

# PAPEal Fallibility?\*

JASON TURNER

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Alexander Skiles and Akiko Frischhut (forthcoming) have designed an intriguing view: *PAPEism*, which holds that, while the past, future, and merely possible exist, they do so in a different, less fundamental way than the actual and present. Its main attraction is its apparent ability to reconcile three intuitive thoughts:

- (1) The present and actual are more real than the merely possible, merely past, and merely future.
- (2) All truths must be grounded in what's real.
- (3) Truths about the past, merely possible, etc., can't be grounded in the present-and-actual.

The idea: If the past, merely possible, etc., all exist in one way, they can ground truths about the past, merely possible, etc. So we can have (2) and (3). But if there is another way of being enjoyed by only the present and actual, and it confers 'more reality' on those than on things not had by it, we can have (1), too.

As Skiles and Frischhut giveth, they taketh away, arguing that the PAPEist can't deliver the goods. Their 'problem of mixed ontological status' is supposed to make the theory untenable. Worse yet, this (indirectly) casts doubt on the theoretical utility of 'ontological pluralism' — the thesis that things exist in different ways. I will argue that the problem of mixed ontological status is no problem, and the theoretical utility of ways of being not yet impugned.

## 1 AIR-CLEARING

For the record, I'm inclined to regard 'more real than' talk as bad mojo: I don't trust the relevant intuitions and would prefer to theorize without it. Making sense of the notion doesn't strike me as one of ontological pluralism's main strengths. I'm also wary of 'relative naturalness',<sup>1</sup> and would prefer to understand ontological pluralism in a way that, unlike Skiles and Frischhut's (MS6 and n. 11), doesn't involve the notion. That's just biography, though, and I'm happy enough to play along with both notions for the time being.

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\*Thanks to Ross Cameron, Akiko Frischhut, and Alex Skiles for helpful comments and conversation.

<sup>1</sup>See Hawthorne (2006) for some reasons why.

## 2 TWO SPOTLIGHTS ON THE PAPEACY

Bog-standard Lewisian realism has, for our purposes, two parts. The first part is its ontology, made up of possible worlds containing all the possible individuals. Those worlds are *eternalist*, made up of progression of times. The second part of bog-standard Lewisianism is a story about truth-conditions for modal and tensed claims. Lewisian modal realism can handle (2) and (3), but looks ill-suited to satisfy (1).

It *also* looks ill-suited to satisfy a weakening of (1):

- (1\*) The present and actual are metaphysically privileged over the merely possible, merely past, and merely future.

To satisfy (1\*), a modal realist can depart from Lewisianism on two fronts. First, to metaphysically privilege the present, the Lewisian can appeal to a *moving spotlight* (cf. Broad 1923: 59): a metaphysically special property of PRESENTNESS that attaches to times, moving from past to future as time marches on. To be *present* is to bask in PRESENTNESS's glow. Second, to metaphysically privilege the present, the Lewisian can appeal to the *modal spotlight* (Bricker 2001): a metaphysically special property of ACTUALITY that attaches to worlds. (Unlike PRESENTNESS, it does not move.) To be *actual* is to bask in ACTUALITY's glow.

Each spotlight is familiar, but I know of nobody who believes in both. It thus falls to me to name the view; I dub it the *Two Spotlight* view, or TS.

TS faces a choice about each spotlight's scope. Does ACTUALITY light up entire worlds, or only time-slices within each world? And does PRESENTNESS light up time-slices from multiple worlds, or just a time-slice in the actual world?

I think there is pressure on TS to say that ACTUALITY shines on entire worlds, and PRESENTNESS shines not just on the actual present, but simultaneously on a multitude of possible presents, too.<sup>2</sup>

Here's why. Lewisian modal realism has a story about how to ground modal and tensed claims. The story is inherently indexical. Very roughly,  $\lceil \text{WAS } \phi \rceil$  is true if and only if there is a time before the present at which  $\phi$  is true. The Lewisian holds that 'present' is an indexical notion — ' $x$  is present' means, roughly, ' $x$  is *my* time'. The TSer wants to keep Lewis's grounding story, but without the indexical component. She should say that  $\lceil \text{WAS } \phi \rceil$  is true iff  $\phi$  is true at a time earlier than one instantiating PRESENTNESS. But if PRESENTNESS only shines on an *actual* time, the grounding story will get the wrong results about tensed claims at any non-actual world. (And similar remarks apply, *mutatis mutandis*, if ACTUALITY is confined to the present.)

