



OXFORD JOURNALS  
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

# ANALYSIS

---

A Desperate Fix

Author(s): Bob Hale

Source: *Analysis*, Vol. 55, No. 2 (Apr., 1995), pp. 74-81

Published by: [Oxford University Press](#) on behalf of [The Analysis Committee](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3328903>

Accessed: 31/01/2011 12:12

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=oup>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



*Oxford University Press* and *The Analysis Committee* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Analysis*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

## *A desperate fix*

BOB HALE

In the words of its author, Gideon Rosen, modal fictionalism is ‘an effort to reconcile two thoughts’ namely that ‘talk of possible worlds in the discussion of modality is clearly illuminating; and yet for many of us it is also palpably a matter of make-believe’. The reconciliation is to be effected by taking such talk as

talk about the content of a fiction. Where the modal realist proposes to analyse a modal statement *P* by means of a non-modal statement about possible worlds, *P\**, the fictionalist proposes the parasitic paraphrase: ‘According to the hypothesis of a plurality of worlds (*PW*), *P\**’. ([5], pp. 67–68).

In my earlier paper in this issue [2], I posed a simple dilemma for this view, and in formulating it, availed myself of one of the paraphrases of statements formed with the fictionalist’s prefix which Rosen provided ([4], p. 344), namely: ‘If *PW* were true, it would be true that *P\**’. For simplicity, the dilemma focused on the atheistic fictionalist who wished to reject *PW* as false, and asked whether *PW* was supposed to be necessarily false, or merely contingently so. On the first horn, it appears that all such statements will turn out vacuously true. On the second, the problem is to see how the fictionalist can understand the involved claim that *PW* might be true – he cannot apply his preferred analysis, since that would give us a statement (‘If *PW* were true, there would be a world at which *PW* is true’) which would be true, even if *PW* were necessarily false; but if he invokes some other account of this modal claim which does not offend against his ontological conscience, then it becomes obscure why that alternative account should not be applied across the board, with the result that fictionalism loses its point. In his reply [5], Rosen takes on my dilemma and, since he thinks the fictionalist has no option but to regard the hypothesis of possible worlds as necessarily false, seeks to blunt the *first* horn. The principal object of this note is to explain why I think he has made no impression on it. As a coda, I shall add some remarks explaining why one attempt to blunt the *second* horn, which I elected not to discuss in my original note, comes to nothing.

It is – and was all along – obvious that the first (necessary falsehood) horn *might* be blunted in one of two ways:

- (a) by denying that the truth of ‘If *PW* were true, it would be true that *P\**’ is sufficient for that of ‘According to *PW*, *P\**’, and hence rejecting the former as a satisfactory paraphrase of the latter;

- (b) by rejecting any standard account of subjunctive or counterfactual conditionals, under which those with impossible antecedents are vacuously true.

Rosen canvasses both strategies, and – although successful implementation of either separately would do – apparently endorses both. I shall first try to show that strategy (a) is hopeless, so that he has no option but to plump for (b), and then argue that he ought to be a good deal less enthusiastic about that option than he is.

*Strategy (a)* In [4], Rosen wrote:

We might begin [i.e. to explain the fictionalist prefix] by offering any of the following glosses: *If PW were true then P would be true; If we suppose PW, P follows; It would be impossible for PW to be true without P being true as well.* These are not perfect paraphrases. None the less, each seems to give a fair preliminary indication of what we mean when we use the fictionalist's prefix. And the trouble is that in every case the key phrase is an overtly modal locution. This suggests that the fictionalist's device should itself be classed as a modal operator. ([4], p. 344)

This admittedly guarded endorsement of the suggested glosses is followed by over four pages of discussion of objections which depend upon taking them seriously. In [5], however, after airing some misgivings (to be discussed below) about the standard treatment of counterfactual conditionals, Rosen writes:

More importantly, the explanation of the fictionalist's story-prefix in terms of a counterfactual was never part of the fictionalist's official view. Rather, it was rejected as inadequate for precisely these reasons. Officially, the prefix is primitive. ([5], p. 70)

It is hard not to feel that the ground has shifted somewhat, but I shall not press the point. Let us focus, instead, on the closing official communiqué. It seems clear that it is simply not an option for the fictionalist to declare his prefix a primitive, and leave it at that. Even if nothing ranking as a definition in any strict sense is needed, some elucidation is called for – without it, there is just no theory to discuss. It was, presumably, sensitivity to precisely this point which led Rosen to propose his various glosses in the first place. If he now thinks they play him false, he ought to put something more to his liking in their place, particularly as they are apt to strike competent English speakers as capturing the essential idea.

