

Notes on *De Re* Modality

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In these notes, I will develop and explain in some detail the fundamental problem of *de re* modality. I will also discuss various attempts to solve the problem (*i.e.*, various accounts of *de re* modality), and some of their virtues and vices. This handout is confined to accounts presupposing *realism* about possible worlds.

The Problem of *De Re* Modality. The fundamental problem of *de re* modality is to explain how the following two claims can both be true simultaneously:

1. For all particulars x and y , if $x = y$, then x and y have all the same properties (and x and y partake in all the same relations). This is just the *indiscernibility of identicals*. I will call this principle (*II*), for short.
2. If particular a has property F *contingently*, then (*i*) a has F in the actual world w^* , and (*ii*) a lacks F in some other possible world $w' \neq w^*$. Specifically, (*ii*) is the tricky clause (nobody in this context is worried about providing an account of (*i*) – we discussed *that* in chapters 1 and 2). To fix ideas, I will talk about the following *concrete instance* of (*ii*):

(*N*) Socrates has five fingers on his right hand in the actual world w^* , but Socrates does not have five fingers on his right hand in some other possible world $w' \neq w^*$. I call this principle (*N*), since it is a naive possible world semantics (PWS) rendering of “Socrates contingently has five fingers on his right hand.”¹

It is not easy to reconcile the indiscernibility of identicals (*II*) and the naive PWS rendering (*N*) of “Socrates contingently has five fingers on his right hand.” In fact, on the face of it, these two seem *inconsistent* with each other. According to (*II*), if Socrates-in- $w^* =$ Socrates-in- w' , then Socrates-in- w^* and Socrates-in- w' must have all the same properties. Thus, since Socrates-in- w^* has five fingers on his right hand, it follows that Socrates-in- w' must also have five fingers on his right hand. But, on a literal reading, (*N*) implies that Socrates-in- w' does *not* have five fingers on his right hand. Thus, on a literal reading, (*N*) is *incompatible* with (*II*). The central problem of *de re* modality is to provide an alternative (non-literal) reading of (*N*) which is consistent with (*II*). Next, I will discuss five alternative accounts of (*N*), each of which restores the consistency of (*N*) with (*II*), and each of which does so in a rather different way.

Account #1: Counterpart Theory. The counterpart theorist provides the following non-literal reading of (*N*), which is consistent with (*II*):

(*N*₁) Socrates has five fingers on his right hand in the actual world w^* , but a *counterpart* Socrates' of Socrates (Socrates' \neq Socrates) does not have five fingers on his right hand in some non-actual, possible world w' .

¹Here, I'm assuming that having five fingers on the right hand is a *contingent* property of Socrates. If you don't think so, just substitute an F that you think *is* contingent.

Since Socrates' \neq Socrates, there is no problem with them having different properties, and there is no conflict with (II). The idea here is that we cannot identify particulars across possible worlds, since particulars in different worlds are bound to have different properties, and – by (II) – such particulars must *not* be *identical* across worlds. The counterpart theorist tells us that it is *in virtue of* Socrates' not having five fingers on his right hand (in w') that *Socrates contingently* has five fingers on his right hand (in w^*). So, it is still *Socrates* that contingently has F . According to the counterpart theorist, this just *means* that some counterpart of Socrates lacks F in some non-actual possible world. Of course, the counterpart theorist (*e.g.*, Lewis) ultimately owes us some account of the *counterpart relation*. Usually, this is defined in terms of *similarity*. Counterparts must be sufficiently similar, but not identical to each other. Lewis, in particular, is pushed toward counterpart theory because (a) he wants (II) to be true, (b) he wants it to be the *very same intrinsic property* F that is had by Socrates, and not had by his counterpart, and (c) he wants non-actual, possible worlds to be *the same kind of thing as* the actual world (*i.e.*, the the kind of thing that flesh and blood people can inhabit). These three things push Lewis to the view that there is a different, non-actual, flesh and blood *person* Socrates' who inhabits a non-actual, concrete, physical world w' , and who lacks F , which is the very same property that Socrates (thereby) has contingently in w^* .

