

Penultimate draft—please cite/quote from the published version.

THE MODAL ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT MEETS MODAL FICTIONALISM

T. Parent (Virginia Tech)

parentt@vt.edu

1. Introduction

In an interview for *The New York Times*, Plantinga adopts a surprisingly strong Judeo-Christian stance. He says ‘There are vastly more Christian philosophers and vastly more visible or assertive Christian philosophy now than when I left graduate school,’ and is attributed the view that:

For too long...theists have been on the defensive, merely rebutting the charge that their beliefs are irrational. It’s time for believers in the old-fashioned creator God of the Bible to go on the offensive. (Schuessler 2011, p. 1)

The last bit may be a liberal paraphrase on the part of the *Times*. Yet such a ‘call to arms’ invites a response from those less confident of orthodox Christianity.

At the center of Plantinga’s view, there is a *modal* version of the ontological argument (Plantinga 1974a, b). (But, besides Anselm and Leibniz, precedents are found in Hartshorne 1941, Malcolm 1960, and Adams 1972.) My aim is to show that the argument commits a fallacy that is common among ontological arguments—though the way in which it is committed is distinctive. Yet the fallacy shall become apparent, once we run the argument assuming *fictionalism about possible worlds*.¹ The discussion ends with a broader, metaontological lesson about proper modal reasoning—which bears significantly other modal-metaphysical arguments in, e.g., Kripke (1972/1980), Chalmers (1996; 2010), and Williamson (2002; 2013).

¹ See Rosen (1990; 1993; 1995), Nolan & Hawthorne (1996), and Nolan (1997; 2002; 2011).

2. Background

The relevant fallacy may be called ‘the existential fallacy.’ The idea is that a term such as ‘God’ can be defined *ad libitum*—yet it does not follow that *there is* anything meeting the definition.

This sort of non-sequitur is exploited in Gaunilo-style arguments; consider for instance:²

(D0) ‘Existicorn’ denotes x iff x is a unicorn and x exists.

The reasoning, in very short form, would play out here as:

(i) ‘Existicorns exist’ is analytic. [From (D0)]

(ii) ‘Existicorns exist’ is true. [From (i)]

(iii) So, existicorns exist. [From the T-schema and (ii)]

Since existicorns are a kind of unicorn, the argument thus purports to show that unicorns exist.

The flaw, however, is that (D0) does not make (i) analytic. Rather, what it renders analytic is a conditional claim: *If* anything is an existicorn, it exists. The fallacy lies in failing to track this.

When it comes to modal arguments, ‘God’ is given a definition that implies:

(D1) ‘God’ denotes x only if, necessarily, x exists.

In Plantinga, the full definition defines “God” as *maximally great*—a being who, not only necessarily exists but also is, necessarily, maximally good, maximally knowledgeable, and maximally powerful. But (D1) isolates the most important element for argumentative purposes.³

Now unlike the existicorn argument, the modal argument avoids the existential fallacy on its face. For it takes as an additional premise:

² The example is adapted from Salmon (1987).

³ In fact, if x is ‘maximally great’ in Plantinga’s terminology, then the existence of x is *necessarily* necessary. But to simplify exposition, I here invoke axiom S4 (where adding more boxes on ‘ $\Box p$ ’ doesn’t alter its truth-condition).

Since Plantinga is already committed to S5, this should be uncontentious in the present debate.

(1) Possibly, God exists.

On an initial encounter at least, (1) seems entirely reasonable. And (1) with (D1) implies that in some possible world, God exists in every possible world. Yet given modal axiom B (Adams) or axiom S5 (Plantinga), it follows that God actually exists. (My focus shall be on Plantinga's argument, but my remarks are applicable to Adams and the rest as well.)

Formally reconstructed, where 'g' is a name for God as per (D1), the modal argument can be reconstructed as follows:

1. $\Diamond(\exists x) x = g$ [Assume]
2. $\Diamond\Box p \supset \Box p$ [S5]
3. $\Box[(\exists x) x = g \supset \Box(\exists y) y = g]$ [By definition of 'g']
4. $\Diamond\Box(\exists y) y = g$ [From 1., 3.]
5. $\Box(\exists x) x = g$ [From 4., 2.]
6. $(\exists x) x = g$ [From 5.]

In reply, however, Tooley (1981) observes that there remains a Gaunilo-type problem. We can alter the 'existicorn' example to illustrate:

(D2) 'Necessicorn' denotes x only if x is a unicorn and x necessarily exists.

Suppose further that:

(2) Necessicorns are possible.

In a parallel manner, then, it follows that necessicorns are necessary and, hence, that there actually exists a kind of unicorn.

Naturally, the ontological arguer can deny (2). Yet in that case, why not deny (1) as well? Tooley makes the point urgent by noting that one can turn the modal argument on its head. After all, instead of (1), one might be equally inclined to say:

(3) Possibly, God does not exist.