TS satisfies (1\*), (2) (with a possible exception to be discussed below), and (3). But it doesn't satisfy (1), and it's easy to see why: nothing becomes *more real* when the spotlight shines on it. But perhaps TS can be further modified:

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<sup>2</sup>Caveat: Bricker (2001) argues that ACTUALITY can shine on multiple worlds. If it did, then actuality would consist of disconnected spacetimes. I set this aside for present purposes.

instead of thinking of the spotlights as properties, think of them as extra ways of being that things have when present or actual.

Introduce two new quantifiers, ‘ $\exists^@$ ’ and ‘ $\exists^{\text{NOW}}$ ’, more natural than the ‘ $\exists$ ’ that TS is formulated with. Then reinterpret ‘ $x$  instantiates ACTUALITY’ as ‘ $\exists^@y(y = x)$ ’ and ‘ $x$  instantiates PRESENTNESS’ as ‘ $\exists^{\text{NOW}}y(y = x)$ ’. Call this the *Ontologically Plural Two-Spotlight* view (OPTS). If things are more real when ranged over by ‘ $\exists^@$ ’ and ‘ $\exists^{\text{NOW}}$ ’ than when only ranged over by ‘ $\exists$ ’, then it seems OPTS can satisfy everything TS satisfies, and (1) besides.

### 3 PAPEAL OPTS

OPTS seems to get the results the PAPEist wanted, using the same tool the PAPEists wanted to use. Surprisingly, OPTS isn’t PAPEal by Skiles and Frischhut’s lights. It meets the second core PAPEal tenet, but not the first, because it doesn’t use quantifiers ‘ $\exists^{\text{WAS}}$ ’, ‘ $\exists^{\text{WILL}}$ ’, and ‘ $\exists^\diamond$ ’ that are at least as natural as ‘ $\exists$ ’ (MS 5-6). Still, it’s easy enough to meet the first tenet, too. We introduce these new quantifiers by stipulation, saying that ‘ $\exists^\diamond$ ’ ranges over everything not ranged over by ‘ $\exists^@$ ’, ‘ $\exists^{\text{WAS}}$ ’ ranges over everything located before a time ranged over by ‘ $\exists^{\text{NOW}}$ ’, and so on.<sup>3</sup> We then insist that these three quantifiers are at least as natural as ‘ $\exists$ ’ and less natural than ‘ $\exists^@$ ’ and ‘ $\exists^\diamond$ ’. The resulting view clearly accepts the central PAPEal tenets, and should count as a version of PAPEism. Call it *PAPEal OPTS*.

PAPEal OPTS gives truth-conditions for modal and tensed claims derived from Lewis’s. As a result, it doesn’t vindicate Skiles and Frischhut’s  $\sigma^\diamond$  and  $\sigma^{\text{NOW}}$ . But that’s a good thing; those principles are independently problematic.  $\sigma^\diamond$ , for instance, straightforwardly entails:

$$\Sigma^\diamond: \Box \text{ALWAYS}(\diamond \exists x \phi(x) \supset (\sim \exists^@y \phi(y) \supset \exists x \phi(x)))$$

This principle tells us that, in any world where something is possibly  $\phi$ , then if nothing is actually  $\phi$ , something is  $\phi$ . Let  $\phi(x) = \ulcorner x = x \wedge \text{there are no people} \urcorner$ ; the principle now tells us that any world which is *possibly* unpeopled is, in fact, unpeopled.<sup>4</sup>

We were tempted by  $\sigma^\diamond$  because we thought it said the mere possibility of talking donkeys is grounded in the existence of (non-actual) donkeys who talk. But  $\sigma^\diamond$  goes astray because it doesn’t account for the way modal operators shift quantifier domains. The uses of ‘ $\exists$ ’ in  $\sigma^\diamond$  are embedded behind modal operators, which shift them so that they no longer quantify over absolutely everything. This makes  $\sigma^\diamond$  not say quite what we wanted it to.

