We’ve explored the value of theorizing about modality in terms of possible worlds (PWs).

\[(P) \quad \text{It is possible that } P \text{ iff there is a world at which } P.\]

Is it possible to adopt talk about PWs without ontological commitment to worlds and possibilia?

**Realism** about a certain kind of thing, such as aesthetic properties, numbers, scientific unobservables, or *possible worlds*, is characterised by the conjunction of three claims:

(i) Sentences of the discourse—e.g. ‘Emily Dickinson’s poetry is beautiful’, or ‘There is a possible world at which talking donkeys exist’—are *truth-evaluable*.

(ii) Such sentences have a semantic structure which, given their truth, *entails the existence of* a given kind of thing—e.g. aesthetic properties or possible worlds.

(iii) At least some such sentences are *true*.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Truth-evaluable?</th>
<th>True?</th>
<th>Modal facts?</th>
<th>Discourse in need of revision?</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fictionalism</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes/No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Instrumentalism</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
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<td>Error theory</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Emotivism</td>
<td>No</td>
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1. **Modal Fictionalism**

‘If you can’t resist writing as if [my] extreme modal realism were true, while believing it isn’t, may I commend Gideon Rosen’s (1990)?’ (David Lewis, quoted in J. Bennett 2003: 155).

According to the standard possible worlds theory of modality (PW), \(P\) holds. If we believe so much as that it’s possible there exist talking donkeys, we must accept there *exists* such a *world*.

The fictionalist strategy is one of paraphrasing away the unwanted ontological commitments of a theory that one accepts is useful, perhaps even indispensable.

While we have good reason to treat \(P\) as true for the purpose of theorizing about possibility and necessity, that’s not to say anything more about *reality* than that we have good reason to treat Bilbo as existing for the purpose of engaging with *The Hobbit*. (This, at least, is the guiding idea.)

You can legitimately say in one breath […] ‘there is a world where blue swans exist’ […] ‘but really, I don’t believe in possible worlds’. The trick is to explain why this is not a plain contradiction (Rosen 1990: 330).
1.1 Fictionalist paraphrasing

The fictionalist proposes that the proper regimentation of \( P \) is:

\[(P^*) \text{ It is possible that } P \text{ iff according to the theory (PW) there is a world at which } P.\]

(1) There is a brilliant detective at 221b Baker Street.
(2) In the Holmes stories, there is a brilliant detective at 221b Baker Street.

Quantification within the scope of a ‘story prefix’ is not ontologically committing.

(3) There could have been talking donkeys.
(4) According to the hypothesis of a plurality of worlds, there is a world \( W \) such that at \( W \) there are talking donkeys.

More generally, let \( P \) be an arbitrary modal proposition. The modal realist will have ready a non-modal paraphrase of \( P \) in the language of possible worlds; call it \( P^* \). [The realist adheres] to the schema \( P \text{ iff } P^* \). The fictionalist’s parasitic proposal is therefore to assert every instance of the schema \( P \text{ iff according to (PW), } P^* \) (Rosen 1990: 332).

Like in (1), the prefix will often be silent. So the fictionalist will often sound just like the realist.

The reason for the fictionalist’s parasitism on reductive realists is the benefit that \( P^* \) will not feature modal notions. If it did, the fictionalist would not be able to analyse all modal notions in terms of possible worlds.

1.2 The fictionalist’s fiction

- Reality consists of a plurality of universes or ‘worlds’
- One of these is ‘the universe’: the one of which we are parts
- The other worlds are the same kind of thing as this one: ours is not special
- Each world is unified by, and isolated from the others by, a network of analogically spatiotemporal relations \(^1\)
- No individual exists (wholly) at more than one world
- There are at least as many worlds as can be formed by recombinations of (duplicates of) individuals from any number of other worlds
- There exists... (Here, the fiction provides an encyclopaedia of the non-modal truths about the intrinsic character of our world, sufficient to entail the unrestricted existence of talking donkeys, blue swans...) (Rosen 1990: 333–5).

\(^1\) Rosen later (1995: 70–2) suggests taking the worldmate relation as a primitive of the fiction, rather than defining it in terms of spatiotemporal relatedness. This permits a (fictionalist) possible worlds analysis of the possibility that there be more than one space-time. Worlds are now maximal systems of worldmates.
Let’s call this fiction \textit{GMR*} in what follows. NB: it is a thoroughly \textit{non-modal} picture of reality.

\textbf{(MF)} \hspace{1em} P \text{ iff according to GMR*, } P^*.

