that w' is *deontically accessible* from w iff it is one of the best worlds open to a at t in w . The semantics for O would then read

- (1) $O\alpha$ is true for a at t in w iff α is true in every w' which is deontically accessible from w (for a at t).

It is easy to see that with this semantics $O\alpha$ can be true or false at a world, and equally easy to see that the semantic plausibility of the analysis does not depend on the comparative ontological status of worlds. A more refined semantics is presented in Feldman 1986. Assume that the possible worlds are ordered on a value scale so that we may say that w_1 is better or worse (or neither) than w_2 . It doesn't matter how we come by such a scale; if we have a notion of value then there should be one. Then

- (2) $O\alpha$ is true for a at t in w iff among the worlds open to a there is one in which α is true which is better than any in which α is false.³

(2) says that you should do something in a world at a time iff among the worlds open to you there is one in which you do it which is better (or at

of want in question "is a want that *I myself* (Lewis's italics) have a certain property." And on p. 127, "Other-worldly evils are neither here nor there. They aren't your evils."

³(2) can be expressed formally in the following way. Say that $w_1 R_{(a,t)} w_2$ iff w_2 is a world open to a at t in w :

- (i) $w_1 \in V(O_{a,t}\alpha)$ iff there is some w_2 such that $w_1 R_{(a,t)} w_2$ and $w_2 \in V(\alpha)$, and for every w_3 such that $w_1 R_{(a,t)} w_3$ and $w_3 \notin V(\alpha)$, w_2 is better than w_3 .

least no worse) than *any* in which you do not do it. In this paper I am not concerned to defend this as the correct analysis of statements of obligation — it is enough that it can be and has been defended — but I’ll take it that if it’s not right then something like it might be, at least for those who espouse a certain version of utilitarianism. Utilitarianism itself may be wrong, but this should not depend on whether modal realism is wrong.⁴ It is I think fairly clear that moral statements have commonsense truth values on this account. Take for instance a case presented in Heller 2003, p. 10:

Righty is drowning. Roz can easily row out and rescue her. No one else can rescue Righty. Roz knows all of this. ... It is obvious what Roz must do. There is no question that Roz would be doing something wrong if she just walked on by. Any metaphysical theory that says otherwise is just plain wrong.

If at least one world in which the child is saved is better than any in which she is not, then, according to (2) Roz has the obligation that Heller assumes.

Although (2) makes use of possible worlds nothing is said about their ontological status, and it is hard to see why it should fail if modal realism is true.⁵ In order to examine the moral argument in more detail it is worth remembering something important about Lewis’s modal realism. It is realism certainly but it is *modal* realism. If it is true then the claim that someone or something does something in another world or that something happened in

See Feldman’s MO on p. 38. Feldman’s principal concern is with conditional obligation. His CMO on p. 87 is a version of the following:

- (ii) $w_1 \in V(O_{a,t}\beta/\alpha)$ iff there is some w_2 such that $w_1 R_{(a,t)} w_2$ and $w_2 \in V(\alpha)$, and $w_2 \in V(\beta)$ and for every w_3 such that $w_1 R_{(a,t)} w_3$ and $w_3 \notin V(\alpha)$ and $w_3 \in V(\beta)$, w_2 is better than w_3 .

You should do something in a world at a time, conditional on something else, iff among the worlds open to you and conditional on that same thing, there is one in which you do it which is better (or at least no worse) than any in which you do not do it. (Then unconditional obligation is obligation conditional on a tautology.)

⁴ Some moral philosophers have indeed questioned whether moral statements have truth conditions at all, but the moral argument cannot accept that, since if it did there would not be a question for modal realism to answer in the first place.