Then, given the relevant modal axiom plus (D2), it follows that necessarily God does not exist.

But the latter point is anticipated by Plantinga, and his reply is concessive, although not entirely. He allows that, since it is debatable which of (1) or (3) is true, his modal argument does not count as a *proof* of theism. Yet he thinks it still can make theism rational. More recently, however, Rasmussen (2010; 2012) has enlivened the possibility of a proof, by offering a novel defense of (1), or rather, something nearby:

(1*) A necessary being is possible.

As Rasmussen is aware, if (1*) is true, it does not follow that the necessary being is *God*. Indeed, in conversation, he has lamented the association between (1*) and theism, since it encourages a kind of ‘guilt by association.’ Yet with apologies to Rasmussen, I want to regard (1*) as ‘close enough’ to (1), so to be generous to the ontological arguer. Besides, it would be surprising enough if (1*) leads to the actual existence of some necessary entity.

Very briefly, the argument for (1*) first defines the ‘maximal state’ in a world *W* as the state consisting in the existence of all *contingent* beings in *W*. It is then suggested that in at least one world, the maximal state for that world has a cause. Moreover, its cause would not be a contingent being; otherwise some contingent being in that world would be prior to itself in the order of explanation. Hence, there is a world where the cause of the maximal state is necessary.

There are ways to question this reasoning, but let us allow it for discussion’s sake. I appreciate that Rasmussen’s argument improves on the traditional cosmological argument. For

instead of insisting that the *actual* universe has a cause, his suggestion is only that it is *possible* for all contingent beings to have a cause. Nevertheless, this along with S5 is enough to derive, Plantinga-style, that there actually is a necessary being.

3. The Objection from Modal Fictionalism

But as advertised, I shall argue that theism has not yet been established in light of *fictionalism about possible worlds*, a.k.a. ‘modal fictionalism’. In brief, thanks to fictionalism, we shall see that *an existential fallacy occurs* if the arguments are interpreted otherwise.

The modal fictionalist is one who denies the real existence of nonactual worlds, yet hopes to retain the truths of ordinary modal discourse (i.e., statements using terms like ‘possibly’, ‘necessarily’, ‘might’, ‘must’, and so on). She does this by interpreting the latter by a ‘story-prefix semantics’ or (SPS). According to (SPS), the truth-value of a modal statement is determined not by facts about genuine possible worlds, but by whether its paraphrase in possible-worlds discourse is entailed by *the modal fiction*. (The ‘modal fiction’ here is often an unflattering reference to Lewis’ view.⁴) (SPS) thus has it that ‘possibly, ϕ ’ is true iff: the modal fiction \mathbf{F} entails that there is a possible world where p —and *mutatis mutandis* for ‘necessarily, ψ .’ Or, where ‘ \models ’ expresses model-theoretic entailment, and ‘ W ’ is a variable for worlds:

(SPS₁) ‘Possibly, ϕ ’ is true iff $\mathbf{F} \models (\exists W) \phi$ is true-at- W

(SPS₂) ‘Necessarily, ψ ’ is true iff $\mathbf{F} \models (\forall W) \psi$ is true-at- W

⁴ A notorious difficulty arises here, known as the Brock-Rosen objection. (See Rosen 1993, Brock 1993.) The simplest fix seems to be Noonan’s (1994) proposal, where the modal fiction is based on Lewis (1969) rather than Lewis (1986). For now, we can assume Noonan’s solution, though I eventually suggest a novel solution to the Brock-Rosen problem; see n. 8.

However, as made especially clear by Liggins (2008), this is not enough for modal fictionalism. That's because (SPS) could equally be used to paraphrase sentences about the 'modal fiction' back into ordinary modal discourse. But naturally, the fictionalist applies the biconditionals in the other direction; she wants to translate modal discourse into talk about an actual fiction. So the right-hand side of each biconditional should be assigned a certain priority; it occurs in the fictionalist's preferred idiom.

With (SPS), the modal fictionalist claims to construe commonsense modal statements as literal truths, *sans* commitment to nonactual worlds. Take the following instance:

- (4) 'Possibly, talking donkeys exist' is true iff: In the modal fiction, there is a possible world W where 'Talking donkeys exist' is true-in- W .

The fictionalist regards the right-hand side as literally true; accordingly, (4) commits her to the literal truth of 'Possibly, talking donkeys exist'. But since the right-hand side starts with a story-prefix, nothing here commits her to nonactual worlds.

This describes a view that Rosen (1990) dubs *strong* modal fictionalism; it is often what contemporary metaphysicians first think of as 'modal fictionalism.' And to be clear, strong modal fictionalism differs from the more radical, so-called *broad* modal fictionalism. The latter says that not only is *talk about other worlds* fictional, but further, *ordinary modal claims* like 'Possibly, talking donkeys exist' are also fictional. But the weaker view (inconveniently labeled as 'strong') preserves that 'Possibly, talking donkeys exist' is literally true. It's just that its truth-condition is *not* a condition of a nonactual world; rather, it is a condition of some actual work of fiction.

