

# The Emptiness of Counterpart Theory: The Mahayana Doctrine of Emptiness and the Consequences for David Lewis' View of *De Re* Modality

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## Author Note

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This paper assesses the impact of certain kinds of doctrines on counterpart theory contained in David Lewis' account of Possible Worlds—Modal Realism—with respect to that theory's ability to account for *de re* modal statements. Since Lewis' theory allows for the construction of possible worlds based on a wide variety of logically coherent principles, we have grounds to consider such a world in which the Mahayana Buddhist Doctrine of Emptiness is true. When this doctrine is incorporated in the structure of a possible world, the consequence is a total elimination of counterparts; it will be impossible for counterparts to exist, not only in the proposed possible world, but also in every possible world constructed. Since, it is impossible for Lewis' theory to account for *de re* modality without appealing to counterparts, it loses some important explanatory power.

## Background

According to Lewis' Modal Realism, our world is just one of many; there are an infinite number of worlds, arranged per an infinite number of logical possibilities.<sup>1</sup> Every way that a world *could be* is in fact a way that some remote world actually *is*. There is no overlap between worlds; there is no spatiotemporal relationship between worlds or between things within those worlds. The difference between worlds is simply a difference in the kinds of things that exist within them and the nature or theories concerning them

(Lewis, 2008a, 500). Likewise, there is no difference in the criteria for the existence of a world; if it is possible for a world to exist then it does exist and it is just as real as any other world. When speaking of our world and the things within it, we are speaking of existence in a restricted sense, i.e., we are quantifying only over our own world and leaving out other worlds and the things within them (Lewis 2008a, 501). However, we are not necessarily ruling out the existence of other worlds and our ignorance of them is of no import to the question of their existence.

Modal Realism is useful for accounting for both *de re* and *de dicto* modalities. For Lewis, modality also refers to quantification over the objects in a particular world or, at times, over all worlds. Consequently, possibility is understood in terms of

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<sup>1</sup> David Lewis, Modal Realism at Work in *Metaphysics: The Big Questions* edited by Peter van Inwagen and Dean W. Zimmerman, 2008, Blackwell Publishing Malden MA, 500-508, (Lewis, 2008a)

existential quantification over worlds and necessity is understood in terms of universal quantification over worlds (Lewis 2008a, 504). The work of analyzing modal statements is done in a framework characterized by the term ‘possible worlds’. This should not be taken to imply that there is a real, forceful distinction between the actual and the possible. Actual, on David Lewis’ view, is an indexical term equivalent to ‘here’ or ‘present’. The term actual is relative to the speaker and can be used by any agent in any world to refer to their world (Lewis 2008a, 508). Possible worlds are all actual, provided that there is no logical inconsistency within them. We habitually speak or think of ways things could have been and these conjectures usually contradict the actual turn of events. This can be paraphrased as a belief in the existence of other entities, i.e., possible worlds.<sup>2</sup> Possible worlds are concrete, spatio-temporally isolated, fully realized, irreducible, not identified with anything else (e.g., linguistic entities), and should be taken to literally exist (Lewis 2008b, 161). Furthermore, the entities within them are just as spatiotemporally isolated as the worlds themselves; they are not “lounging in the doorways of two worlds at once” (Lewis 2008b, 163).

Rather than each possible world containing entities that can hop between worlds or exist simultaneously in multiple worlds—otherwise referred to as transworld individuals—they contain world isolated individuals—counterparts—that stand in as the truthmakers for modal statements. An individual’s existence in a possible world may be mirrored by a corresponding counterpart in another world. A

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<sup>2</sup> David Lewis, “Possible Worlds” in *Metaphysics Contemporary Readings* edited by Micheal J. Loux, 2008 Routledge, 160-167 (Lewis 2008b)

counterpart’s existence is both maintained by distinctness within a world (a world contains things that are distinct from me i.e. a counterpart) and identified by similarity (whether or not something counts as a counterpart depends on a given definition of meaningful resemblance).<sup>3</sup> Of note, however, is that counterpart relations are not identity relations; similarity relations do not contain the formal properties of identity.<sup>4</sup> In other words, counterparts and counterpart relations are substitutions for identity between entities in different worlds (Lewis 1979, 126). Counterparts are who we would be had events gone a different way, thus they can account for modal statements. Anything that is the subject of a coherent modal claim will have a counterpart in at least one other world. The events in that other world will account for our intuitions about possibilities.