Account #2: Overlap Theory. Let F be the property of having five fingers on the right hand (as we know it here in w^*). Overlap theorists suggest the following non-literal reading of (N) to restore consistency with (II):

(N₂) Socrates has F in w^* , and Socrates lacks a F' in w' , where $F' \neq F$.

Since $F' \neq F$, there is no problem with one and the same person (Socrates) having one of these properties and lacking the other – they are different properties. An overlap theorist who takes possible worlds to be the same kind of thing as the actual world (I will discuss *ersatzers* below) will say that it is *Socrates himself* that “lacks F ” in the non-actual, possible world w' . But, then, “lacks F ” cannot be read literally as lacking *one and the same property* F that Socrates has in w^* , since *that* would lead to a violation of (II). So, it must be some *other* property $F' \neq F$ that Socrates lacks in w' . The usual story the overlap theorist (or kindred *ersatzer* – see below) tells is that there are really *no intrinsic properties* of particulars. What we think is an intrinsic property of Socrates – that he has five fingers on his right hand – is really a *relational* property: *having five fingers on his right hand in w^** . So, it is F -in- w^* that Socrates has, and it is F -in- w' that he lacks. And, it is *in virtue of* Socrates lacking F -in- w' that he has F -in- w^* *contingently*. Presumably, the overlap theorist will owe us some account of “similarity” (or some other relation) between properties in different worlds that would warrant both F -in- w^* and F -in- w' being called F -in- w 's. I take it they will claim that F -in- w^* and F -in- w' are “the same property *exemplified at different locations*.” And, since the overlap theorist thinks of worlds as *concrete*, this talk of “locations” makes some sense. But, the overlap theory has Socrates leading lives in many distinct (causally disconnected), concrete possi-

ble worlds simultaneously. This is what most people find objectionable about Overlap Theory, which is why Overlap Theory has few or no defenders.

Account #3: Ersatzism – Three Kinds. The *ersatzist* rejects the assumption made by both the counterpart theorist and the overlap theorist – that a possible world $w' \neq w^*$ is *the same kind of thing as* the actual world w^* in Lewis’ sense (*i.e.*, a concrete mereological whole of “I and my surroundings”). According to the *ersatzist*, possible worlds are not concrete but *abstract* entities. They are not the kinds of things that flesh and blood people (or concrete objects) can *occupy* or *inhabit*. Rather, possible worlds are abstract entities that (somehow²) *represent complete and total ways the world might be*. On this view, the *actual* world w^* is just a complete and total representation of *the way things are*. And, since worlds are *complete and total* representations of the way things might be, there can be *only one* actual world, which veridically represents all aspects of the world. All other possible worlds fail to veridically represent the way the world *is* (in some respect or other). *Ersatzers* are often motivated by *actualism*, which holds that “the actual world” is synonymous with “the way things are” (or “reality”), so that there can be no non-actual, possible worlds. By making possible worlds *abstract*, the ersatzist can remain an *actualist*, since – on their view – abstract entities *actually exist* (indeed, they exist in *all* possible worlds!). With these things in mind, consider the following *naive ersatzist* non-literal reading of (N), which is consistent with (II):

(N₃) The actual world w^* represents Socrates as having F , and some possible world $w' \neq w^*$ *misrepresents* Socrates as lacking F .

On the *naive ersatzist* reading, w^* accurately represents Socrates having F , and some other possible world w' *misrepresents* Socrates as lacking F . This is an unsatisfying reading of the naive PWS statement about contingency. On the naive view, there is supposed to be some sense in which it is *possibly true* that “Socrates lacks F ”. For the counterpart theorist, “Socrates lacks F ” is possibly true in the sense that *a counterpart of Socrates truly lacks F (in w')*; and, for the overlap theorist, “Socrates lacks F ” is possibly true in the sense that *Socrates truly lacks F -in- w'* . On the *naive ersatz* theory, the sense in which “Socrates lacks F ” is *possibly true* is that – according to some abstract *misrepresentation* of Socrates – Socrates lacks F . Or so the *naive ersatzist* would have us believe. But, isn’t this just a fancy way of saying that Socrates *falsely* lacks F ? It’s hard to see how *that* could be the reason that “Socrates lacks F ” is possibly *true*. *Naive ersatzism* is analogous to overlap theory, in the sense that it takes the abstract *misrepresentation* w' to be a representation *of Socrates* (as opposed to thinking of w' as a *veridical* representation of some “abstract counterpart” of Socrates – see below). But, *naive ersatzism* is importantly *disanalogous* with (and significantly *inferior to*) overlap theory, in that it does not involve a *veridi-*

