POSSIBLE GIRLS

BY

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Abstract: I argue that if David Lewis' modal realism is true, modal real-ists from different possible worlds can fall in love with each other. I offer a method for uniquely picking out possible people who are in love with us and not with our counterparts. Impossible lovers and trans-world love letters are considered. Anticipating objections, I argue that we can stand in the right kinds of relations to merely possible people to be in love with them and that ending a trans-world relationship to start a relationship with an actual person isn't cruel to one's otherworldly lover.

David Lewis famously holds that reality consists not only of our own uni-verse, but also of countless other universes as real as our own. According to Lewis' modal realism, every possible way that a universe could be is instantiated by one of these 'possible worlds.' Lewis calls our world the 'actual world,' but 'actual' signifies only that it is the universe he happens to inhabit. He regards 'actual' as an indexical like 'I' or 'here' – a resident of another world could use it to refer to her world. 'Possible' indicates some world that the speaker might or might not inhabit. The reason we never meet the residents of other worlds is that they're as stuck in their worlds as we are in ours. Their worlds and ours aren't spatiotemporally or causally connected.[1]

The ability to causally interact with your partner is important to many aspects of happy romantic relationships, but not to all of them. It's quite pleas-ant simply to know that your partner loves you and appreciates being loved by you. A loving relationship with a faraway person can enhance one's self-esteem and turn loneliness into contentment. As a lonely philosopher, I've come to wonder: If modal realism is true, can I have a loving relationship with someone from another possible world?

This paper will try to answer that question. The answer, I think, is yes. Given that every possible world is real, I shouldn't feel lonely. There are many possible girls out there in worlds where modal realism is widely accepted. Some of the girls are single, and are pining for a boy in a world that isn't their own. Some of them are pining for a boy who fits exactly

my description, down to the smallest detail. Some worlds hold legions of girls who desire a boy from a world other than theirs, and who fits exactly my description.

Since I'm not good at dealing with lots of romantic relationships at once, I'll want to pick just one of the girls. It shouldn't be hard to find one who will suit my desires – the space of logical possibility abounds with kind, beautiful, intelligent girls who want a boy exactly like me. The notion of a closest possible world, used in Lewis' analysis of counterfactuals, might be useful in narrowing down the options. Once I think out the characteristics that I want my girlfriend to have, maybe I'll just choose the closest possible world to ours where there's only one girl like that, and who wants a boy like me. The girl from that world will be my girlfriend.

There is a problem with this proposal, though. Not only is the space of possible worlds filled with girls like her who want boys like me, it's filled with my counterparts who match her preferences. I'm not going to be the only one who fits the description that she has in mind. I may have to share her affections with some counterpart of mine in another possible world, and that's not something I want to do. It's not that I'll feel upset about my counterpart getting in on the action – I like him well enough, and I hope he finds his own girlfriend. I just want somebody who'll be in a one-to-one trans-world relationship with me.

I can't just apply the closeness relation again on her side, and give her the one among us who is closer to her world. Maybe the pluriverse is set up so that for every girl who is pining for an otherworldly boy exactly like me, there's a duplicate of mine whose world is closer to hers than mine is. Then my duplicates, and not I, will be picked by all of the possible girls.

In fact, the pluriverse is probably set up this way. As far as I know, no actual modal realist girls love otherworldly boys. So a world that differed from mine only in that some modal realist girl loved a boy from another world would be closer to my potential admirers' worlds. Even if my potential admirers stipulated that they wanted a boy from a world without modal realist girls, there's no guarantee that I'd be selected.

I need a way in which possible girls can pick me out from my counterparts. One way would be for them to do something that picked out my world from all the other worlds. Maybe the girl I want is the one who desires a boy fitting exactly my description, in a world exactly like mine. If characteristics uniquely picking out my world are in the content of her desire, I alone will be selected.

For this to work, my girl needs to have an amazingly intricate desire. She wants the boy from a world that is exactly like mine, down to the last subatomic particle. On Lewis' functionalism, it won't be right to attribute such a complex desire to her unless she engages in some kind of activity that makes it clear that her desire has exactly this content. It might take a

long time for her to finish the activity, but that can be provided for. Perhaps she's immortal, with eternally youthful beauty, spending each day singing out every fact about my world that differs from hers. Some of the facts are about me, but many other facts are included. She can translate between all of this world's microphysical properties and the macrophysical ones that they reduce, so she knows the facts about this world in the same kind of way that we know them. When she first told her friends that she was in love with an otherworldly philosopher, they responded with incredulous stares. But now that they see how happy she is, they're supportive and happy for her.

There's no reason for you to feel jealous, of course. There are myriads of possible boys, girls, penguins, and talking donkeys whose affections have settled upon you. Choose among them as suits your preferences. Modal realism can be especially beneficial to people who believe that no actual individuals suit them. If you will be satisfied only by the love of a talking donkey, you might be depressed because no actual talking donkeys exist. But you can rest assured that there's a possible donkey who is reciting a full particle-by-particle description of all the differences between our world and his. He gets especially excited about braying out the parts that concern you.

