

David Lewis on Ways Things Might Be: An Examination of Modal Realism through Lewis's Correspondence

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Abstract

David Lewis is widely known for maintaining the bizarre thesis known as genuine modal realism (hereafter, modal realism). He argued for modal realism on grounds of serviceability in *On the Plurality of Worlds*. However, earlier in *Counterfactuals*, he proposed a different kind of argument: from talk of ways things might be to possible worlds. In this paper, I examine the evolution of the latter argument in Lewis's thought and evaluate its place in his overall case for modal realism, especially in light of the alternative theory of modality known as magical ersatzism. I argue that Lewis turns the argument on its head in his critique of magical ersatzism, but that his later commitment to Ramseyan humility subjects him to a similar criticism. Therefore, the argument is, ultimately, a poisoned pawn for Lewis.

Keywords: metaphysics of modality, possible worlds, modal realism, magical ersatzism, Ramseyan humility

1. Introduction

David Lewis is widely known for maintaining the bizarre thesis known as genuine modal realism (hereafter, modal realism). According to modal realism, our world is one among many possible worlds; other worlds are equally real as our world and only differ from ours with respect to what occurs in them. There is no difference in categorial kind: the actual world and possible worlds are both concrete. The word 'actual' is indexical, referring to the world in which the predicate is expressed. The property of *being actual* is relative to each world and does not hold any ontic significance. On his preferred demarcation of possible worlds, each world, including our own, is a maximal sum of spatiotemporally interrelated things. Each world, then, is spatiotemporally disconnected from every other world. As such, a thing existing in a world is bound to that world. A thing exists in another world insofar as that thing has a counterpart that exists in that other world. Lewis also admits mereological sums of worlds and parts of worlds, along with sets of such things. His ontology has two categories: concreta and sets. As a comprehensive metaphysic, modal realism explains necessary truth, possibility, counterfactuals, propositions, properties, events, persistence, change, de re modal

ascriptions, and much more. Its simplicity, elegance, and explanatory breath are hardly rivalled, even today.¹

On the Plurality of Worlds (hereafter, *Plurality*) is Lewis's book-length exposition and defence of modal realism, from the mid-1980s.² But this theory dates back to the late 1960s when he first realised that possibilia are 'tolerably well behaved'³ and 'clear enough to use in other philosophical efforts'.⁴ It is evident that he had in mind 'standard of goodness'⁵ and that these standards – otherwise called theoretical virtues – guided him in initially adopting modal realism. If the concept of a possible world is clear enough and possibilia yield a fruitful theory and do not offend ontic parsimony, we have before us a very theoretically beneficial theory. This early consideration reflects his mature argument from *Plurality*, wherein he offers a serviceability argument for modal realism in its opening pages. He writes: 'Why believe in a plurality of worlds? – Because the hypothesis is serviceable, and that is a reason to think that it is true'.⁶ However, earlier in *Counterfactuals*, he proposed a different kind of argument for modal realism. There are ways things might be, so, given a Quinean criterion of ontic commitment, our ontology includes entities called 'ways things might be', which he called 'possible worlds'.⁷ Call this *the argument from ways*.

The argument from ways was Lewis's initial attempt at an argument for modal realism, after the philosophical world got wind of the theory. Naturally, it was critically discussed in the literature, by such contemporaries as Robert Stalnaker and Peter van Inwagen.⁸ Despite this, Lewis did not give up on the idea that ways things might be are identical with worlds, but he recognised that the argument from ways does not establish modal realism. In recognising the implausibility of the argument, he used it to argue against magical ersatzism in *Plurality*. In effect, he turns the argument on its head, weaponising it against an opponent. However, in doing so, he opens himself up to a compelling objection in light of his later commitment to Ramseyan humility. Therefore, the argument from ways is, ultimately, a poisoned pawn for Lewis.

¹ For an accessible survey, see Phillip Bricker, "Concrete Possible Worlds", in *Contemporary Debates in Metaphysics*, ed. T. Sider, J. Hawthorne, and D. Zimmerman (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 111-34.

² David Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

³ David Lewis, *Convention: A Philosophical Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), 209.

⁴ Letter 126. To W.V. Quine, 1 October 1968. See Helen Beebe and A.R.J. Fisher, eds., *Philosophical Letters of David K. Lewis: Volume 1: Causation, Modality, Ontology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 252.

⁵ See David Lewis, "Analog and Digital", *Noûs* 5, no. 3 (1971): 324; Helen Beebe and A.R.J. Fisher, eds., *Philosophical Letters of David K. Lewis*, 462.

⁶ Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*, 3.

⁷ David Lewis, *Counterfactuals* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 84.

⁸ Robert C. Stalnaker, "Possible Worlds", *Noûs* 10, no. 1 (1976): 65-75; Peter van Inwagen, "Two Concepts of Possible Worlds", *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 11 (1986): 185-213.

The better, more plausible and compelling argument for modal realism is the serviceability argument. It is easy to agree that the success of modal realism rests on that argument, although it too has received scrutiny concerning the epistemic status of theoretical virtues.⁹ Nonetheless, an examination of the argument from ways yields a fruitful discussion worth reflecting on for the following reasons. First, the snippet in *Counterfactuals* that contains the argument from ways was readily anthologised, even after the publication of *Plurality*.¹⁰ That snippet was and still is a convenient, self-contained discussion of Lewis's views about possible worlds, especially for instruction in metaphysics. But, because of this, an impression is generated that the argument from ways is a lasting argument for modal realism, never un-endorsed by its author. This impression should be corrected. Second, an examination of the argument from ways affords a lens into his system and provides a new assessment of it, which advances the debate on the success of his system and its continuing legacy in the twenty-first century.

