

Introduction: Thinking the (Im)possible

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1. The State of the Art

The issue of the relationship between our cogitative abilities, in particular the ability of thinking about something that does not exist, and modal characteristics, in particular those featuring unactualized (im)possibilities, i.e., the ways the world might (not) have been, has always been very intricate.

In analytic philosophy, reflection on this matter has started by reviving an optimistic thesis traditionally ascribed to Hume, according to which conceivability entails possibility: if something is conceivable, then it is also possible. As Wittgenstein clearly suggests in the incipit of the *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, where he says that there is no room for conceptions of something impossible:

The book will, therefore, draw a limit to thinking, or rather—not to thinking, but to the expression of thoughts; for, in order to draw a limit to thinking we should have to be able to think both sides of this limit (we should therefore have to be able to think what cannot be thought). The limit can, therefore, only be drawn in language and what lies on the other side of the limit will be simply nonsense.

On the one hand, the Humean thesis seems quite reasonable. What can be the source of our notion of an unactualized possibility, if not our capacity of conceiving viz. imagining, at least in the sense of imagining which for Hume seemed to be synonymous with conceiving itself (a nonsensuous imagining),¹ how things would have been differently from how they actually are? Yet on the other hand, our imaginative capacities seem well to exceed the realm of the unactualized possible. As Priest (2016²) has reminded us with the story of Sylvan's box, which is both empty and full at one and the same time, fiction is plenty of descriptions of situations that might not have obtained.

In (1971, 1980) Kripke seems to have definitely relinquished optimism by drawing a distinction between an *epistemic* notion of possibility, what is possible according to one's state of knowledge, and a *metaphysical* notion of possibility, how things might have really been in the world. For, he says, there are many things that are epistemically possible but not metaphysically possible. For instance, for all what ancients did know, it was surely possible that Hesperus is not identical with Phosphorus. Yet clearly enough, this nonidentity does not amount

¹ Cf. Szabo Gendler and Hawthorne 2002: 17.

to a metaphysical possibility. Hesperus, viz. Venus, might have been different in many ways from what it actually is—for instance, it might have orbited closer to the Sun—but it might not have been different from Phosphorus, if this means the impossible eventuality for Venus to be different from itself.² Granted, adds Kripke, an epistemic possibility corresponds (if not amounts) to a certain sort of metaphysical possibility. In the Hesperus/Phosphorus case, the epistemic possibility that Hesperus is not identical with Phosphorus corresponds to the metaphysical possibility that a given subject be in the same kind of mental states she actually entertains when she faces Venus at dusk and Venus at dawn respectively and yet face different celestial bodies, a certain Hesperian planet and another Phosphorean planet respectively.³ Yet that metaphysical possibility is *not* the metaphysical possibility that Hesperus is not identical with Phosphorus, for there is no such possibility. As a result, there is a sense according to which what we can conceive—an epistemic possibility—is not a metaphysical possibility, so that the Humean thesis does not hold across the board.

To be sure, one may interpret Kripke's notion of an epistemic possibility as displaying a mere illusion of conceivability. When it seems to us that Hesperus might not have been identical with Phosphorus, it also seems to us that we are conceiving such an (epistemically) possible situation, but in point of fact we are wrong: we are not conceiving that situation, at most we are conceiving another situation that indeed is metaphysically possible, namely the aforementioned situation in which we are in the same mental states as we actually are and yet we face different celestial bodies.⁴ If this were the case, clearly enough the entailment between conceivability and possibility could be saved. Yet, even if one may admit that we are not infallible as to what we can conceive, it is hardly the case that this interpretation can be generalized to all cases of seeming conceivability. Sometimes at least, when we seem to conceive something—for instance, when we seem to think that there are no numbers, as an evil demon may lead us into mumbling—we do conceive that very something, even if it is not possible; we are hardly considering the possibility that there are pseudonumbers.⁵ Thus, it is better to say, as some have maintained,⁶ that an epistemic possibility in general is an illusion of possibility, i.e., the fact that non-P seems possible when in point of fact it is not, for P is instead necessary.

