

Review of *Modality and Tense: Philosophical Papers*

Steven T. Kuhn

Department of Philosophy

Georgetown University

This is a collection of Kit Fine's nontechnical papers in metaphysics and the philosophy of language. Recent work on essence is omitted, as are papers in the philosophy of mathematics and on mixtures, compounds and aggregates. Nevertheless, this volume provides an excellent overview of Fine's penetrating investigations into central areas of philosophy. Two of the papers are previously unpublished, one appeared only in considerably shorter form and the remainder are gathered from a scattered assortment of journals and anthologies published over the last thirty years. It is a great convenience to have them all nicely organized into a single attractive volume.

The first of the two "new" papers, "Reference, Essence and Identity," was written as a conference talk in 1984 and a number of the ideas it contains have made their way into subsequent publications. It seems appropriate, therefore, to devote particular attention in this review to the second new paper, "Necessity and non-existence," which was written for a talk at a conference of the Society for Exact Philosophy at the University of Maryland in 2005. I will briefly describe contents of all the papers, refraining from excessive commentary, and will give a somewhat more expansive treatment of "Necessity and Non-existence." Following that, I will offer a few reflections on the collection as whole.

The book is divided into three main sections: issues in philosophy of language, in ontology and in metaphysics, though each of the sections contains observations relevant to topics of other sections and other parts of philosophy. A shorter fourth section contains reviews of David Lewis's *Counterfactuals* and Alvin Plantinga's *the Nature of Necessity*, and an introduction briefly summarizes the positions defended in the essays and situates them among others in the literature. There is considerable overlap in the ideas introduced in the essays in section I and also in those in section II. Since the ideas are difficult and the exposition spare, this overlap is welcome. The first essay, "Reference, Essence, and Identity," examines issues that pervade

contemporary discussions of modality – essentialism, direct reference, haecceitism and the identity of individuals across possible worlds. A variety of concepts that have been discussed under these labels are disentangled and formulations taken to capture the most central issues are identified. For example anti-essentialism (or “de re skepticism” in the preferred locution) is the view that all necessity is ultimately general. Similarly, to deny direct reference is to hold that all “saying” is general, that one cannot say something *of* a particular. Each of the issues is shown to raise concerns that are frequently confused but are actually independent: a stance on one issue does not commit one to a particular stance on the others. The next two chapters (“The Problem of De Re Modality” and “Quine on Quantifying In” constitute a “microscopic” examination of Quine’s argument that quantification into modal contexts, as exhibited by  $(\exists x)\Box(x>7)$ , is incoherent. Fine distinguishes a linguistic version of the argument that applies to quantifying into all contexts that Quine takes to be non-transparent, and a metaphysical version that applies only to necessity. The metaphysical version rests on the assumption that satisfaction of an open sentence by a sequence of objects cannot be necessary (which, for Quine, means logically or analytically necessary). Here Fine suggests a natural way that the notions of logical truth and analytic truth can be extended to logical satisfaction and analytic satisfaction. “x is not the sister of y,” it turns out, is analytically true of (George Bush, George Bush) but not of (George Bush, Tony Blair). The linguistic version of the argument is broken down into five steps, each of which is shown to be vulnerable to objection. Many of the objections seem to result from Quine’s using an inappropriate understanding of the idea of a “referential” occurrence of a term or variable and from his being unclear about the language to which his argument is supposed to apply. Ultimately, Fine concludes that a carefully reconstructed version of Quine’s argument can provide a useful constraint on how quantified modal languages may be interpreted.

The focus of the second section (‘Prior on the Construction of Possible Worlds and Instants,’ ‘Plantinga on the Reduction of Possibilist Discourse’ and ‘The Problem of Possibilia’) is the reduction of talk of possible individuals and possible worlds to a language acceptable to the actualist, who does not believe that such objects exist. Prior and Plantinga both propose what Fine calls “proxy reductions”. Possible worlds and possible individuals are replaced by proxies, in this case world-propositions--propositions true in exactly one possible world--and