⁵ Feldman on p. 216 takes possible worlds as primitive, but thinks of a world “as being nothing more than the conjunction of all the states of affairs that occur, or are true there.” He assumes that only one is actual, but does not say whether ‘actual’ is an indexical word. But the semantics referred to in note 3 makes no mention of actuality, and the truth-conditions of moral sentences are given independently of what worlds are.

another world amounts to *no more than that that thing is possible*, logically possible⁶ if we are thinking about all possible worlds, and possible in some other sense if we are thinking about worlds accessible (in the relevant sense) from ours. Much discussion of Lewis's modal realism appears to forget that it is *both* a metaphysical doctrine *and* a semantic doctrine. If it is correct then any statement of the form ' α in some world w ', is exactly equivalent to 'it is possible (in some sense of possibility) that α '.

Lewis admittedly presents modal realism in a form which makes it difficult to see as clear a distinction between actuality and possibility as he needs. (See pp. 69–81.) He speaks of other worlds as universes which are spatio-temporally disconnected from ours, and the thought is very tempting that he is making a claim about actuality. But Lewis certainly intends that the claim that something happens in another world is an analysis of possibility. (E.g., 1986, p. 98, where he says that "modal operators *are* (my italics) quantifiers over [possible worlds]").) For that reason his modal realism has to involve claiming that the existence of the disconnected universe is *guaranteed by the modal facts of our world*. On p. 124 he locates a possible source of confusion in the moral argument as "our old enemy, the thought that really the other worlds are just parts of actuality".

The hypothesis of spatio-temporally distinct parts of the actual world realising every possibility claims something to be true in the actual world which would have been false if things had been otherwise. The moral argument has to say that if there were such disconnected portions of reality then our moral obligations *would be different* from what they actually are; i.e. the hypothesis of modal realism would make a difference to the way the world is; i.e. it is a *contingent* hypothesis. Heller for one takes it that whether or not there are such worlds makes a moral difference to our actual obligations, and if so the moral argument must be assuming that these other worlds are

⁶I prefer the phrase 'logical possibility/necessity' to the fashionable term 'metaphysical possibility/necessity'. Metaphysical necessity suggests a God's eye view of all possible worlds, whereby it is just a stronger version of physical necessity. Physical laws tell you what happens in each world, while metaphysical laws tell you what happens in every world, and how many worlds there have to be. But logical necessity is very unlike physical necessity. A physical law makes substantial claims about the way the world is. It says that *all* bodies *everywhere* behave in a certain precisely definable way (either deterministically or probabilistically). It is tempting to think that logical laws make even more general claims. For example that in every world every proposition is 'true if true'. But in fact, just because a logical law is true in every world it makes *no* claim about the way the world is. It is weaker than even the claim that at least one particle did something at least once. The world can be *any way it likes*, and the logical law is still true. (On this issue see p. 202f of Stalnaker 2003.) There is of course a notion of logical truth which applies most properly to a schema. Thus $p \supset p$ is logically true in the sense that it remains true when p is replaced by any proposition whatsoever, whether true or false. (Still, nothing whatever in this paper is changed if you read 'metaphysical' for my 'logical'.)

part of actuality. Heller (p. 7) imagines a situation just like the one described above except that

Roz and Righty are on Earth; Lisa and Lefty are earthlings who, along with other colonizers, have traveled to the earth-like planet Faarov with the assistance of suspended animation. Righty on Earth and Lefty on Faarov are drowning. Roz is the only one who can save Righty and Lisa is the only one who can save Lefty. However, Roz and Lisa are hooked up in the following interesting way.

Prior to the decision to save or not to save the child, Roz and Lisa are in identical brain states and, in case that is not enough, identical mental states. If Roz chooses to save Righty, the first physical manifestation of this choice will be that a particular electron in her brain which is now in an indeterminate spin state will go into the spin-up state. That event will have further physical consequences that will lead to Roz's rescuing Righty. On the other hand, if Roz chooses not to save Righty, the first physical manifestation will be that that same electron will go into the spin-down state, and that in turn will result in Righty's not being saved. Lisa's potential choices have the parallel potential effects; the choice to save Lefty would be effective by way of a process initiated by the electron going into the spin-up state, and the choice not to save Lefty would be effective by way of a process initiated by the electron going into the spin-down state. But the choices of the two agents are not wholly independent. The electron in Roz's brain is paired with the electron in Lisa's in such a way that by nomological necessity they must always be in opposite spin states whenever they are in any determinate spin state. Thus, it is nomologically impossible for both to effectively choose to save the child drowning in front of them and nomologically impossible for both to effectively choose not to save the child in front of them.