In this paper, I examine the evolution of the argument from ways in Lewis's thought and evaluate its place in his overall case for modal realism, especially in light of magical ersatzism. In what follows, I provide a contextual analysis of the argument from ways and argue that it did not *lead* him to adopt modal realism; instead it was put forth as an *ex post facto* consideration. I then explain why Lewis retreated from the argument from ways in subsequent work and demonstrate that its failure is crucial to understanding his debate with magical ersatzers. Finally, I identify a tension between his critique of magical ersatzism and his later commitment to Ramseyan humility, which I argue poses a threat to his realism and conception of philosophical analysis.

2. The Path to Modal Realism

Beginning with 'Counterpart Theory and Quantified Modal Logic' and *Convention*,¹¹ Lewis judged that possibles (as he called them then) are clear enough to use in philosophical analyses. Possibles or possibilia are unreduced entities, i.e., not reduced to anything else such as state descriptions or sets of sentences. The thought is that we take

⁹ See Bricker, "Concrete Possible Worlds", 119. An examination of the serviceability argument for modal realism is beyond the scope of this paper.

¹⁰ Michael J. Loux, ed., *The Possible and the Actual: Readings in the Metaphysics of Modality* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1979); Stephen Laurence and Cynthia Macdonald, eds., *Contemporary Readings in the Foundations of Metaphysics* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998); Michael Tooley, ed., *Analytical Metaphysics, Vol. 5: Necessity and Possibility* (New York: Garland, 1999); Michael J. Loux, ed., *Metaphysics: Contemporary Readings* (London: Routledge, 2001); Helen Beebe and Julian Dodd, eds., *Reading Metaphysics: Selected Texts with Interactive Commentary* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007).

¹¹ David Lewis, "Counterpart Theory and Quantified Modal Logic", *Journal of Philosophy* 65, no. 5 (1968): 114; Lewis, *Convention*, 207-8.

them for what they are.¹² In this period, he often compares possible worlds with sets. In reflecting on the motivations behind writing *Convention*, he says in a letter to Quine:

Given my present contentment with handling analyticity by means of possible worlds, how could the analyticity problem have been a motive originally? The answer is that up to about a year ago, I took for granted that possible worlds were *entia non grata* unless reduced to state-descriptions, maximal consistent sets of sentences, or the like – in which case, of course, it would have been badly circular to use them as I do now. The defense of unreduced worlds as material for philosophical constructions – last half of the last galley – is something I wouldn't have written even as recently as my final oral. Why the change? Partly as a result of the counterpart paper, which I take to remove the difficulties about inter-world identity; and partly as a result of thinking about the post-Cohen situation in set theory, and asking the question: what's wrong with worlds that isn't wrong with sets? Not that I think the worlds are clear enough to be content with: but they're clear enough to use in other philosophical efforts.¹³

The identity conditions of sets are spelled out in terms of set-membership. Two sets are identical just when they have the same members. As Quine would say, no entity without identity. It follows that sets are clear and respectable entities. Similarly, possible worlds are clear and respectable entities because identity and individuation conditions can be provided using counterpart theory. In other places in his correspondence, Lewis says *possibilia* are more respectable than sets. He says to Charles Chastain in March 1970: 'My working ontology is actual and possible concreta, together with any sums or sets over these; but if I had to choose between giving up the sets or giving up the possibles I'd give up the sets'.¹⁴ We grasp the concept of a possible world by understanding that possible worlds are things exactly like our world in the categorial sense: concrete whole with parts. Since we understand the idea of our world as roughly 'us and our surroundings', to paraphrase Lewis,¹⁵ we can grasp the idea of other worlds as large objects that have things in them of the same kind as our world. By contrast, the concept of a set is not grasped through already familiar concepts. We arrive at the concept of a set through various pieces of theorising such as the notion of set-membership.

In Lewis's early period, he was guided by theoretical virtues in his adoption of realism about *possibilia*. *Possibilia* are non-mysterious entities in their own right; hence they satisfy the standard of clarity. *Possibilia* are fruitful entities in the sense that they can figure as the things doing the analysing in several philosophical analyses; hence they satisfy the standard of fruitfulness. *Possibilia* do not offend ontic parsimony because in

¹² Lewis, *Counterfactuals*, 85.

¹³ Letter 126. To W.V. Quine, 1 October 1968. See Helen Beebe and A.R.J. Fisher, eds., *Philosophical Letters of David K. Lewis*, 252.

¹⁴ Helen Beebe and A.R.J. Fisher, eds., *Philosophical Letters of David K. Lewis*, 443.

¹⁵ Lewis, *Counterfactuals*, 86.

admitting possible worlds we are admitting things of the same category as our world (an entity that we have already admitted); this is the category of concrete thing. The only kind of parsimony that possibilities offend is that of quantitative parsimony. But for Lewis (and many others) quantitative parsimony is not a serious measure of goodness for our theory.¹⁶ A theory that posits 17 electrons is no better off with respect to parsimony than a theory that posits an infinite number of electrons. The real cost is the initial countenance of the kind *Electronhood*. This line of reasoning appears in his serviceability argument in *Plurality*. But when it came to offering an initial argument for modal realism, Lewis puts forth the argument from ways:

I believe that there are possible worlds other than the one we happen to inhabit. If an argument is wanted, it is this. It is uncontroversially true that things might be otherwise than they are. I believe, and so do you, that things could have been different in countless ways. But what does this mean? Ordinary language permits the paraphrase: there are many ways things could have been besides the way they actually are. On the face of it, this sentence is an existential quantification. It says that there exist many entities of a certain description, to wit ‘ways things could have been’. I believe that things could have been different in countless ways; I believe permissible paraphrases of what I believe; taking the paraphrase at its face value, I therefore believe in the existence of entities that might be called ‘ways things could have been’. I prefer to call them ‘possible worlds’.¹⁷

The argument from ways was not the guiding reason behind his adoption of modal realism. On my reading, Lewis already believed in possible worlds, given that he saw the theoretical benefits in positing them. Rather, the passage above provides an *ex post facto* argument for possible worlds. He already believes the conclusion and will believe it at the cost of denying premises that imply its denial, and subsequently offers an argument in support of it. The argument itself did not *lead* Lewis to that conclusion.

