

WINFRIED LÖFFLER

ON ALMOST BARE POSSIBILIA. REPLY TO TIMOTHY
WILLIAMSON

Most contributions to the possibilism/actualism debate tackle the question of what is ontologically necessary to make various (more or less sophisticated) regions of our speaking of ways the world could be meaningful and true. Timothy Williamson offers us more: he seeks to harmonize those ontological demands with semantical and syntactical issues concerning our best logical devices to handle our talk about modalities. A similar attempt was recently published by Linsky and Zalta (1994, 1996) for the weakest modal system K plus classical quantification theory plus BF; Williamson extends this to the strongest system S5, a system with more interesting philosophical applications.

Thus, I read the task of Williamson's paper as twofold: First, he postulates a special kind of possibilium as constituents of the truthmakers for our modal discourse. Second, he defends quantified S5 as a materially adequate system for metaphysical modalities. Although he introduces the adequacy of S5 as an assumption, the following discussion *de facto* consists of undermining apparent counter-arguments to this assumption.

The label 'possibilism' covers a lot of different positions, and it is one of Williamson's points that we should keep syntactical issues more clearly in mind than we often do. The central claim of Williamson's possibilism is that there are individuals x which possibly have properties ϕ . This is clearly to be kept apart from the thesis that there are possible, but nonexistent x 's which are nevertheless ϕ . The latter position is often (duly or not) attributed to Meinong, and it usually goes along with free logics and an existence predicate. According to Williamson, there is something which could have been Wittgenstein's child, but there is no nonexistent child of Wittgenstein.

It is an old and much-disputed question whether quantified S5 correctly grasps our intuitions concerning metaphysical modalities. Among the most prominent counter-arguments is the reference to BF and BFC. Both are theorems in quantified S5 (partly also in weaker systems, but this need not concern us now), and both violate our intuitions concerning the contingency of objects, since they involve what we see as illicit steps from



de dicto to de re modalities. We consider the existence of various objects as possible without feeling committed to the existence of possible objects, be they 'bare' possibilia or Meinongian nonexistent objects. It could have been the case that Wittgenstein had fathered a baby, but we do not feel committed to postulate a possible baby of Wittgenstein. It could have been the case, most of us would be inclined to say – that is all. It could be the case that the world contained more things than it actually does, but this does not seem to mean that there are possible things. And some things could have failed to exist, but we reject the consequence that possibly something is nothing.

Williamson holds that all those counter-intuitive claims are true and that our counter-examples vanish at closer investigation. The root of all the puzzles mentioned is a feature of the usual semantics for quantified S5: the domain of individuals is stipulated to be the same in all possible worlds. Various ways out of this problem by adapting the semantics have been proposed: introducing a third truth-value for sentences about nonexistent objects; solutions with free logics and an existence predicate, and the two varying-domain-approaches discussed by Williamson. (His argument against Kripke's nonmodal version is – in addition to pointing out its technical complications – that illicit quantifications across different domains come in by the back door, if we state e.g., that in world₁ there are objects which do not exist in world₂. Fine's and Peacocke's account is accused of explanatory regress, since the modal concepts applied in the metalanguage tend to be the same as those in the object-language.)

Williamson holds that the domains are *in fact* the same across all worlds. Hence, every object exists necessarily in the sense that it exists in every possible world. To avoid making everything a necessary being, Williamson draws a decisive distinction between spatiotemporal existence and 'bare' existence, the mode of 'bare possibilia'. Everything exists in every possible world, but not everything exists spatiotemporally in every possible world. Within such a framework, BF and BFC lose their counterintuitive appeal: The \exists -equivalent to BF then reads as: If there is in one world something that is ϕ (which means: spatiotemporal and ϕ), then there is in the actual world something (which however in the actual world is not spatiotemporal) that is possibly ϕ . And the \exists -equivalent to BFC reads as follows: if in the actual world there is a possible ϕ , then it exists spatiotemporally in some possible world.

To make this claim plausible, Williamson draws an analogy: Let us conceive possible objects on the model of past objects. Suppose the river Inn ceases to flow; then we would have no problems with conceiving the Inn as a concrete, past object. We would refer to it as unproblematically

as we today refer to Shakespeare. An obvious objection, however, quickly arises: Is not that kind of objecthood, identity and reference dependent on the past spatiotemporal properties of the Inn or Shakespeare and our memory about them? So let us turn to the future: what about the identity and individuation of future objects, of whose spatiotemporal properties we know almost nothing? Williamson's Jacket & Trousers-example is not really convincing here, because the number and all the interesting properties of possible suits are determined in advance by the given set of jackets and trousers and the well-forming rules for suits.

Is there really an equally plausible analogy between possibilium and future objects, or are we back to well-known puzzles about whether the possible fat man in that doorway is identical with the possible bald man there, and how many barely possible Austrians exist? Furthermore, suppose there is more than one; are they all one and the same, or are they exemplifications of an abstract object 'possible Austrian'? Or are they perhaps identical with actually existent persons, as some actualist defenders of BF would say?

