

A non-two-dimensionalist treatment of metaphysical and epistemic possibility

PHIL 93515

Jeff Speaks

February 19, 2007

We have been discussing Chalmers' two-dimensionalist treatment of metaphysical and epistemic possibility, so I thought that it would be useful to also have on the table one view about how to understand these two notions without invoking a second dimension of meaning to explain the latter. This is the view defended in Soames' paper, "Actually."

The view has the following main features:

- World-states are properties.
- (Metaphysically) Possible world-states are maximal properties that the universe could have had.
- Epistemically possible world states are maximal properties that the universe can't be known a priori not to have.
- If we think of the space of epistemically possible worlds, some but not all of these will be metaphysically possible. For example, if it is an essential property of my pencil that it be made of wood, world-states which are such that my pencil is made of plastic are, even though epistemically possible, metaphysically impossible.
- Metaphysical possibility is relative to worlds. For example, relative to the actual world, worlds in which my pencil is made of plastic are impossible, and many worlds in which it is made of wood are possible. Let w be some (metaphysically impossible) world in which my pencil is made of plastic. Relative to that world, the actual world is metaphysically impossible. In general, $\diamond \diamond p \vdash \diamond p$ is not valid.

This leads to a surprising result about propositions expressed by sentences of the form 'Actually, S '. Given that 'actually' like other indexicals is a rigid designator, what sentences like this say is that the proposition p expressed by S is true at @, the actual world. Accordingly, if sentences like this are true at all, they are true necessarily, since relative to any world w , it is true at @ that p is the case. Further, it seems to be knowable only a posteriori, if p is knowable only a posteriori — for how can you come to know that p is actually the case without first coming to know that p is the case?

The surprising result is that this cannot be correct — the proposition expressed by a relevant instance of 'Actually, S ' cannot be an example of the necessary a posteriori. The problem is that it looks as though claims of this form are true not only at every metaphysically possible world state, but also at every epistemically possible world state. But that would make a claim of this sort knowable a priori.

Soames endorses this consequence, and suggests that the view of the metaphysics of worlds above makes sense of it. On the above view, world-states are complex properties, which include facts about which objects have what properties in that world state. Given this, one can see why truths of the form ‘in w , p is the case’ would be a priori — if one grasps the complex property w , it should be a priori that if the universe instantiated w , p would be the case. Sentences of the form ‘Actually, S ’ are just instances of this, for the special case in which $w = @$.

Another move which could be made here is to say that some sentences of the form ‘Actually S ’ do express necessary a posteriori truths, and that these are true with respect to every epistemically possible world, but deny that truth in every epistemically possible world entails a prioricity. Two-dimensionalists think of a prioricity as truth in every epistemic possibility, but it is not mandatory to adopt this analysis. We don’t have to see a prioricity as being that closely linked to metaphysical necessity.

For this to be plausible, one has to deny that closure of a priori knowability under logical consequence, since it is plausible that claims of the form ‘Actually S iff S ’ are knowable a priori. If closure held, this plus the a prioricity of ‘Actually S ’ would lead to the a prioricity of every proposition. The explanation of this failure of closure is rooted in a distinction between two ways of thinking about world-states — the descriptive way in which one grasps the constituents of the world-state, and the indexical way typical of our use of ‘actually.’

We also have to reject the view that if p is a priori, then p is true at all epistemically possible worlds. This is because claims of the form ‘Actually S iff S ’ are contingent and knowable a priori. If a prioricity entailed truth in every epistemically possible world, then contingent a priori propositions would have to be both true in every epistemically possible world but false in some metaphysically possible worlds, which would entail the odd result that some metaphysically possible worlds are not epistemically possible.

This can seem puzzling, because of the following line of argument. Let p be an example of the contingent a priori, and w be a metaphysically possible world at which p is false. It seems that since p can be known a priori, $\neg p$ can be known a priori not to obtain. But w includes $\neg p$; so it seems that w can be known a priori not to obtain; which means that w is not epistemically possible. So, the argument goes, some metaphysical possibilities are not epistemically possible.

Soames replies to this argument with the failure of the closure of a priori knowability. It is a priori knowable that p is the case; and it is a priori knowable that, in w , p is not the case. But it is not a priori knowable that w is not the case. The explanation of the failure of closure again relies on two different ways of thinking about the actual world. Examples of the contingent a priori, Soames thinks, always involve use of ‘actually’; and, as above, such propositions can be grasped either by thinking of the actual world indexically — in which case one can know a priori the proposition that p is true in @ iff p is true — or descriptively — in which case one can know a priori the proposition that in w , $\neg [p$ is true in @ iff p is true] — but one can’t combine knowledge of these two propositions to derive a priori knowledge that w is not the case.

This gives one systematic way to think about necessity and the a priori without introducing primary intensions. From a two-dimensionalist point of view, the costs of going this way include giving up the closure principle, and giving up the ‘analysis’ of a priori knowledge as truth in every epistemically possible world.