In such a case Heller considers that Roz may not have any clear obligation to save Righty. Finally Heller considers modal realism. As he understands it, modal realism postulates a case just like the one he has described. Roz knows that, whatever she chooses, one child will be saved and one will drown. It is definitely wrong to fail to save the child *unless* someone else will save another child who would drown if you fail to save the one you are able to. Unless one is a verificationist the assumption that someone else will always do the good or the bad that you do not does seem to be a factual difference about the world, even a disconnected part of it. At this point I need to make clear that I am not in this paper defending modal realism. All I am trying to do is show that the moral argument fails as a reductio argument against

it. You might argue that modal realism is not a good account of modality because it treats possibility as a kind of actuality, and it may well be difficult to see whether Lewis can make the distinction between disconnected parts of the actual world and other possible worlds.⁷ Matthew McGrath puts the bewilderment like this:

Moreover, and more incredibly, the states of some otherworldly cats — those whose similarity to our cats qualifies them as *counterparts* of our cats — underwrite *de re* possibilities for our cats. A host of questions arise: Why aren't cats that are spatio-temporally unrelated to us and our pets still parts of actuality? What qualifies spatio-temporal relatedness as the worldmate-determining relation? How does the mere existence of a three-legged cat similar, but spatio-temporally unrelated to my cat, ground the *de re* possibility that my cat is three-legged? (McGrath 1998, p. 590)

What the moral argument may do is explain why modality *matters*. Remarks like McGrath's show that there may be a *direct* argument that the metaphysical claims of modal realism are incompatible with its semantic claims. Put these together and you have the result that the truth or falsity of modal realism may indeed have moral implications. But whatever may be the truth about *that* claim, the moral argument cannot be used as a *reductio* argument if it does not incorporate the semantic claim of modal realism in its *reductio* assumption. Obviously, as a contingent hypothesis about actuality modal realism *is* incredible, *is* unlikely, *would* have the moral consequences that the moral argument attributes to it, but, most important of all, *would be neither sufficient nor necessary* to ground the truth of modal statements. In short it would not be modal realism. To labour the point, all that the moral 'argument' could show is that if we *already* know that the metaphysical claim of modal realism is incompatible with its semantic claim then the metaphysical claim might entail morally wrong statements. But then the moral argument does not itself play any role in establishing the substantive result. In fact it *presupposes* the falsity of modal realism to begin with.⁸

⁷ For myself I incline to the view that you can never get a modal notion out unless you put one in. You can think of the world-matedness relation as primitive and argue that its nature is to be *defined* by its claiming no more than does the equivalent modal sentence.

⁸ I might say that I agree with pretty much everything Heller says in his article, with the exception of his claim that the doctrine he is attacking is *modal* realism. Some kind of realism it may be, but, as I show, it cannot be David Lewis's modal realism. The one point in Heller's paper where he appears to acknowledge the difference between disconnected parts of the actual world and other possible worlds is in his discussion of universes in section IV. But he ends that section by claiming that what goes on in a universe which is a part of a pluriverse is

One can offer the propounder of the moral argument a dilemma at this point. Either ' α is true in some world w ' means more than that α is logically possible or it does not. If it means no more then it will be legitimate in any example put forward by the objector to modal realism, to replace ' α is true in some w ' by ' α is logically possible'. If on the other hand it does mean more then modal realism is being claimed to be more than an analysis of modality, and in that case there will have to be propositions which are logically possible but are not true in any world. It may be difficult for Lewis to say just why this cannot be, but that it cannot be has to be a part of his metaphysics, and if it is not then we are not talking about *Lewisian* modal realism, or indeed not about any kind of *modal* realism. And the moral argument is a reductio argument based on the premise that *modal* realism is *true*. Look closely at the argument. It appears to attribute to modal realism the claim:

(3) If I don't do this then someone else will.