essences—properties possessed by exactly one possible individual. (For example these might be a conjunction of all propositions true of a world and of all qualities possessed by an individual.) The possibilist language is then translated into a language about propositions and properties. Fine carries through this project more carefully and completely than Prior and Plantinga and examines the metaphysical assumptions required to make it work. He finds a variety of objections—the reduction requires extravagant logical resources, it rests on questionable assumptions (e.g., that propositions and essences have necessary existence), and the alleged “proxies” are actually ontologically dependent on the possibilia that they are intended to replace. In the third essay of the group, he suggests a different kind of proxy reduction inspired by the reduction of Euclidean to analytic geometry, whereby possible individuals and worlds are arbitrarily assigned to actual entities and relations among possible individuals in a world are simulated by sequences of a world- and individual- proxies. This idea, however, faces its own difficulties. For one thing, there are not enough actual entities to go around. Behind all of these efforts, according to Fine, lies a faulty presumption that reductions must proceed via proxies. As Fine reminds us, “the mother of all reductions,” Russell’s theory of descriptions, manages to replace sentences containing descriptions by sentences without them even though no entity replaces the descriptions themselves. In a similar way, Fine proposes a translation of possibilist language into actualist language in which reference to and quantification over possibilia disappears even though nothing “stands in” for the suspect names and variables. As an approximation<sup>1</sup>, a quantification over possibles, say “Some possible individual is immortal” is replaced by a modalized quantification over actuals “It’s possible that someone is immortal.” As Fine puts it, objects are not replaced by objects, but rather by *modes*.

The papers in the final group comprise a more diverse lot. The first, “The Varieties of Necessity” argues that there are three forms of necessity—the metaphysical, the natural and the normative—which are not reducible to each other or to any other form of necessity. No argument is given that these may not be reducible to something other than necessities or that there might not be other irreducible forms of necessity, though it is apparent that Fine finds both theses attractive. Two possible kinds of reduction are considered.. A form of necessity  $N_1$  is a *relativization* of a narrower form  $N_2$  if there is some class of propositions such that the  $N_1$

necessities are the propositions that follow from these with necessity  $N_2$ .  $N_2$  is a *specification* of a broader form  $N_1$  if there is some condition such that the  $N_2$  necessities are the  $N_1$  necessities meeting this further condition. Relativizing reductions are said to trivialize the necessity of propositions from the defining class. Specification, by contrast, is a plausible means of reducing, say, mathematical necessity to metaphysical. Nevertheless, no attempt to reduce one of three basic forms of necessity here to another by specification succeeds. Particular attention is paid to claims of “neo-naturalists” that normative necessity might be reducible to some other form. (The nature of this form of necessity is a little unclear. We are told that the ‘must’ of normative necessity is not “merely” the ‘must’ of obligation. “I am obliged to keep the promise [made in appropriate circumstances], but that I am so obliged is something *required* by my having made the promise in the first place.” (p249) (But the necessity of keeping one’s promise and the necessity of there being an obligation to keep one’s promise in particular circumstances would seem to be two different kinds of necessity. Someone for whom morality is based on convention might well think the act necessary, but the obligation contingent.) Using the naturalistic assumption that any moral property coincides with a natural property by conceptual necessity, Fine lays out one argument for the reduction and points to an objection based on what he takes to be a strengthening of a metaphysical version of Moore’s open question argument. A more plausible case for reduction, Fine suggests, is available to those who subscribe to a two-tier naturalistic theory: For example that ‘good’ is to be analyzed as ‘valued under ideal conditions’ and that, as a matter of fact, pleasure is valued under such conditions. Fine concedes that such a view is capable of giving a better account of the metaphysics of morality, but finds it epistemologically flawed. For it is not able to account for the non-empirical nature of moral ethical judgement, when that notion is properly understood. (Here again, one can quibble. Roderick Firth, who might be viewed as subscribing to such theory, is perfectly happy to admit that ethical judgments are empirical: based, in fact on human psychology. All of Fine’s “inner experience” from vivid tours of imagination and the reading and contemplation of novels are worthless as moral evidence if he does not know that his psychological reactions are normal.)