This philosophical approach may seem odd. Should not argument lead us to our view? For Lewis, this approach is not foreign to his way of thinking. We can detect a similar thing with his views about time. He was a four-dimensionalist and a perdurantist as early as 1969 when he informally gave lectures on time travel at UCLA.¹⁸ In ‘The Paradoxes of Time Travel’ he simply *states* four-dimensionalism (all times are equally real) and perdurantism (things persist by having temporal parts).¹⁹ He never stops to offer

¹⁶ See Lewis, *Counterfactuals*, 86. For precursors of the rejection of quantitative parsimony, see H.H. Price, *Perception* (London: Methuen, 1932), 46; Donald C. Williams, “The Inductive Argument for Subjectivism”, *The Monist* 44, no. 1 (1934): 89.

¹⁷ Lewis, *Counterfactuals*, 84.

¹⁸ See Helen Beebe and A.R.J. Fisher, eds., *Philosophical Letters of David K. Lewis*, 441. For discussion, see A.R.J. Fisher, “David Lewis, Donald C. Williams, and the History of Metaphysics in the Twentieth Century”, *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 1, no. 1 (2015): 3-22.

¹⁹ David Lewis, “The Paradoxes of Time Travel”, *American Philosophical Quarterly* 13, no. 2 (1976): 145-46.

an argument for, say, perdurantism. Likewise, in his Gavin David Young lectures on time travel, delivered at the University of Adelaide in July 1971, where he had plenty of space to discuss the metaphysics of time, he still does not reflect on any arguments for perdurantism.²⁰ Despite this, he believes that it is true. It is more of a starting point for him than a position he must reach. However, later in *Plurality*, he does offer an argument for perdurantism – the argument from temporary intrinsics.²¹ Like the argument from ways, the argument from temporary intrinsics comes *after* his commitment to the view. It is not as if argument leads him to adopt perdurantism.

3. Evaluating the Argument from Ways

The argument from ways can be formulated as follows:

1. Any entities quantified over in our theory, after various paraphrasing is complete, exist.
2. The modal opinion ‘there are ways things might be’ quantifies over entities.
3. Therefore, there are ways things might be.

The conclusion of this argument establishes the existence of ways things might be. So far the argument is unexceptionable, as van Inwagen remarks.²² What makes it exceptionable is that Lewis infers that these ways are Lewisian possible worlds, worlds that are of the same kind as our world with concrete flesh-and-blood things in them like talking donkeys and crayons the size of skyscrapers. In making this inference, Lewis is committed to the following identification thesis:

(ID) ways a world might be are identical with worlds.

With (ID), we get the conclusion that there are possible worlds and, in particular, that there are Lewisian possible worlds. Stalnaker objected that the expression ‘ways things might be’ refers to or means something abstract, say, properties, not concrete objects. The way the table is is a property of the table; the way the world is is a property of the world. So, the argument from ways establishes the existence of *abstracta* or *properties* that have earned the label ‘ways things might be’. Also, if a possible world is a maximal way things might be, then ‘the actual world ought to be *the way things are* rather than *I and all my surroundings*’.²³ Hence, there is a real distinction between ways and the world, just like there is a real distinction between the way a substance is and the substance, which is that

²⁰ These time travel lectures have been recently published. See David Lewis, *Philosophical Manuscripts*. Ed. Frederique Janssen-Lauret and Fraser MacBride (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), 3-56.

²¹ Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*, 202-4.

²² van Inwagen, “Two Concepts of Possible Worlds”, 185.

²³ Stalnaker, “Possible Worlds”, 68.

way. van Inwagen chimed in, arguing that ways and worlds are to be distinguished based on language: ‘surely the cosmos cannot itself be identical with any way the cosmos could have been: to say this would be like saying that Socrates is identical with the way Socrates is, which is plain bad grammar’.²⁴ Phillip Bricker concurs also with Stalnaker’s assessment.²⁵

Lewis accepted Stalnaker’s criticism.²⁶ Lewis agrees that ‘ways things might be’ suggests that possibilities are abstract. Hence the view that worlds are abstract captures these ordinary expressions better than Lewisian worlds. But he did not give up on the idea that ways things might be are identical with worlds, that is, (ID). He just had to find another way to motivate the identification. In *Plurality*, he offers a parsimony argument for (ID):

Given modal realism, it becomes advantageous to identify ‘ways a world could possibly be’ with worlds themselves. Why distinguish two closely corresponding entities: a world, and also the maximally specific way that world is? Economy dictates identifying ‘ways’ with the worlds.²⁷

This is not an argument for modal realism. It presupposes modal realism. So, it will not convince Lewis’s opponent or amount to an argument that he and his opponent can start from. That aside, its force derives in part from nominalist intuitions operating in the background. We should all agree that the way an object is is a property of that object; the red way the Australian rules football is is a property of the football. If you are a nominalist, you would say that the red way is nothing but the red football. Or consider the total way the football is. It is more economical to say that when we talk about the total way the football is we are talking about the football. A red way for an object to be is identical with a red object.