Going in the same direction, following Chalmers one may draw a distinction between a *negative* sense of conceivability, according to which something is conceivable “when it is not ruled out a priori” (Chalmers 2002: 149), and a *positive* sense of conceivability, which, by relying on some (again nonphenomenal, in particular nonsensuous) form of imagination, “require that one can form some sort of positive conception of a situation in which [something] is the case” (*ibid.* 150). The point of such a distinction is precisely to restore a sense of conceivability for

² For an alternative account according to which for Hesperus not to be the same as Phosphorus counts as a genuine metaphysical possibility insofar as it does not amount to the impossible eventuality that Venus is different from itself, cf. Voltolini 2014.

³ Cf. Kripke 1971: 157 fn.15, 1980: 103-104, 143.

⁴ Cf. Di Francesco and Tomasetta 2014: 195.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Cf. Szabo Gendler and Hawthorne 2002: 33.

which Hume's thesis holds. At most, negative conceivability entails *logical* possibility, the mere noncontradictoriness of a certain imagined situation. Yet it does not entail metaphysical possibility, which is rather what positive conceivability opens the way to. We cannot follow here the details by means of which such a move may be developed, which involve endorsing some form of semantic bidimensionality, according to which expressions have two forms of intensions, a primary and a secondary one, which in the cases where conceivability really entails metaphysical possibility collapse.⁷ Yet even if this move were successful, it remains that there is a residual form of conceivability for which, *pace* Humeans, the entailment to a genuine form of possibility is prevented.

So far, so good, Meinongians of all sorts may say. In actual fact, they hasten to add, even the entailment from a sense of conceivability to logical possibility is to be questioned, for contradictory situations are clearly conceivable. Those who are interested in giving a modal twist to Meinongianism will indeed say that, along with possible states of affairs, hence possible worlds, there also are impossible states of affairs, hence impossible worlds, those where contradictory situations hold. Along with ways the world might have been, there indeed are also ways the world might *not* have been.⁸ Those latter ways correspond to what is conceived but it is not possible, for it precisely subsists in some of the latter worlds.⁹ To be sure, this move does not please all those who believe that ontology should not be inflated with impossible states of affairs and impossible worlds. One only needs a way to alternatively deal with any evidence that apparently supports the claim that there are impossible worlds. Yet even if one dispenses with impossible worlds and states of affairs, one has still to provide an alternative account of how we can conceive what is not possible.

The situation is made more difficult by the fact that there seem to be not only impossible states of affairs, hence impossible worlds, but also impossible *objects*. Clearly enough, being committed to impossible worlds does not entail being committed to impossible objects. For even if impossible objects would exist at impossible worlds, there may be impossible worlds without impossible objects, namely those worlds containing impossible situations made just by actual, or even merely possible, entities. Yet the intentionality of our thoughts seems to commit us to impossible objects, at least if we admit that there are nonpropositional forms of thoughts. Indeed, the fact that one thinks *of* something, or in other terms, that one's thought has an intentional object, appears not to be exhausted by the fact that one thinks *that* such and such is the case.¹⁰ But if this is the case, then one has thoughts about not only actual, but also about possible and even impossible items, as in the famous example originally pointed out by Twardowski (1894) of someone thinking of a wooden cannon entirely made of steel at one and the same time.

Now, if one wants to dispense with impossible objects, one has to develop an account of intentionality in which one explains how one can think of such objects even if there really are no such objects. This explanation is no easy task.

⁷ For such a move, cf. primarily Chalmers 2002.

⁸ Cf. Yagisawa 2010.

⁹ Cf. Priest 2016², Berto 2012.

¹⁰ Cf. e.g. Crane 2001, 2013.

