

'That's the guy who might have lost'

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ABSTRACT: In an influential passage of *Naming and Necessity* Kripke argues, with the help of a fictional dialogue, that *de re* metaphysical modal distinctions have intuitive content. In this note I clarify the workings of the argument, and what it does and does not support. I conclude that Kripke's argument does not, despite possible appearances, support the view that metaphysical modal distinctions are made in common sense discourse. The argument does however support the view that if metaphysical modal distinctions make sense at the level of statements or states of affairs, then they also make sense *de re*.

Keywords: *de re* modality, metaphysical modality, Kripke, common sense, intuition.

1. Introduction

There is an influential, memorable passage in *Naming and Necessity* where Kripke argues that the *de re* metaphysical modal distinction between the necessary and contingent properties

of an object has intuitive content and means something to ‘the ordinary man’.¹ My aim here is to clarify what Kripke’s argument does and does not support. Here is the passage:

It is even suggested in the literature, that though a notion of necessity may have some sort of intuition behind it (we do think some things could have been otherwise; other things we don't think could have been otherwise), this notion [of a distinction between necessary and contingent properties] is just a doctrine made up by some bad philosopher, who (I guess) didn't realize that there are several ways of referring to the same thing. I don't know if some philosophers have not realized this; but at any rate it is very far from being true that this idea [that a property can meaningfully be held to be essential or accidental to an object independently of its description] is a notion which has no intuitive content, which means nothing to the ordinary man. Suppose that someone said, pointing to Nixon, ‘That's the guy who might have lost’. Someone else says ‘Oh no, if you describe him as “Nixon”, then he might have lost; but, of course, describing him as the winner, then it is not true that he might have lost’. Now which one is being the philosopher, here, the unintuitive man? It seems to me obviously to be the second. The second man has a philosophical theory. The first man would say, and with great conviction, ‘Well, of course, the winner of the election might have been someone else. The actual winner, had the course of the campaign been different, might have been the loser, and someone else the winner; or there might

¹ The passage, or part of it, is singled out for quotation in three book-length treatments of Kripke’s work: Hughes (2004, pp. 83 - 84), Ahmed (2007, p. 42 - 43), and Noonan (2012, Ch. 4). It is quoted in Vol. 2 of Soames’s historical survey of analytic philosophy in the 20th century (Soames (2003), p. 352). Rorty quotes it in his (1980) review of the book version of *Naming and Necessity* in the *London Review of Books*.

have been no election at all. So, such terms as “the winner” and “the loser” don't designate the same objects in all possible worlds. On the other hand, the term “Nixon” is just a name of this man'. When you ask whether it is necessary or contingent that Nixon won the election, you are asking the intuitive question whether in some counterfactual situation, this man would in fact have lost the election. When you ask whether it is necessary or contingent that *Nixon* won the election, you are asking the intuitive question whether in some counterfactual situation, *this man* would in fact have lost the election. If someone thinks that the notion of a necessary or contingent property (forget whether there *are* any nontrivial necessary properties [and consider] just the *meaningfulness* of the notion) is a philosopher's notion with no intuitive content, he is wrong. (Kripke (1980), pp. 41 - 42. The parentheses and emphases come from the text - they are not my additions.)

Before discussing the argument in depth, a preliminary interpretative difficulty must be dealt with: the quote mark signifying the end of the first man's reply (the reply made ‘with great conviction’) appears to be placed too late in the text. The first man is supposed not to be being a philosopher - note Kripke's rhetorical question about ‘which one is being the philosopher here’, which is clearly meant to suggest that the first man is not being one - and yet the placement of the quote mark has him talking explicitly about what certain terms *designate in all possible worlds*.

I have not been able to get an official answer here, but I will simply assume that this is a typo and that the first man's reply ends before the quote mark. Where exactly the reply *really* ends is not clear. It's not even clear that there is a fact of the matter. For my purposes it is enough that the reply doesn't really include the sentence beginning ‘So, such terms as...’ (and even

that is just to avoid confusion, by clearing the ground of an interpretation of the passage which makes it blatantly objectionable).² Whether the reply includes just the first sentence or the first two doesn't matter for my purposes. What matters is that the first man begins by saying 'That's the guy who might have lost', and then argues back against the second man's claim that that depends on how the guy in question is described.

