SQML, Actualism and Possibilism

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1. Introduction

POSSIBILISM There are *possibilia*, i.e., things that are not actual but could have been.

ACTUALISM There could not have been any *possibilia*.[1]

[1] If 'A' be 'actual', **Poss**: $\exists x(\neg Ax \wedge MAx)$ and **Act**: $\neg M\exists x(Ax \wedge MAx)$.

Actualism is certainly the more common-sense position. Compare:

(1) Ludwig Wittgenstein could have had a child.

(2) There is something which possibly is Wittgenstein's child.

(1) is true. Plausibly, (2) is false.[2] However, possibilists think (2) explains (1).

[2] (2) is certainly false, if (i) everyone has the parents they actually have essentially and (ii) every non-human thing is essentially non-human.

2. Possibilism and Actualism in More Detail

How should we best formulate actualism and possibilism?

First, actualism. Many people have thought actualism frustrating to make precise.

> To say that everything is actual is precisely to say that there are no things that do not actually exist, which is precisely to say that there are no mere possibilia, and which is also precisely to say that we cannot separately quantify over what exists and what is actual. These claims all amount to the same thing. But what *is* that, exactly? What on earth does it mean to say that everything is actual, that there are no mere possibilia and so on? (Bennett, 2005: 297)

Bennett proposes a taxonomy. There are two *axes* of actualism.

Axis One: Domain inclusion vs. Non-Domain inclusion.

> ***Domain Inclusion***: The actualist "takes the claim that 'everything is actual' to require that every *possible* thing actually exists as well."
>
> ***Non-Domain Inclusion***: "[Possibilia] do not count within the scope of the 'everything'—not ... because the scope of the quantifier is restricted ... but rather because *things that merely possibly exist do not exist at all*'

Axis Two: Actualism is *merely* true vs *fixedly* true.

> ***Merely True***: Actualism ... is true whichever world w is actual.
>
> ***Fixedly True***: Actualism ... is true given that this world @ is the actual world.

What about Possibilism? What are *possibilia* exactly?

BI-MODAL ACCOUNT: The distinction between *possibilia* and *actualia* is drawn in terms of modes of being. Both *actualia* and *possibilia* are alike in that they have BEING; but *possibilia* SUBSIST, whereas *actualia* "do more" and EXIST instead.

- Wittgenstein's possible child is something which subsists and which has the property of possibly being Wittgenstein's child.
- According to Bi-Modalism, Possibilism is the claim that there are things which subsist and Actualism is the claim that there cannot be subsistent things.

CONCRETENESS ACCOUNT: Drop modes of being. The distinction between *possibilia* and *actualia* is drawn using the notion of concreteness. On this account, *possibilia* are not concrete but they could have been and *actualia* are things which are concrete.

- Wittgenstein's possible child is something which is contingently non-concrete.
- According to the Concreteness Account, Possibilism is the view that there are things which are not concrete, but could have been and Actualism is the view that could not have been contingently non-concrete things.

3. The (Two-Fold) Possibilist Challenge.

(i) Provide a systematic and philosophical satisfying account of truth conditions for claims like 'Ludwig Wittgenstein could have had a child'.

(ii) Develop a quantified modal logic (semantics and syntax) that invalidates the purportedly problematic inferences, e.g., inferring (2) from (1).

4. SQML and Possibilism

The essential problem is that SQML validates the Barcan Formula

> **Barcan Formula**: $M\exists v\alpha \supset \exists v M\alpha$

Nice quote from Christopher Menzel (2022, §3.3):

> In its validation of **BF**, then, SQML, underwrites in general, and as a matter of logic, the possibilist's thesis that *de dicto* modal truths like (2) asserting simply that there *could* be things that are thus and so are *in fact* grounded in *de re* modal truths about the modal properties of individuals, i.e., the properties they have at some or all possible worlds.

Another worry: if we give an *intended model* of SQML, we must accept that all worlds have the same domains. This, it would seem, favours the possibilist.

5. Living with or without SQML.

5.1 Living With:

Linsky and Zalta (1994) argue that we can interpret SQML in an actualistically acceptable way. (BF) requires that there is *something* which might have been F, if there possibly is something which is F. This does not require committing to something which does not actually exist, but committing to a plenitude of contingently non-concrete things. All of which, we might think actually exist![3]

[3] Of course we must reject the Concreteness Account.

> The upshot of the above ideas is that ... we can interpret QML so that it is consistent with actualism and serious actualism. Just read the quantifier of the language of QML as 'there exists' or 'there is'. By actualist lights, these mean the same. Moreover, let us suppose that everything that exists is actual. This squares the object language with the thesis of actualism. Since the quantifer ranges over everything in domain D in the models of QML, everything in D therefore both exists and is actual. D includes concrete objects, contingently nonconcrete objects, and necessarily abstract objects, all of which, we claim, exist and are actual. So our metalanguage conforms to the thesis of actualism as well. There are no objects of any shadowy sort ... (Linsky & Zalta, 1994)

5.2 Living Without

Linsky and Zalta's approach is controversial. An alternative: reformulate SQML.[4]

[4] We'll look at reformulations in a lot more detail in later weeks. For controversy, see Bennett (2006) "Proxy "Actualism"".

A **Kripke Model** $\mathfrak{M}^K$: $\langle W, R, D, d, v\rangle$, where W, R, and v are as we defined them last week, but d is a *function* from $w \in W$ to $D_w \subseteq D$. Then:

($\forall$) $\mathfrak{M}, w, \mu \vDash \forall x\phi$ iff for any x-variant ρ such that $\rho(x) \in D_w$, $\mathfrak{M}, w, \rho \vDash \phi$.

A logic defined using Kripke Models must differ from one defined using SQML models. Thinking syntactically, the standard move is reject classical quantification. Instead, modal logic is formulated using a *free quantifier logic*.

So, instead of ($\forall$1), for instance, we have the following weaker axiom.[5]

[5] "If everything ϕs, then if y exists, y ϕs.

$$(\forall 1^*)\ \forall x\phi \rightarrow (\mathrm{E}y \rightarrow \phi[y/x])$$

Kripke semantics for actualists is controversial: how are they applied? does the metalanguage commit one to possibilia? should we so readily ditch classical logic?