POSSIBLE WORLDS AND HUMAN FREEDOM

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It seems to be prima facie plausible to say that in some possible world Venus is not the morning star. Our intuitive interpretation of such semantics makes crucial use of the idea of one and the same individual existing in different possible worlds. If quantified modal logic is to be of interest, there must be a distinction between necessary properties, properties that an object has in all possible worlds, and contingent properties which it has in some but not all possible worlds [1]. Linsky rightly points out that Kripke and the philosophers who accept talk of possible worlds inevitably fall back on some variety of essentialism. What is certainly required is that we make sense of the idea of one and the same individual in different possible worlds, the idea of crossworld identity. Kripke's position is that we need not supply an answer to the epistemological question «How could we identify the same individual in different possible worlds?» but we do need to supply an answer to the metaphysical question «What does it mean to say an individual is the same in different possible worlds?» [2]

Against Quine and all those who consider such talk as unintelligible, Kripke maintains that even if we cannot verify the existence of a person living in different worlds, it still makes sense to talk about what would have happened if Nixon had not been elected in 1968. Kripke's example is taken from the context of human action and this certainly is not accidental. It is above all in such context that the notion of unrealized possibilities plays an essential role. By choosing a language we can of course always ensure that a given problem shall be meaningless or have no solution. But once we have chosen say the historical mode of discourse, we are no longer free to tamper with its logic as this will interfere with communication.

[1] Leonard LINSKY, *Names and Descriptions*, The University of Chicago Press 1977, p. 143.
[2] *ibid*. p. 144.

Our ordinary daily talk is full of statements about what nearly took place and what might have been the case. To say that I might have been hit by that car however is not quite the same as holding that there is a possible world in which I have been hit by that car. While in the first case we imagine a detail in the actual world to be different from what it is, in the second case we make that detail the focus of a different possible scenario. A possible world is not just restricted to a single counterfactual statement; it consists in the imagining of an extensive appropriate context. Such context however has no precise boundaries and the objects in it cannot be fully individualized; it is merely an open ended field of background knowledge. A possible world is at the same time both like and unlike our actual world, and hence we have conflicting intuitions about it. Unlike the actual world, a possible world does not exist on its own, and under no circumstances can it be directly inspected. There is no way to describe what difference the non election of Nixon in 1968 really would have made. In imagining a possible world, we always fall back on what actually happened in the real world, while the whole point of a possible world of course is that it is *not* like the real world. For Leibniz a possible world exists only in the mind of God, and it is only the divine mind who knows the full scope and composition of a possible world. Kripke and Linsky on the other hand want to talk about possible world in strictly human terms. Contrary to Linsky [3] however, when I consider a possible world, I do *not* know how many possible objects I am considering. While we can state precisely what we take to be counterfactual, we cannot know how this will affect a possible world. There is a fascination with the word «possible» that has intrigued philosophers: Aristotle put actuality (*energeia*) above possibility, but since the beginning of modern times this relationship has effectively been reversed. Possibility (*potentia*) is now also conceived as force and is given priority, while actuality is taken to be merely a restricted form of possibility.

When we say «He might have been hit by that car,» we base ourselves on actual experience, and a sentence which formulates such experience is a possibility. Yet there are no precise limits to possible experience, and none therefore to any possible world. A possible

[3] *ibid*. p. 152.

world is merely an imagined context, and while we can say what we cannot imagine (for exmple a round square or some other such contradiction), we cannot make sense of what we cannot imagine. All exclusion from possible world talk happens therefore in advance on the basis of what we mean by the term in question, but such meaning is often not precise and therefore indeterminate. Kripke decides to admit talk of this kind in the face of its logical and epistemological inconsistencies because of his overriding commitment to a mode of discourse that will make sense of human freedom. To maintain this belief we must assume that a human being could have acted differently from the way he actually did. But there is a price to be paid for this: an unrealized possibility is either incomplete or incoherent; it is a borrowed context, never fully intelligible. Such vagueness is not due to our laziness as it were, our not troubling to make it precise; it is inherent rather in the role such concepts play in our language. We think that such concepts as «round square» or «married bachelor» violate the language rules which are established for them in our language, and consequently we find that they have no meaning and that we cannot imagine them. But such language rules change and what we consider a contradiction at one time may no longer be a contradiction later on. Before Einstein, Kripke might well have maintained that bended space cannot occur in any possible world. Whether a possible world contains or leads to contradictions crucially depends on current language conventions which are however often not precise.

Thus, whether a person with different parents is still to count as the same person in a different world is not settled by our ordinary language conventions. Kripke denies that he is to count as the same person[4], but he cannot really convince one who claims that he nevertheless can imagine such a thing to be the case.

