

## Are Possible Worlds Really 'Real'?

The idea of possible worlds has developed through the philosophy of the modal logic of possibility and necessity. These worlds are not to be confused with the multiple universes that have been postulated by the mathematical results of physical theory. In this essay I will outline what is meant philosophically by possible worlds and their reality. My own position in response to this question is best described as a weak realist. I will argue for this position while looking at some of the issues that the question generates. For the sake of this essay I will accept without discussion that knowledge of the external world is possible.

The concept of possible worlds initially resulted from the philosophy of modal logic. Briefly, if we say that a proposition is necessarily true, then it is necessarily true iff (if and only if) it is true in all possible worlds. Whereas if a proposition is possibly true, then it is possibly true iff it is true in at least one possible world. An outcome of this is that each and every possible set of circumstances would be represented by particular possible worlds and each world will contain its own entire separate universe. However, it is important to recognise that the contents of a possible world must be logically consistent. For example, there cannot be a possible world in which there exists four-sided triangles: this would be semantically illogical. But there could be a world containing blue oranges, as there is no logical inconsistency here. Each world will consist of its own independent spatio-temporal universe with no relationship between it and any other individual world.

Some philosophers, for example the Australian philosopher David Lewis, are strong realists and argue that possible worlds are truly real. But many philosophers reject this, maintaining that the concept is merely a device to deal with 'necessarily true' and 'possibly true' types of proposition. However the concept also provides a way of explaining the different options or choices in decision-making. For every available option there will be another possible world.

The new world will then contain the entire universe of the pre-decision world, but now modified by the new possible outcomes. So, for example, if I choose to take a job as a philosopher, that would generate a different possible world from that if I chose to be a scientist. In order to identify the particular world that we perceive and in which we exist, we define it as the Actual World and so distinguish it from the infinite variety of other possible worlds. The Actual World is the one which we consider real and knowable, while possible worlds account for all the situations, options and variations that could occur.

So can possible worlds be real? What do we mean here by 'real'? In this context, I believe we mean that something actually exists and can be perceived, as in our known world. There is, however, a problem here - each possible world has a completely separate and unrelated spatio-temporal structure and so is impossible to investigate. There is no method by which we can interrogate another such world. If it is not possible to detect or even to imagine how such worlds could co-exist with our Actual World, how then could they be considered real in any sense?

This suggests that the ability to perceive a world is a pre-requisite for a world to be considered real. Let us consider our Actual World: I certainly consider this to be real, yet I am not and cannot be aware of every action, feature or event that takes place in this world. Indeed it is impossible for me to have knowledge of every 'thing' in the world, even given that the knowledge were possible. I do not know, and am never likely to know, the happenings on, or the properties of, a planet around a distant star in a distant galaxy. I am not even likely to know features of a particular individual in a village in the middle of a jungle in a far off continent. Even though I cannot perceive what may occur on a distant planet, I still consider this universe to be real without necessarily being able to fully investigate it. But I can perceive my immediate surroundings, so how much must I be able to perceive before I can accept the reality of a world? All of it? Not the case in the Actual World. Some of it? Indeed I can perceive some of this world. None of it, or perhaps just a glimpse? I certainly cannot investigate

any other possible world, but on this basis, I cannot reject their reality either. So to say that possible worlds can be real cannot be summarily rejected by the impossibility of detecting any of their properties. That distant planet and what happens on it, could just as easily be in a possible world as in the Actual World.

This stumbling block of perception may provide a solution. One significant aspect of our experience of the world is that of making choices. If we are making a decision between two possible routes, we can sometimes 'see' the shadow of the alternative for a short time. For example, suppose I am walking down the street and seeing a ladder against a wall, I decide to walk around it. At the moment I pass the outside of the ladder a can of paint falls. I can see that this would have landed on me covering me in paint and completely altering the arrangements for the day ahead. For a short time I am aware of the possible world that has split off from the Actual World by my decision. Similarly, if I accept a particular job offer, it is possible to imagine the alternative outcomes of the other decision. These glimpses of decision branches suggest the reality of those possible worlds.

I consider this argument sufficiently strong for my position as a weak realist. Firstly, it is clear, with the proviso that we can have knowledge of the external world, that our Actual World is real enough. I will always consider it real because I exist in it and perceive it. So if this one is real, why not others? Secondly, with any decision a branching of outcome occurs. The one branch that we take, we identify as our Actual World while the other can easily be perceived as being real. If I had made a different decision, then I know that the other world would really have become my actual one. Therefore both worlds must be real and exist in order that either world could become my Actual World, depending on my choice. If those two worlds are real, then all alternative possible worlds that result from a decision branching must also be real.

On the other hand the concept of there being real possible worlds for every conceivable but

logical situation, no matter how extreme, is to me merely a possibility rather than reality. So there could indeed be a world consisting of two dragons fighting for five minutes, but this does not seem to have any basis in reality. Similarly the use of thought experiments in which we create a particular set of circumstances for analysis are merely possible not real. If we were to hold a strong realist position, these would all be real possible worlds. But just because we can imagine a situation does not imply that the situation is reified as a real possible world.

The concept of possible worlds has powerful uses in examining what we mean by necessity and possibility and for developing thought experiments. However, the impossibility of investigating them, together with the huge difficulty in intuiting or imagining their existence, leads to strong doubt regarding their actual reality. But there is an argument for their reality in certain circumstances. If we accept that we know that our own Actual World is real, then also worlds that appear as the potential outcomes of alternatives, choices and decisions are just as real. While exotic universes containing all manner of imagined options are logically possible, the argument for their reality is far weaker. In my view there are real possible worlds - we live in one, and there are also those that arise as potential outcomes, but by no means are all conceivable worlds real.