Possible Worlds

1. What is a Possible World?

Two views:

a. Modal realism (Lewis): A possible world is a whole world that differs from the actual worlds in some respects. It is just as real as the actual world.

b. Ersatzism (Kripke): A possible world is simply a set of counterfactual conditions build on our world conceptually (in our imagination); it does not really exist (or subsist) as a real thing. Possible worlds are stipulated, not discovered.

2. In Favor of Modal Realism

1. We should take sentences at face value unless (i) taking them at face value is known to lead to trouble and (ii) taking them some other way is known not to.

2. Interpreting modal sentences as about other concrete worlds (modal realism) does not lead to trouble.

3. All the other alternatives to modal realism do lead to trouble.

C. Therefore, we should accept modal realism.

Possible objection (1): “Only our world and its contents exist! Therefore, modal realism is false.”

Response: Either the argument tacitly assumes what it purports to prove or it proceeds by equivocation.

Possible objection (2): “Parsimony!”

Response: We must distinguish between two kinds of parsimony: qualitative and quantitative. According to Lewis, qualitative parsimony is good in a philosophical or empirical hypothesis. But there is no presumption in favor of quantitative parsimony. And modal realism is merely quantitatively, not qualitatively, unparsimonious.

Possible objection (3): “Transworld Identity!”

Response: While no other possible world contains Clare herself, there are plenty of other possible worlds that contain people sufficiently similar to Clare to count as ‘counterparts’ of Clare and it is the properties of these counterparts that ground our modal claims.

3. In Favor of Ersatz Worlds

In another possible world, how do we locate Nixon?

Lewis’ modal realism depends on the wrong way looking at what a possible world is. On this picture, one thinks of a possible like a foreign country. But a possible world isn’t like a distant country that we come across, or can view through a telescope. Possible worlds are stipulated, not discovered.