

What in the world are the ways things might have been?

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Abstract Robert Stalnaker is an actualist who holds that merely possible worlds are uninstantiated properties that might have been instantiated. Stalnaker also holds that there are no metaphysically impossible worlds: uninstantiated properties that couldn't have been instantiated. These views motivate Stalnaker's "two dimensional" account of the necessary a posteriori on which there is no single proposition that is both necessary and a posteriori. For a (metaphysically) necessary proposition is true in all (metaphysically) possible worlds. If there were necessary a posteriori propositions, that would mean that there were propositions true in all possible worlds but which could only be known to be true by acquiring empirical evidence. Consider such a purported proposition P. The role of empirical evidence for establishing P's truth would have to be to rule out worlds in which P is false. If there were no such worlds to be ruled out, we would not require evidence for P. But by hypothesis, P is necessary and so true in all metaphysically possible worlds. And on Stalnaker's view, the metaphysically possible worlds are all the worlds there are. So there can be no proposition that is true in all possible worlds, but that we require evidence to know. In this way, the motivation for Stalnaker's two dimensional account of the necessary a posteriori rests on his denying that there are metaphysically impossible worlds. I argue that given his view of what possible worlds are, Stalnaker has no principled reason for denying that there are metaphysically impossible worlds. If I am right, this undercuts Stalnaker's motivation for his two dimensional account of the necessary a posteriori.

Keywords Possible worlds · Impossible worlds · Modality · Actualism · Properties · Necessary a priori · Necessary a posteriori · Epistemic possibility

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Ways a World Might Be (henceforth *WWMB*) is an excellent collection of important essays by Robert Stalnaker, one of the leading contemporary figures in philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, metaphysics and philosophical logic. The collection is also extremely useful, in that it brings together essays on a variety of related topics in such a way as to allow one to more readily see deep connections between Stalnaker's views in a number of different areas.

Because Stalnaker is the most prominent and most ingenious current defender of unstructured propositions, when a structured proposition theorist like me is asked to contribute to a symposium on Stalnaker's work there is a very strong temptation to make the contribution a defense of structured propositions. I am pleased to say that I have resisted this temptation. Other than the fact that I am not sure how much new there is to contribute to that dispute, the main reason for my not succumbing to temptation is that *WWMB* does not, unlike Stalnaker's (1984) *Inquiry*, contain a direct defense of unstructured propositions. Thus it seemed inappropriate for a symposium on this work to take up the defense of structured propositions.

Instead of addressing an issue on which Stalnaker and I disagree, I thought I would at least start out with something we agree about. Stalnaker and I are both actualists.¹ This means that if we accept merely possible worlds—ways things could have been—we must locate them, like everything else, in the actual world. But then the question arises for us: what entities in the actual world are these possible worlds? Section 1 of *WWMB* (*Ways and Worlds*) comprises Stalnaker's most explicit attempt to address this question.² In the present work, I propose to do two things. First, I will discuss what possible worlds are according to *WWMB*. Thus, I hope to get clear on the metaphysics of possible worlds on Stalnaker's view. Second, I will discuss whether given Stalnaker's metaphysics of possible worlds, he can maintain his view that there are no metaphysically impossible worlds.³ Various related issues will be touched on along the way.

Before turning to these two issues, let me clarify the second of them and explain why it is important for Stalnaker. Given that you accept that there are possible worlds, whether you can plausibly deny that there are metaphysically impossible worlds can be very much influenced by your account of what possible worlds are. For example, suppose you thought that possible worlds are sets of propositions.⁴ Then it looks like you are committed to metaphysically impossible worlds. For there are sets of propositions that contain metaphysically impossible propositions (or propositions whose conjunction is metaphysically impossible). Since on your view worlds are just sets of propositions, then sets containing metaphysically impossible propositions would seem to be metaphysically impossible worlds. On the other hand, suppose you are a modal realist of the sort Lewis (1986) is and so you think other possible worlds are concrete entities like the actual world, only not spatio-temporally connected to it. Then you might think that your view of the metaphysics of possible worlds forces you to hold that there are no metaphysically impossible worlds. For you might think that metaphysically impossible worlds would also have to be concrete and that the notion of a concrete entity that is metaphysically impossible is incoherent. For

¹ See *WWMB* pp. 6–7, 8, 32 and 55. Henceforth all page and chapter references are to this work unless otherwise indicated.

