Philosophical Papers

Volume I

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Postscripts to

"Anselm and Actuality"

A. IMPOSSIBLE WORLDS

I retract my misguided stipulation that "If some otherwise impossible worlds are conceivable . . . we should count those [as worlds]." I thought to smooth over the difference between my own talk of possible worlds and Anselm's talk of what can be conceived, but I did so at an intolerable cost. Truth to tell, there are no impossible worlds, whatever feats of conceiving may be within our power.

Suppose there were. We would have to take great care in describing the impossible things that go on therein. We would have to distinguish very carefully between (1) the consistent truth about this extraordinary subject matter, and (2) false contradictions about it. For contradictions are not the truth about any subject matter whatsoever, no matter how exotic.[1] For instance, we would have to distinguish (1) the uncanny truth about a certain impossible world where pigs can fly and also they cannot from (2) the contradictory falsehood that, in that world, pigs can fly, although it is not so that, in that world, pigs can fly. —Nonsense! There is no such distinction to be drawn.

I am well aware that formal means are on offer for keeping track of the alleged distinction. It would suffice to imitate my own way of distinguishing between (1) the truth about the inconsistent content of an impossible story, and (2) contradictory falsehoods about that story. (See Postscript B to "Truth in Fiction," in this volume.) There are also the proposals of the relevantists.[2] But it's no use knowing how to keep track of a distinction that does not exist. If worlds were stories, or "set-ups," or suitably constructed models, or representations of some other sort, there could very well be impossible ones. They would purport to represent worlds, but could not really do so. We could very well distinguish between the truth about the content of an impossible representation and contradictory falsehoods about it. But worlds are not representations, as witness the case of this world. If anyone takes distinctions that make sense only for representations, and applies them to "worlds," charity dictates that really he is not speaking of worlds at all. He is not referring to those huge things, in one of which we live and move and have our being. Let us hope he didn't even intend to.

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[1]This is uncontroversial, though it has been controverted. See, for instance, Graham Priest, "The Logic of Paradox," *Journal of Philosophical Logic* 8 (1979): 219–41.

[2]For instance, the *-function that governs "negation" in R. and V. Routley, "The Semantics of First Degree Entailment," *Noûs* 6 (1972): 335–59.

B. THE AMBIGUITY OF SHIFTINESS

I noted in passing that we can distinguish two senses of actual: a *primary* sense in which it refers to the world of utterance even in a context where another world is under consideration, and a *secondary* sense in which it shifts its reference in such a context. This ambiguity deserves more emphasis than I gave it, for without it my indexical analysis is indefensible. This has been shown by Peter van Inwagen[3] and Allen Hazen,[4] as follows. Consider these sentences.

- (1) The following is contingent: in the actual world, Caesar is murdered.
- (2) Let 'Alpha' name the actual world; Alpha might not have been actual.
- (3) Let 'Beta' name some nonactual world; Beta might have been actual.
- (4) There could have been objects other than those there actually are.
- (5) I could have been richer than I actually am.

Each of these sentences, I take it, is true on a natural reading. But if "actual" always has its primary, unshifty sense, how can (1)-(3) be true? If, on the other hand, it always has its secondary, shifty sense, how can (4)-(5) be true? Neither sense will serve for all cases. We need both.

C. SCEPTICISM REVIVIFIED?

According to my modal realism, there are countless unfortunates just like ourselves who rely on reasonable inductive methods and are sorely deceived. Not the best but the third best explanation of their total evidence is the true one; or all their newly examined emeralds turn out to be blue; or one dark day their sun fails to rise. To be sure, these victims of inductive error differ from us in that they are not actual. But I consider that no great difference. They are not our worldmates, but they do not differ from us in kind.

Among those who trust induction, those who are sorely deceived are just as numerous as those who are not. For it follows from plausible premises that both sets have the same cardinality as the set of worlds.

And yet we are confident that *we* are not among the deceived! Inductive disaster strikes ever so many victims no different from ourselves, and still we feel safe in continuing to trust induction. We have no reason at all for this faith in our own luck.

So it seems that the modal realist must be a sceptic about induction, else he is totally unreasonable in his optimism. —I disagree. As a modal realist, I have no more and no less reason than anyone else to give over my groundless faith in my inductive luck. I have the reason everyone has: it is possible, and possible in ever

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[3]"Indexicality and Actuality," *Philosophical Review* 89 (1980): 403–26.
[4]"One of the Truths about Actuality," *Analysis* 39 (1979): 1–3.

so many ways, that induction will deceive me. That reason is metaphysically neutral. It becomes no better and no worse if reformulated in accordance with one or another ontology of modality.

Then why does it sound so much more disturbing when stated in the modal realist way? —Simply because it sounds fresh and new. We have never defeated the case for scepticism, we have only learned not to let it bother us. Let it reappear in new guise—any new guise—and our habit of ignoring it gives out.