Either one has to resort to a notion of an *intentional content* to be traced back at least to Husserl's *Logical Investigations* (1901), by holding that in thinking of an *impossibile*, one is merely related to an (unsatisfied) intentional content. Or one has to draw a distinction between the ontologically noncommittal notion of an object and the ontologically committal notion of an entity and say that in thinking of an *impossibile*, there is an impossible intentional object one is thinking of even if such an object is no entity.¹¹ Neither move seems to be unproblematic, unless it is spelled out in appropriate details. What exactly is an intentional content, especially if there really is no object it relates a thinker with (does at least mental descriptivism come back from the rear door)? How can there be impossible intentional objects, if in the overall ontological domain there really are no such things?¹²

These problems appear even more serious if one takes that the domain of objects that necessarily fails to exist is broader than what originally seemed. For there is a sense according to which not only *impossibilia* like the Twardowskian wooden cannon made of steel, but also fictional objects like Madame Bovary and Sherlock Holmes, if not all abstract objects in general (universal attributes among them), necessarily fail to exist.¹³

This issue is intended to reconsider all these venerable problems and indicate possible solutions to them. We hope that these essays will advance the current debate about possibility and impossibility (as well as their conceptions), which seems to be of interest to an increasing number of researchers in various areas such as logic, philosophy of language, epistemology, philosophy of mind, and metaphysics.¹⁴

2. Summaries of Papers

G. Priest, *Thinking the Impossible*

By acknowledging the essential role played by possibility in Western philosophy, Priest focuses on its actual role in possible-world semantics and explains the move from a mono-modal logic to a multimodal logic (whose language contains multiple possibility/necessity operators, and whose semantics contains multiple accessibility relations). There is a most general notion of possibility (simply called "logical possibility") that needs to be taken into account according to which to be possible is to hold at some world, and anything that is possible in any more restricted sense should be possible in this sense. Priest concentrates next on the relation between impossible worlds and possible world semantics by examining two

¹¹ For the second move see Smith 2002, Crane 2001, 2013, Sainsbury 2010, Sainsbury and Tye 2012. Sainsbury (this issue) returns to it in great detail. Actually, these two moves are not incompatible.

¹² For some such problems, cf. Voltolini 2016.

¹³ On this, see Kripke 2013 and Zalta 1983, 1989 respectively.

¹⁴ "Thinking the (Im)possible" was also the title of the FINO/SIFA Graduate Conference that took place in Turin on June 29-30, 2015. On that occasion we started discussing on these problems with some prestigious experts such as M. Sainsbury, G. Priest and T. Williamson together with many researchers and students. After those fruitful discussions we got to like this topic more and more, which prompted us to edit an issue of *Argumenta* on these themes.

different directives, the primary (“Everything holds at some worlds, and everything fails at some worlds”) and the secondary (“If A and B are distinct formulas, there are worlds where A holds and B fails”) one. The final part of the paper is dedicated to the comparison between conceivability and possibility, where *conceiving* (considered as the same as *imagining*) is seen—differently from the Humean proposal according to which what is conceivable is somehow possible—as the mere bringing before the mind of a particular state of affairs, even of an impossible one. Then he answers three possible objections against the idea of conceiving impossibilities and concludes that the impossible shouldn’t be marginalized but understood in its big potential.

T. Williamson, *Counterpossibles in Semantics and Metaphysics*

The paper focuses on counterpossibles, which are counterfactual conditionals with impossible antecedents such as “If whales were fish, their behaviour would differ from what it actually is” or “If whales were fish, their behaviour would be just as it actually is”. According to semantic orthodoxy all counterpossibles are true, therefore the above two counterpossibles should be seen as true, and not as genuine alternatives as they seem. Williamson asks whether orthodoxy about counterpossibles is correct and, by defending orthodoxy against recent objections, shows how that kind of questions, far from being a negligible small point of the logic and semantics of counterfactuals, has important ramifications in several directions.

L. Estrada-González, *Impossible Worlds and the Intensional Sense of ‘And’*

The essay shows why in an argument like that offered by Lewis against concrete impossible worlds the extensionality of ‘and’ is an assumption that can be coherently challenged and rejected. Estrada-Gonzales starts by explaining why, independently from Lewis’ argument, ‘and’ is in general intensional and then answers some possible objections. Later on he presents an allegedly ‘and’-free argument against impossible worlds which is still subject to well-known objections to the extensionality of ‘not’. Then he shows that the reasons to support the intensional ‘not’ blocking that argument belong to the same family of reasons to support the intensional ‘and’. Estrada-Gonzales concludes by claiming that intensional ‘and’ is needed as a premise-binder and that the argument is blocked at a stage prior to the steps about negation.

