

Impossible Worlds

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Eva Dadlez draws a distinction between fictional and imaginary worlds.¹ Fictional worlds are composed of those states of affairs explicitly included in the work, and those necessarily entailed by them. Imaginary worlds, on the other hand, expand upon fictional worlds in a subjective manner. They include states of affairs that, while not explicit in the work, are necessary for completeness in the imagination. It seems natural then, since we are talking about worlds, to attempt a counterfactual analysis of such states of affairs, but there are (at least) two problems. First, the imaginary world may accidentally (through the fault of the author or the individual audience members) contain contradictory states of affairs. Second, the fictional world may contain contradictory states of affairs *on purpose* (i.e. by design of the author). It seems that, not only must we involve *possible* worlds, but impossible worlds as well.

This difficulty may be brought out by considering Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. In *Wonderland* the Queen's soldiers have the bodies of playing cards with human-like appendages. Somehow, these soldiers have the ability to speak, although they lack lungs. Yet, when we imagine them speaking, we imagine the words being carried forth by the breath from their mouths, just as normally happens in our own world. This seems to lie in tension with David Lewis' counterfactual analysis: "A counterfactual of the form 'If it were that [p], then it would be that [q]' is non-vacuously true iff some possible world where both [p] and [q] are true differs less from our actual world, on balance, than does any world where [p] is true but [q] is not true."² This obviously won't work, since such soldiers do not exist in any possible world, and even if they did, they could not speak in the normal way.

This situation only gets worse on Lewis' alternative analysis: "A sentence of the form 'In the fiction *f*, [*p*]' is non-vacuously true iff, whenever *w* is one of the collective belief worlds of the community of origin of *f*, then some world where *f* is told as known fact and [*p*] is true differs less from the world *w*, on balance, than does any world where *f* is told as known fact and [*p*] is not true."³ First, I cannot imagine any world where *Alice in Wonderland* is told as fact, and even if there were, it still wouldn't be true that *p* (i.e. 'the Queen's soldiers can speak'). Second, it might be noted that, if there were such a world where it is told as fact, and *p* is false (i.e. the Queen's soldiers cannot speak), then that world would differ less from our world than a world where such things could speak.

Lewis was aware of our ability to imagine the impossible, or at least to hold contradictory beliefs. He lists four ways in which one's beliefs may be inconsistent:⁴

- 1) Doublethink (sometimes believing that *p*, other times believing that *not p*)
- 2) Ascribing to something "a property contrary to its existence"
- 3) Ascribing "conflicting properties to the same thing via two different relations of acquaintance"
- 4) "Someone could believe that a sentence is true when in fact it is subtly contradictory."

It seems that, in the *Alice in Wonderland* example, the second or the fourth on the list may help, but not much. Lewis' counterfactual analysis of belief is not quantified over possible worlds, but doxastically accessible worlds. These are ways in which one's beliefs about the world may be. Now, is there some possible world where I believe that the Queen's soldiers can speak? I hope not. But if not, then the counterfactual analysis of the imaginary fictional world fails. It fails because such things are not possible in any world, nor are such beliefs held by any of my

counterparts. It seems then that the imagining of fictional worlds is not entirely captured by counterfactuals, yet it remains something entirely accessible to me (and my counterparts).

1. Eva Dadlez; *What's Hecuba to Him?* The Pennsylvania State University Press, PA, 1997, 141 ff.

2. David Lewis, "Truth in Fiction", *American Philosophical Quarterly* 15 1978, 42.

3. Ibid, 45.

4. David Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*, Blackwell, MA, 1986, 34 ff.