But this is not really correct. The reductio premise has to be:

(4) If I don't do this then someone will do it *in another world*.

or rather

(5) If I don't do this then my counterpart will.⁹

Assuming that modal realism is true (5) simply means

(6) If I don't in fact do it I might have done it.

If (6) is true it is reprehensible of you not to save the child, precisely *because* you might have saved it. On the modal realist account it is your counterpart's saving the child which is necessary to give *you* the option. If no counterpart saves the child then you *couldn't have* saved the child, and you couldn't be blamed for failing.¹⁰

just like what goes on in another possible world. The cases are, he says, 'alike in kind' (p. 20). Heller may respond that Lewis cannot make the distinction between disconnected parts of the actual world and other possible worlds, and I have conceded that he may be right about this. But if Lewis cannot distinguish between the possible and the actual the doctrine is doomed from the beginning.

⁹ If we for the moment ignore the possibility of multiple counterparts it matters little whether we speak of my counterpart or of me in another world.

¹⁰ One confusion may be to fail to distinguish between the proposition p and the proposition that p is true in a world w . A world is the totality of everything that happens in it. So if something different were to happen it would be another world. For any proposition p if p is

The world-relativity of actions is easy to miss because Lewis's assumption that things exist in at most one world enables him to treat properties as sets. (See, p. 51) Why is this significant? Well, suppose that things can exist in more than one world. Then a property will be something that a thing can have in one world and fail to have in another. So when we say that if I don't do something in this world I will do it in another world, it is the property of 'doing it in another world' that I have — not the property of doing it. For Lewis it is my counterpart who does it, and since for Lewis properties are not world relative you don't need to add 'in another world'. That is why it is easy to read (4) as (3), and forget that the counterpart does it in another world. It is important to stress that (5) says no more than (6).

Suppose, despite all I have said, you still believe that modal realists must eschew morality. Then let me show you that the believer in abstract worlds is no better off, or *almost* no better off. For it turns out that if the line of reasoning pursued in the moral argument is cogent then actualists must eschew

a set of worlds and w is a world then that $w \in p$ is a set-theoretic, and therefore a necessary fact. The proposition that I do something in w is in fact necessary — if I do do it in w ; or impossible — if I do not do it in w . So it can hardly be *that* proposition that I am wondering whether to bring about. If you ask me whether something is true without qualification then the answer to your question is a proposition. Your question occurs in a world and the proposition is either true or false in that world. If I tell you that it is true and it is then I have spoken truly. If I tell you that it is true and it is not then I have spoken falsely. I have not told you that it is true or false in this or that possible world, even though my telling occurs in a possible world, and in each possible world in which the telling occurs the proposition is true or false according as that world is in the set of worlds which is the proposition. In speaking as he does as though metaphysical propositions were simply ordinary propositions with unrestricted quantifiers Lewis obscures this important difference. It is instructive to consider the parallel with the argument against four-dimensionalism. It is said that a four dimensionalist assumes a static universe in which change is impossible. The reply is that a change from φ to not- φ simply *means* that there is a time t at which something is φ and a later time t' at which it is not φ . Similarly for the modal realist the claim that something is possible simply *means* that it is true in some world. Heller is bothered about the problem of causation between worlds. But perhaps that whole question is based on a category mistake. What does it mean to say that nothing that happens in one world can cause something to happen in another? It might seem tempting to analyse cross-world causation in some such way as:

- (i) p 's occurrence in w_1 causes q 's occurrence in w_2 .

But the proposition that p occurs in w_1 is not a contingent proposition so *that* proposition cannot cause anything. In particular it cannot cause it to be the case that q occurs in w_1 . In fact there may be quite viable instances of a kind of trans-world causation. Consider

- (ii) If it had been possible for p not to have occurred then q would not have occurred.