T. Yagisawa, *S4 to 5D*

The paper focuses on the modal logic axiom 4, *if necessarily P, then necessarily necessarily P*. According to Chandler (1976) and Salmon (1981, 1989), there is trouble with S4. Axiom 4 is equivalent to *if possibly possibly p, then possibly p* which requires that the accessibility relation between worlds be transitive. Chandler’s and Salmon’s argument against axiom 4 is based on the idea that even if an ordinary object could have had a slightly different origin from the one it actually has, it could not have had a very different origin from its actual one. Hence, they conclude that accessibility is not transitive, i.e., that what is possibly possible may not be possible. Yagisawa’s move is to propose a different way to save axiom 4: by supporting five-dimensionalism, he preserves both axiom 4 and absolute possibility by postulating objects as extended not only in physical space-time but in logical space as well.

V. Morato, *World Stories and Maximality*

The paper deals with the actualist conceptions of modality that reduce talk about possible worlds to talk about world stories. Such conceptions have classical problems, namely that of representing the possible existence of non-actual objects, and that of expressing, in an actualistic way, the possible nonexistence of actual objects. Morato finds a way out of problems of this sort. He suggests that we abandon the notion of global maximality in favor of the notion of local maximality, thanks to which we could generate world stories where the possible nonexistence of an object is represented by the lack of any proposition having it as a constituent. Such world stories would also be locally maximal in the sense of being complete descriptions of alternative courses of actuality.

C. Nencha, *Natural Properties Do Not Support Essentialism in Counterpart Theory: A Reflection on Buras's Proposal*

The paper is a defence of Lewis' antiessentialism against Buras' view (2006). According to Buras, if Lewis accepts both counterpart theory and natural properties, then he can no longer be an antiessentialist: for natural properties determine the existence of similarity relations among individuals that are relevant independently of the ways those individuals are represented, therefore individuals do have real essential properties. Nencha's argument is that the implications of counterpart theory for essentialism are not altered by the acknowledgement of natural properties, since if counterpart theory is antiessentialist without natural properties, then it remains so also when natural properties are taken into account.

M. Jago, *Propositions as Truthmaker Conditions*

The paper outlines an account of propositions as sets of truthmakers, along the lines suggested by Fine (2014 a, b, 2016). According to Jago, propositions are to be seen as sets of possible truthmakers, thanks to which he succeeds in offering a redescription of semantic phenomena such as same-saying, subject matter, and aboutness.

N. Spinelli, *Husserlian Intentionality and Contingent Universals*

Spinelli starts from Husserl's challenge of maintaining both that universals exist in the strongest sense and that they exist contingently. After a short presentation of Husserl's intentionalism, idealism and the role played by universals, he then presents a version of the Husserlian view regimented in terms of modal logic and possible-worlds semantics and distinguishes between two accessibility relations, world-bound and free, having different structural properties. Thanks to his modal apparatus, he is able to show how the necessary or the contingent existence of universals can be derived. Therefore, he concludes that in Husserl's philosophy there is room for both necessary and contingent universals.

M. Sainsbury, *Intentional Relations*

The paper focuses on a classical topic concerning intentionality that could be summed up by the following question: what kind of relation is the intentional relation? Is it a two-term relation or a three-term relation? Sainsbury starts from the intuition that, on the one hand, thinking about Obama and thinking about Pegasus seem to be the same kind of thing (since both are cases of thinking about something), but, on the other hand, they also seem to be different kinds of thing because the first kind of thinking seems to be relational whereas the other does

not. The essay aims at offering a solution to this kind of problems by distinguishing varieties of relationality and by underlining that what matters is the two-term relational nature of all intentional states, regardless of whether or not the representations they involve have referents.

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