No getting around it: there *is* a striking analogy between our inductive reason, on the one hand, and unreasonable optimism, on the other. For both consist in ignoring possibilities—perfectly good possibilities, which we cannot rule out—of disaster. It does not matter what the metaphysical nature of the ignored possibilities may be. The distressing analogy of reason to unreason remains. That analogy is no reason to start calling reason unreason, or vice versa. (Even if life is somehow very like a fountain, we had best go on calling the two by different names.) All the same it is disconcerting, especially if presented in a fresh way that gets past our defenses.[5]

D. THE ANTHROPIC PRINCIPLE

"Why is there something and not rather nothing?" —"If there were nothing, you wouldn't be here to ask the question." Ask a silly question, get a silly answer. But perhaps what makes the answer silly is just that it tells the questioner no more than he must have known already. What if an answer of the same sort were more informative?

"Why is the universe such as to make possible the evolution of intelligent life?"—"If it were not, you wouldn't be here to ask the question." A bit better, but still it gives no real news.

"Why does the recessional velocity of the universe after the big bang exactly equal the escape velocity?" —"If it did not, the universe would not be such as to make possible the evolution of intelligent life [here follows an elaborate demonstration], in which case you wouldn't be here to ask the question." This time, the answer deserves to be taken seriously. In recent cosmology, such questions sometimes do get such answers. They are called "anthropic."[6]

What is an anthropic answer? It might be meant as a veiled argument from design, or from natural teleology, or from subjective idealism. Let me assume that

[6]George Gale, "The Anthropic Principle." *Scientific American* 245, no. 6 (December 1981): 154–71; and John Leslie, "Anthropic Principle, World Ensemble, Design," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 9 (1982): 141–51.

it is none of these. Then it is not a straight answer to the "why"-question. The questioner sought information about the causal history of his explanandum.[7] He was not given any. (And not necessarily because there was none to give. In at least some of the cases in which anthropic answers are offered, he could truly have been told that his explanandum is so global a feature of the world that it leaves no room for causes distinct from itself, and hence it cannot have any causal history.) And yet he was told something that was responsive, in a way, to his request for explanatory information.

I think he was offered consolation for the lack of the explanatory information he sought. He was told: the thing is not so very mystifying after all, it was only to be expected. Therefore it is not so very bad if it must be left unexplained.

If actuality is a special distinction whereby one world is distinguished from all the rest, the anthropic consolation falls flat. For it seems that the capacity to support life also is a very special distinction, at least among worlds with roughly the same sort of physics as ours. It does not get rid of any mystery if we are told that both these rare distinctions happen to belong to the same world.

It is otherwise if actuality is not a rare distinction at all, but merely indexical. The anthropic answer serves its purpose well. For then the unexplained explanandum comes down, either immediately or by way of an elaborate demonstration, to this: the world we inhabit is one of the habitable worlds. However scarce the habitable worlds may be, it is no wonder that our world is one of them. We should turn out to live in a world that *isn't* habitable? Or, to return to the original question, in a world where there is nothing, and not rather something?[8]

E. TERMINOLOGICAL ACTUALISM

It is part of my view that many things—whole worlds and all their parts, including some people very like ourselves—are not actual. Hence my view is opposed to *actualism*: the thesis that everything there is (taking the quantifier as entirely unrestricted) is actual.

Actualism might be a metaphysical thesis to the effect that there are far fewer things than I believe in—only a large finite number of people, for instance, instead of an uncountable infinity of them spread over countless worlds.

But it might just be a terminological proposal, neutral with respect to ontology: whatever things there may or may not be, and however they may be related, all of them are to be called actual. "Actual" is to be used indiscriminately, as a blanket term applicable to everything there is (and again we take the quantifier as entirely unrestricted).

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[7]See my "Causal Explanation" (to appear in the sequel to this volume).
[8]I am grateful to Peter van Inwagen, who called my attention to the connection between indexical actuality and certain anthropic answers. He comments on this connection in "Indexicality and Actuality," 403–4.

Terminological actualism will suit a philosopher who accepts common opinion as to what there is. It does not suit me. I would prefer to disagree with common opinion that everything is actual, so that I may instead agree with common opinion about the extent of actuality—about what sorts of things are actual, how many of them there are, how they are related to us. I cannot agree with common opinion on both points. I do not think there is any determinate convention of language that requires me to agree on the first point rather than the second. Why should there be? Why should our linguistic community have troubled to settle a point that has arisen so seldom?

But it scarcely matters. I have no objection of principle to absolutely indiscriminate blanket terms; I myself use "entity" that way. What does matter is that no one should foist metaphysical actualism on us by representing it as an innocent terminological stipulation.

If I had to, I too could say that everything is actual, only not all that is actual is part of this world. (Then I would advance an indexical analysis of thisworldliness.) But the game would begin over. Someone would be sure to say that by definition the world consists of everything there is, so there can be nothing that is not part of the world. . . . The moves go just as before.