Observe, however, that this means the strong modal fictionalist must (strictly speaking) deny the standard possible-worlds analysis that:

- (4*) 'Possibly, talking donkeys exist' is true iff there is a world with talking donkeys.

Although she thinks the left-hand side is literally true, she sees the right-hand side as only true-in-fiction. The two sides are thus seen as non-equivalent, and (4*) is thereby rejected. Arguably, however, this need not create a disadvantage. The strong modal fictionalist can still utilize the basic machinery of possible-worlds semantics; she just needs to add a fictionalizing-operator here and there.⁵

Let ‘fictionalism’ henceforth concern this strong modal fictionalist view exclusively. Consider, then, that although ordinary modal truths are upheld as literally true, Plantinga-style modal arguments that invoke possible worlds will end up looking rather different. For instance, the fictionalist will interpret (1) as the claim that *according to the modal fiction*, there is a possible world where God exists, symbolized below at 1_F .⁶ Whereas, axiom S5 is understood as per 2_F , so that it says *the fiction entails* that for any sentence ϕ , if there is a world where ϕ is true at all worlds, then ϕ is indeed true at all worlds. (Likewise, the necessity operator in the definitional 3 means that it is replaced with its fiction-relative, modal-free version.) More broadly, the reasoning reconstructed earlier at 1-6 now is understood as follows:

⁵ More details on this are given in the supplement to Nolan (2011). Even so, as an anonymous referee reminds me, a modal fictionalist may lapse into a literal commitment to other worlds if she attempts to analyze the story-prefix in the natural way: ‘ $\mathbf{F} \models p$ ’ is true iff, *at a world where \mathbf{F} is true, p is true*. (This alone does not imply that there is a world described by \mathbf{F} —but that is secured once we recognize that ‘ $\mathbf{F} \models p$ ’ is not always vacuously true). Rosen (op. cit.) recognizes this point, and offers a few rejoinders on the fictionalist’s behalf. But long story short, Rosen thinks the best solution is for the fictionalizing-operator to remain unanalyzed. (“Officially, the prefix is primitive,” Rosen 1995, p. 70). It is recognized all around that this is not ideal, but I shall assume here that such primitivist fictionalism is at least viable.

⁶ Lewis himself is neutral on the possibility of a necessary being; so if \mathbf{F} is Lewis’ view, 1_F is false strictly speaking. But waive this—the modal fictionalist can tailor her modal fiction as she wishes.

- 1_F. $\mathbf{F} \models (\exists W) \text{ '}(\exists x) x = g\text{' is true-at-}W$ ⁷
- 2_F. $\mathbf{F} \models (\exists W) \lceil (\forall V) \phi \text{ is true-at-}V \rceil \text{ is true-at-}W \supset (\forall V) \phi \text{ is true-at-}V$
- 3_F. $\mathbf{F} \models (\forall W) (\text{'}(\exists x) x = g\text{' is true-at-}W \supset (\forall V) \text{'}(\exists x) x = g\text{' is true-at-}V \text{ is true-at-}W)$
- 4_F. $\mathbf{F} \models (\forall W) (\forall V) \text{'}(\exists x) x = g\text{' is true-at-}V \text{ is true-at-}W$ [From 1_F, 3_F]
- 5_F. $\mathbf{F} \models (\forall V) \text{'}(\exists x) x = g\text{' is true-at-}V$ [From 4_F, 2_F]
- 6_F. $\mathbf{F} \models (\exists x) x = g$ [From 5_F]

But thus far, what is shown is just that *the modal fiction* is committed to the actuality of God. And this does not establish that God is actual. For in general, if a fiction says that p , it does not follow that p . Indeed, if the entire argument is embedded in a fiction, we can hardly assume it is a guide to what actually exists beyond the fiction.⁸

Before considering objections, three clarifications are necessary. First, Plantinga may protest that 6_F is not a proper rendering of *his* conclusion, for he means to conclude that God *non-fictionally* exists. But if the proper semantics of his premises is the fictionalist's semantics, then 6_F is the most that follows.⁹ Plantinga indeed concludes something stronger, yet in so doing, he simply discounts the fictionalist's rendering of his premises. (Plantinga might respond that the

⁷ N.B., 'true' is here used as a predicate of sentences. However, this is inessential; one could revise the arguments without loss so that the predicate applies to propositions instead.

⁸ Similarly, in reply to the Brock-Rosen objection, a fictionalist can insist her view implies only that according to the modal fiction, 'A plurality of worlds exists' is true. And it in no way follows from this that a plurality of worlds *non-fictionally* exists. The fictionalist reply to the modal argument thus also reveals a novel response to Brock-Rosen.