Now I have a way for this girl to pick me out uniquely. But how can I pick her out uniquely? There still might be a ring of equally close worlds containing girls with all the properties I have specified. If you like the idea of being a Don Juan of the pluriverse, surrounded by a ring of otherworldly lovers, this might please you. It's not that I think there's anything wrong with that, but I feel that a one-to-one relationship will be the best salve for my loneliness. I can't pick her out from her counterparts as she picks me from mine, however. I am mortal, and I won't live long enough to select her uniquely by singing a complete description of all the differences between her world and mine.

But my mortality will not keep me from my beloved. Each world in the ring is exhaustively described at the microphysical level by many different sets of atomic English sentences. To end up with only one girl from the ring, I can stipulate that the girl I want is the one from the world that is picked out by the set of sentences that would come first if all of these sets were put in alphabetical order. I will call this the Alphabetical Stipulation.[2]

Now I just have to pick the possible girl who has all the properties I've stipulated. To recap; in addition to being an immortal with eternally youthful beauty whom I would find extremely physically attractive and lovable (I will not enumerate her attractive and lovable properties here), she sings out a microphysical description of all the differences between my world and hers including the facts about my presence, can translate between the microphysical properties and the macrophysical ones, and

often expresses her intense desire for the boy fitting my description in the closest world that fits the specifications in her song. Of all the closest worlds containing girls who fit this description, she is the one in the world that fits the Alphabetical Stipulation. Admittedly, I don't know exactly what her world is like, and I don't know that much about her, besides what is implied by my stipulation. I just know that it's the closest world to mine that fits a certain set of conditions.

There is still one problem that I don't know how to deal with, which threatens to push me into a wildly promiscuous relationship. Perhaps the same possibilities are instantiated by many duplicate worlds. Lewis himself held that each possibility was instantiated by exactly one world, though he allowed that this might not be the case. Since my beloved and I would then have counterparts in identical worlds, the best I could hope for would be a promiscuous relationship on both sides, involving countless possible people.

It's interesting to note that while duplicate worlds will keep me from being the unique beloved of any possible girl, they reduce the impact of Robert Adams' objection that modal realism leads to indifference about good and evil in the actual world.[3] On the assumption that there is exactly one world for every possibility, Adams asks, 'What is wrong with actualizing evils, since they will occur in some other possible world anyway if they don't occur in this one?' As Mark Heller points out, if you rescue a drowning child instead of standing idly on the beach, it will still be the case that somebody in the pluriverse stands idly on the beach just as you would have.[4] Only thus will the gap in modal space be filled, giving one world per possibility. But suppose there can be more than one world per possibility, and there are already worlds that will instantiate the rescue and worlds that will instantiate the drowning. If you make your world another rescue-world rather than another drowning-world, you make it the case that fewer children drown in the pluriverse. This will require a non-causal way of making something the case, but fortunately Lewis' view allows for things to be made the case non-causally. For example, the fact that all the bachelors in the pluriverse are unmarried non-causally makes it the case that necessarily, bachelors are unmarried. So if a plenitude of duplicate worlds blocks trans-world monogamy, at least it preserves the impermissibility of moral indifference.

There is a way to get love letters from your possible girlfriend.[5] Of course, you can't see the paper that she's writing on, since worlds are causally isolated. Still, you can know what she's writing to you. The way to do this is to include an extra stipulation when you choose your possible girlfriend. Stipulate that you want a girl who will write to you exactly those words which you write in a particular notebook. Then, when you want to hear from her, use the notebook to write the words that you want to hear from her. When you write responses to her, she'll get them – she

has knowledge of every feature of your world that is absent from hers, and hence knows what you wrote.

While relationships with possible girls involve a broadening of my romantic horizons, some suggest that I'm still being too narrow-minded.[6] They would have me go beyond the Lewisian framework and consider relationships with impossible girls. These girls inhabit impossible worlds where some propositions are both true and false. Impossible girls have some appealing features. In an impossible girl's world, it can be true (and false) that she kissed me. In any possible girl's world, and in my world, it is merely false that she kissed me. A modal realist interested in other-worldly kisses (and willing, unlike Lewis, to tolerate concrete impossibilia) might find what he wants in a relationship with an impossible girl.

At first, I had some major hangups about impossible girls. If it's correct to apply classical logic to impossible worlds, everything will be both true and false of the inhabitants of these worlds. For example, impossible girls will have (and not have) pigtails, nose piercings, and tentacles. I must leave girls of whom everything is true (and false) to boys with less conventional tastes than mine. Fortunately for the impossible girls, there are many such boys in impossible worlds (though it's also true that there aren't).