² Perhaps along with Stalnaker (1986).

³ p. 8, 102 and Chapter 3.

⁴ See Adams (1974).

example, you might think that there is no world in which water is XYZ, because this would require water, the concrete stuff, to lack one of its essential properties and that is incoherent.⁵

I'm actually not sure whether this latter line of reasoning can be upheld, but I give the above two examples simply to illustrate the idea that your metaphysics of possible worlds can be a significant factor in determining whether it is plausible for you to deny that there are impossible worlds. The second of the issues mentioned above that I intend to discuss, then, is whether given Stalnaker's account of the metaphysics of possible worlds, he can plausibly maintain that there are no metaphysically impossible worlds. I shall make a case for the claim that he cannot.

Having made clear what the issue is here, let me explain why it is important for Stalnaker. Because Stalnaker thinks there are no metaphysically impossible but epistemically possible worlds (roughly, metaphysically impossible worlds that we cannot rule out a priori), he is driven to deny that there are any necessary a posteriori propositions.⁶ A (metaphysically) necessary proposition is true in all (metaphysically) possible worlds. If there were necessary a posteriori propositions, that would mean that there were propositions true in all possible worlds but which could only be known to be true by acquiring empirical evidence (I assume that to be necessary a posteriori, a proposition must be knowable *only* on the basis of evidence). Consider such a purported proposition P. The role of empirical evidence for establishing P's truth would have to be to rule out worlds in which P is false. If there were no such worlds to be ruled out, we would not require evidence for P. But by hypothesis, P is necessary and so true in all metaphysically possible worlds. And on Stalnaker's view, the metaphysically possible worlds are all the worlds there are. So there can be no proposition that is true in all possible worlds, but that we require evidence to know.⁷

As result of this reasoning, Stalnaker is compelled to develop his "two dimensional" account of the necessary a posteriori according to which there are no propositions that are both necessary and knowable only a posteriori. However, it should be clear that this reasoning depends on denying the existence of metaphysically impossible but epistemically possible worlds. For if there were such worlds, metaphysically necessary propositions could go false in them. But then there could be necessary propositions that are knowable only a posteriori: they are true in all metaphysically possible worlds but false in some epistemically possible worlds. Thus evidence would be required to know them because evidence would be required to rule out the epistemically possible worlds in which they were false. In this way, the motivation for Stalnaker's two dimensional account of the necessary a posteriori rests on his denying that there are metaphysically impossible worlds. Thus the importance of that denial to Stalnaker's overall view. With this background in place, let us turn to Stalnaker's views about the metaphysics of possible worlds.

Some remarks of Stalnaker's suggest that he doesn't have much to say about what possible worlds are, that he wishes to remain neutral on the topic, and hence that the present paper should be very short. Thus Stalnaker writes:

⁵ Of course, Lewis (1986) himself gives a different reason for thinking that on his conception of worlds, there are no (logically) impossible ones. See p. 7 foot note 3.

⁶ p. 16, 192

⁷ This line of reasoning is spelled out in more detail in Soames (2003) pp. 374–375. I have benefited greatly from discussions of these issues with Soames.

My aim was to separate a commitment to possible worlds from any specific metaphysical theory at all. I see the apparatus of possible worlds, not as a metaphysics, but as a framework for representing one's commitments, and for clarifying disagreements between people with conflicting commitments.⁸

Later he puts the same point as follows:

To accept the semantics for quantification theory is not to accept any particular metaphysics of individuals...Similarly, a possible world is not a particular kind of thing or place. The theory leaves the *nature* of possible worlds as open as extensional semantics leaves the nature of individuals.⁹

Such comments make it sound as though Stalnaker intends to remain neutral on the question of what possible worlds are. But that is not the case, and a hint that it isn't is that, as I've already said, Stalnaker makes clear that he is an actualist. To take that position is already to commit yourself to a view about the metaphysics of possible worlds: whatever they are, they are part of the actual world (as we'll see, Stalnaker says a lot more than this).