²It’s unclear *how ersatz* worlds are supposed to effect representations of the way things are (or might be). Perhaps *ersatz* worlds are linguistic entities that represent in the way language does. Or, perhaps they represent with “pictures” or some other sort of representational device. A full account and evaluation of *ersatzism* would, of course, need to spell this out in detail.

cal representation of Socrates, which seems essential to capturing the meaning of (N). Moreover, (N₃) implies that *every* property Socrates (or anyone else) has is contingent! This is because, for any property *F* that Socrates has, there will be misrepresentations of him that say he lacks *F*. This will be true even for properties he has necessarily (like being either human or non-human). So much for naive ersatzism! It's a non-starter. But, I include it here for logical completeness. There is an improved version of *ersatzism* that is more analogous to overlap theory in this sense. I will call this alternative rendition *O-ersatzism*.

The *O-ersatzist* proposes the following second alternative *ersatz* reading of (N):

(N₄) The actual world w^* represents Socrates as having *F*-in- w^* , and a possible world $w' \neq w^*$ represents Socrates as lacking *F*-in- w' (F -in- $w' \neq F$ -in- w^*).

(N₄) is much closer to overlap theory, since it (a) involves a *veridical* representation of Socrates in (by) w' , and (b) it has w' representing Socrates as lacking a *different* property than the property Socrates *actually has*. This is necessary. If w' is going to *veridically* represent Socrates, it cannot represent Socrates as lacking *F* (i.e., *the very same F we know and love in w^**), since that would contradict (II). As such, *O-ersatzism* inherits the main problem we saw in overlap theory: *O-ersatzism* implies that all attributes we call “intrinsic properties” are really *relations* that particulars bear to the various possible worlds. And, as was the case with overlap theory, there will presumably be some kind of “similarity relation” between *F*-in- w^* and *F*-in- w' , which warrants their both being called *F*-in- w 's. But, the *ersatzist* is at a distinct disadvantage here, since he cannot unpack this similarity as “exemplification of *F* at different locations”. For the *ersatzist*, possible worlds are not “places” where “things happen”, they are *abstract entities* that represent things – there are no “locations” in this story. Note: Plantinga defends a version of *O-ersatzism*. The third and final version of *ersatzism* is analogous to counterpart theory. I will call this variety *C-ersatzism*.

The *C-ersatzist* proposes the following third alternative *ersatz* reading of (N):

(N₅) The actual world w^* represents Socrates as having *F*, and some possible world $w' \neq w^*$ represents an *ersatz counterpart of Socrates* (Socrates' \neq Socrates) as lacking (the very same property) *F*.

While *C-ersatzism* is analogous to counterpart theory, it is also a far cry from it. On the one hand, *C-ersatzism* is like counterpart theory in the sense that (a) it has a *counterpart* of Socrates, rather than Socrates himself, being represented by the possible world $w' \neq w^*$, and (b) it has Socrates' lacking *the very same intrinsic property* in w' that Socrates has in w^* . On the other hand, *C-ersatzism* differs from counterpart theory in that the counterpart of Socrates is not a flesh and blood human being like Socrates is. This *ersatz counterpart* is merely a *fictional character* which (in the “fictional story of his life” w') lacks the property *F* that the real person Socrates has. On this view, it is *in virtue of* the fictional character Socrates' in w' lacking *F* that *Socrates contingently* has *F* in w^* . This completes my discussion of *de re* modality. Time limitations prevent me from discussing either non-realist views or views that reject (II).