But if a paraconsistent logic is the correct one to apply to impossible worlds, my hangups are unwarranted. Under a paraconsistent logic, the presence of an inconsistency in the world – say, the fact that my possible girlfriend was kissed by me, even though she wasn't – won't imply the truth and falsity of everything – for example, that she has and does not have tentacles. If you're depressed by the fact that no possible girls are being kissed by you, and you'd be happy for some contradictory otherworldly kissing, impossible girls might be the way to go. Now I will consider some objections. The first one is inspired by Lewis' comments that we shouldn't worry about suffering in merely possible worlds – that is, in possible worlds that aren't actual.[7] He talks about how virtuous dispositions, as traditionally conceived, concern only actual people. According to him, we'd be needlessly changing our practices if we extended them to non-actual people. Similarly, one might object that love is restricted to our worldmates.

While relationships with merely possible people are unusual, they're more continuous with common practice than they might seem. Prevailing attitudes towards actual and possible people differ mainly because of the prevailing opinion that actual people are the only real people. Reality, not actuality, does the work. If we become convinced that possible people are real too, we shouldn't regard them differently from how we regard faraway actual people. I'm interested in real girls, and if Lewis convinces me that some non-actual ones like me, I'm going to get excited about them.

One might also wonder whether a trans-world relationship, without the possibility of causal interaction, can count as love. While most loving relationships involve causal interaction, it's hard to see why this is a necessary condition of love. If I'm intricate enough in setting up my stipulations, I can find someone with the whole range of endearing, noble, and attractive features that would cause me to fall in love. Lewis' view allows that I can have attitudes towards merely possible individuals, and that the possible individuals can have similar attitudes towards me.

Robert Kraut has argued that loving someone (rather than loving some attribute of a person) is a *de re* attitude that takes the person as its object.[8] While the person's attributes can certainly cause me to fall in love with them, the person must be the *de re* object of my attitude in order for me to love them. This is not a problem for trans-world love. While I initially picked out my possible girlfriend using her attributes and the attributes of her world, in the future I can use this as a reference-fixing description and have *de re* attitudes towards her.

There is one more issue to consider. With luck, at some point I'll find an actual girlfriend. Since I don't want to be unfaithful, I'll have to break up with my possible girlfriend if I want to enter into an actual relationship. One might criticize me for this. My possible girlfriend is spending eons of her life singing about me and my world! Isn't it heartless to break up with someone who has so much invested in a relationship?

This is not as big a problem as it seems. Since all the facts about my doings will be in my possible girlfriend's song – they're ways that my world differs from hers – the fact that I'm destined to break up with her will be something she knows from the outset. She could've chosen a more permanent boyfriend from among my counterparts. It's mysterious why she still chose me. But actual girls are mysterious to me in many ways, and there's no reason why possible girls would be any different. Do the arguments in this paper, if sound, give anyone a reason to accept modal realism? No, at least if you don't count pragmatic reasons for belief. Pragmatic considerations aside, beliefs aren't justified by the good consequences of believing. Many philosophers who are impressed by Lewis' theory still think that a more deflationary view about possible worlds is the right way to go. Nothing I have written gives them any reason to change their minds.

However, I will confess that when I first wrote this paper, the arguments in it irrationally caused me to accept modal realism, albeit in what Lewis calls a 'compartmentalized' way.[9] When engaging in philosophical reflection on modality, I have always rejected Lewis' modal realism. But there were times when I wasn't thinking about philosophy and I started to feel lonely. Then I thought of my possible girlfriend, and smiled at the thought of someone out there who loved me and desired to be loved by me. In quick succession I realized that she knew I was thinking of her – after

all, she knew every temporal part of me down to a microphysical description! She knew everything I was saying and doing. I felt more motivated to act like a worthy man. My posture straightened. I came to believe that she was happy about my writing this paper, so I wrote more of it. From a functionalist perspective, it would have been reasonable to attribute a belief to me – the belief that someone merely possible but real who loved me was aware of what I was doing. In allowing for merely possible individuals who are as real as me, this belief presupposed modal realism, and marked me as someone who had been seduced to Lewis' theory.[10]

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NOTES

[1]   Lewis, D. (1986). *On the Plurality of Worlds*. Oxford: Blackwell.

[2]   I thank Josh Dever for helping me develop the Alphabetical Stipulation.

[3]   Adams, R. M. (1974). 'Theories of Actuality,' *Noûs* 8, pp. 211–31.

[4]   Heller, M. (2003). 'The Immorality of Modal Realism, or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Let the Children Drown,' *Philosophical Studies* 114, pp. 1–22.

[5]   I thank Justin Tiehen for helpful discussion of this issue.

[6]   I thank Dan Korman for raising this issue, and Ted Sider for informing me about the sexual possibilities offered by paraconsistent logic.

[7]   Lewis, 1986, p. 127.

[8]   Kraut, R. (1986). 'Love *De Re*,' *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 10, pp. 413–430.

[9]   Lewis, 1986, pp. 30–35.

[10]   Thanks to Dan Bonevac, Josh Dever, Kathleen Higgins, John Hawthorne, Dan Korman, Rob Koons, Mark Sainsbury, Ted Sider, Bob Solomon, David Sosa, and Justin Tiehen for helpful comments on this paper.