⁹ Obviously, *within the formal system S5*, the argument at 1–6 is demonstrably valid. But if one wants to apply the formalism to draw conclusions about metaphysical reality, one needs to interpret it—and the basic issue is whether the fictionalist's interpretation of the formalism is the right one (vs., e.g., the modal realist's interpretation, the ersatzter's interpretation, etc.).

fictionalist is unfaithful to what *he* meant by his premises, but I wish to save these additional dialectics for section 5.)

Second, the claim that theism ‘does not follow’ is subject to different interpretations. (Ditto with talk of a ‘fallacy’.) This could mean that it is *logically* or *metaphysically* possible for the premises to be true and the conclusion false. Or, it may suggest that it is *epistemically* or *doxastically* possible for the premises to be true and the conclusion false. Thus, in the latter case, the argument might end up being *de facto* valid, though its validity would be an open question. Yet the open question would be enough to sap the dialectical force of the modal argument, which is the ultimate aim of the objection. Consequently, the objector is free to be neutral on the sense in which the conclusion ‘does not follow.’

Third, ‘theism does not follow’ should not be glossed as ‘there is a world where the premises are true while theism is false.’ If the objection from fictionalism were taken that way, then fictionalism itself may imply that the objection holds only in the modal fiction. So instead, the fictionalist’s objection should be framed in ordinary modal discourse, as in ‘it is possible for the premises to be true while theism is [non-fictionally] false.’ Naturally, a fictionalist unpacks the premises in terms of what the modal fiction says about possible worlds. But again, if she is right that these ultimately represent actual facts about an actual fiction, then she upholds the literal truth of the premises, and her accusation of a non-sequitur remains literally correct.

4. Replies and Counter-Replies

One rejoinder on Plantinga’s behalf is that modal fictionalism licenses more than what has been admitted. In particular, a modal fictionalist typically holds that the fiction accurately represents

the *actual* world at least.¹⁰ Thus, if the fiction entails something about the actual world, as at \mathfrak{G}_F , she treats it as true of the non-fictional actual world as well. And generally, for any non-modal sentence ψ , she holds that:

(*) ψ is true-in-@ if $\mathbf{F} \models \psi$ is true-in-@

So given \mathfrak{G}_F , (*) would license the conclusion that God is non-fictionally actual.

Dialectically, however, notice what has occurred. The conclusion of the modal argument does not follow *unless one recruits a further, substantive premise at (*)*. And (*) is not something we get for free, at least not when theism is at stake. After all, it is an *empirical* matter whether a fiction \mathbf{F} accurately represents our world (a point I would think uncontroversial).

Nevertheless, some have replied that (*) is partly *constitutive* of modal fictionalism, so that the fictionalist should get it for free. In that case, let us grant it is not a ‘fictionalist’ view per se that creates the difficulty. Rather, it is the idea that reasoning about other worlds might be like reasoning about the story-line of *Pinnocchio*. In both cases, what obtains in the fiction is largely independent of what is otherwise actual. Whether one calls the view ‘fictionalist’ is of little importance. But to avoid controversy, let us qualify it as ‘cautious modal fictionalism.’

As a similar objection, it seems the theist can infer that God is actual outside the fiction, assuming also that:

(**) $(\exists x) x = g$, if $\mathbf{F} \models (\forall W) (\exists x) x = g$ is true-in- W

Further, (**) can be given a compelling defense. Consider that if a (non-modal) ϕ is *necessarily* true, then even if it occurs in the ‘modal fiction,’ there is still reason to say its necessity implies its actual truth. That’s because a proper modal fiction still successfully describes *every possible way that the world might be*. Each maximally consistent set is used to define each such way.

¹⁰ E.g., Rosen (1990, p. 335) builds his modal fiction to include an exhaustive encyclopedia of the actual world.

Consider, then, that the theist purports to show that ‘God exists’ is a member of every such set. If she is right about this, and if these sets represent absolutely every possible way the world might be, then *there is no possible way* for our world to be a Godless world. So God is non-fictionally actual.

The reasoning here enjoys great intuitive force. But strictly speaking, it is question-begging against the cautious fictionalist. For one, it presumes that there are fiction-independent facts about the various ways our world might be. For another, it assumes that the worlds described by the maximally consistent sets *exhaust* these ways. If that were granted, then (**) would obviously follow. But our fictionalist has some reason to be cautious about the assumption here as well.

