

# Could I Have Been a Turnip?



A Very Short Introduction  
to the Philosophy of  
Modality

# Modality

- If something is **possible**, it *could have* happened.
- If something is **necessary**, it *had to* happen.
- If something is **actual**, then it *did* happen.
- If something is **necessary**, then its failure to happen is impossible.
- If something is **possible**, then its failure to happen is not necessary.

# Possibility

- Some things are **possible and actual**
- Some things are **possible but not actual**
- If something is the case, then it is possible:

**Everything that's actual is possible**

Hence observation can tell you something about what's possible. But observation doesn't seem to tell you that much about what's **merely possible**: that is, what's possible but not actual.

# Necessity

Nor does observation tell you much about what's **necessary**. Of course, if something is necessary, it actually happens:

**Everything that's necessary is actual**

Given that what's necessary is actual, you can observe *necessities*. But you don't seem to observe that things *are necessary*.

# Kinds of Possibility

- There are different kinds of possibility and necessity:
- **Physical possibility:** Consistent the laws of physics
- **Epistemic possibility:** Consistent with what I know
- **Metaphysical possibility:** Consistent with the metaphysical truths
- **Logical Possibility:** Logically consistent

# Philosophical Questions

- If we can't observe that something is merely possible or necessary, how can we *know* about what's merely possible or necessary?
- What's possible and what's necessary?
- What *makes* something possible or necessary?

# What's Possible?

- I could have had brown eyes.
- Could I have had wings?
- Could I have been able to read minds?
- Could I have been a turnip?



Many philosophers think that **what could be possible is possible.**

Not all: there is an alleged counterexample.  
Take this table...



# What's Necessary?

- It looks like it's necessary that I'm a human being. Being a human being is part of my **essence**.
- Similarly, it's necessary that water is H<sub>2</sub>O: being H<sub>2</sub>O is part of the essence of water.
- It's necessary that vixens are female foxes.
- Mathematical and logical truths are necessary.

# Necessitism

- Could you have failed to exist?
- Timothy Williamson says 'no': you are a **necessary existent**. You could have been **non-concrete**, but not *nothing*.
- Necessitists hold that there are possible unicorns: things that could have been unicorns. But they may not be unicorns; perhaps they are **merely possible** unicorns.

# What Makes Things Possible and Necessary?

A Very Bad Idea:

## **Conventionalism**

What makes something necessary or possible is how we define our terms. For example, we define a 'bachelor' as an unmarried man, and that's why it is necessary that bachelors are unmarried.

Conventionalism is false.

- First: If 'vixen' had meant *male fox*, then it would still have been the case that vixens are female foxes.
- Second: It is necessary that I am not a turnip. But the sentence 'Dan is not a turnip' does not seem to be true by definition.

# Modal Reductionism

- Hold onto your hats.
- David K Lewis (1941-2001) held that what makes something possible is that there is a real, concrete universe- a **possible world**- where things really are that way. What makes it true that there could be unicorns is that there is a possible world in which there are real, concrete unicorns.

- What makes something **necessary** is that it is true in every possible world.
- What makes something **actual** is just that it is true in *this* possible world.
- All possible worlds are metaphysically on a par: this world is not *metaphysically special*.
- What makes it true that I could have had wings is that there is a **counterpart** of me at some possible world who has wings. (Do I have a counterpart who's a turnip?)

- Modal reductionism + concrete possible worlds = **modal realism**
- You can be a modal reductionist without being a modal realist. Maybe possible worlds are abstract things, like stories (**ersatzism**).
- Two objections to modal realism:
  - (1) There are no unicorns!
  - (2) Why aren't concrete possible worlds just more of what is actual?

# Modalism

- There are some **basic, fundamental, unanalysable** facts about what's possible and what's necessary.
- Modalists can deny that there are unicorns: there could be unicorns, but there aren't.
- Objection: Modalism gives up the task of explaining what makes things possible and necessary.

Thank you

# Reading

- Easy: Ch. 9 of Conee, E & Sider, T (2005), *Riddles of Existence*, Oxford: OUP
- Medium: Beebe, Effingham & Goff (2011), *Metaphysics: The Key Concepts*, London: Routledge
- Hard: Part III of Loux, M (2007), *Metaphysics: Contemporary Readings* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition), London: Routledge
- Hard: Lewis, D K (1986), *On the Plurality of Worlds*, Oxford: OUP