To complete the argument we need to establish the ontic complexity of the opposing theory on offer. Lewis’s opponent says that our world and other worlds are not members of the same ontic category. Our world is concrete. Other worlds are abstract. It is added that what we call the ‘actual world’ is not really the world but rather the actualised representation of the world. Thus Plantinga:

²⁴ Peter van Inwagen, “Indexicality and Actuality”, *Philosophical Review* 89, no. 3 (1980): 406. I am sceptical that language can decide the issue. That it is bad grammar to say Socrates is the way he is should not move anyone who thinks that ontology should not be read off language. I will not develop this criticism here, but its starting point is found in the ontological turn. For discussion, see C.B. Martin and John Heil, “The Ontological Turn”, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 23 (1999): 34-60; John Heil, *From an Ontological Point of View* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003).

²⁵ Bricker, “Concrete Possible Worlds”, 118-19; see also Otavio Bueno and Scott A. Shalkowski, “A Plea for a Modal Realist Epistemology”, *Acta Analytica* 15, no. 24 (2000): 175-93.

²⁶ David Lewis, “Attitudes De Dicto and De Se”, *Philosophical Review* 88, no. 4 (1979): 533.

²⁷ Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*, 86.

... just one of these possible worlds – α – has the distinction of being such that every state of affairs it includes is actual; so α is the actual world. Each of the others *could have been* actual but in fact is not. A possible world, therefore is a state of affairs, and is hence an abstract object. So α , the actual world, is an abstract object.²⁸

Similarly, Skyrms is aware that: ‘One must admit, on this approach, that the real world is not a “possible-world”. But to insist that it must be is perhaps to take a metaphor too literally’.²⁹ Herein lies the extra ontic complexity. The way the world is and the ways it might be are members of the same category (abstracta) but then we have the unwelcome consequence that the world is of its own unique ontic category (real concrete object). There is the further odd consequence that what is called ‘the actual world’ is abstract.

By contrast, Lewis’s view escapes such complexity. Prima facie, he has support for his view. Intuitively, the actual world is not the way the world is; rather, the actual world is the sum total of actual things with actual properties: you and me, our environs, and so on *ad maximum*. It seems awkward to postulate the concrete realm plus a distinct abstract entity called ‘the actual world’ (which is the total way the concrete realm is) and then admit possible worlds (total ways the concrete realm might be). This might be a natural inference to make, if possible worlds are abstract, but saying that begs the question against Lewis. Moreover, elaboration is needed on Skyrms’s remark that our world should not be considered a possible world, because standard inferences in modal logic suggest that what is actual is possible. So it seems we should consider our world as one of the possibles. All worlds, including ours, are possible.

In response to van Inwagen, Lewis understands Stalnaker’s objection as follows. A world is a maximal way. A maximal way is a property. Properties are sets. A maximal way is a unit set (with the world as its sole member). So a way is distinct from the world because the unit set is distinct from its member. Lewis says in reply:

But to me, the choice whether to take a ‘way’ as a unit set or as its sole member seems to be of the utmost unimportance, on a par with the arbitrary choice between speaking of a set or of its characteristic function.³⁰

Unfortunately, Lewis gives no further argument as to why the choice is unimportant. Worse still, the suggestion that there is no important difference between $\{a\}$ and a is hard to square with Lewis’s views about sets in *Parts of Classes*.³¹ In that book, he thinks that the parts of a class (if it has parts) are its subsets and that the relationship between an individual and unit set is the primitive singleton operator. The singleton operator takes on

²⁸ Alvin Plantinga, “Actualism and Possible Worlds”, *Theoria* 42, nos. 1-3 (1976): 144, his italics.

²⁹ Brian Skyrms, “Possible Worlds, Physics and Metaphysics”, *Philosophical Studies* 30, no. 5 (1976): 327.

³⁰ Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*, 87 n. 57.

³¹ David Lewis, *Parts of Classes* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1991).

an important role in defining and distinguishing a unit set and its sole member, which in turn makes it significant whether we are talking about a set or its member(s).³² Finally, this response will not convince those who do not share the same view of properties as Lewis. If you think properties are immanent universals or particular modes, then there is an important metaphysical difference between the substance and the universal or mode. Of course, dialectically, *Lewis* is attempting to avoid refutation, so he is free to introduce theories that he accepts in replying to the objection.

At the end of the day, when we reflect on the notion of a possibility, we often have the idea of scenarios or situations of things happening in a different way. The primary emphasis of such expressions is neither the ways nor the things but *the things being (different) ways*. To see this, consider the state of affairs of *a's being F*. One side of the debate says that our opinion is about the thing *a* and the other side says that our opinion is about *F*. But really our opinion is about the state of affairs: *a's being F*. So it is indeterminate whether our predicative opinion concerns *a* or *F*. Analogously, it is indeterminate whether our modal opinions pick out ways or things. Our concept of a possibility does not favour ways over things or things over ways. The intuition behind each interpretation is not decisive enough because our opinion is primarily about *some thing being some (different) way*, or analogously, *a's being F*.

Therefore, the argument from ways is indecisive in the following respect: the crucial premise favours neither possibilities as concrete objects nor as abstract properties. The argument from ways will not settle the dispute. This is a 'spoils to the victor' issue, in my view, whereby the theory of modality that wins on other grounds gets to decide the correct interpretation of expressions concerning ways things might be. My evaluation further shows that Lewis's discussion in *Plurality* on identifying ways with worlds is limited and its plausibility confined to other commitments that may not necessarily be shared by others.