Consider that if the sets are exhaustive, then some maximally consistent set corresponds to the actual world, where ‘consistency’ means *classical* consistency. Yet there are many ways to question classical logic vis-à-vis the actual world. For instance, as Quine (1951) famously pointed out, quantum mechanics casts doubt on the Law of Excluded Middle. Mathematical intuitionism also motivates such doubt, and indeterminacy views about vagueness (e.g., Parsons 1987) add to the doubts as well. Besides intuitionistic logics, moreover, there are a multitude of other nonclassical logics which would need to be ruled out. So as things stand, the cautious fictionalist thinks agnosticism is best on whether our world fits a classically consistent description.¹¹

Perhaps such doubts strike the reader as contrived. Commonsensically, the actual world conforms to LEM and other classical principles. But the cautious fictionalist retorts that,

¹¹ Even if one can establish LEM in the *actual* world, it is yet a further (and rather large) step to say LEM holds in *every possible* world. This is not directly relevant to the dialectic over (*). But as an aside, it is worth stressing how much is assumed in requiring classically consistent descriptions of worlds.

especially since there are *scientific* reasons to doubt LEM, appeals to ‘commonsense’ ring hollow. Accordingly, she thinks it is clearly more rational to suspend judgment. That means she will not accept that the maximally consistent sets must include one set that represents the actual world.¹² But since the argument for (***) assumes otherwise, she will not be moved by the argument.

A different complaint, however, is that the objection from cautious fictionalism overgeneralizes. For it would seem to create havoc for modal reasoning in general. Consider that it is eminently valid to reason as follows:

- (a) Necessarily, camels are mammals.
- (b) Necessarily, mammals are animals.
- (c) So, necessarily, camels are animals.
- (d) So, camels are actually animals.

But if modal truths are fixed by a fiction, the reasoning becomes fallacious, at least when (c) is thought sufficient for the *non-fictional* truth of (d). For the reasoning is interpreted as follows:

- (e) $\mathbf{F} \models$ In each world, camels are mammals.

¹² Consequently, the cautious fictionalist is agnostic about axiom (T): $\Box p \supset p$. If p is true in all classical worlds, p follows only if our world is a classical world (and the cautious fictionalist is ultimately agnostic about that). Still, shouldn't (T) be accepted as *analytic*? This would be question-begging, for (SPS) is supposed to define modal discourse, thus, wholly determine what is true by definition in that discourse. And the cautious fictionalist's view is that the *nonfictional* actuality of p is *not* true by the definition of ' $\Box p$ ' (although the fictional actuality of p indeed follows analytically). Even so, as I explain further down in the main text, the cautious fictionalist might nonetheless grant the truth of (*) in some contexts. Ditto with (T). But she will not grant such things in all contexts. As a reminder, I need not make this stance *attractive* in opposing the modal argument. But I do need it to be tenable, and no question-begging argument will show otherwise.

(f) $F \models$ In each world, mammals are animals.

(g) So, $F \models$ In each world, camels are animals.

(h) So, $F \models$ Camels are actually animals.

Here too, (h) does not mean that ‘Camels are actually animals’ is true outside the fiction—unless something like (*) is assumed. But (*) is not something the cautious fictionalist takes for granted. So cautious fictionalism undermines a piece of eminently valid reasoning.

This is not the place for a general defense of modal fictionalism.¹³ Regardless, since the view is meant to be viable at least, observe that the reasoning of (a)-(d) is importantly dissimilar to the modal argument. To wit, the premises and the conclusion are utterly uncontroversial.¹⁴ They may just help regiment or systematize what we already know, rather than prove something *de novo*. Also, following some remarks by van Fraassen (1989), talk of ‘necessity’ or ‘truth in all worlds’ may just focus inquiry by excluding specific explanatory questions from consideration.¹⁵ For instance, ‘necessarily’ in (a) may effectively render otiose the question of why mammalhood in our world is ‘constantly conjoined’ with animalhood.¹⁶

¹³ For the record, I am not a modal fictionalist; I instead suffer from a kind of Meinongianism. See Parent ms. To be honest, my kind of Meinongianism may lead into cautious modal fictionalism, but I omit this discussion here.

¹⁴ An extreme Quinean about modality might reject (a)-(c), but I am not very concerned about that. (I would argue that not even Quine dispensed with modal notions altogether; see section 3 of Parent 2008.)

¹⁵ I am thinking here especially of van Fraassen’s remarks in the first sections of his chapter 2. Although he does not explicitly mention fictionalism about possible worlds until chapter 3.

¹⁶ Even so, this may just replace the question with: Why there is constant conjunction in *every* possible world? Philosophers often treat this as a brute fact, but van Fraassen implies it may be better to take as brute just the *actual* constant conjunction. This may indeed help relegate possible worlds to the realm of fiction.

At any rate, in the case of (a)-(d), the cautious fictionalist may have no problem in granting (*), thus allowing that the argument is valid. Nevertheless—this does not mean she will grant us (*) whenever we want. In particular, if we tout an existence proof using premises about multiple worlds, she will ask whether we take too seriously what may just be a useful fiction.

Some may object that this is just skepticism about modality. But first, note that cautious fictionalism is not modal *nihilism*; it does not declare all modal discourse to be literally false. That would be the result if broad modal fictionalism were at issue. But again, our cautious fictionalist grants the literal truth of (1), (S5), and many other commonsense modal claims.