But then what are we to make of the above remarks? What Stalnaker is getting at is that to accept the possible worlds framework is not *thereby* to commit yourself to any *particular* metaphysics of possible worlds (just as to accept the semantics for quantification is not *thereby* to commit yourself to any particular metaphysics of individuals, as Stalnaker points out). And this is clearly right, as is shown by the fact that those employing the framework disagree on the metaphysics of possible worlds. Stalnaker of course agrees that adopting the framework does commit you to possible worlds:

I have been arguing for the metaphysical neutrality of the possible worlds framework, but I should emphasize that I do not mean to suggest that the use of the framework is free of ontological commitment to possibilities (ways things might be, counterfactual situations, possible states of the world).¹⁰

So Stalnaker's claim is that the possible worlds framework is metaphysically neutral in the sense that adopting it does not force you to adopt any *particular* metaphysics of possible worlds. But adopting it does commit you to the existence of possible worlds.¹¹ The particular metaphysics of these things you are thereby committed to is a further matter on which people, all of whom accept the possible worlds framework, may disagree. As I said, I certainly agree with Stalnaker on this point. The question we now turn to is: what particular metaphysics of possible worlds does Stalnaker advocate?

On this point, Stalnaker is unequivocal. I have already indicated that Stalnaker is an actualist. He thinks that possible worlds are better thought of as possible states of the world. Possible states of the world are simply properties the world might have had.¹² Exactly one of these properties is instantiated: the way the world actually is. Here Stalnaker distinguishes between two senses of 'possible world'. When the

⁸ p. 8.

⁹ p. 38. Similar themes are voiced in Stalnaker (1986).

¹⁰ p. 171.

¹¹ See pp. 168–169.

¹² pp. 7, 27–28, 54.

actualist says there is only one possible world, the actual world, she is talking about the thing that in fact instantiates one of these properties that is a possible state of the world. When the actualist also agrees that there are many possible worlds, she is simply saying that there are many of these properties the world might have had, all but one of which are uninstantiated.¹³

So there is exactly one concrete world, in virtue of the fact that exactly one property the world might have had is instantiated. Nonetheless, there are many uninstantiated properties the world might have had, and these are the merely possible worlds or possible states of the world.¹⁴ Since these uninstantiated properties exist in the actual world, this view is a form of actualism. If we use the term ‘possible world’ for these uninstantiated properties, we can say somewhat paradoxically that on this view merely possible worlds exist in the actual world (though they are uninstantiated).

Now to this point I agree with Stalnaker. As I indicated I too am an actualist and I too think that so-called possible worlds are in fact uninstantiated properties. However, there is an important difference in our views. I think there are metaphysically impossible worlds (they are also properties) and Stalnaker does not.¹⁵ One reason I think this is that I think my metaphysics of properties simply makes it hard to deny that there are uninstantiated properties that are metaphysically impossible worlds. Because I want to consider whether Stalnaker’s metaphysics makes it hard for him to deny that there are impossible worlds, it will help focus the central issues to explain why my metaphysics makes it hard for me to deny this.

I think of possible worlds as big, uninstantiated properties that are complex and have as parts other properties and relations.¹⁶ So consider worlds according to which bachelors exist. This means that if these worlds/properties had been instantiated—one of them is—bachelors would have existed. This in turn means that these big properties have the bachelor property as a part. (I assume that a merely possible world has as a part any property that would have been instantiated had it been.) The bachelor property is itself the conjunction of the properties of being an adult, being male and being unmarried. In saying this, I assume that properties somehow can be combined conjunctively to form conjunctive properties. Now these big, complex properties that are merely possible worlds result from properties and relations being combined in the ways complex properties and relations generally can be formed out of simpler ones. These modes of combination include (but are not limited to) conjunction, disjunction, and negation.¹⁷ Given that properties can combine in this way

¹³ p. 7

¹⁴ The sense in which the world might have had one of these other properties is something that merits serious discussion. Unfortunately, I do not have the time or space to discuss this issue here. See Stalnaker’s discussion of related matters on pp. 27–29.