4. Exploiting the Argument from Ways

Lewis dropped the argument from ways by the time he wrote *Plurality*. However, the argument from ways is not a useless relic. Understanding its implausibility is useful for evaluating his criticism of magical ersatzism and his use of methodological principles against rivals. The Ramsey-Carnap-Lewis doctrine of theoretical terms is the engine of his philosophy and method. His identity theory of mind is the first instance of this doctrine,

³² It appears that Lewis gives this reply up in an unpublished letter to van Inwagen, 8 October 1985. Lewis writes: 'I'm now rather down on the $x = \{x\}$ trick. OK in itself, as Quine shows; but it can't coexist with the better-motivated idea that the mereological parts of a (nonempty) set are exactly its (nonempty) subsets'. David Lewis Papers, C1520, 'Van Inwagen, Peter', Box B-000677, Princeton University Library.

from which he laid out the framework in ‘How to Define Theoretical Terms’.³³ The rough idea is that terms are functionally defined via specified roles and that entities fill these roles in order to deserve the name associated with the given role. From the 1980s onwards, he appeals to the thesis that in philosophy we begin with various terms that are associated with roles that should be specified accordingly and that there are entities that fill those roles. Recall the famous quip: ‘one [cannot] have mighty biceps just by being called “Armstrong”’.³⁴ Two rules tacitly at work are:

Rule 1: If entities of kind *K* exist in our ontology, the *K*s deserve the name ‘R’ only if the *K*s fill role R.

Rule 2: If entities of kind *K* exist in our ontology, the *K*s do not deserve the name ‘R’ in virtue of the *K*s being called ‘R’.³⁵

These rules and related ones are found throughout *Plurality*. When Lewis talks about properties he says that the word ‘property’ has no settled use and that there are many versions of the property-role, or equivalently, that there are many different property-roles; there is no one property-role. Then we ask: ‘which entities, if any, among those we should believe in, can occupy which versions of the property-role?’³⁶

The argument from ways can be interpreted in light of these rules. Lewis has specified a role central to our modal thought: the ways-things-might-be-role, asserted that there exist entities that fill this role, and inferred that those entities are Lewisian worlds. If Lewisian worlds fill the role, they deserve to be called ‘ways things might be’. However, if we interpret the argument from ways like this, it is doubly indecisive. His opponent can accept that there are entities that fill the ways-things-might-be-role, but deny Lewis’s proposed role-filler. We need further reasons to secure the premise that Lewisian worlds fill this role and that Lewisian worlds best fill this role.

As things unfolded in Lewis’s correspondence and in his writing of *Plurality*, his understanding of the debate about ways versus worlds evolved and developed. He began to write *Plurality* in December 1982 and finished the near final version in June 1984. In 1982 and 1983 he discussed many core issues in the metaphysics of modality with van Inwagen. Their correspondence reveals that van Inwagen informed Lewis’s thought metaphilosophically to some extent.

³³ See David Lewis, “An Argument for the Identity Theory”, *Journal of Philosophy* 63, no. 1 (1966): 17-25; David Lewis, “How to Define Theoretical Terms”, *Journal of Philosophy* 67, no. 13 (1970): 427-46.

³⁴ David Lewis, “New Work for a Theory of Universals”, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 61, no. 4 (1983): 366.

³⁵ For further discussion of these roles in Lewis’s metaphysics of modality, see A.R.J. Fisher, “On Lewis against Magic: A Study of Method in Metaphysics”, *Synthese* 195, no. 5 (2018): 2335-53.

³⁶ Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*, 55.

In September 1982, in one letter, Lewis raises a query about the debate between Jon Barwise and Richard Montague concerning propositions.³⁷ Barwise and Montague both believe in propositions but they disagree about whether some are necessarily equivalent to others (Montague thinks no proposition is necessarily equivalent with any other; Barwise thinks any proposition is necessarily equivalent with some other proposition(s).) The puzzle, according to Lewis, is that if we said Barwise and Montague believe in distinct entities that each call ‘propositions’, we have mischaracterised the debate since we deny that they agree that there are propositions.

In October 1982, in a follow-up letter, Lewis accepts van Inwagen’s suggestion to distinguish between the functional concept of an entity (that some x fills some role R) and the ontological concept of an entity (that some x is of some kind K), as outlined in van Inwagen’s ‘Two Concepts of Possible Worlds’.³⁸ Lewis says:

Something like your theoretical-role line is surely right in making sense of the way you and I agree that there are worlds, or Montague and Barwise agree that there are propositions, while disagreeing about their nature.³⁹

In the case of modality, Plantinga’s abstract states of affairs are captured by one ontological concept and Lewis’s concrete spatiotemporally interrelated sums are captured by another ontological concept. There are two ontological concepts of possible worlds but one functional concept. I think that Lewis acknowledged that van Inwagen taught him something here, although what was taught is traceable to Lewis’s metaphilosophy. For Lewis’s doctrine of theoretical terms provides the resources and conceptual tools to answer the initial query about propositions and possible worlds. The phrase ‘possible world’ is introduced as a T-term, functionally characterised, and then ready to be filled by suitable occupants in one’s ontology.

In *Plurality*, Lewis weaponises the argument from ways against magical ersatzism – a competing view of modality attributed to Plantinga and van Inwagen. According to magical ersatzism, worlds are abstract maximal simples. Lewis calls them ‘maximal elements’; element E is selected in virtue of what happens in the concrete world; element E represents that p iff necessarily if E is selected, then p . After proposing a dilemma about the selection relation that allegedly holds between elements and the concrete world he considers the reply that elements should be given a more appropriate name such as ‘states of affairs’ or ‘ways things might be’; selected elements are states of affairs that obtain or ways things are. He then says:

³⁷ Letter 156. To Peter van Inwagen, 14 September 1982. See Helen Beebe and A.R.J. Fisher, eds., *Philosophical Letters of David K. Lewis*, 304.

³⁸ van Inwagen, “Two Concepts of Possible Worlds”, 192-93.

³⁹ Letter 157. To Peter van Inwagen, 1 October 1982. See Helen Beebe and A.R.J. Fisher, eds., *Philosophical Letters of David K. Lewis*, 306.

This seems to help, but I think it just covers up the problem. Yes, we have all those customary names: ‘states of affairs’, ‘ways things might be’, and the rest. We have no difficulty at all in using them correctly; or at least, we have thoroughly mastered a limited repertory of uses. Our use of the names associates them in the first instance with roles in our thought. I suppose it is a firm commitment of common sense that there are some entities or other that fill the roles, and therefore deserve the names. But that is not to say that we have much notion what sort of entities those are. We can toss the names around and never think what manner of entities we are talking about. Only when we want to improve on common sense, and get something more systematic and unified and definite, does the question arise. The entities that deserve the names are the entities best suited to fill the roles. To figure out what those are, we must survey the candidates according to our best systematic theory of what there is. It’s no good saying: which are they? – why, they are the states of affairs! (Or the ways things might be, or ...) You might as well interrupt a serious discussion of how to cast a play and say: who shall be Polonius? – Let it be Polonius!⁴⁰

Lewis exploits the fact that the argument from ways is indecisive and uses this to argue that magical ersatzers employ a functional concept (state of affairs/ways things might be) where they need an ontological one. Our theory of modality needs to supply some notion of what kind of entity fills the ways-things-might-be-role, but it is inadequate to say that the notion of the role-filler is that of the entity that fills the role. Call this *the Polonius objection*.

Stalnaker responded to the Polonius objection as follows:

I find this expression of dissatisfaction elusive. Suppose I were to ask what donkeys are. Then I impatiently interrupt a lengthy account of the biology, history, care, and feeding of donkeys by saying, ‘I know all that – I know how to play the donkey language game – but what are they really? What are the things that play the role of donkeys? And don’t avoid the question by telling me that it’s donkeys that play the role!’ But it *is* donkeys that play the role. And there is nothing more to be said, other than to describe the biology, history, care, and feeding of donkeys.⁴¹

To which Lewis replied in a letter to Stalnaker:

Thank you very much for the draft review. I *did* find it surprising: we differ more radically than I had realized about ontological seriousness. I think all the issues you raise amount to parts of this one big issue.⁴²

⁴⁰ Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*, 184.

⁴¹ Robert C. Stalnaker, “Critical Notice of *On the Plurality of Worlds*”, *Mind* 97, no. 385 (1988): 127.

⁴² Letter 185. To Robert Stalnaker, 28 July 1987. See Helen Beebe and A.R.J. Fisher, eds., *Philosophical Letters of David K. Lewis*, 360.

The one big issue is serious ontology. Stalnaker is not ontologically serious. He holds some sort of quietism about the metaphysical nature of possibilities according to which there is the ‘possible worlds framework’ and we ‘understand the basic constituents of the framework – the possible worlds – *only* in terms of the concepts they are used to analyse’.⁴³ The concepts that are analysed in terms of them include modal, epistemic, causal, intentional, and semantic concepts, but possible worlds are not something with an existence outside this framework. This leads Stalnaker not to offer any metaphysical account about the nature of possibilities. He thinks this sort of metaphysical question involves a bum steer. By contrast, Lewis is ontologically serious, labelling himself as the realist and Stalnaker the quasi-realist:

I *do* call you and Carnap quasi-realists; and I don’t accept the reply that you’re willing to say all that a realist would say. Yes, you are. But the trouble is that you’re willing to say *more* than the realist does. Your positive statements are all that a realist could wish; except that they stop too soon, and not out of professed ignorance. But there are also your rejections of questions and your disclaimers, and it is these that seem to me to render your realism quasi.⁴⁴

As a realist, Lewis is ontologically serious about the occupants of some theoretical role (causal or non-causal), which is to say that he thinks that there is a genuine, objective answer to what fills some specified role. Possible worlds are real entities that play a variety of theoretical roles. To be sure, he recognises that in some, or indeed many, cases there are equally good occupants of the specified role. He also recognises that in some cases, and again perhaps in many cases, the word and its associated roles are vague or indeterminate. The crucial point in response to Stalnaker, on my reading, is that more can be said and needs to be said beyond specifying roles and specifying things purely as role-fillers. To bring in another analogy: suppose I were to ask what pain is. Someone then gives me an account of the things that bring about pain and the many behaviours that stem from pain. I interrupt and say ‘ok, but what is pain really?’ and I add ‘I want to know what plays the role of pain; it is a non-answer to reply that pain plays the role of pain’. There is more that can be and should be said about what occupies the pain-role.

The disagreement in terms of serious ontology invites a clarification about the extent to which Lewis is ontologically serious. In ‘Naturalness, Arbitrariness, and Serious Ontology’,⁴⁵ I argued that it is best to understand ontological seriousness in terms of degrees. Given that it is on a spectrum, Stalnaker may be placed at one end of it, with his quietism and quasi-realism, which is to say that Stalnaker is not ontologically serious at

⁴³ Stalnaker, “Critical Notice of *On the Plurality of Worlds*”, 123-24, my italics.

⁴⁴ Letter 209. To Robert Stalnaker, 26 April 1995. See Helen Beebe and A.R.J. Fisher, eds., *Philosophical Letters of David K. Lewis*, 408.