It is true, however, that this fictionalist is *cautious* about how modal truths bear on the real world. So in one sense, she is skeptical. Even so, one should not think of this as an *idle* sort of skepticism. The cautious fictionalist is not asking anyone to rule out bizarre possibilities (e.g., a deceiving demon) that no one would ever take seriously. To the contrary, cautious fictionalism is worth taking very seriously. A fictionalist can argue (quite compellingly) that it is just unwarranted to take linguistic intuitions as evidence for nonactual worlds or even ersatz-worlds. Granted, the ersatzer option might be the more sane one.¹⁷ But either way, the cautious fictionalist sees all this as wildly speculative. According to her, even the ersatzer is making quite a dramatic claim with little to no independent evidence, viz., that there really are abstract objects which play *exactly* the semantic role the ersatzer wants.¹⁸ She might add (in a Moorean spirit) that all things considered, it is more likely that possible worlds are mere fictions.

¹⁷ On ersatzism, see Adams (1974), Plantinga (1976), and Lycan (1979; 1994).

¹⁸ Rosen (1990) claims the modal fictionalist is committed to *one* kind of abstract object, viz., a ‘modal fiction’. But in fact, she could adopt nominalism about works of fiction. In contrast, ersatzism as usually understood does not allow nominalizing (ersatz) worlds. (Even Carnap’s ‘state descriptions’—which are as close to ‘nominal worlds’ as ersatzers get—are defined by sentence-*types*.)

Still, one need not insist on all this to press the objection from cautious fictionalism. The main point is just that such fictionalism provides a non-idle counter-possibility which has not been ruled out. And that means theism has not yet been shown from (1) and (S5).

Even so, some have said that the objection is too bold. An objector may be better off just rejecting (1) or (S5). I myself am unsure of this, but the point can be granted. The objection from cautious fictionalism would remain of interest regardless, insofar as it furthers doubt about the modal argument. Plus, the objection occupies an especially strong dialectical position. For the fictionalist *agrees* with the ontological arguer that (1) and (S5) express literal truths. The problem, however, is that if these premises have a fictionalist semantics, then their literal truth only reflects what some actual fiction says. Thus construed, the premises are not suited to establish truths about what is *actual*, independent of the fiction. Yet since the premises are indeed granted, theism should remain an open question *even by the ontological arguer's own lights*. This dialectical effect is absent if one just denies (1) or (S5).

5. The Modal Argument as an Existential Fallacy

As a different rejoinder, it seems the cautious fictionalist interprets the modal argument in an unintended way. Plausibly, the ontological arguer meant the premises to be construed per the usual possible-worlds semantics. If so, (1) should be interpreted along the following lines:

(5) (1) is true iff there is a world where God exists.

But thus interpreted, a fictionalist will say that (1) is at best true only in fiction. Regardless—if (1) is so interpreted, she has no basis for claiming that a non-sequitur has occurred. She would not have shown that it is possible for the premises to be *true* (on their intended reading) while the conclusion is false.

In one respect, the point is fair. But in another respect, it begs the question against the fictionalist. For her view is precisely that statements like (5) are misleading, and that modal discourse should instead be analyzed per (SPS). Again, this is because she thinks the real existence of worlds is not required for the literal truth of ordinary modal discourse. Accordingly, she will regard (5) as just wrong-headed. It is as if the ontological arguer insists on taking literally talk about ‘doing x for Mary’s sake’—as if there were literally entities called ‘sakes.’

More broadly, if the modal argument is given the standard possible world semantics, then it commits an existential fallacy. Yet here, the fallacy would occur not in relation to the definition of God, but rather in relation to Kripke’s (1959; 1963) definitions of possible worlds. Consider that in Kripke’s modal semantics, a world is defined by a maximally consistent set of sentences—and let us assume per the modal argument that each set contains ‘God exists’. Still, it does not follow that there are *non-fictional* worlds that satisfy those definitions. So even if theism is a theorem in Kripke’s system, that may be just be a point about the actual world *according to the fiction*. When it comes to our non-fictional world, what follows from Kripke’s system is conditionally true only, conditional on the existence of multiple worlds.

However, this somewhat oversimplifies matters. After all, both Adams (1974) and Plantinga (1976) adopt modal ersatzism, an interpretation of Kripke’s logic that forgoes the literal existence of other worlds. Accordingly, when these authors levy the modal argument, they do not presume such things exist.¹⁹ But though the existence of *worlds* is denied, they still hold that there are fiction-independent modal *facts*.