Counterpart theory makes use of the idea of essences. The essence of an individual is found in an examination of all the attributes it shares with all its counterparts. This essence is the “intersection of its essential attributes”, thus essentialism is an indispensable part of counterpart theory. An essential attribute is just an attribute which is found in the original individual *and* exemplified by all its counterparts (Lewis 1979, 120). A counterpart of an individual contains all the attributes that are a part of the individual’s essence (121). These attributes are never accidental to an individual like hair color or nationality. Instead they are always significant and

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<sup>3</sup> Richard Woodward, “Counterparts,” *Philosophy Compass* 7, no. 1 (2012): , doi:10.1111/j.1747-9991.2011.00451.x

<sup>4</sup> David Lewis, Counterpart Theory and Quantified Modal Logic in *The Possible and the Actual* by Michael J. Loux, Cornell University Press, London, 1979, 110-129 (Lewis 1979)

integral to the individual such that the removal of that attribute would have a profound effect on that individual's identity. Thus, counterpart relations are very much a matter of intrinsic quality (126). *De re* modal claims are then explained, in part, according to standards of similarity postulated by counterpart theory (127).

Just as meaningful statements can be made about counterparts, the same may be done for the possible world a counterpart is situated within. Assertions should not be restricted to statements about objects and events but also theories that are associated with the structure of possible worlds. Possibilities concerning the nature of objects in a world can be accounted for by modal realism and espoused in the form of physical theories, metaphysical theories, and, most notably, religious doctrines. These doctrines are composed of statements that are possibly true or false, and have a verification transcendent truth value. They may also be understood to represent possibilities and as such, should be accounted for using Lewis' theory: for every such coherent religious doctrine, there exists a possible world in which it is true and a possible world in which it is false.

An important point here is that theories are contingently true. Lewis himself seems to allude to such an inclination in his treatment of laws in certain discussions. For example, in his discussion of restrictions on quantification over worlds he states: "Thus it is nomologically necessary, though not unrestrictedly necessary, that friction produces heat: *at every world that obeys the laws of our world*, friction produces heat. It is contingent which world is ours; hence what are the laws of our world..." (Lewis 2008a, 504, emphasis mine) The laws of our world are considered facts and are a part of larger theories. But here, Lewis seems to

imply that these facts and theories are true in some worlds and false in others, i.e., contingently true. They are correct, so long as the world follows from certain origins and continues to adhere to a certain continuity in properties (e.g. atmospheric makeup or gravitational consistency) or events. Theories that are based on these and other kinds of continuity are contingent; if one thing is altered then theories are symmetrically altered or fall apart. Therefore, their corresponding counterfactuals must be accounted for using possible worlds theory.

### The Doctrine of Emptiness

There are certain doctrines that, when viewed as modal claims and used in constructing possible worlds, have detrimental effects on modal realism and its ability to account for *de re* modality. The Mahayana Buddhist doctrine of emptiness states that objects within the world are devoid of any intrinsic nature. Objects are not *ultimately* real, if *ultimately* means that we must stipulate that a necessary condition for this designation is for an object to have a nature that is wholly its own.<sup>5</sup> If nothing has its properties intrinsically, no object should be thought of as having real, independent reality, i.e., all phenomena are interconnected and nothing exists on its own, independent from anything else (Siderits, 10). We only believe objects are *ultimately* real because of the way we view the world; really what we are viewing are interconnected aggregated aspects connected by the shared emptiness that runs throughout all things in the world. We have practical use for aggregated aspects, and we use names like 'bus' or 'tree' or 'self' to identify

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<sup>5</sup>Mark Siderits, "On the soteriological significance of emptiness," *Contemporary Buddhism* 4, no. 1 (2003): , doi:10.1080/1463994032000140158

aspects that seem to co-occur because we tend to shy away from simply listing parts and their relations. We mistakenly characterize aspects according to a misguided view, and when asked to differentiate between and make meaningful statements about ‘named’ aggregates we discover that we cannot. Thus, it is revealed that we have made a mistake in thinking that there are independent, whole objects that really exist. Rather, what actually exists are parts that happen to co-occur, while ‘named’ objects are really ‘conceptual fictions’; they are not whole entities with intrinsic, independent natures. (Siderits, 10). So, rather than accounting for things based on their nature, we can account for them in terms of their parts.<sup>6</sup>

A pertinent concern here is if this doctrine gives birth to logical inconsistencies. The criterion for an idea’s inclusion in the possible structure of a possible world is that it does not produce logical inconsistencies (i.e., a world that allows for a one-sided, three-dimensional figure). I cannot conceive of any objections made on the grounds of logical inconsistency. It is difficult to know if anything particularly meaningful can be said about material objects or if our navigation of

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<sup>6</sup> Much can be said about the content of the doctrine of emptiness and it can be--and has been-- interpreted in ways that disregard its metaphysical implications. This paper, however characterizes this doctrine as a metaphysical view. I endorse the sort of reading that argues that the doctrine of emptiness states that objects have no nature or intrinsic properties because reality is inherently causal in nature. Caused entities cannot be said to possess an independent and essential nature because “the products of causal processes necessarily derive their natures from their causes”. They do not have an independent nature; all that products derive from their causes is material existence. Thus, objects have no independent nature and, consequently, are not *ultimately* real (Siderits 21).

the world will be at all affected by our realization that things are empty. However, it does not produce logical incoherence to state that there are real entities in the world that are simply aggregate parts and relations. Thus, I will move forward with the supposition that a possible world can be constructed in which it is true that no object has an independent nature, nor does any object contain any intrinsic or essential properties. This possible world will be called world e (hereafter  $W_e$ ).

### Against Counterpart Theory

A forceful objection to counterpart theory can be derived from the perspective of world-building analysis. When constructing a possible world one can see the impotence of counterpart theory emerge. Inspired by Jim Stone’s *Counterpart Theory and Modal Realism*, the argument form chosen is a *reductio ad absurdum*.<sup>7</sup> This will exemplify a contradiction for counterpart theory that can be derived when building a possible world.

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<sup>7</sup> Stone postulates two examples from which he derives a *reductio ad absurdum*. In the first situation, every subject that finds themselves in a specific situation acts in the same manner, in every possible world. This is the case even though they could have done otherwise. The second example is situation T where, in every possible world, each coin in situation T is flipped and lands heads up even though every coin could have landed tails up. On a Modal Realist account, one must accept that in every possible world, every subject acted the same way and every coin landed heads up. There are no counterparts that acted differently or landed tails up. But if one accepts Counterpart Theory then there are corresponding counterparts to account for the corresponding counterfactuals, thereby negating Modal Realism. If one accepts both Modal Realism and Counterpart Theory, then there both are and are not any counterparts. This leads to a contradiction, thus one must accept one and get rid of the other. Jim Stone, *Counterpart Theory and Modal Realism*, 2009

According to counterpart theory, for all possible worlds, every individual that is the subject of a coherent modal claim in a given possible world has a counterpart in at least one possible world. This counterpart is identifiable based on degrees of similarity. This similarity is based on the exemplification of characteristics that an entity has essentially. Here, ‘essentially’ carries with it the implication of intrinsicity, since any property an individual contains essentially will be an intrinsic property. This is not to be confused with the inaccurate statement that every intrinsic property is essential. Counterparts are those entities that, upon examination, are found to have a list of essential properties that appears most like the original individual’s.

There exists a possible world in which Mahayana Buddhists put forth the doctrine of emptiness and, when viewed as a modal statement, in that possible world this doctrine is true. In this possible world,  $W_e$ , no individuals have intrinsic characteristics, e.g., an essence. In counterpart theory, an attribute that is shared by all its counterparts is said to be an essential attribute (Lewis, 1979). If the Mahayana Buddhist doctrine of emptiness is true in  $W_e$ , however, then there are no such things as intrinsic characteristics in  $W_e$ . Thus, all entities in this proposed possible world are *empty*. There is no essence to speak of for things in  $W_e$  as the essence of an individual is the intersection of all the attributes shared by an individual and its counterparts.

If there are no intrinsic characteristics, then there cannot be any identification of counterparts. Consequently, there is no list of essential properties drawn for these entities to which entities in other possible worlds can be compared. The similarity at the heart of the counterpart relation is

rendered nonexistent. For entities within  $W_e$ , counterparts do not exist. However, meaningful, coherent modal claims can be made about individuals in this world. For example, when reviewing the life of a 70-year-old woman named Veronica in  $W_e$ , it is revealed that at 21 years old, shortly before her marriage, she had the opportunity to travel to Japan to earn a Masters in Japanese Linguistics. The corresponding modal claims here are: “Veronica could have earned a masters and been fluent in Japanese” or “Veronica could have lived in Japan”. Per the original premise of counterpart theory, all individuals in a possible world that are the subject of coherent modal claims have a counterpart. Therefore, Veronica should have a counterpart. But Veronica, just as all other aggregates and phenomena in  $W_e$ , is empty; she has no intrinsic characteristics. Therefore, she does not have a counterpart. So there exists at least one individual that does not have a counterpart, thus a contradiction is derived. Therefore, we must conclude that our original assumption that counterpart theory is true was mistaken.