We know two things about 'According to PW, ...' – (1) it has to be non-factive, and (2) if my dilemma is to be avoided, it can't be para-

phrased as a strong (strict or counterfactual) conditional or entailment with 'PW is true' as hypothesis. For whilst such paraphrases preserve the requisite lack of factivity, their other logical properties render them unsuitable for Rosen's purposes. What other non-factive operators might better serve?

The most obvious suggestion – given the background thought that we are dealing with some kind of *fictional* operator – is to gloss our prefix as 'PW says that ...'. This has the requisite non-factivity; and while 'PW says that A' presumably does entail 'If what PW says were true, it would be that A', it is – at least on one natural reading of these sentences, false that the latter entails the former. (For example, the necessary truth of A suffices for the truth of 'If what PW says were true, it would be that A', but not for that of 'PW says that A'). The snag is, that cleaving to *this* reading gives something far too *restrictive* for the fictionalist's purposes. PW simply does not *say enough*, in any sense of 'say' that is exacting enough to obstruct the entailment from 'If what PW says were true, it would be that A' to 'PW says that A'. It can't do so, since there are potentially infinitely many A for which the fictionalist will want to substitute 'According to PW, A', while PW can explicitly (or near enough explicitly) state only a finite selection of them. To overcome this, the fictionalist would be obliged to adopt a less exiguous reading of 'say', on which 'PW says that A' holds true not only when PW explicitly states that A, but equally when it follows from things which PW explicitly states that A. But this takes us straight back to the original difficulty. In short, any reading of the fictionalist's prefix in terms of 'says that' will be too restrictive, unless he allows that the truth of a strong conditional 'If PW were true, it would be true that A' or an entailment 'PW entails that A' suffices for the truth of 'PW says that A' – in which case he is lost unless he endorses strategy (b) anyway.

There is another, quicker, way to see that the fictionalist must follow strategy (b) – a way which simply bypasses any wrangling over what is/isn't an apt paraphrase for 'According to PW, ...'. For the upshot of the immediately preceding observations is that it is a second constraint (on top of non-factivity) upon any acceptable reading of this prefix that whenever, if PW were true, it would be true that A (or whenever PW entails that A), it must also be true that according to PW, A. If not, then the fictionalist's saving move will be unavailable in cases where it is needed. But so long as the strong conditional is standard (or the entailment classical), this means that the necessary falsehood of PW will guarantee the truth of every statement of the form 'According to PW, A'. In sum, strategy (a) is hopeless unless backed by strategy (b); and redundant in the presence of (b), so a waste of time at best.

*Strategy (b)* In pursuit of strategy (b), Rosen writes:

... the feature of the standard semantics for counterfactuals which Hale's objection exploits is plausibly regarded as a *defect* in that analysis. As Hartry Field has observed in another context, we do seem to be able to make discriminating use of counterfactuals whose antecedents we suppose to express necessary falsehoods: if arithmetic were inconsistent, set theory would be inconsistent; if the God of the philosophers (i.e. a perfect, necessary being) existed, the righteous would have nothing to fear; if the Queen were your mother, Diana would be your sister-in-law.<sup>1</sup>

The apposition here of the reference to Field to the claim that the standard semantics is defective certainly suggests that Rosen thinks Field's point provides a good reason for rejecting the standard semantics – though to be fair, he doesn't expressly say as much. If so, he presumably has in mind some such argument as this: We do in fact make pointful, discriminating uses of counterfactuals with necessarily false antecedents. But we could not do so if (all) such conditionals were vacuously true, as on the standard semantical account. Hence the standard account is defective. The weakness of this argument lies, of course, in the second premiss, i.e. in the claim that vacuous truth entails incapacity for pointful or discriminating use.

One kind of case where we can make a discriminating use of a vacuously true conditional is – ironically – noticed by Rosen himself: the case where someone believes what is in fact a necessary falsehood, and we attempt to wean her off it by getting her to see that if what she believes were true, something else which she recognises as quite certainly false, or even absurd, would also be true. The strategy of *reductio* demands the *truth* of our conditional, but not its *non-vacuous* truth. It does require that we can get her to appreciate the truth of the conditional other than by appealing to the (necessary) falsehood of its antecedent. But that is quite another matter, and one which bears on other cases – such as those mentioned by Rosen – in which we may make discriminating uses of conditionals with impossible antecedents, including cases – such as Rosen's first, and perhaps his second – where an argument by *reductio* is not in the offing. The truth of a conditional (vacuous or not) never by itself guarantees that it can pointfully be asserted. In general, and somewhat roughly, what makes discriminating use of one of a pair of vacuously true conditionals possible is that there is a way of defending the one we favour without appealing to the necessary falsehood of its antecedent. The standard semantics by itself, unsupplemented by such broadly pragmatic considerations, does not

<sup>1</sup> [4], pp. 69–70. The reference to Field is to [1], pp. 237–8. The last example obviously assumes that you are not Prince Charles.