⁴⁵ A.R.J. Fisher, “Naturalness, Arbitrariness, and Serious Ontology”, in *Perspectives on the Philosophy of David K. Lewis*, ed. Helen Beebe and A.R.J. Fisher (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 134-53.

all. However, Lewis is not at the other end. Rather, D.M. Armstrong and Peter Forrest are.⁴⁶ This is due to the fact that there are conventional elements in Lewis's metaphysics. For example, according to Lewis's class nominalism, relations are classes or sets of n-tuples of individuals, both actual and possible. A two-place relation is a class or set of ordered pairs of individuals. This nominalism about properties entails that ordered pairs are artificial constructions from sets of sets. It is arbitrary whether relations are Kuratowski-pairs or Wiener-pairs or In other words, it is conventional which sets fill the relation-role; the word 'relation' is semantically indeterminate; the arbitrariness is vagueness or ambiguity of the word. One implication is that the category of relation is indeterminate, which is problematic enough for Armstrong and Forrest to resist Lewis's class nominalism.⁴⁷ Interestingly, Lewis embraced the conclusion of this objection against class nominalism when Armstrong charged that Lewis is not doing serious ontology. He says to Armstrong: 'I'm not at all sure that I "believe in being ontologically serious"'.⁴⁸ His thesis is motivated by the observation that many terms in philosophical theory are vague or semantically indeterminate. Now, although Lewis says in reply to Armstrong that he is not sure whether he believes in being ontologically serious, his distancing from Stalnaker implies that he is ontologically serious to some degree, albeit to a degree that is not as serious as Armstrong (and Forrest). In being ontologically serious to some degree, Lewis intends to hold onto some sort of genuine realism: the occupants of a specified role exist mind-independently and more needs to be said about the occupant independent of the specified role.⁴⁹

5. Ramseyan Humility

It is questionable whether Lewis can maintain his position in light of his adoption of Ramseyan humility later on in his career. In 'Ramseyan Humility',⁵⁰ Lewis argues that we

⁴⁶ D.M. Armstrong, "In Defence of Structural Universals", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 64, no. 1 (1986): 87; Peter Forrest, "Neither Magic nor Mereology: A Reply to Lewis", *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 64, no. 1 (1986): 91.

⁴⁷ For discussion, see Theodore Sider, "Naturalness and Arbitrariness", *Philosophical Studies* 81, nos. 2-3 (1996): 283-301; Fisher, "Naturalness, Arbitrariness, and Serious Ontology".

⁴⁸ Letter to D.M. Armstrong, 25 February 1985. See Peter R. Anstey, A.R.J. Fisher, and Stephanie R. Lewis, eds. *The Philosophical Correspondence of David Lewis and David Armstrong* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2025).

⁴⁹ Strictly speaking, Stalnaker's position on ontological seriousness renders his theory of possible worlds distinct from magical ersatzers like Plantinga and van Inwagen, who admit the real existence of abstracta that play the role of possible worlds. Nonetheless, magical ersatzers, also called by Lewis 'nondescript' ersatzers, make the mistake of identifying the role-filler entirely through the role. Stalnaker's reaction that nothing more needs to be said seems to flow naturally from the formulation of magical ersatzism. For discussion, see Fisher, "On Lewis against Magic", 2349-51.

⁵⁰ David Lewis, "Ramseyan Humility", in *Conceptual Analysis and Philosophical Naturalism*, ed. D. Braddon-Mitchell and R. Nola (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 203-22.

do not have knowledge of the intrinsic nature of the entities in our ontology. The doctrine is usually couched in terms of properties, but it is obvious that it applies to entities of all categories and to non-causal roles as well as causal ones. It implies that we only know an entity through its role, i.e., qua role-occupant. At the level of total theory, we cannot go beyond the Ramsey sentence of our total theory T. We cannot tell which realisation of T is the actual one. Sure enough, we know that some entity must fill some role R, but we do not know which is the role-filler; we merely know the property of having whatever property fills role R. To further illustrate, take some property P. If Ramseyan humility is true, we only know P qua-occupant of role R. We cannot answer the question of which property fills R independent of the description of P as an occupant or filler of R. Lewis adds, in a somewhat radical manner, we cannot even *ask* the question of which property fills R because we need a given set of candidate role-fillers. He is not sure we have access to the set of candidate role-fillers, because that knowledge requires that we know the candidate role-fillers independent of the role, and this is precisely the piece of knowledge Ramseyan humility denies us. Knowing that role R is uniquely occupied is not enough. Also, we have reason in some cases to think that there are many candidate role-fillers out there that might fill R.⁵¹

Note further that having alternative answer-propositions does not help because the issue concerns alternative answer-sentences and what we do not know is which sentence expresses which proposition. It is also important to note that the epistemic predicament that Ramseyan humility puts us in is not benign, even though it might not entail some radical form of scepticism. Lewis claims that Ramseyan humility is not worrisome because we never presume that we know everything, but omnipotence is largely irrelevant. Dustin Locke asserts that Ramseyan humility is benign for another reason: it denies useless knowledge.⁵² However, if it denies knowledge of entities that are described using ontic notions (that is, notions independent of the role), then this piece of ignorance is far from useless. Indeed, knowing the entity via ontic notions is a crucial part of saying that some kind of entity deserves to be called ‘R’, thereby completing the recipe for analysis. This procedure is likewise vital to considering a variety of alternative hypotheses that allows us to argue that one among them is the best explanation. Hence, the knowledge we lack is useful for us in philosophical theorising.

⁵¹ For discussion of Ramseyan humility, see Alexander Kelly, “Ramseyan Humility, Scepticism and Grasp”, *Philosophical Studies* 164, no. 3 (2013): 705-26; Rae Langton, “Elusive Knowledge of Things in Themselves”, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 82, no. 1 (2004): 129-36; Dustin Locke, “A Partial Defense of Ramseyan Humility”, in *Conceptual Analysis and Philosophical Naturalism*, ed. D. Braddon-Mitchell and R. Nola (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), 223-41; David Yates, “Three Arguments for Humility”, *Philosophical Studies* 175, no. 2 (2018): 461-81; José L. Zalabardo, “Humility and Metaphysics”, *Analytic Philosophy* 64, no. 3 (2023): 183-96.