### Implications

A further consequence of this is the loss of explanatory power of Lewis’ theory regarding *de re* modality. Meaningful *de re* modal statements are supposedly only possible if and only if counterparts are present in another possible world. Although  $W_e$  contains individuals, their emptiness renders the similarity relation that grounds counterpart theory obsolete, because these individuals have no essences to appeal to, i.e., there are no counterparts. But this has disastrous consequences for any analysis of *de re* modal statements. Particularly, counterfactual statements concerning possible properties of an individual only

have a truth value respective to possible worlds that contain their counterpart. When I say, I could have been a gymnast, or I could never be a soccer player, these statements are true because I have at least one counterpart in a possible world that is a gymnast while none of my counterparts are soccer players. As previously stated, in  $W_e$  there are no counterparts of any objects. Therefore, we should not be able to make meaningful, coherent claims about individuals in  $W_e$ . The problem then is that it *is* entirely possible to formulate meaningful, coherent claims about individuals in  $W_e$ , but the truth value of these *de re* modal statements cannot be accounted for in  $W_e$ . Neither can they be accounted for by appeal to the inhabitants of any other world. Lewis' theory is now faced with the problem of being unable to supply adequate truth makers for such modal statements.

Since religious doctrines are typically viewed as necessarily true, I will expound upon further implications for the explanatory power of Lewis' theory with the presupposition that the doctrine of emptiness is necessarily true. Operating on this presupposition the doctrine of emptiness turns into a universal claim and the conclusion is that in every possible world, there are no counterparts. However, within a modal realist framework, counterpart theory also seems to operate as necessarily true as it is a theory that exists outside of and governs possible worlds. When examining counterpart theory in conjunction with the doctrine of emptiness, we reach the conclusion that not only can counterpart theory not account for *de re* modal statements, but it also cannot be maintained in any possible world without deriving a contradiction. There are now no counterparts

in *any* possible world, and consequently no truth makers for *de re* modal claims.

### Objections

Multiple objections may be made to my world-building analysis; however four will be entertained in this section. The first objection is that I am mistaken in assuming that the objects in  $W_e$  have no counterparts because their counterparts are similar aggregates of parts that do have essences, i.e., an object. The statement "This aggregate of parts could have an essence" is supposedly a coherent modal statement concerning possibility because there truly are aggregates of parts in another possible world that do contain an essence. My response to this is two-fold. First, if the counterpart relation is based on similarity, then an aggregate of parts that does have an essence and an aggregate of parts that does not have an essence are wholly dissimilar and thus incomparable. Secondly, even if we can claim that there are counterparts that display patterns of co-occurrence similar to the original *and* that these counterparts are also empty, it would still be unclear which particular counterpart is assigned to which original.

An objector could also contend that counterparts are identifiable by consistent co-occurrence. The counterparts of the originals will repetitively display the same co-occurrence of 'attributes'. Besides the intelligibility of the term 'display' in this objection—for how is anything being displayed if the attributes are not intrinsic—the issue is that for a proper counterpart relation to obtain, the comparative similarity must reference an important, essential attribute, not any accidental property. Since the attributes that are seemingly displayed are not essential (and even seen as illusions on some readings of the doctrine) they are

not proper material for the formulation of counterpart relations.

A third objection is that Lewis could contend that modal claims about individuals in  $W_e$  seem to be meaningful, when in fact they are not. However, it is not that these statements simply *seem* meaningful; it is that they *are* meaningful. They transmit knowledge and they contribute to a particular discourse. They are statements that we want to claim are true or false and because of this propensity we must have a truthmaker for these claims. Thus, it is not enough to simply say that they seem meaningful. Furthermore, this objection seems to allude to an illegitimate addition to the argument of modal realism. There does not seem to be room for the idea that some coherent modal claims seem to be meaningful while others do not. They are all meaningful, thus they are all subject to judgments concerning their truth or falsehood.