We saw that the fundamental difference is drawn between spatiotemporal and possible objects. Furthermore, possible objects are obviously not conceived as abstract objects.¹ Possibilium are concrete objects with modal and nonmodal properties. Their modal properties fix the genus or kind if they were spatiotemporal. Williamson repeatedly mentions kinds of possibilium; possible rivers would always be rivers if they were spatiotemporal, and never trees or mountains:

What is necessary to it is not being in space and time *but the possibility of being in space and time*; furthermore, although it is not necessarily a river, it may well be *necessarily such that if it is in space it is a river* (p. 266, my italics).

In other words, possibilium have essences which fix their genus. They describe all the properties they would have in all those worlds in which they exist spatiotemporally. Nothing is said explicitly about the haecceity of possibilium. We expect that being-the-Inn is among the modal properties of the Inn, and the name 'Inn' designates rigidly. The Inn is essentially the Inn and could never be the Rhine and vice versa. However, from note 18 we learn that being-the-Inn is a nonmodal property. Then the following seems conceivable: An object x may be the Inn in world₁ and a possible river in world₂, but it does not follow that it is the possible Inn in world₂. And it seems to be possible that x is a river in world₃, but e.g., the Mississippi. Notice that this is not excluded by LI and LNI: those theorems admit a reading that just says that no object could be another object than it is (Hughes and Cresswell 1996, p. 318).

Another point which could perhaps lead us into trouble is the question of iterated modalities. There could well be objects with tricky modal properties among their essentials, for example, necessary existence in some suitably defined way. I do not see a reason to exclude a priori the consistency of constructions akin e.g. to Grim's maximally ignorant beings (put forward against Plantinga's Ontological Proof (Plantinga 1974; Grim 1979)). If this is right, we can prove their existence in every possible world. Roughly outlined: if there is an x which possibly necessarily exists spatiotemporally, then, according to S5 modal reduction theorems, there is necessarily one, and hence there is actually one. The apparent possibility of ontological existence proofs for dubious entities is one more reason to doubt the adequacy of S5 for metaphysical modalities.

Finally, there is another obvious difficulty: since the domain of objects is the same in all possible worlds, and since objects are fixed in their kind, the universe becomes quite large. Things could have developed very differently, and the number of spatiotemporal objects in the world could differ dramatically. To take a trivial example: Every decision whether or not to swat a fly determines whether billions of descendant flies over the following years will exist spatiotemporally, or whether they will remain what they are now: bare possibilities. The problem is that there are quite a lot of them. Williamson clearly sees the difficulty when he talks about definite descriptions concerning possible objects; he admits that 'the possible child of Wittgenstein' has improper reference, since Wittgenstein could have had quite a lot of quite different children (we could add: with different mothers, etc.). If descendance is an essential property, then the way out is postulating a collection of possible persons who could have been Wittgenstein's children. Admittedly, it is disputable whether ontological parsimony is more than an aesthetic criterion; but I suggest to consider ontological prodigality as good a warning sign of philosophical error as the technical complications (with varying domains) mentioned by Williamson.

As a still unsafe area of logic, quantified modal logic has a strong explicative moment in respect of our ordinary modal reasoning. Correspondingly, strong and robust intuitions of what there is are by no means the main philosophical criterion to adjudicate fundamental ontological questions, but also not the worst. Even more, a significant decrease in intuitive plausibility between the explicandum (our thinking about possibilities without postulating possible objects) and its explication should make us suspicious.

NOTES

¹ Those familiar with Linsky's and Zalta's account should not be baffled by the different terminology: they define abstract objects as objects which are not spatiotemporal. Williamson does not expose his definition of abstractness, but he would presumably accept a definition of abstract objects as objects which can be exemplified. Hence, there should not be a substantial difference between Williamson's possible objects and Linsky's and Zalta's abstract objects. By the way, Williamson's claim that possible objects are not abstract objects does not imply that there are not any abstract objects at all; abstract objects as sets, numbers, etc. do of course exist.

REFERENCES

- Grim, P.: 1979, 'Plantinga's God and Other Monstrosities', *Religious Studies* **15**, 91–97.
Hughes, G. E. and Cresswell, M. J.: 1968, *A New Introduction to Modal Logic*, Routledge, London, New York.
Linsky, B. and Zalta, E. N.: 1994, 'In Defense of the Simplest Quantified Modal Logic', in: J. E. Tomberlin (ed.), *Philosophical Perspectives 8: Logic and Language*, Ridgeview, Atascadero, pp. 431–458.
Linsky, B. and Zalta, E. N.: 1996, 'In Defense of the Contingently Nonconcrete', *Philosophical Studies* **84**, 283–294.
Plantinga, A.: 1974, *The Nature of Necessity*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.

Institut für Christliche Philosophie
Leopold-Franzens-Universität Innsbruck
Universitätsstraße 4/II
A-6020 Innsbruck
Austria