\subsection*{1.3 The fictionalist’s operator}

What is the meaning of ‘According to GMR*…’? Does it mean ‘If GMR* were true…’?

There are two options for the fictionalist: (i) classify the prefix as a modal operator; (ii) take the prefix as primitive and unanalysed.

On (i), the least the fictionalist has accomplished is reduced the variety of modal notions to one, ‘If GMR* were true, then…’.

But if there are modal operators which must be fully explicable without recourse to possible worlds semantics, why not employ the same explication in giving the truth-conditions of (3)?


We cannot even understand the fictionalist’s operator as expressing ‘GMR* says that…’, because \textit{GMR*} simply does not say enough. We would need some notion of entailment.

There is something uncomfortable about taking ‘According to GMR*’ as a thoroughly unanalysable philosophical primitive. \textit{Truth according to x} feels like a notion we should be able to explain.

We know how to understand ‘According to GMR*…’ well in practice. Whether this is enough for a fictionalist account of possible worlds discourse depends on what our theoretical ambitions are.

\subsection*{1.4 Timid fictionalism}

What is the goal of the fictionalist? Need it be a full-fledged theory of \textit{what modality consists in}?

Perhaps all it needs to do is license moves between unanalysed modal idiom like (3) and the idiom of possible worlds like (4), minus the commitment to the genuine modal realist’s ontology.

Because timid fictionalism does not seek an analysis \textit{per se} using (MF), she can claim that modal truth does not depend on the contents of (any particular) fiction. Indeed, the content of the modal fiction appealed to can depend on modal truth. (The opposing view, that modal truth depends on or is explained by the content of some modal fiction, is known as \textit{strong modal fictionalism}.)

NB: timid fictionalism, though less open to objections, is proportionally less interesting—giving up on a \textit{theory} of possibility and necessity.
1.5 The fictionalist’s ontology

...since it is conventional to regard [stories, theories, and other] representations as abstract entities, fictionalism may not appeal to nominalists (Rosen 1990: 338).

But even if the fictionalist cannot avoid commitment to abstract entities entirely, most of us were willing to accept the existence of stories and representations anyway. So there’s no obvious cost.

Still, some (e.g. Nolan 1997) have claimed that it is unclear why the fictionalist’s ontology of abstract representations is any less objectionable than that of linguistic abstractionist theories.

2. Problems for Modal Fictionalism

2.1.1 The Brock-Rosen objection

There is a set of problems for fictionalism first raised independently by Brock (1993) and Rosen (1993), and discussed by Menzies and Pettit (1994), Noonan (1994), and responded to by Rosen (1995). I shall give the gist of the issues. (See Nolan (2016: §3) for a summary of the literature.)

(5) There exist a plurality of worlds.

The fictionalist denies (5), strictly speaking, though she will assent to ‘According to GMR*, there exist a plurality of worlds’.

According to Lewis’ statement, that there exist a plurality of worlds is true at all worlds. So it seems that according to the fiction GMR*, it’s true at every world that there is a plurality of worlds.

This gives us the right side of (N), below. And (N) is merely an instance of the schema (MF)... So the left side of (N) is forced upon the modal fictionalist.

(N) Necessarily, there exist a plurality of worlds iff according to GMR*, it is true at every world that there exist a plurality of worlds.

Using the uncontroversial axiom ‘□p → p’, we can derive the non-modal proposition there exist a plurality of worlds. And modal fictionalism collapses into modal realism.

2.1.2 Response

Noonan’s (1994) recommendation (that taken up by Rosen (1995)) is to use the analyses of modal claims such as (3) proposed in Lewis’ (1968).

(6) Necessarily, there exist a plurality of worlds.

Lewis’ (1968) treatment renders (6) false, and thus (5) necessarily false. For (6) is analysed as
\(\forall x (Wx \rightarrow \exists y \exists z (Wy \& Wz \& Iy \& Iz \& y \neq z))\)

which claims that every world has at least two distinct worlds as parts (violating \((P2)\) (1968: 27)).

2.1.3 The fictionalist’s predicament

The translations offered in Lewis (1968) are not capable of accommodating what we called ‘extraordinary’ modal claims in Lecture 2. That’s why (6) comes out false. But then so does (8),

\[(8) \quad \text{It’s possible that there exist natural properties.}\]

which receives the following translation:

\[(9) \quad \exists x (Wx \& \exists y (lyx \& Ny))\]

No world has (natural) properties as parts, since they are not parts of any single world.

