

Counting Possibilia

In his article *Necessary Existence* Timothy Williamson argued for the strongly implausible thesis that every possible entity necessarily exists. Implausible though this may be, Williamson needs to explain how a possible Wittgenstein's son, for example, exists in our -actual- world. He recurs to the idea of a Merely Possible Object (MPO) an entity which is neither concrete nor abstract, a pure "locus of potential", characterized only by modal properties and by mostly trivial non-modal properties (such as being something or being self-identical). Many possible worlds, on this view, are MPOs.

In *Bare Possibilia* and *Logic and Existence* Williamson presented a short argument in favour of MPOs based on counting questions about artifacts. Consider two blades and two handles at a time t before they have been fitted together by workers in a factory: how many knives could have been made by fitting them together? In one sense the answer is "two"; but, in a perfectly intelligible sense of the question, the answer is "four" because there are four possible knives, not all compossible in one single world. So, in cases like this, we count at least two merely possible knives (and not sets of components, mereological sums, sequences or possible situations, argues Williamson).

In my paper I show that there is a way to avoid reference and ontological commitment to MPOs. My proposal is that we can dispense with this puzzling entities using the notion of rules of art.

Knives are artifacts realized via "the art of knives" rules. Consider a (mental representation of) a handle H and a (mental representation of) a blade B . One can reasonably think that the rules of art permit to select relevant instruction lists to physically combine H and B . The rules (in the head of the craftsman) only select certain lists the ones which, given the rules, result legitimate lists. So, it could seem, we don't count MPOs but ways of constructing artifacts, that is to say instruction lists selected by the rules of the relevant art.

This account, however, has its problems in turn. Consider a handle H^2 with two slots, s and s' , and a blade B . There seems to be, in this case, two possible knives. But how come we are so sure that that is the right answer? Only because we have considered *every possible* list of instruction and obviously this is not a promising alternative to Williamson's proposed ontology.

Here is my solution. Consider all possible worlds such that B and H^2 exist in them and such that B and H^2 are combined according to (particular instances of) an obvious and general rule R for making knives: "put a blade into a slot of a handle". The relevant worlds will be of two sorts, $W1$ and $W2$, corresponding to two different ways of applying the same rule R : in $W1$, B will be in s and, in $W2$, B will be in s' .

So, I maintain, we count kinds of possible worlds in which a general rule is applied in the same way. (Contra Williamson: counting possible situations or worlds doesn't presuppose having identified possible objects; the relevant possible worlds are selected using rules like R).

Of course, admitting possible worlds in our ontology is not beyond all disputes, but maybe it's easier -and more common, at least among philosophers- than populate our world with infinitely many puzzling MPOs. Anyway, I end my paper sketching a radically mentalistic account of possible worlds which, I believe, could be developed using some recent work -even by Williamson- in the field of modal epistemology.