¹⁵ Soames (2005) also endorses the view that there are metaphysically impossible but epistemically possible world states understood as properties. See pp. 82–83 and 199–209.

¹⁶ See King (1998) for discussion of this view of properties and relations.

¹⁷ And of course these modes of combination can be iterated. Consider the property of being an uncle. Roughly, we might think the uncle property is to be understood as (suppressing being human for simplicity): x is an uncle iff x is male and some: y (x is a sibling of y & some: z (y is a parent of z)). Here there are various modes of combination that combine the components in forming the uncle property. First, the parent of relation combines with the property of properties some. Some combines with an n -place relation on one of its argument places to yield an $n-1$ place relation. In the

to form complex properties, it is hard to see what would prevent properties from combining to form properties that could not be instantiated. So, for example, the property of being water could conjunctively combine with the property of being H_2O_2 yielding the conjunctive property of being water and H_2O_2 . Note that the point is purely metaphysical: if properties result from the modes of combination specified, those modes could lead to the formation of complex properties that are necessarily uninstantiated.

This in turn leads me to think that there are metaphysically impossible worlds. That is, there are big properties that the world could not have had, because they contain as parts properties that are necessarily uninstantiated. Thus, there are worlds according to which water is XYZ and so on. I want to emphasize that the argument here for metaphysically impossible worlds is not quite of the sort one often sees, where it is claimed that some argument for possible worlds is such that if it succeeds it would also show there are impossible worlds.¹⁸ Rather, the argument is that given what possible worlds are metaphysically, there are bound to be things of that kind that are impossible. In the present case the reason is that the modes by means of which properties combine to form complex properties are bound to yield big properties that are necessarily uninstantiated.

Now in my view, some of these properties are epistemic possibilities that are metaphysical impossibilities: we cannot rule out a priori that the actual world instantiates them even though they are not ways the world metaphysically could be. These epistemic possibilities that are not metaphysically possible explain why there are necessary a posteriori truths. A claim may be metaphysically necessary, but rule out epistemic possibilities that can only be ruled out by empirical investigation.¹⁹

As I indicated above, Stalnaker wants none of this. He thinks that there are no metaphysically impossible worlds.²⁰ Thus, again as suggested above, he gives a “two dimensional” explanation of the necessary a posteriori. The question I wish to raise is *why* on his view there are no metaphysically impossible worlds. Possible worlds are just properties the world might have had. What is it about properties as Stalnaker understands them that allows for properties that are ways things might have been but disallows properties that are ways things couldn’t have been? As we saw above, other views of properties seem forced to hold that there are properties that are ways things could not have been. What is it about Stalnaker’s views of properties that rules this out? On some views of properties, there aren’t uninstantiated properties (e.g. Armstrong, 1978). But once one allows uninstantiated properties, as Stalnaker does, since many ways things might have been are uninstantiated, why are there no uninstantiated properties that are ways things (metaphysically) could not have been?

Lurking behind my question is the assumption that if you hold that properties exist, but deny that properties of a certain sort exist, you should provide a principled reason as to why properties of that sort don’t exist. Some might balk at this assumption, but that seems to me bizarre. If you can’t provide any principled reason

Footnote 17 continued

above case, some combines with the parent of relation on its second argument place to yield a (one place) property that holds of x iff x is a parent of something. Similar remarks apply to some combining with the two place relation of x ’s being y ’s sibling where y is a parent.

¹⁸ See Naylor (1986) and Yagisawa (1988).

¹⁹ Soames (2005) endorses this explanation of the necessary a posteriori. See pp. 82–83.

²⁰ p. 8, 102 and Chapter 3.

for thinking that a certain sort of property doesn't exist, you should either think that it does exist or be agnostic on the question. In the present case, if Stalnaker can give no principled reason for thinking that impossible worlds don't exist, he should not deny their existence. Indeed, it seems to me that in the present case something stronger is true: if Stalnaker cannot provide a principled reason for thinking impossible worlds don't exist, he should accept that they do. For he holds there are uninstantiated properties that are ways things might have been. Uninstantiated properties that are ways things could not have been are sufficiently similar to ways things might have been (both are big, maximal uninstantiated properties) that if you admit the latter exist and can find no principled reason to deny that the former exist, you should allow that the former do exist. But whether this is so or not, Stalnaker at any rate needs some principled reason for holding that impossible worlds don't exist.