*explain* how we can make discriminating uses, but it does not rule them out. Only if it did would we have an argument against it.

Referring back to the examples cited above, Rosen writes:

The significant feature of these examples is that the alleged impossibilities supposed in the antecedents are not logical impossibilities. They are substantive impossibilities, metaphysical or mathematical; and while there may be insuperable obstacles to making sense of counter-*logical* conditionals, conditionals whose antecedents are impossibilities of these substantive sorts seem much better behaved...

He seems to concede here – albeit somewhat tentatively – that there may be no sensible use of conditionals with *logically* false antecedents.<sup>2</sup> If that is his view, his fictionalist must hold that it is at least logically possible that PW be true, even if this is not a metaphysical possibility. And in that case, the atheist fictionalist should hold that the falsehood of PW is a logically contingent matter. Since my dilemma is intended to be understood in terms of (broadly) logical necessity and contingency, the fictionalist who takes this tack is effectively refusing the *first* horn of my original dilemma, and opting for the *second*. That leaves him needing an account of what he means by ‘Possibly PW is true’ – as on the original dilemma; so far as I have been able to see, Rosen does nothing to blunt this second horn.

If that is right, then Rosen had better rescind his apparent concession about logical impossibilities and repudiate the standard semantics for counterfactual conditionals across the board. Indeed, since the dilemma can just as well be constructed using the other glosses – in terms of strict conditionals or entailment statements – Rosen originally suggested, he cannot stop short at tinkering with the logic or semantics of counterfactuals: a thoroughgoing implementation of strategy (b) requires him to repudiate the standard classical account of logical consequence. It is, of course, not unknown for people to think that a good thing. I am not about to argue that they are wrong (though I think they are). My present point is just that it is an unexpected, and not entirely endearing, feature of Rosen’s proposal that a commitment to some form of relevantist revisionism lurks in its shadows.<sup>3</sup>

The considerations just rehearsed in connection with strategy (b) do not, of course, add up to a conclusive case against it. Nor do they, or anything

<sup>2</sup> I have to confess to some uncertainty here over what Rosen means by *logical* as opposed to *substantive* or *metaphysical* impossibility. I am assuming that the former is intended to include not only narrowly logical impossibilities (roughly, instances of unsatisfiable schemata involving only logical vocabulary essentially) but any statements whose truth can be ruled out on purely conceptual grounds.

else I have said, directly address the further manoeuvres in which Rosen engages, premised upon a somewhat obscure distinction between possible worlds and ‘island universes’. But they do, it seems to me, indicate respects in which strategy (b) is unattractive and lacking in independent motivation. And if the final point in my discussion of strategy (a) is well-taken, it should be clear that it would be sheer confusion to think that those further manoeuvres could help the fictionalist’s cause.

*Appendix: Have Menzies and Pettit blunted the first horn?*

In the final section of [3], Peter Menzies and Philip Pettit claim to provide a satisfactory way for the fictionalist to construe potentially awkward claims about the modal status of PW. They agree that ‘Possibly, PW is false’ is ‘a very special sort of modal claim’ – a ‘modal dangler’ which demands a special analysis, different from that offered by the fictionalist for modal claims in general. They would, presumably, accept that the same goes for ‘Possibly, PW is true’. They also agree that it must be analysed ‘in a way that marks the peculiarity of the claim but that remains continuous with the fictionalist analysis of modal talk generally’. They propose the following translation schemes for ‘dangling’ modal claims:

Possibly *A* iff *A* is true in the actual world or at one of the other worlds posited in PW

Necessarily *A* iff *A* is true at the actual world and at all of the other possible worlds posited in PW

Let us suppose the fictionalist takes PW to be false, but maintains that it is only contingently so. That is, she holds that:

PW is false (at the actual world) but possibly, PW is true.