The less experience we have of a certain situation, the more difficult we will usually find to imagine it, but there is no definite cut off point to what we can imagine. Possible world talk would be pointless without a belief in essences; the essence of Nixon is that without which we cannot imagine him to be Nixon, but there is no way

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[4] Saul KRIPKE, «Naming and Necessity,» in *Semantics of Natural Language*, ed. D. Davidson and G. Harman, Dordrecht, Reidel 1972, pp. 313-314.

to settle this with reference to our ordinary way of talking. While Linsky believes that we cannot imagine a person to be an Oscar Mayer wiener[5], Kafka in «The Metamorphosis» imagined Gregor Samsa to be a giant insect. Since these imagined contexts are constrained merely by weak forms of resemblance, it is simply impossible to lay down in advance what is and what is not conceivable.

The plausibility of a possible world is derived solely from its likeness to the real world and under non standard conditions this evaporates rapidly. Only as long as we share similar intuitions about essence will a given possible world make sense to us. It is not like a lump of stuff with sharp edges, but rather like a network of hypothetical analogies. What makes possible world talk odd is that in it we focus on the background of the discourse rather than on the intuitive content of what we say, and we are driven to do this because the content is taken to be counterfactual. We can elaborate the imagined consequences of a counterfactual detail, but there is nothing to settle the choice between different scenarios. All such possibilities remain forever hypothetical and this is why it is so easy to convince people that whatever has happened is really inevitable. The tension between the actual and the possible expresses the scope of human freedom.

Possible world talk is therefore not without point in the human context. The inherent tension between the actual and the possible is represented respectively by the human past and the human future. Kripke finds possible world talk intelligible because he interprets it in terms of the human future (or in terms of a hypothetical future, as when we consider what might have happened differently in the past). Quine on the other hand finds the idea of a possible world unintelligible because it is in principle impossible to settle the issues that arise here in terms of logical functions. There is no accepted way of settling what is intelligible; this depends on the type of discourse we start with and therefore take for granted. In the tradition of classical logic, Quine opts for a minimal ontology and prefers clarity to richness of language. Kripke on the other hand finds talk about contexts of unrealized possibilities not just intelligible but essential to any language designed

[5] LINSKY, op. cit. p. 148.

to deal with such things as elections in the real world. The issue between Quine and Kripke as to intelligibility depends on the mode of discourse chosen, and we cannot say in advance whether or when to apply Occam's razor. When we argue with people whose intuitions about essence are different from our own about unrealized possibilities, we may reach a point where our differences simply cannot be settled anymore. But such difficulties are like the uncertainties we face in radical translations; they are normative rather than factual [6].

Quine prefers to define possibility narrowly: while the number of possible permutations in a finite set can be accurately calculated, the number of conceivable worlds is not only infinite but indefinite. They are partly overlapping and sometimes even conflicting contexts, but this fact is often obscured by the lack of logical rigor of the ordinary language in which they are described. If we are committed however to the intelligibility of assertions about possible worlds in which a person exists, this always implies some exclusion of worlds in which the individual does not exist. A realm of unrealized possibilities is a necessary assumption for the idea of human responsibility and therefore deeply entrenched in our moral and legal forms of discourse. To be capable of realizing possibilities is essential to what we mean by being a person, even when we cannot make this notion precise and consistent. Kripke admits that such statements are metaphysical but claims that their being intelligible renders them legitimate. With expressions such as «Nixon might have lost the election of 1968» or «He nearly was hit by that car,» we treat such events as alternative futures to the actual course of events as they occurred up to a certain point in time. Such talk stresses that things could have been different from what they are and focuses consequently on the human capacity to bring about such change. We defend the claim that these possibilities are real not only by referring to known laws but also by alluding to commonly accepted beliefs, and human freedom of action is certainly such a belief. It is not essential in our world that Venus be the morning star, but a world in which there are no unrealized possibilities is no longer a human world. The child learns the meaning of the word «possible» as part of his training in the acquisition of

[6] Joseph GRÜNFELD, «Translatability as a Norm in Quine,» *Science et Esprit*, XXX/3 (1978), pp. 325-328.

cultural norms and a language that would be incapable of expressing unrealized possibilities would no longer be a human language. We recognize that not everything in the human past is essential because we insist to treat the human future as open ended – as a possible world.

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[1] Leonard LINSKY, *Names and Descriptions*, The University of Chicago Press 1977, p. 143.

[2] *ibid*. p. 144.

[3] *ibid*. p. 152.

[4] Saul KRIPKE, «Naming and Necessity,» in *Semantics of Natural Language*, ed. D. Davidson and G. Harman, Dordrecht, Reidel 1972, pp. 313-314.

[5] LINSKY, *op. cit*. p. 148.

[6] Joseph GRÜNFELD, «Translatability as a Norm in Quine,» *Science et Esprit*, XXX/3 (1978), pp. 325-328.