¹⁹ Occasionally, ersatzers are described as *realists* about possible worlds; see, e.g. Divers (2002). On this characterization, the ersatzers’ worlds are identified with actual abstracta (in contrast to the nonactual concreta of Lewis 1986). But: If some actual abstracta are literally identical to *other worlds*, then they would be both nonactual and actual. (This is roughly what Divers calls the ‘D-problem.’) For this reason, I ultimately prefer to construe

Considering cautious fictionalism, however, such facts are contentious.²⁰ Indeed, ersatzers also have their problems, and cautious fictionalism says that the very idea of fiction-independent modality is a mistake. So the fallacy in the modal argument is not so much that Kripke's definitions are presumed to represent extant possible worlds. It is rather that the modal facts represented are assumed to exist independently of fiction.²¹

Put in this light, the modal argument commits an existential fallacy even if modal realism is true. For, thanks to cautious fictionalism, one cannot just *assume* that there are fiction-independent modal facts. (In *Plurality*, Lewis has his indispensability argument for realism, but even he admits it leaves room for debate.) So the relevance of the existential fallacy is quite general: If cautious fictionalism has not been ruled out, then without further comment, the modal argument does not settle the theism question.

Here is one last concern. It has been said that if the theist's argument still works under the standard possible world semantics, she may not care whether it fails on the fictionalist semantics.

'ersatzism' as *anti-realist* about other worlds. This view posits actual semantic surrogates—actual abstracta that fix the meaning of modal discourse *in lieu of* nonactual worlds, strictly so-called. (Lycan 1994 is especially clear that his ersatzism is to be understood this way.) Perhaps Adams and Plantinga *de facto* think of their ersatzism as a type of realism—but then their ersatzism does not alter the dialectical situation with the fictionalist. The fictionalist's point was not that the modal argument is contingent on the existence of other *concrete* worlds, but rather contingent on the existence of other *worlds*.

²⁰ To be clear, the cautious fictionalist can agree (if she likes) that there are fiction-independent facts about the maximally consistent sets. But she would still deny that these facts constitute *modal* facts.

²¹ The fallacy could also be illustrated via modal conventionalism (see Sidelle 1989; Thomasson 2008, pp. 60-62). But the case of fictionalism strikes me as less contentious. A Carnapian view of possible worlds also seems to work, where worlds exist only 'internal' to a framework. Then, even if God exists in the modal framework, it does not follow that God exists external to the framework. (The latter would be meaningless).

The standard semantics is, after all, the standard semantics. I have two replies. First (assuming this is not some kind of *ad populum*) it is not clear why the theist puts credence in a semantics being *de facto* standard. But more importantly, the foregoing discussion illustrates what is well-known—that the standard possible-worlds semantics comes with a colossal ontology. It apparently demands a commitment to concrete nonactual worlds, or at least, to non-denumerably many abstracta of a cherry-picked kind. The fictionalist, on the other hand, promises the benefits of the standard semantics without the ontological cost. And if the fictionalist can deliver, this seems considerably more impressive than a semantics which just bears the ‘standard’ brand.

6. The Metaontological Lesson

So unless we show the fictionalist fails to deliver (or unless (*) is granted in context), the modal argument commits an existential fallacy. The point, moreover, can be extended. The modal ontological argument is just one instance where philosophers deploy premises about other worlds to argue substantive metaphysical views. For instance, ‘pain’ is sometimes analyzed as a state that is both actual and nonphysical (cf. Kripke 1978/1982, Chalmers 1996; 2010). Similarly, a philosopher might analyze a ‘proposition’ as an entity that literally has the relevant individual(s) as parts. (As a result, one may be led to believe in one’s own necessary existence; cf. Williamson 2002; 2013.) Yet even if these are accurate analyses of one’s concepts, it does not follow that *there are* things that fall under the concepts, thus analyzed.

Like the modal ontological arguer, however, it can be replied that the object of the concept is at least *possible*. Assume, for instance, that there is a possible world where none of one’s physical state tokens are mental tokens (a world where you are a ‘zombie’). Then, by the necessity of identity, it apparently follows that none of one’s *actual* physical state tokens are

identical to mental tokens.²² As is well-known, the leading objection to this denies that the zombie world is a real possibility. But there is now an alternate way to resist the argument. Thanks to our fictionalist explorations, one can instead *grant* that that the zombie world is a possible world. For if cautious fictionalism is true, this is to say only that *the modal fiction* is committed to a zombie world. And that hardly bears on whether one's *actual* physical states are token-distinct from mental states. It may just reveal that they are distinct according to the fiction.

I am not able to pursue here this instance of the fictionalist objection. Yet the case of the ontological argument indicates, I believe, how the details would go. Generally, if the ontological argument reveals that one cannot define things into existence, then in particular, one cannot define modal facts into existence. A fortiori, one cannot use a Kripkean definition of modal facts to discover the essential features of an *actual* thing. Specifically, if a Kripkean logic entails that 'the mental is nonphysical' is true in every world, this may reflect only what our modal fiction *says* about the mental—and that is hardly a reliable guide to what is actual.