Applying Menzies and Pettit’s proposal, this comes to:

PW is false at the actual world & (PW is true at the actual world or at one of the other possible worlds posited in PW)

<sup>3</sup> It is perhaps worth briefly noting a further apparent drawback of strategy (b). It is difficult to see how an analysis of counterfactuals in terms of possible worlds theory could avoid the feature which, in Rosen’s view, renders standard accounts (i.e. Lewis’s and Stalnaker’s) objectionable. Certainly rejecting the standard accounts cuts away one of the central planks in Lewis’s main argument for realism about possible worlds – that is, its (alleged) capacity to support a good analysis of counterfactuals. To be sure, the fictionalist does not wish to regard this argument from explanatory virtue as supporting modal *realism*: but he does want to commend his own view as securing the explanatory advantages of realism (without the ontological costs) – so he is, indirectly, shooting himself in the foot; not a direct hit perhaps, but a rather regrettable ricochet!

How is this to be understood? Obviously it is no good construing it as:

PW is false at the actual world & (PW is true at the actual world or there is a possible world  $w$  such that  $w \neq$  the actual world & PW posits  $w$  & PW is true at  $w$ )

– no good because both components of the disjunctive right conjunct are inconsistent with the left conjunct. It must rather be understood along the lines of:

PW is false at the actual world & (PW is true at the actual world or according to PW, there is a possible world  $w$ , distinct from the actual world, at which PW is true)

More generally, the proposed analysans for (dangling) ‘Possibly  $A$ ’ must be construed as:

Either  $A$  is true at the actual world or according to PW, there is a possible world  $w$ , distinct from the actual world, at which  $A$  is true

A not unfair gloss on this is:

Either there is a world – the actual world – at which  $A$  is true or there would be one, if PW were true

I think it is a fair question whether this concoction captures a genuine notion of possibility. Note that the proposed analysans is, as it stands, *consistent* with the necessary falsehood of PW. But if PW were necessarily false, the right disjunct would be vacuously true. So if the left disjunct were false, the truth of the analysans would scarcely vindicate the claim that possibly  $A$ . To get something more plausibly taken as sufficient for truth of ‘Possibly  $A$ ’, we need to incorporate an additional clause,<sup>4</sup> stipulating the possible truth of PW, i.e. we need something like:

Either there is a world – the actual world – at which  $A$  is true or (there would be one, if PW were true, and PW might be true)

But then the claim that PW might be true is being analysed as:

Either there is a world – the actual world – at which PW is true or (there would be one, if PW were true, and PW might be true)

And this is clearly either viciously circular or regressive.

*The University, St. Andrews  
Fife, KY16 9AL, Scotland  
rlvh@st-andrews.ac.uk*

<sup>4</sup> Remember that what’s being offered is supposed to be an *analysis* – so it won’t do just to take the possibility of PW’s truth as a background assumption.



*References:*

- [1] Hartry Field, *Realism, Mathematics and Modality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).
- [2] Bob Hale, 'Modal fictionalism: a simple dilemma', *Analysis* this issue 63–67.
- [3] Peter Menzies and Philip Pettit, 'in defence of fictionalism about possible worlds' *Analysis* 54 (1994) 27–36.
- [4] Gideon Rosen, 'Modal fictionalism', *Mind* 99 (1990) 327–54.
- [5] Gideon Rosen, 'Modal fictionalism fixed', *Analysis* this issue 68–73.

## *Modal fictionalism cannot deliver possible worlds semantics*

JOHN DIVERS

According to deflationism you can have *all* the benefits of talking about possible worlds without the ontological costs. (Rosen [9] p. 330, my emphasis)

1. Rosen conceives his modal fictionalism as a version of deflationism. The fictionalist who is prepared to assert the proposition expressed explicitly by the ordinary modal sentence type:

- (1) There might have been blue swans.

wishes to gain the benefits associated with expressing his belief, as the genuine modal realist would, in terms of possible worlds by using the sentence type:

- (2) There is a possible world in which there are blue swans.

but he wishes to do so while avoiding an ontological commitment to non-actual worlds. Rosen's fictionalist proposal is that one may gain the desirable form of expression while avoiding the unwanted ontological commitment by using (2) as an elliptical means of expressing the proposition which is expressed definitively and explicitly by the sentence type:

- (3) According to PW, there is a possible world in which there are blue swans.

In general the fictionalist interpretation of possible world discourse is derived from a genuine modal realist theory (story) PW. PW associates with each ordinary modal sentence P a genuine modal realist analysis, P\* and so entails every instance of the schema: