

Actually

On What There Might Have Been

True or False?

- My Uncle Leonard might have shopped for shoes during his last trip to London.
- My Uncle Leonard might have been my Aunt Delores.
- My Uncle Leonard might have been my dog Pavlov.
- My Uncle Leonard might have been a fruit fly.
- My Uncle Leonard might have been a door knob.
- My Uncle Leonard might have been a sigmoid.
 - —where a sigmoid, let us say, is a non-existent but possibly existing animal with a *modal distance* further from Uncle Leonard than a fruit fly enjoys.

Two Crucial Notions

- Possible Existence (and Possible Existents)
- Modal Distance

Modal Distance

- The modal distance **D** between **a** and **b** is the counterfactual space **a** would need to travel to be **b**.
 - If **a** = **b**, then **D** is zero.
 - If not possibly (**a** = **b**), then **D** is infinite.
 - Here, though, we might wish to be more fine-grained, as the non-traversable varies:
 - not possibly ($7 = 9$)
 - not possibly ($7 = \text{Uncle Leonard}$)
 - not possibly ($7 = \text{a wistful gaze in the direction of Alcibiades}$)

Possible Existence

Possible Existents

- We might ask: yes, but what *is* a sigmoid?
- So far: it is a non-existent type of animal whose modal distance from human beings is so great that it is not possible that my Uncle Leonard could have been one of them.
 - So, the modal distance between Uncle Leonard and a sigmoid is infinite.
 - So, too, let us grant, between every this-worldly animal and a sigmoid.
- So, then: there is a possible existent, a sigmoid, which is such that no this-worldly animal could have been one of them.
 - A sigmoid is an alien being, a truly alien being (TAB)
- Question: what makes that true that this or that TAB might have been?

Two Approaches

- Two ways to take this claim, from the standpoint of truth-makers:
 - It's possible that there is something which is such that . . .
- Take the quantification at face value:
 - There is a possible something, something non-actual, such that. . .
 - This is possibilism: actual existents are but a subset of all existents; in addition there are non-actual *possibilia*.
- Take the quantification as in the first instance restricted to the actual:
 - There is something, something actual, such that, possibly, it. . .
 - The actual and the existent are co-extensive; there are no *possibilia*.

For clarity: BF

- The Barcan Formula (BF), derivable from Simple Quantified Modal Logic:
- BF: $\forall x \Box \phi \rightarrow \Box \forall x \phi$
- or, equivalently: $\Diamond \exists x \phi \rightarrow \exists x \Diamond \phi$

BF: an Actualist's Nightmare?

- Taken at face value, BF seems to move decisively against Actualism
- After all, the expression ' $\Diamond \exists x \phi \rightarrow \exists x \Diamond \phi$ ' seems to say : if it's possible that there is something that is ϕ , then there *is* something such that it is possibly ϕ .
 - So, if it is possible that there is something that is sigmoid, then there is something which is possibly sigmoid. There *are* possible sigmoids.
 - Yet if no human or this worldly animal is possibly a sigmoid, then there must be something else — a possible but non-existent animal — which is such that it is possibly sigmoid.
 - So, there must be *possibilia*, and Actualism must be false.

But Wait

- We accept a commitment to Possibilism on the basis of BF only if the D as between every actual being (=every existing being) and indeed between every concatenation of all actual beings (=all existing beings) is infinite.
- So far, the bare existence of TABs does not deliver the result that Actualism must go.