The second paper in the section, “Tense and Reality,” is a long and difficult essay on the question of whether the “aspect” of tensed and (though these cases get somewhat less attention)

modal and first-personal statements are merely a feature of our viewpoint or linguistic representation or whether they reflect a real feature of the world. The familiar ways to elucidate this debate (in terms of whether, say every true tensed sentence is entailed by tenseless ones, or whether “sitting” is an absolute or relative property, or whether propositions are tensed or tenseless) are all flawed. The parties to the dispute can each provide coherent interpretations of key concepts like *entailment*, *property*, *proposition* that decide the issue in their favor. The issue then becomes *ideological* rather than *doctrinal*. A better way to frame the issue, Fine suggests, is to take seriously the idea of metaphysical reality—not merely how things are, but how they *really* are. Metaphysical reality, on Fine’s conception, is constituted by *facts*, and the questions we want to ask are whether facts are tensed and worldly and first-personal. Framing the issue in this way reveals a greater variety of coherent positions on the issues than is usually acknowledged. The positions are cleverly cataloged by constructing a version of McTaggart’s argument on time. McTaggart commentators may not recognize Fines’ very abstract rendering of it. The aim is no longer to demonstrate the unreality of time, but rather the incompatibility of four conditions: 1) reality is composed of facts, 2) the facts constituting reality are not oriented toward any particular time, 3) reality is not irreducibly relative, and 4) reality is irreducibly coherent. To deny the first condition is to adopt an anti-realist stance. The standard realist accepts the first condition, but holds that reality is composed entirely of the facts that presently obtain, thereby denying the second condition. A “neutral” realist accepts both of the first two conditions. For him, reality at another time *t* is an “alternative” reality, “on equal footing with the current reality.” This contrasts with the views of the anti-realist, for whom it is one “facet” of reality, and the standard realist, for whom it is merely a “hypothetical” reality, what would be real were *t* present. There are two ways that neutral realism can be maintained. The “external relativist” denies the third condition, admitting that tensed facts belong (as wholes and not as time-relativized fragments as the anti-realist would maintain) to reality, but maintaining that they belong to reality in this way only at particular times. (These formulations simplify and distort slightly since, in the end, Fine wants to allow the possibility that times are not among the ultimate constituents of reality.) Alternatively, one can accept the absoluteness condition, but deny the fourth condition. On this last view, reality contains both the tensed propositions that KF is sitting and that KF is standing. This “fragmentalist” version of neutral realism is not quite as radical as it might seem, since one

can extract from the multitude of facts constituting reality maximally coherent fragments that correspond to the external standpoints of the relativist. A major concern of the essay is to defend neutral realism against the standard variety by showing that it is immune to familiar arguments that purport to refute realism. Fine also advances, somewhat more tentatively, a series of “reasons” to prefer fragmentalism over external relativism. The paper concludes with an interesting and difficult section on first-personalism and subjectivity. It is plausibly suggested that philosophers have been misled by leaning too heavily on the analogy of tense with alethic modality, for which neutral realism is a very unattractive option, and neglecting the analogy with first-personal statements, for which neutral realism is the most obvious position to adopt.

The final paper, “Necessity and Non-existence,” urges the importance of a distinction between worldly and unworldly sentences analogous to a presumably more familiar and less contentious distinction between tensed and tenseless sentences. Worldly sentences, like *Socrates exists*, are true or false in a world. Their truth depends on “how things turn out.” Unworldly sentences, like *Socrates is self-identical* are, properly speaking, not true or false in a world, but true or false *simpliciter*. They are true *regardless* of how things turn out, where ‘regardless of’ is taken to mean something like “independently of” rather than “whichever way.” Of course, we can think of Socrates as being self-identical in a world (in fact, in all worlds), but to do so is to take worldliness in an “extended” sense. We can go a step further and take a compound sentence like *Socrates exists and is self-identical* to be true in all worlds. In this case, however, we are taking worldliness in a “superextended” sense. We are, by nature, a little reluctant to take worldliness in the extended sense and more reluctant still to take it in the superextended sense. Worldly sentences that are true no matter how things turn out are *necessary*. Unworldly sentences that are true regardless of how things turn out, on the other hand are *transcendent*. If we think of God as choosing which possible worlds to create, then the transcendent truths provide a framework within which his choices must be made. An inventory of transcendental truths will invariably be controversial, for the “worldly” philosopher, while accepting the sensibility of the distinction, will deny existence of transcendental truths. Nevertheless Fine suggests at least three interesting candidates for transcendental truth. One is modal truths. (This is plausible. If we regard worldly sentences as having an implicit free world-variable then modal truths would bind that variable to

a quantifier. Or, by analogy, as tense operators are naturally regarded as applying to time-relative sentences to yield timeless ones, modal operators may be taken as applying to worldly sentences to yield unworldly ones.) A second is sentences formed by application of certain intrinsically transcendental predicates. The only examples given are identity, set-membership, and expression (as a relation between a proposition and its content) but it would be reasonable to take relations of, say, *successor* on numbers or *initial segment* on sequences, to be similarly transcendental. (There is an unfortunate tendency to freely mix talk of identity and self-identity here. One can imagine a skeptical reader accepting the transcendental nature of the latter while resisting that of the former.) Third, and perhaps most significant, are sentences like *Socrates is a man*, that predicate a *substance sortal* of an individual. Philosophers have mistakenly thought that being a man was a temporal and worldly property. This might be because they confused *man* with *existent man* or because they were misled by its grammatical similarity with terms like *child* (David Wiggins' so-called "phase sortals") or because they conflated the temporary features by which we recognize that a man is a man with the property that actually makes a man a man. One might try to rectify the latter mistake by identifying *man* with a certain kind of "temporal-modal profile": to be a man is to undergo an appropriate transformation in this world and appropriately similar transformations in other possible worlds. Note, however, that this suggestion returns *man* to its transcendental status. Moreover, this approach takes the possession of the appropriate temporal-modal profile to be what it *is* to be a man, whereas we would like the temporal modal feature to "flow from" what it is. The correct way to define 'man' is to classify it under a more basic sort and to differentiate it from other members of this sort. "This suggests that every object should be taken to fall under some general and basic sort, one that cannot be subsumed under any other sort or be defined in other terms" (p348). (We have here an interesting and fundamental metaphysical claim. One wonders whether the "suggestion" can be turned into a more convincing argument, how large this collection of "basic sorts" is and what its members might be. None of these questions is addressed satisfactorily here, perhaps because the issue is deemed to be peripheral to matters at hand. At any rate, that *Socrates is a man* is transcendental, and therefore necessary in the extended sense, while *Socrates exists* is worldly and merely contingent allows Fine to reverse Sartre's famous dictum that "existence precedes essence."

A large proportion of this paper is devoted to the discussion of a small puzzle intended to demonstrate the utility of the worldly/unworldly distinction (and which also helps the reader understand it.) Consider the following argument.

- (1)  $\Box$  Socrates is a man
- (2)  $\Diamond$  Socrates does not exist
- (3)  $\Diamond$  (Socrates is a man and does not exist)

Judged independently, (1) and (2) seem true and (3) seems false. Yet 3 seems a (valid) modal logical consequence of (1) and (2). There are two familiar approaches to this kind of puzzle. The standard approach takes all sentences to have truth value and distinguishes between qualified and unqualified forms of modality. (*Pegasus has wings* is necessary in the qualified sense if it is true in any possible world where Pegasus exists and it is necessary if it is true in all possible worlds.) The Priorean approach takes sentences that mention non-existents to lack truth value and distinguishes between strong and weak modalities. (A sentence is strongly necessary if it is everywhere true and weakly necessary if nowhere false.) A thorough examination of applications of these approaches to the puzzle demonstrates pretty convincingly that neither can adequately explain the puzzle and, by attention to the nature of the failures, provides a set of criteria that an adequate explanation must meet. Fine's own solution is roughly the following. In considering (1) separately we tend to make the relatively easy step of interpreting necessity in the extended sense. (2) is true in either the unextended or extended sense of possibility so of course we accept it. Our general reluctance to interpret possibility in the superextended sense causes us to tend to withhold evaluation of 3. If forced to evaluate it, we turn it into an unextended sense of possibility by mistakenly interpreting the unworldly predicate *man* as the worldly predicate *existent man*. Once we see our errors, of course, we can correct them, either by taking all modalities in the extended sense and refusing to evaluate the conclusion on the grounds that it is anomalous or by taking all modalities in the superextended sense and accepting the conclusion, so understood.

The worldly/unworldly distinction applies in the first instance to sentences and predicates, but it gives rise to metaphysically weightier distinctions. A fact is said to be unworldly if it cannot be expressed by worldly sentences. An object is said to have transcendental or unworldly existence if it exists "outside" of all possible worlds, i.e., regardless of how things turn out.