2. The Metaphysical Interpretation and Why it is Implausible

I will now explain what I call *the metaphysical interpretation* of the first man's utterance of 'That's the guy who might have lost'. Let us grant for the sake of argument that there is a metaphysical distinction between ways the world could have been and ways it could not have been. Furthermore, let us grant that it makes sense to ask, of a particular individual *I* and property *P*, whether *I* - that very individual - possesses *P* in any of these ways the world could have been. Now, what Kripke's first man is saying on this interpretation amounts to this: that in the case of Nixon and the property of losing the election, the answer to this sort of question is Yes: among the metaphysical possibilities are those in which Nixon - that very man - loses the election.

Before I begin to cast doubt on this interpretation, a methodological note. Someone may object as follows to the very idea of casting doubt on this interpretation: 'Kripke is making up a little story here, and he is free to put what he wants in the story. So if it was Kripke's

² In this connection it may be admitted that the phraseology of the first two sentences of the first man's reply is unfortunately academic, but I do not make anything of this. The first two sentences of the first man's reply could be made more colloquial without affecting the argument substantially.

intention that the first man's words meant what the above interpretation says they do, then that's what they meant!'. My response is that, if you want to insist in this way on the metaphysical interpretation, you may have to give up the view that the story is realistic, or the view that what the first man says is ordinary and commonsensical. But it seems clear that the story is intended to be realistic, i.e. something that easily could have happened, and that the first man's "man on the street" credentials are a crucial part of the argument. Accordingly, I give due weight to these points in my interpretation, and let them constrain what the first man's words can plausibly be held to mean. If the metaphysical interpretation does not fit well with the realism of the story or the commonsensicality of what the first man says, so much the worse for it: we should in that case look for alternatives.

I do not propose to cast doubt on the metaphysical interpretation by casting doubt on the idea that there are *de re* metaphysical modal distinctions to be made. Rather, I am granting that for the sake of argument and then arguing against the metaphysical interpretation *as an interpretation of the first man's words*.

I intend to cast doubt on the metaphysical interpretation by offering two others that are more plausible, but I also have a specific bone to pick with it: it makes what the first man says pragmatically suspicious, because what he means on this interpretation is suspiciously weak. Here's what I mean: if all the first man is saying about Nixon is that he loses the election in some of the *presumably very many and various* ways the world could have been, it's not clear why he would say such a thing. After all, a great many people alive at that time could presumably have lost the election. Of course, to lose an election you have to be in the running, but many people who were not actually in the running could have been in the running, and then lost, had things gone sufficiently differently.

It may be protested that the first man uses the definite article: he says ‘That’s *the* guy who might have lost’ (my emphasis). Taken to imply that there is only one guy who has the modal property of losing in some metaphysically possible world, the problem is that that seems false: lots of people presumably have that modal property - not least of all Hubert Humphrey, the actual loser of the 1968 election. But what if we try to be more charitable and construe this as meaning that the indicated person is just the *salient* guy with the modal property of losing in some metaphysically possible world? That seems the most promising version of the metaphysical interpretation, to be sure. But still, it raises the question: why should this modal property be under discussion at all, if so many people have it? It seems that the possession of *that* property is quite beside the point. (This should become clearer in a moment, with the first alternative interpretation that I provide.)

So much for the bone I have to pick with the metaphysical interpretation considered by itself.

I will now propose two alternatives.

The first alternative has the first man talking not about what is possible (somewhere, anywhere) in the full range of metaphysical possibilities (remember, we’re granting for argument’s sake that it makes sense to talk about such a range), but rather about what is

possible in some still-objective³ but more down-to-earth sense.⁴ It certainly seems as though people often do this. For example, imagine someone who just completed a hike where they took their time and did not exert themselves very much. Suppose it took them two hours. If asked ‘How quickly could you have done it?’, they might say something like ‘I’m pretty confident I could have done it in 90 minutes. I don’t think I could have done it in an hour though, and I certainly couldn’t have done it in 40 minutes’. It seems like this could easily be true. But its truth doesn’t require that it is metaphysically impossible for the person to have done the hike in 40 minutes. This imagined statement is better interpreted as being about

³ This passage from Williamson explains the relevant sense of ‘objective’:

Such a sense in which things could have been otherwise is *objective* rather than *epistemic*. It is not a matter of what any actual or hypothetical agent knows, or believes, or has some other psychological attitude to; nor is it a matter of what any actual or hypothetical agent *ought* to be or do, either morally or in order to achieve a given purpose. (Williamson (2016), p. 454)

⁴ Williamson touches on this sort of discourse, as distinct from metaphysical modal discourse, in the following passage:

Objective possibility and necessity come in many varieties. (...) Philosophy, especially metaphysics, studies metaphysical possibility, impossibility, and necessity (amongst many other things). Of course, in everyday speech modal words such as ‘can’ and ‘can’t’ are typically used to speak about much more restricted kinds of possibility and necessity. Right now, I can reach my keyboard, but I can’t reach my bookshelves, even though the laws of physics do not preclude my reaching them. In such examples, the modal words still express objective possibilities or impossibilities, but ones that hold fixed my current circumstances — the position of the chair in which I am sitting, the length and inelasticity of my arms, and so on. (Williamson (2016), p. 455.)

what is possible in a sense more restricted and down-to-earth than that of metaphysical possibility.

Given that a lot of ordinary objective modal discourse is about what is possible in a more down-to-earth, restricted sense than that of metaphysical possibility, it is more plausible to interpret Kripke's first man as talking about what is possible in a down-to-earth, restricted sense than it is to interpret him as talking about what is metaphysically possible. One reason for this is just that, *qua* ordinary person, he's more likely to be talking about something down-to-earth than he is to be talking about something that could be called 'metaphysical'.

But also (to return to the bone I had to pick with the metaphysical interpretation), on the present interpretation, the modal property the first man attributes to Nixon is one which could be unique to a small, relevant group of people - Nixon, Humphrey, perhaps a few others - rather than anyone who in *some* metaphysically possible counterfactual scenario, however far out, loses the election. So the first man's utterance makes more pragmatic sense on the down-to-earth interpretation.

Now, it may be objected that, even if the first man's words are better interpreted as being about what is possible in an objective but more down-to-earth sense, that notion of possibility brings along with it the notion of metaphysical possibility. This idea may be supported by pointing to theories of objective modal discourse which cash it out in terms that involve the notion of metaphysical possibility.

I do not think this objection is a good one. Yes, it could be argued that the first man makes a common sense claim whose truth-conditions are best spelt out in terms of a restricted range of (what are characterised as) metaphysical possibilities, and thus in terms that involve a

distinction between metaphysical possibilities and impossibilities. But that does not show that the latter distinction is part of common sense, or that it is made in common sense. (It may well be argued that we can arrive at the metaphysical modal notions by refining and extending certain capacities and ideas that are part of ordinary thought, but I do not know of anyone maintaining that the ability to talk or think about restricted sorts of objective possibility requires actual possession of the notion of metaphysical possibility. Indeed, such a claim seems highly implausible.)

So much for the first alternative interpretation. The second alternative has the first man talking not about objective possibility at all, but rather about past epistemic possibility. Talk of what ‘might have’ or ‘could have’ happened can sometimes be about objective possibility. But these forms can also be used to make epistemic modal claims about what could be the case about the past. For example, asked ‘Did John go to the party?’, one might reply ‘He might have gone, I don’t know’. But that’s not all: it appears that these forms can also be used in a way that is epistemic, but about the epistemic situation in the past, so to speak. Suppose some sport commentators are talking post-match and one says ‘Even in the third quarter it could have gone either way’. This could be understood to mean that it *was*, in the third quarter, epistemically possible for the game to go either way.

It must be admitted that the existence of such retrospective epistemic instances of ‘might have’ and ‘could have’ constructions is controversial, but they seem quite natural, and serious linguistic endorsements of their existence may be found in von Fintel & Gillies (2008), Martin (2011) and Rullmann & Matthewson (2018). (The relevant literature gives the impression that, for a time, the view that retrospective epistemic modals do not occur in

English⁵ may have enjoyed formidable support, but that this view has lost much of its support as linguistics and philosophy of language have progressed and more powerful frameworks have been proposed.)

I have distinguished three interpretations of the first man's words - the metaphysical interpretation, the still-objective but down-to-earth interpretation, and the retrospective epistemic interpretation - and argued that the metaphysical interpretation is implausible (both inherently and because of the availability of the other two). I will now consider what this means for Kripke's argument.