Let me briefly summarize the point at issue. Whether one ought to hold that there are epistemically possible but metaphysically impossible worlds depends at least in good part on what one thinks worlds are. If one takes worlds to be properties all but one of which are uninstantiated, as Stalnaker does, it isn't at all clear why there would not be uninstantiated properties that are ways things could not be. So my question is: what is it about Stalnaker's conception of properties in general or these sorts of properties in particular that results in their being none that is a way things could not have been? Again, what is the principled reason as to why there are no such properties?

To try to answer this question, we must turn to another feature of Stalnaker's view of possible worlds or ways things might have been. Consider what Stalnaker says when contrasting what he calls his "moderate realist" view of possible worlds with Lewis's "extreme realism":

But the moderate realist believes that the only possible worlds there are—ways things might have been—are (like everything else that exists at all) elements of our actual world. They are obviously not concrete objects or situations, but *abstract objects whose existence is inferred or abstracted from the activities of rational agents. It is thus not implausible to suppose that their existence is in some sense dependent on, and their natures explained in terms of, those activities.*²¹

Stalnaker begins this passage by reiterating his actualist view according to which possible worlds are abstract objects—properties, as we have seen—that exist in the actual world. So far, so good. But in the italicized portion of the quotation he appears to make the somewhat surprising claim that the existence of possible worlds *depends on the activities of rational agents*. In Stalnaker (1984) he says, apparently in a similar vein, that possible worlds are “abstractions from the dispositions of rational agents.”²² These claims are not easy to understand. Stalnaker often says that in pursuing rational activities such as deliberating, inquiring, and conversing, rational agents distinguish between various possible alternatives: ways things might be or have been, or possible worlds.²³ Stalnaker generally cites this purported fact as a reason for invoking possible worlds in theorizing about such activities. But in a very few places, including the quotations above, Stalnaker appears to make the more startling claim that the *existence* of possible worlds depends on these activities.

²¹ p. 32, my emphasis.

²² Stalnaker (1984) p. 166.

²³ For example, Stalnaker (1984) p. 4, 57; Stalnaker (1986) pp. 115–117; Stalnaker (1999) pp. 2–3, 79, 152; Stalnaker (2003) p. 8; 38.

Several things are puzzling about this. First, it is unclear how Stalnaker thinks of properties such that activities of rational agents can bring the properties that are possible worlds into existence. Whether I agree with it or not, I understand the idea that the property of loving Rebecca could not exist without Rebecca existing, and so the property depends for its existence on Rebecca's existence. But it is much harder for me to understand the idea that the existence of the property of being a world in which there is nothing but a single hydrogen atom depends on the existence of rational agents who are inquiring, deliberating and so on. I suppose that's because I think of these properties, and properties generally, as existing quite independently of minds and languages (in the strong sense that had minds and languages never existed, the properties still would have). Obviously, if Stalnaker means what he says in the above quotation, he doesn't agree with this. But I need to be told more about properties in order to grasp how the existence of a property such as the above could depend on the occurrence of deliberation.²⁴

The second thing I find puzzling about the claim that the existence of possible worlds depends on the existence of rational activities is that it seems to make the existence of possible worlds highly contingent. If rational creatures hadn't existed, these properties that are possible worlds wouldn't have either. But then it seems as though if rational creatures hadn't existed, there would be no other ways things might have been! I am fairly sure on general grounds that Stalnaker doesn't think this, but I wonder why he isn't committed to it given what he says.