Numbers and sets, for example have unworldly existence. Like necessity, transcendental existence can be taken in an “extended” sense so as to include both numbers and worldly existents like people. On these conceptions, to exist is to enjoy a sort of status like that of being a man or cat, but in some respects more general. This is to be contrasted with the conception on which (following Quine) so much emphasis has been placed recently. On that conception (“ontic” existence or “being”) for  $a$  to exist is for it to be identical to something, i.e., for  $\exists x(a=x)$  to be true.

The issues raised in this paper are deep, difficult and numerous. I want here to point to a few places where the examples don’t seem fit the rhetoric, where the arguments are not quite convincing or where the positions taken seem to have awkward consequences. The first concerns the idea that necessity is truth under all circumstances and transcendence is necessity only in an “extended” sense. This stance is somewhat surprising in view of Fine’s criticism of Quine and Lewis in the introduction to this volume: “Neither can understand modality except as a form of regularity; and the only difference between them lies in the range of the regularities to which their respective ontologies allow them to appeal.” (p2) From the metaphor about God choosing the possible worlds from within the framework of transcendental truths we see that transcendental truths are, if anything, even *more* necessary than the omnipresent worldly truths. Thus (assuming *man* really is unworldly) there should be no hesitation at all in accepting the necessity of *Socrates is a man*. Furthermore, every explanation Fine proposes of the worldly/unworldly distinction seems to point to the thesis that analytic truths are transcendent rather than necessary. Yet there seems to be no sense of anomaly at all in combining analytic and worldly sentences: *John is a bachelor and bachelors are unmarried. If bachelors are unmarried, John is not a bachelor*. This observation may make us a little more reluctant to accept other claims of anomaly of mixed sentences. (There are some independent grounds for supposing that Fine does not want to accept analytic truths as unworldly. They are conspicuously absent as examples and they violate the tentative suggestion that unworldly sentences must be built from unworldly predicates. But in this case we are owed a more precise account of the distinction or an explanation of why the desiderata provided rule them out.) There is something else unsatisfying about Fine’s diagnosis of the puzzle of Socrates. To read the conclusion as an

unextended possibility requires only that we read *man* as a worldly predicate. Several such readings are available—*man* might be the opposite of *child* or the opposite of *female* or even the opposite of *wimp*. Each of these makes the conclusion *true*. So instead we are said to take *man* to mean *existent man*, a reading, Fine tells us, that it does not really have. One wonders why we would go out of our way to attribute the reading that makes the sentence false and one also wonders how commonly a mistaken meaning can be attributed to an expression before it becomes a legitimate meaning.

There is also room for doubt about the claim that sortal predicates are unworldly. Canada was once a colony and is now a nation. Tasmania was once the tip of an isthmus and is now an island. KF is a man but (if various myths are deemed possible) he might become an angel, a god, a monster, a frog, or a constellation. Of course each of these examples can be explained in various ways so as to save the thesis. One difficulty here is that the notion of sortal or substance sortal, which has been invoked by different philosophers for diverse purposes, is not treated as a concept in need of explanation.

Finally, one might note the rather unsettling conclusions that can be drawn from the discussion of existence at the end of the paper. Since it is possible that the Fountain of Youth exists, there is a sense (i.e., the “inclusive” sense) in which it has an unworldly or transcendent existence. From this it follows that there is a sense (the “extended” sense) in which it has necessary existence and therefore that there is a sense in which the Fountain of Youth exists. Fine is well aware of all this and makes an effort to assuage the reader (See the bottom of page 353.) Nevertheless, for someone who so eloquently defends actualism in earlier chapters and who sees himself as defending plausible views against the wildly implausible ones of Quine and Lewis (pp 1-2) this position seems somewhat surprising.