⁵² Locke, “A Partial Defense of Ramseyan Humility”, 238.

Now, if Lewis accepts Ramseyan humility, he commits a similar methodological error to magical ersatzers. That is to say, Ramseyan humility undermines the Polonius objection against magical ersatzism because the Polonius objection assumes that we have some notion of what entities are independent of the role they fill. What motivates Stalnaker's position is that we cannot know the entity (a donkey) beyond the roles it fills. That is what Ramseyan humility denies epistemic access to. The threat from Ramseyan humility is especially troubling. It infects all of Lewis's first-order doctrines (conceptual analyses) because his theory of theoretical terms is a core component of his metaphilosophy. He presents the doctrine in terms of properties and quiddities vis-à-vis nomic roles, but it is easy to show that the doctrine is wide-ranging. First, all things can be understood in terms of instantiation of the relevant property at some general level, so we are back to talk of properties. If we are back to talk of properties in providing any analysis, then Ramseyan humility is relevant to all philosophical analyses. Second, theoretical terms, that is, T-terms, can name any category, not just the category of property.⁵³ If T-terms are names of entities of any category, then Ramseyan humility has a pervasive impact on philosophical analysis. It is not restricted to properties and laws in fundamental physics.

In response to my criticism, Lewis might point out that ontology is still settled on Quinean terms. Total theory of what there is remains available from scientific theory in philosophical theorising, even though we do not know the role-fillers independent of the roles they fill and we do not have any notion of what these entities are. This reply invites some sort of distinction between Ramseyan humility operating inside the theory (on one or more categories in the theory) versus outside the theory (on the categories of the theory as a whole). However, while science might be able to prop our theories up like this, it does not help Lewis entirely. His project is to systematise opinion (ordinary belief and theory) into a variety of reflective equilibria; this involves specifying roles and filling them with entities in our ontology, which requires the use of concepts of role-fillers independent of the role.

Perhaps, we should read the Polonius objection as reminding magical ersatzers of their humility. This modest interpretation looks plausible when we consider Lewis's structuralist sympathies in the philosophy of mathematics. These structuralist sympathies express a systematic semantic indeterminacy whereby it is indeterminate what exactly is, say, the true singleton function or operator.⁵⁴ However, this reply is overly pragmatist when applied at the general level of philosophical analysis. Any sort of realism worth its salt should say it is determinate and objective that some entity or set of entities fill the

⁵³ Lewis says: 'We may stipulate that our *T*-terms are names, not predicates or functors. No generality is lost, since names can purport to name entities of any kind: individuals, species, states, properties, substances, magnitudes, classes, relations, or what not' (Lewis, "How to Define Theoretical Terms", 429).

⁵⁴ David Lewis, "Mathematics is Megethology", *Philosophia Mathematica* 1, series III (1993): 15-17.

roles of theory T, especially non-causal roles. Genuine realism should imply that it is determinate and objective that something fills the non-causal role of ways-things-might-be.

It should be noted that Lewis is committed to some genuine form of realism in light of his commitment to naturalness. Natural properties carve reality at the joints and this carving is determinate and objective. Having said that, naturalness might guarantee that there is a unique, actual realisation of T, but it will not secure knowledge of which entities fill the relevant roles. We still do not know *what* the role-filler is. After all, when Lewis presents Ramseyan humility, it is done in terms of fundamental properties, which is another name for perfectly natural properties, so his assumption of naturalness is baked into his formulation of Ramseyan humility. In short, naturalness gets him only a limited realism in the context of Ramseyan humility and will not answer the objection.

To sum up, Ramseyan humility may not entirely undermine Lewis's approach to philosophy, but it does reveal the limits of his realism and the fact that he is not entitled to a key argument in his criticism of magical ersatzism. In addition, someone on the fence should now see no real difference or decisive factor to prefer Lewis's pragmatist realism to Stalnaker's quasi-realism. The argument from ways has finally run its course.

6. Conclusion

I have presented an examination of the evolution of the argument from ways in Lewis's thought, from his initial pass at proposing the argument from ways as an argument for modal realism to his realisation that while it does not establish the existence of Lewisian possible worlds it does cause trouble for magical ersatzism. I further showed that Lewis's use of the failure of the argument from ways against magical ersatzism reveals his commitment to a pragmatist realism that comes with some degree of ontological seriousness. The degree of ontological seriousness is not as strong as Armstrong's ontological seriousness, while it is stronger than Stalnaker's ontological seriousness, which is arguably next to nothing (assuming that ontological seriousness runs along a spectrum). I then argued that Lewis's pragmatist realism and his degree of ontological seriousness leads to problems when combined with the wide-ranging, pervasive thesis of Ramseyan humility, which Lewis explicitly endorses in later work. If Ramseyan humility is true, then knowledge of the role-fillers independent of the roles and independent of the description of the role-fillers as role-fillers is beyond us, but it is precisely this claim that Lewis relies on in his Polonius objection against magical ersatzism. My examination allows us to conclude the following: that the Polonius objection loses its force against

magical ersatzism and that there is little difference between Lewis's pragmatist realism and Stalnaker's quasi-realism.⁵⁵

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⁵⁵ An older, shorter version of this paper was presented at the 93rd Joint Session, Durham University, UK, 20 July 2019. I thank Giacomo Giannini, Jeroen Smid, and Henry Taylor for comments and discussion.

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