Let's leave these puzzles behind. Perhaps in the end Stalnaker doesn't think that the existence of possible worlds literally depends on activities of rational agents. For our purposes we only need a weaker claim that Stalnaker also seems to make in the quoted passage and that I am fairly certain he does hold: that the existence of possible worlds is inferred from, or, more properly, read off, these activities of rational agents. This would mean the activities of rational agents don't bring worlds into existence, but rather provide the way for us to tell that there are possible worlds and what worlds there are. Whether Stalnaker holds that the existence of possible worlds depends on the activities of rational agents or whether he only holds the weaker view that looking at the rational activities of agents tells us what worlds there are, for him the criterion for determining what worlds there are is to consider the possible alternatives agents distinguish between in deliberation, inquiry and so on. Those alternatives are what worlds there are.

So either these rational activities bring the worlds into existence or they are our sole means for inferring the existence of worlds. In either case, on Stalnaker's view we decide what worlds there are by looking at the alternatives rational agents distinguish between in these activities. We'll put this by saying the activities of rational agents determine what worlds there are.

Returning to the main thread, our question is whether this helps explain why for Stalnaker there are no epistemically possible but metaphysically impossible worlds. Recall that it wasn't clear why on Stalnaker's view of properties there are uninstantiated properties that are ways that things could have been but there are no

²⁴ There are other related questions I have about how Stalnaker thinks of properties as well. First, I wonder whether on Stalnaker's view properties of objects can be brought into existence by activities of rational agents. Second, I would want to know whether on Stalnaker's view there are two kinds of properties, those whose existence depends on rational activities and those whose existence doesn't; and I would like to be told how these differ metaphysically and why they are nonetheless all properties.

uninstantiated properties that are ways that things (metaphysically) could not have been. We were demanding that Stalnaker provide a principled reason as to why there are no such properties. Now it might be thought that this new feature of Stalnaker's view provides the missing reason. If activities of rational agents determine what worlds there are, this may provide a principled reason for thinking that there are only ways could have been and not ways things could not have been. The idea would be that if we look at the possible alternatives rational agents distinguish between in deliberation, inquiry and the like we will see that these alternatives are one and all metaphysically possible ways things might have been. Since these alternatives are *all* the worlds there are, there are only metaphysically possible worlds—ways things might have been. In short, examination of the alternatives rational agents distinguish between in inquiry, deliberation and so on reveals that these alternatives are all metaphysically possible worlds; and this examination gives us all the worlds there are (either because these rational activities alone bring the possible worlds/alternatives into existence or because they are our only means for inferring the existence of possible worlds/alternatives).

Unfortunately, I don't think this line of reasoning stands up to scrutiny. The problem is that if we are to look at the alternatives rational agents distinguish between in rational activities in order to determine what worlds there are, we must examine these alternatives pretheoretically without having decided what worlds there are. After all, this is the means by which we make that decision. Now when we look at these alternatives pretheoretically, they seem to include metaphysically impossible worlds. So, for example, an early researcher investigating the nature of water distinguishes between alternatives in which water is XYZ, H₂O₂, and various other things. A shopper who hasn't ascertained the material from which a pair of leather shoes in front of her are made distinguishes between alternatives in which they are made of pigskin and alternatives in which they are made of leather. Obviously, examples could be multiplied. Thus, when we pretheoretically examine the alternatives that rational agents distinguish between in rational activities, they certainly appear to include metaphysically impossible worlds. But then if this is how we tell what worlds there are for Stalnaker, he should hold there are metaphysically impossible worlds.

Of course, if we had some independent reason for supposing that there are no metaphysically impossible worlds, we could attempt to explain away the appearance that some of the alternatives rational agents distinguish between are metaphysically impossible worlds. In fact, this is what Stalnaker does. But this seems to me to be clearly illegitimate. For Stalnaker claims that the alternatives rational agents distinguish between in these activities, possible worlds, either are brought into existence by these activities or at any rate we infer their existence from these activities. This means we have no reason independent of the examination of these activities and the alternatives they involve for supposing that there exist or fail to exist worlds of *any* sort. Again, we decide what worlds exist solely on the basis of examining the nature of the alternatives agents distinguish between in these activities. But as I have said, these activities consulted pretheoretically and without prejudice strongly suggest that the alternatives agents distinguish between in these activities include metaphysically impossible worlds. Thus, if these activities bring these alternatives/worlds into existence or are the basis on which we infer what the alternatives/worlds are like, we are compelled to admit that there are metaphysically impossible worlds.

