Aim and scope

This course is an introduction to four key themes in the contemporary debate about modality: essentialism, absolute necessity, realism vs. actualism, impossible worlds.

Essentialism. It is common for many philosophers (as well as lay persons) to say that something has a given property essentially. How are we supposed to understand essentialist predication? Is it intelligible at all? Does essentialist predication commit one to essentialism — the thesis that objects possess essences absolutely, i.e., independently of the context? In this course we will consider some possible responses: Quinean skepticism, Kripke’s modal essentialism, Lewis’ ‘relativism’ and Fine’s neo-aristotelian essentialism.

Absolute necessity. Many philosophers think that logical necessity is absolute, i.e., of the strongest kind: if something is logically necessary, then it is necessary in any sense (practical, physical, deontic necessity). Is logical necessity the only absolute necessity, or are there other kinds? In this course we will study various takes on this issue.

Realism vs. actualism. What are possible worlds? Are they concrete objects like ours? If the actual world is the only concrete one, can we conceive the merely possible worlds as abstract? If so, what are the pros and cons of carrying out a reduction of non-actual worlds to abstract entities?

Impossible worlds. The semantics of possible worlds does not adequately model reasoning with impossible premises. That problem could be solved by accepting the existence of impossible worlds. What is the correct ontological option for understanding impossible worlds: realism or actualism?

Schedule

Lecture 1 Basic notions about modality and the realism vs. anti-realism debate
A. Essentialism (José Edgar González Varela)

Lecture 2 Quinean skepticism

Lecture 3 Kripke’s modal essentialism

Lecture 4 Essentialism and counterpart theory

Lecture 5 Fine’s definitional essentialism

B. Absolute Necessity (José Edgar González Varela)

Lecture 6 Absolute necessities

Lecture 7 Varieties of necessity

Lecture 8 Logical necessity
C. Modal realism and actualism (Alessandro Torza)

Lecture 9 Lewis’ modal realism I

Lecture 10 Lewis’ modal realism II
Reading: Sec. 1.6-9 in Lewis, D. (1986).

Lecture 11 Actualism. Linguistic ersatzism.
Reading: Sec. 3.1-2 in Lewis, D. (1986).

Lecture 12 Pictorial and magical ersatzism.
Reading: Sec. 3.3-4 in Lewis, D. (1986).

D. Impossible worlds (Alessandro Torza)

Lecture 13 Extended modal realism

Lecture 14 Ersatzism and impossible worlds

Lecture 15 Hybrid modal realism