That p might not have occurred is constituted by the fact that in another world p *did not* occur, so p 's failure to occur in a world w_2 might after all cause something in w_1 .

counterfactual reasoning in morality; i.e. you cannot reason about what your obligations would be if things were different. The basic assumption made by actualists is that while the actual world is special, *all other worlds* are on a par. Suppose actualism is true and all the other worlds are only abstract. Let α be false in the actual (and only concrete) world, and consider a being, a say, in w , one of the non-actual worlds, who has an obligation to bring it about that α . Since α is false in the actual world then *any* w' in which α is true is just the same kind of world as w is, and if a does not bring it about that α , α will occur in some other world which is just as real as w . So, according to the moral argument, a has no more obligation to bring it about that α than to refrain from bringing it about that α . I.e. in any world w *except* the actual world

(7) a should bring it about that α

is false. You might say so what, since a is only an ‘abstract’ agent. Unfortunately facts about a ground modal statements in the actual world. If the context is College Station on 13 November 2002 it is not in fact raining. So, under the hypothesis that all worlds are abstract it would seem that the statement

(8) If it were raining a should bring it about that α

could never be true. One might go even further and assume that abstract beings have no obligations at all.¹¹ If so, the claim that a has no obligations in a rain world would follow from the fact that a is abstract. But now consider the sentence

(9) If it were raining then a would be abstract.

What should be said about (9)? Is it plausible to think that a person is not abstract? In Lewis 1978 Lewis claims that Holmes is a flesh and blood person, on the ground that although one *can* tell stories about abstract entities Conan Doyle wasn’t. If so ‘abstract’ has to be an indexical word like ‘actual’, in that

(10) a is abstract

¹¹ In the version of actualism presented in Plantinga 1976, in non-actual worlds all there are are haecceities. But haecceities are abstract, and so, presumably have no claim on our action.

is always false at a world w provided a is a person in w , and in (9) a has to be a person at w , or else

- (11) If it were raining a would not have been a person

would be true. The only way to save these counterfactuals is to recognise that the inhabitants of another world are just as real or just as concrete from the point of view of their world as we are from ours. One cannot use a phrase like 'abstract' in a sentence like (10) other than as an indexical, *whatever views you hold about the reality of possible worlds*.¹² The moral argument says that the following is true given modal realism:

- (12) Because other worlds are real a has no obligation to do anything.

If 'real' and 'actual' were metaphysical predicates then, given actualism, the following would be true:

- (13) Because no world but the actual world is real a has no obligation to do anything except what a does in the actual world.

You can say if you like that possible worlds are no more than whatever it takes to codify our ordinary judgements about modal and counterfactual reasoning. Lewis believes that other worlds must be just like ours to do this.

¹² Another way of putting the point is to look at the supposition that another world is actual. Consider

- (i) If it had been raining a world in which it is raining would have been concrete.

(i) seems true, but the raining world is *not* actual, and so is not concrete. The question is therefore what it amounts to to say that the world would have been concrete. We may either take 'actual' and 'concrete' to be metaphysical predicates, applying only to the world Plantinga has described as @, or we may take them as indexical. If we take 'concrete' to be a metaphysical predicate then, according to the possible-worlds semantics for counterfactuals, (i) will be true at @ iff the closest rain world to @ is concrete. But since only the actual world is concrete and it is not raining in the actual world then that is enough to make the counterfactual false. To get the right truth conditions for a sentence like (i) we must take it that words like 'actual', 'real' and 'concrete' are indexical terms. This gets the truth conditions of counterfactual sentences like (i) correct but it means that in ordinary discourse one cannot introduce these terms as absolute metaphysical terms, and still get the intuitively correct truth-conditions for ordinary counterfactual sentences. The moral argument, however, assumes that it is legitimate to reason about morality on the basis of the absolute ontological status of other possible worlds.

Others disagree. All I have tried to show is that if a theory of modality succeeds in its *own* terms, there is no extra mileage to be obtained by looking at its moral implications.

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