Worse, we can plug this into \((MF)\) to derive falsity of the left side:

\[(MF9) \quad \text{It is possible that there are natural properties iff according to GMR,}\]

\[\exists x (Wx \& \exists y (lyx \& Ny)).\]

How bad is all this?

2.1.4 It gets worse

Hale (1995) argues that the necessary falsity of (5)—and thus of GMR* which entails it—has bad consequences.

It should be a constraint on fictionalism that if GMR* entails \(p\), ‘According to GMR*, \(p’\) is true.

But GMR* is necessarily false... So everything is true ‘according to GMR’!

Fictionalists must therefore reject the standard possible worlds semantics for conditionals. (i) What is their alternative? (ii) If possible worlds are not apt to play this role in the characterisation of entailment, why bother being a fictionalist about them?

2.2 The argument from concern

Recall the ‘Humphrey’ objection to Lewis’ counterpart theory. We not only need to ensure we preserve the truth-values of our modal discourse. We also need to ensure we preserve our concern for modal truths.
An adequate account will preserve the intelligibility of our caring about the modal truth as we do; of our responding emotionally, morally, and practically to our modal thoughts. [...] Just as modal realism strains credulity by identifying facts of vital concern with apparently indifferent facts about distant simulacra, so fictionalism may be thought to strain credulity by identifying these same facts with facts about the content of an arcane story. [...] Imagine that Humphrey comes to believe that the fact that he might have won just is the fact that, according to the story \([GMR^*]\), there is a world in which someone rather like him—his counterpart—does win. Could his pattern of concern conceivably survive this identification? (Rosen 1990: 349–51).

Of course, Rosen is free to respond in an exactly analogous way to Lewis:

[the] fictionalist may come to think that truth in the fiction \([GMR^*]\) is important to him in a way he had not previously imagined. The fact that things would have gone better if he had only acted differently just is the fact that according to \([GMR^*]\), worlds most like the actual world in which his counterparts act differently are worlds where things go better. But this only means that he must care—perhaps desperately—about what happens to these characters in this fiction (Rosen 1990: 352; emphasis added).

Is this psychologically possible for us? If it isn’t, does that vitiate the fictionalist project?

2.3 Fictionalism as Fetishism?

Since the fictionalist does not take \([GMR^*]\) to be true, why should we be interested in what follows from it, any more than from some other (modal) fiction?

...the principles which guide the imagination when we construct possible states of affairs are in some sense well captured by the postulates of \([GMR^*]\). [...] the fictionalist might try to argue that \([GMR^*]\) derives its ‘authority’ from being an explicit formulation of our own imaginative habits (Rosen 1990: 353).

I think our everyday modal opinions are, in large measure, consequences of a principle of recombination [...]. One could imagine reasoning rigorously from a precise formulation of it, but in fact our reasoning is more likely to take the form of imaginative experiments. We try to think how duplicates of things already accepted as possible—for instance, because they are actual—might be arranged to fit the description of an alleged possibility. Having imagined various arrangements—not in complete detail, of course—we consider how they might aptly be described. If things of these kinds were arranged like this, would that be a world where Saul Kripke is the son of Rudolf Carnap? (Lewis 1986: 113–4).
In fact, Rosen (1990) claims that fictionalism has a preferable epistemology to Lewis’ realism:

If the realist is right in suggesting that we are guided in the imaginative construction of possibilities by principles like the postulates of \[GMR*\], then when we engage in imaginative experiments, *the least we discover is what is true according to \[GMR*\]. But for the fictionalist, that is enough. The modal facts just are facts of this kind (340).

But why, exactly, is there such a connection between an accurate formulation of the procedures we follow in imagination and the fiction of \[GMR^\]*?

It begins to look as if it is only on a more radical theory, on which modal sentences are made true by our imaginings, or are, as a matter of meaning, expressive of them, that the appeal to imagination can do work in answering the charge of fetishism (Peacocke 1999: 155).

**Conclusion**

If only timid fictionalism is intended, do these objections fail to have their force? Is fictionalism still of *interest* if only the timid variant is available?

Even if fictionalism can be ‘fixed’, I see no advantages to it. It shows me a way of retaining the language of ‘worlds’ without the extreme realist ontology, but if I avail myself of it I shall be merely parroting something in which I do not believe. I prefer to put my money on the representationalist approach to possible worlds. At best I shall come up with a somewhat rickety structure, but it will be planted directly on the ground, rather than sitting on the shoulders of a theory I reject (Bennett 2003: 156).

No consensus. What do you think the most promising philosophical account of possible worlds is?

**Further reading:**