In reading through the collected essays, one is struck by the continuity of philosophical outlook. Many of the ideas developed in such detail in later papers are presaged in the pithy reviews of 1974 and 1975. On Lewis’s discussion of foundations in *Counterfactuals*, for example, Fine remarks “I do not see any reason why the modal idioms (possibly, necessarily,

etc.) are more in need of explanation than the notion of possible world, unless there is an objection to taking any non-extensional notion as basic.” (p 361) As noted above, this insight is elevated in subsequent papers to the doctrine of *modalism* and developed and defended extensively. Similarly, the review of *The Nature of Necessity* reports approvingly Plantinga’s adherence to *actualism* – the position that only actual objects exist– but chides him for merely giving an *example* of a how the actualist might construe a sentence about possibles: “what is required is an actualist reduction of *all* possibilist discourse.” (p 368) In section II of this volume we get a more thorough exploration and defense of actualism and we see just how tricky it is to provide such a reduction. I noticed only two significant changes in position. First, an initial acquiescence in the common practice of identifying *necessary* and *essential* properties of an object is now replaced by the conviction that they are importantly different. Second, Fine reports (p242) that he once subscribed to the view that every property was either existence-entailing or definable from properties that were existence entailing. This conflicts with his current view that non-existents may possess transcendental properties. One reason why Fine finds so little cause to change his views is that he is happy to remain agnostic or tentatively committed on issues where he finds the evidence inconclusive. It is refreshing to find such restraint in an authoritative figure.

One is also struck by a continuity of philosophical method and style. Big original ideas are sketched in the course of what purports to be commentary on others. In commenting on Quine’s discussion of *referentiality*, for example he advocates and initiates the study of a completely abstract syntax in which primitive notions of *occurrence* and *substitution* are freed from any special connection to strings of symbols and notions of interpretation and translation are explained in terms of the notion of homomorphisms. Similarly a possible formulation of modal set theory is introduced in the course of commentary on Prior. Again, in responding to Quine’s arguments against the intelligibility of de re modality, he introduces the notion of “literalist” quantification according to which satisfaction depends on the identity of the variables as well as the objects assigned to them, and outlines varieties of such quantification that would be natural in a number of unrelated contexts.

Familiar arguments are dissected in unfamiliar ways, each step is examined for possible objections and the merits of these objections are assessed. When an objection is seen to be telling, there generally follows a discussion of why the objection might have been unappreciated by those holding alternative views. This is particularly noticeable in discussions of Quine's arguments against quantifying in and Plantinga's for property actualism, but the pattern is often repeated. Multiple ambiguities are discerned behind concepts and positions employed by others. Modal haecceitism is to be distinguished from metaphysical; the syntactical version of Quine's argument from the metaphysical; the problem of essentialism for analytic necessity from that for metaphysical necessity, the informal concept of referentiality from the technical; the typographic notion of 'occurrence' from the syntactic. Once a set of distinct problems is discerned, every permutation of positions on these is examined for coherence. There is an exploration and understanding of alternative viewpoints. Indeed, a great effort is made to *improve* positions of others that are ultimately rejected (best illustrated, perhaps by his efforts to find workable versions of proxy reduction for modalities and of modal fictionalism).

Fine sees himself as defending two very plausible views--that the distinction between the necessary and the contingent is intelligible and that merely possible worlds are not real in the same sense as the actual world--against pervasive philosophical orthodoxies that deny them. I can't resist noting that his own theories occasionally lead him to views that seem implausible: Ordinary objects (or at least sequences of them) have logical form, abstract objects may exist contingently. A formula of the form  $[A \text{ if and only if the proposition expressed by } A \text{ is true}]$  may be false. "Being" should to be distinguished from existence and (as was noted above) there is a sense in which the fountain of youth exists. There are good reasons to embrace the view that reality contains contradictory facts. It is a testament to Fine's meticulous examination of the issues involved and his skill in communicating it that many of these positions seem quite plausible, and all of them far less implausible, after the book is read.

1. "Approximation," because, unless propositions are assumed to exist necessarily, the correctness of this translation requires that the quantified formula (say, "x is immortal") to be *rigid*, i.e., to be true of an object in all worlds or none. If the formula is non-rigid, a correct translation would have to express the idea that it is possible that some individual is immortal-in-the-actual-world. This can be done with modal constructions analogous to the "now" and "then"

operators of Frank Vlach (having no natural English renditions that avoid reference to worlds) or by constructions involving propositional quantification. Such quantification (over actually existing propositions), is already needed to translate quantification over worlds and the name of the actual world, so this carries no new commitments.