3. Consequences for Kripke's Argument

Let us distinguish three things that Kripke's argument may cause a sympathetic reader to believe:

- (1) *De re* modal talk of one sort or another occurs in common sense discourse.
- (2) If metaphysical modal distinctions make sense at all, then *de re* metaphysical modal distinctions make sense.
- (3) *De re* metaphysical modal talk occurs in common sense discourse.

Nothing I have said is supposed to cast any doubt on the idea that Kripke's argument shows (1) to be true. Furthermore, I suggest that Kripke's argument also provides good reason to believe (2). A good argument for (2) based on a plausible story involving common sense

⁵ The *locus classicus* for this view appears to be Cinque (1999).

discourse does not require, in order to go through, the metaphysical interpretation of the first man's words: the argument could just work by showing that *de re* modal talk of one sort or another makes good sense. If suspicion of *de re* metaphysical modal talk just derives from general suspicion of *de re* modal talk, then it should be reconsidered in light of Kripke's argument. Indeed, to support (2) seems to be a major part of Kripke's intention in giving the argument.⁶

So far, so good for Kripke's argument. (3), however, is not supported by the argument, since the metaphysical interpretation of the first man's words is implausible.

Is (3) true, anyway? My own suspicion is that (3), formulated as it is in terms of 'common sense', is false, but that *de re* metaphysical modal talk can nevertheless be found "in the wild". We must distinguish the question of whether a distinction may crop up in ordinary (non-technical, non-academic) discourse from the question of whether that distinction is part of common sense. I suspect that *de re* metaphysical modal talk probably does occur in ordinary discourse, but that when it does, the talkers have strayed outside the bounds of common sense and things have taken a philosophical (or proto-philosophical) turn.

By contrast, it's clear that things are not supposed to be taking such a turn - yet! - when Kripke's first man points and says 'That's the guy who might have lost'. So, while it may yet be true that metaphysical modal distinctions, *de re* or otherwise, have some 'intuitive content'

⁶ The page or so leading up to the passage quoted makes this especially clear - see Kripke (1980), pp. 39 - 40.

(Kripke's phrase), this cannot be shown by exhibiting common sense bits of discourse such as the first man's 'That's the guy who might have lost'.

4. *Why This Matters*

It may be protested that this has been much ado about nothing, and that Kripke's main aim with this argument was to establish (2). I have two replies to this.

Firstly, while this may have been Kripke's main aim, parts of the passage suggest that he also intended to show something like (3). For instance:

[...] it is very far from being true that this idea [that a property can meaningfully be held to be essential or accidental⁷ to an object independently of its description] is a notion which has no intuitive content, which means nothing to the ordinary man.

This suggests that Kripke intended the first man to be making a metaphysical modal distinction. Similarly for this bit from later in the passage:

If someone thinks that the notion of a necessary or contingent property (forget whether there *are* any nontrivial necessary properties [and consider] just the

⁷ Of course the now common distinction between essential and merely-necessary properties, highlighted by Fine (1994) decades after Kripke gave his argument, is not being made here. This is quite lucky for my purposes; while the language of 'necessary' and 'contingent' could perhaps be argued to be functioning in a restricted, down-to-earth way throughout Kripke's argument, the words 'essential' and 'accidental' more strongly suggest an unrestricted, metaphysical interpretation.

meaningfulness of the notion) is a philosopher's notion with no intuitive content, he is wrong

Secondly: irrespective of Kripke's own intentions, it would be easy for a reader to overlook the possibility, indeed the greater plausibility, of non-metaphysical interpretations of the first man's words, and to come away with the impression that the argument *does* support (3).

This is no idle clarification! One's very attitude to metaphysical modality may be at stake. Many are skeptical about the very idea of a metaphysical distinction between ways things could have been and ways they could not have been. For instance, here is Divers on the concept of metaphysical necessity:

There comes a time when a concept, that has no discernible and significant non-philosophical life, and which has had generous theoretical attention over a long period of time, becomes a fitting target of pragmatic scepticism. (Divers (2018), p. 8.)

Misunderstanding Kripke's argument may make it seem as though Divers and those who suggest similar views are running afoul of it. But a proper understanding of Kripke's argument reveals that it does not tell against such skepticism.

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