The Humphrey Objection (and other criticisms)
Various Authors

Saul Kripke (excerpted from Naming and Necessity, 1980)

Strictly speaking, Lewis’s view is not a view of ‘transworld identification’. Rather, he thinks that similarities across possible worlds determine a counterpart relation which need be neither symmetric nor transitive. The counterpart of something in another possible world is never identical with the thing itself. Thus if we say ‘Humphrey might have won the election (if only he had done such-and-such), we are not talking about something that might have happened to Humphrey but to someone else, a “counterpart”.’ Probably, however, Humphrey could not care less whether someone else, no matter how much resembling him, would have been victorious in another possible world. Thus, Lewis’s view seems to me even more bizarre than the usual notions of trans-world identification that it replaces.

Alvin Plantinga (excerpted from The Nature of Necessity, 1974)

Of course the Counterpart Theorist will reply that Socrates—the Socrates of \( \alpha \)—no doubt has unwise counterparts, which is sufficient for the truth that he could have been unwise. But how are we to take this reply? In either of two ways, perhaps. On the one hand he may mean to hold that the proposition

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(30) \text{There are worlds in which there exist unwise counterparts of Socrates}
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is sufficient for the truth of

\[
(31) \text{Socrates could have been unwise.}
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But how is (30) so much as relevant to (31)? According to (30) there is a world \( W \) (distinct from \( \alpha \)) that includes the existence of an unwise counterpart of Socrates. If this world had been actual, then there would have existed an unwise person much like but distinct from Socrates. And how is that even relevant to the claim that Socrates himself—the Socrates of \( \alpha \)—could have been unwise? There could have been a foolish person a lot like Socrates; how does this fact show that Socrates could have been unwise? How is the former a reason for the latter? We might as well claim that there is a property \( P \) such that Socrates could have had both \( P \) and its complement \( \neg P \)—on the grounds that there are worlds where Socrates has a pair of counterparts, one with \( P \) and the other with \( \neg P \). No doubt there is a possible state of affairs including the existence of an unwise person who is similar to Socrates; but this fact is totally irrelevant to the truth that Socrates—Socrates himself—could have been unwise.
But the Counterpart Theorist might respond to quite another fashion. We noted earlier that he can appeal to a new and looser sense of 'has' and 'exists' such that Socrates can be said in this sense to exist and have properties in other possible worlds. Socrates has P in a world W, in this sense, if he has a counterpart that has P in W in the old and strict sense. We may therefore imagine him replying as follows. "When I say that Socrates could have been unwise I do not mean that there is a possible world in which Socrates—our Socrates—in the strict and literal sense is unwise; I mean only that there is a world in which in the new and looser sense he has that property. I so use the sentence 'Socrates could have been unwise' that what it expresses is entailed by the truth that Socrates has foolish counterparts." Thus perhaps he speaks with the vulgar but thinks with the learned. He genially agrees that there is a world in which Socrates is unwise and concludes that Socrates could have been unwise. By adopting this course he preserves verbal agreement with the rest of us who do not look upon Socrates as a worldbound individual.

But of course the agreement is only verbal. For it is only in this loose and Pickwickian sense that he concedes the existence of a world in which Socrates is unwise; and his use of 'Socrates could have been unwise' is therefore similarly loose and Pickwickian. If in his use the sentence 'Socrates could have been unwise' expresses a proposition entailed by the fact that Socrates has unwise counterparts, then the Counterpart Theorist is using that sentence to express a proposition different from the one the rest of us express by it. While he assents to our sentence, he denies the proposition we take it to express. Furthermore, he does not really disagree with us when we say that Counterpart Theory entails that Socrates could not have been unwise. For his counter claim was only that his theory does not entail that Socrates had no foolish counterparts. The justice of this claim is incontestable; but it is quite consistent with our claim that Counterpart Theory entails that if Socrates is wise, then he could not have been unwise. For our claim, of course, is that Counterpart Theory entails the proposition we take to be expressed by these words.


Suppose you were told that somewhere deep in the rain forest is a book that includes a story about you and your truck-driving ways. I doubt that you would be inclined to think that that story, that book, is the reason you could have been a truck driver. You would rightfully respond to such a theory with an incredulous stare. But being informed that it’s not literally a story, and that it’s not actually written in a concrete book, and that it’s not located in the rainforest (or anywhere else, for that matter)—that is, being informed that the story is instead an abstract object—should serve only to make you more, not less, incredulous. It is, indeed, puzzling why anyone would think that abstract representations of me, even if there are such things, make it true that I could have done such-and-such or couldn’t have done thus-and-so. That modality is primitive does not entail that it is best thought of as a primitive property of representations.
Michael Jubien (excerpted from ‘Analyzing Modality’, 2007)

For all we know, there really do exist what we may neutrally call detached concrete realms. But as soon as we start calling them possible worlds, we beg the question of their relevance to our prior notion of possibility. … For all we know, there are just two such realms, or twenty-seven, or uncountably many, or even set-many. Suppose there are just a few, but that all of them happen to include stars. How plausible is it to think that if this is how things really are, then we’ve just been wrong to regard the existence of stars as contingent? …

[I]t seems obvious that any other realms that happened to exist would just be scattered parts of the actual world, not entire worlds at all. They’d be actually existing entities. It would just happen that physical reality was fragmented in this remarkable but modally inconsequential way. There would be no call for restricting our notion of actuality to the connected realm we happen to inhabit, nor for viewing the other realms each as “actual” with respect to itself but to the exclusion of the others, nor for viewing individual entities in other realms as modally relevant “counterparts” of entities in our realm, nor any of the like. …

[I]Imagine, if you will, that there’s a distant but very similar planet in our own universe where someone very much like yourself is a playwright and not a philosopher. How plausible would it be to pin the possibility of your having been a playwright on this far-off circumstance? If you find it as implausible as I do, then it should seem all the more implausible if such an individual inhabits an inaccessible physical region instead of a merely distant one. … I believe the possibility of your having been a playwright has nothing to do with how people are on other planets, whether in our own or in some other realm. It has only to do with you and the relevant property.

It simply doesn’t follow from A’s nonmodal similarity to B (no matter how impressive it might be) that A makes something possible for B. If someone similar to Humphrey won, that nicely establishes the possibility of someone’s winning who is similar to Humphrey. But we mustn’t confuse this possibility with the intuitively different possibility of Humphrey’s winning. For the former possibility to establish the latter requires a further hypothesis (or presupposition).