If such cautious fictionalism has not been ruled out, then, the dualist argument seems to commit an existential fallacy. As with the modal argument, if worlds are only a useful fiction, the reasoning would just abuse the device of possible worlds. Indeed, our kind of fictionalist thinks possible worlds are just meant to regiment or systematize our understanding of things. Perhaps they also help focus inquiry, insofar as talk of 'true in all worlds' brackets specific explanatory questions. Either way, possible worlds would earn their keep by reducing cognitive load and/or facilitating strategies for successful action. I am uncertain whether this sort of view is

²² For convenience, I am glossing differences between Kripkean and Chalmers-style arguments. E.g., unlike Kripke, Chalmers does not argue from the necessity of identity, but rather from the supervenience of the mental on the physical. But I assume such things do not affect the present point. Regardless of the details, the cautious fictionalist thinks the zombie world shows at most a truth about the modal fiction, not a truth independent of the fiction.

ultimately correct. But insofar as it is viable, it is fallacious to presume that modal logic is a window to our world.

[4924 words]

Acknowledgments

I thank Marcus Arvan, Jason Bowers, David Faraci, William Larkin, Moti Mizrahi, Joshua Rasmussen, and an anonymous reviewer, for invaluable comments on earlier drafts. I also thank audiences at the 2013 Northwest Philosophy Conference, and at the 2013 Illinois Philosophical Association

References

- Adams, R. (1972). The logical structure of Anselm's arguments. *Philosophical Review*, 80, 28-54.
- _____. (1974). Theories of actuality. *Noûs*, 8, 211–231.
- Brock, S. (1993). Modal fictionalism: A response to Rosen. *Mind*, 102, 147–150.
- Chalmers, D. (1996). *The conscious mind*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- _____. (2010). *The character of consciousness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Divers, J. (2002). *Possible worlds*. London: Routledge.
- Hartshorne, C. (1941). *Man's vision of God*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Kripke, S. (1959). A completeness theorem in modal logic. *Journal of Symbolic Logic*, 24, 1–14.
- _____. (1963). Semantical considerations on modal logic. *Acta Philosophica Fennica*, 16, 83–94.
- _____. (1972). Naming and necessity. In G. Harman & D. Davidson (Eds.), *The semantics of natural language* (pp. 253–355 & 763–769). Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Reidel.
- Reprinted as Kripke, S. (1980). *Naming and necessity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Lewis, D. (1986). *On the plurality of worlds*. Malden, MA: Blackwell
- Lycan, W. (1979). The trouble with possible worlds. In M. Loux (Ed.), *The possible and the actual* (pp. 274–316). Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- _____. (1994). *Modality and meaning*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Malcolm, N. (1960). Anselm's ontological arguments. *Philosophical Review*, 69, 41–62.
- Nolan, D. (1997). Three problems for 'strong' modal fictionalism. *Philosophical Studies*, 87, 259–275.
- _____. (2002). *Topics in the philosophy of possible worlds*. New York: Routledge.
- _____. (2011). Modal fictionalism. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, winter edition, E. Zalta (Ed.). <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/fictionalism-modal>. Accessed 4 April 2014.
- Nolan, D. & Hawthorne, J. (1996). Reflexive fictionalisms. *Analysis*, 56(1), 23–32.
- Parent, T. (2008). Quine and logical truth. *Erkenntnis*, 68, 103-112.
- _____. (ms.) Conservative Meinongianism. Draft available at:
<http://www.unc.edu/~tparent/conservativeMeinong.pdf>
- Parsons, T. (1987). Entities without identity. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 1, 1–19.
- Plantinga, A. (1974a). *The nature of necessity*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- _____. (1974b). *God, freedom, and evil*. New York: Harper & Row.
- _____. (1976). Actualism and possible worlds. *Theoria*, 42, 139-160.
- Quine, W. (1951). Two dogmas of empiricism. *Philosophical Review*, 60(1), 20–43.
- Rasmussen, J. (2010). From states of affairs to a necessary being. *Philosophical Studies*, 148(2), 183–200.
- _____. (2011). A new argument for a necessary being. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 89(2), 351–356.

- Rosen, G. (1990). Modal fictionalism, *Mind*, 99, 327–354.
- _____. (1993). A problem for fictionalism about possible worlds. *Analysis*, 53, 71–81.
- _____. (1995). Modal fictionalism fixed. *Analysis*, 55(2), 67–73.
- Salmon, N. (1987). Existence. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 1, 49–108.
- Schuessler, J. (2011). Philosopher sticks up for God. *The New York Times* (December 13, 2011).
www.nytimes.com/2011/12/14/books/alvin-plantingas-new-book-on-god-and-science.html. Accessed 4 April 2014.
- Sidelle, A. (1989). *Necessity, essence, and individuation: A defense of conventionalism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Thomasson, A. (2008). *Ordinary objects*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Tooley, M. (1981). Plantinga's defence of the ontological argument. *Mind*, 90/359, 422–427.
- Van Fraassen, B. (1989). *Laws and symmetry*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Williamson, T. (2002). Necessary existents. In A. O'Hear (Ed.), *Logic, thought, and language* (pp. 233-251). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- _____. (2013). *Modal logic as metaphysics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.