So I conclude that Stalnaker's claim that rational activities bring worlds into existence or merely provide the basis on which we infer what worlds there are and what they are like cannot provide a principled reason as to why there are no metaphysically impossible worlds. If anything, this claim supports the view that there are such worlds.

The only other consideration I find in WWMB that may provide a principled reason for denying that there are properties that are ways things could not have been is provided by Louis, the fictional protagonist of 'Impossibilities' (Chapter 3 of WWMB) and possible (or impossible) alter ego of David Lewis. It is difficult to know how much of what Louis says is endorsed by Stalnaker (e.g. though it plays little role in the paper, Louis, like Lewis, endorses the view that other worlds are concrete²⁵), but Stalnaker is clearly very sympathetic to Louis.²⁶ Throughout 'Impossibilities', Louis exasperates Will by claiming not to understand what impossible worlds are supposed to be. He uses this as a reason for refusing to admit the existence of impossible worlds:

My problem is that I don't understand what I would be admitting if I admitted that there were impossible worlds...²⁷

So perhaps this is Stalnaker's principled reason for refusing to admit the existence of impossible worlds. He doesn't understand what impossible worlds would be.²⁸

But I think Stalnaker *must* understand what impossible worlds are. He understands what possible worlds are: they are large uninstantiated properties the world might have had. Impossible worlds are also large uninstantiated properties. So Stalnaker must understand this feature of them. Impossible worlds differ from possible worlds only in that the world couldn't have had the properties that are impossible worlds. Thus, not only are they uninstantiated properties, they are properties that couldn't have been instantiated. Perhaps this is the idea Stalnaker would claim not to understand. The problem is that we can explain *why* the world could not have had various properties of this sort in terms Stalnaker must understand. If that's right, I can't see how he could fail to understand the idea of a property the world could not have had.

Here's the explanation. Stalnaker must understand what it is for a world to represent an object as possessing a property (because he thinks propositions are true and false at worlds and that the proposition that *o* is *F* is true at a world just in case it represents *o* as possessing *F*). He also must understand what it is for two properties to be such that no object (metaphysically) could possess both (e.g. being a water molecule and being an XYZ molecule). But then he must understand what it is for a world to represent an object as possessing two properties that no object could possess. Some worlds are impossible because they so represent an object and that's why the world couldn't have possessed that property/impossible world. Similarly, since Stalnaker understands what it is for a world to represent an object as possessing a property, and he understands what it is for an object to be (metaphysically) incapable of possessing a property (e.g. Aristotle couldn't possess the property of

²⁵ p. 63

²⁶ e.g. he calls him an ally (p. 8).

²⁷ p. 57. See also p. 60, 61, 62, and 66.

²⁸ Remarks on p. 102 perhaps suggest this.

being a dog), he must understand what it is for a world to represent an object possessing a property it could not possess. Again, some worlds are impossible because they so represent objects. That is why they could not be instantiated. By similar reasoning, Stalnaker must understand what it is for a world to represent an object as lacking a property it (metaphysically) could not lack. Again, some worlds are impossible because they so represent objects. And again, that is why they could not be instantiated.

So in all these cases, Stalnaker must understand both what it is for these impossible worlds to be big uninstantiated properties and why such properties are ways things could not have been. But then he understands what it is to be an uninstantiated property that is a way things could not have been. Since that is all impossible worlds are, he understands what they are. Thus, Stalnaker cannot use the claim that he doesn't understand what impossible worlds are as a principled reason for refusing to admit they exist.

It appears to me that Stalnaker has no other means for providing a principled reason as to why, given that metaphysically possible worlds are (mostly) uninstantiated properties, there are not also uninstantiated properties that are metaphysically impossible worlds. If this is right, Stalnaker has no principled reason for denying that impossible worlds exist. Worse yet, I have suggested that he has a positive reason for holding they do exist. As indicated at the outset, this is quite significant because among other things it very much threatens the motivation for his two dimensional treatment of the necessary a posteriori.

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