Another objection to my attack on counterpart theory is that religious doctrines should not be treated as necessary truths because it is possible to formulate a claim where they can be proven false without a contradiction being derived in reality. Religious doctrines, metaphysical or otherwise are not the same as statements like “ $2+2=4$ ” or “A square has 4 sides”. The converse of these statements can be proven as contradictions through appeal to real evidence. The same cannot be said for religious doctrines. What evidence can be appealed to when claiming the converse of the doctrine of emptiness, i.e. “Objects are ultimately real, whole entities with an essence.”? There is just as much evidence in favor of the doctrine as there is in favor of its converse and the same can be said for many religious doctrines. Therefore, it is better to consider religious doctrines as

contingently true. There are worlds where the doctrine of emptiness is false and consequently has no bearing on any other possible world. Counterparts can still serve as truth makers for *de re* modal claims in all other possible worlds. Furthermore, the presence of one world in which there are no counterparts is of no import, since Lewis is not actually committed to the claim that every individual must have a counterpart. It could very well be the case that I do not have a counterpart and that this possible world is the only one where I exist, but that discovery would be perfectly in line with counterpart theory. Likewise, the absence of counterparts for individuals in  $W_e$  in no way dooms counterpart theory.

In response to this objection I maintain that the supposition that religious doctrines are necessarily true is supported by Lewis' modal realism. Necessity is included in the realm of modality, meaning any and all necessary truths can be accounted by modal realism. However, as a consequence, it is fair to presuppose that religious doctrines are not necessarily true but rather contingently true i.e. mere possibilities. Therefore, I am willing to relinquish the presupposition that religious doctrines are necessarily true in favor of the converse. However, the fact remains that coherent modal claims can be made about the individuals in  $W_e$ . There is no explanation for this without counterpart theory according to Lewis; there is nothing to make these claims true or false thus, in  $W_e$ , modal claims have no identifiable truth value. If we claim that the absence of counterparts for individuals in  $W_e$  is inconsequential, then we are accepting the claim that counterpart theory—a theory that is meant to be applicable in all possible worlds—is useless in some possible worlds and applicable in others. But there is no real reason why this is the case, especially

because possible worlds theory is qualitatively parsimonious— all possible worlds are meant to be the *same* kind of thing. If possible worlds are all the same kind of thing, then no substantial criteria can be provided that explains why certain worlds are governed by counterpart theory while others are not. Therefore, if we accept that  $W_e$  individuals simply do not have counterparts we have rendered counterpart theory incoherent and incapable of conclusively supplying truthmakers for *de re* modal claims.

While Lewis is not committed to the claim that all individuals have a counterpart, he is committed to the claim that there are counterparts for individuals that can be the subject of modal statements. He is also committed to the claim that counterparts are the truthmakers for modal statements. In general, concrete entities within possible worlds can be the subject of coherent modal claims. Entities in  $W_e$  are no different, so there should be corresponding counterparts in other possible worlds. However, their emptiness makes the existence of that counterpart impossible. If we accept that religious doctrines are viable materials for structuring possible worlds, and if we are committed to a modal realist account, then we must acknowledge that there is a possible world in which nothing within it has a counterpart. But this creates a problem that leaves two options for a solution: disregard counterpart theory or relinquish our intuition that modal claims are true or false. Given the fact that the purpose of modal realism is to provide a foundation for the truth value of modal claims, it does not seem plausible that Lewis would be willing to give up that intuition. Thus, to preserve the integrity of modal realism we must abandon counterpart theory and look for a new truth maker for

modal claims that is applicable in all possible worlds.

### Concluding Remarks

This paper has endeavored to show that Lewis' possible worlds cannot properly account for *de re* modal statements. The incorporation of the metaphysical portions of doctrines into the structure of a possible world can cause portions of the theory to break down, most notably counterpart theory. The proposal of  $W_e$  has shown that there exists a possible world in which counterparts do not exist. Taking into account the nature of possible worlds, this renders counterpart theory incoherent. Consequently, David Lewis' possible worlds theory loses explanatory power as it can no longer account for all meaningful *de re* modal claims. However, I have not argued that possible worlds theory should be abandoned or that attempts should not be made to restore the theory's explanatory power. Possible worlds theory is compelling in its attempt to account for our modal intuitions, therefore adjustments can and should be made. Restrictions may be placed on the structure of possible worlds, counterpart theory may be adjusted, or a new theory may be incorporated into the possible worlds framework. Whatever the solution may be, as it stands the question of why our modal claims are true or false cannot be answered by counterpart theory.

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