<sup>3</sup>If  $x$  spans both past and present times, we’ll have to decide whether ‘ $\exists^{\text{WAS}}$ ’ covers it or not. But we can remain neutral for present purposes.

<sup>4</sup>If ‘ $\exists^@$ ’ is ‘shifty’ (see below), that’s because we can derive a contradiction from assuming the world is peopled; if it’s ‘rigid’, it’s because the actual world is peopled.

Once we replace the  $\sigma$ s with the principles we derive from the Lewisian truth-conditions, Skiles and Frischhut's argument won't go through in full generality. It won't work, for instance, when  $\phi$  is  $\lceil x = x \wedge \text{there are no people} \rceil$ . But it will still be true, on PAPEal OPTS, that there is something that was a talking donkey. Here's why: the spotlight of PRESENTNESS, according to TS, shines not just on the actual present but on some merely possible presents, too. Some of those merely possible presents will be located in worlds with talking donkeys at earlier times. That's enough to make

(\*) WAS  $\exists x(x \text{ is a talking donkey})$

true.

The PAPEal OPTSimist shouldn't be embarrassed by this, though, because (\*) doesn't mean what it sounds like it means. It *sounds* like it means it is *actually* the case that there was a talking donkey. But it means no such thing. The ' $\exists$ ' starts out absolutely unrestricted. Putting it behind a tense operator restricts it to things in the past of the moving spotlight, does did *not* restrict it to actual objects.<sup>5</sup> But the PAPEal OPTSimist is a modal realist, and believes that some possibilities are located at times earlier than where their respective world's spotlights are shining. So (\*) is true, because it's true that there is a past possibility which is also a talking donkey. This shouldn't bother any modal realist; the existence of a past, merely possible talking donkey is no worse than the existence of a merely possible talking donkey. There would only be a problem if the argument showed that there is *actually* a past talking donkey. Since the problem of mixed ontological status shows us no such thing, it's no problem at all.

## 4 FURTHER OBJECTIONS

As it stands there seems to be no problem of mixed ontological statuses. But there might be other, related problems lurking in the wings. Let's see if we can find some.

First try: 'According to PAPEal OPTS, some merely possible things exist<sup>NOW</sup>, and some merely past things exist<sup>@</sup>. But then these things are (i) just as real as the actual and present, and (ii) more real than the merely-past-and-merely-possible. That's a terrible violation of our intuitions about how real these things should be!'

I'm not sure about (i): Why can't the PAPEal OPTSimist say that each perfectly natural quantifier imparts a degree of being, so that things falling under both are more real than things falling under just one? Charge (ii) seems less avoidable. But in any case, I'm too wary about these sorts of intuitions to get very worked up about this complaint. Potential PAPEists will have to make peace with their own conscience, of course; but I don't see why they should be

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<sup>5</sup>We could have adopted a story about tense operators where it did. In that case we could no longer argue that (\*) is true.

confident that, for example, merely future actualia are no more real than merely future possibilities. Furthermore, even if this is a real cost, it may be well worth paying for a reconciliation of (1)–(3).

Next try: ‘Your so-called “PAPEal OPTS” isn’t PAPEist at all! The  $\sigma^\diamond$  and  $\sigma^{\text{WAS}}$  principles are part-and parcel of the PAPEal package. Reject them, and you reject PAPEism; if the principles are independently bad, then PAPEism is independently bad.’

I guess we could *define* ‘PAPEism’ so that  $\sigma^\diamond$  and  $\sigma^{\text{WAS}}$  are definitionally required. But we cared about PAPEism because we wanted to reconcile (1)–(3). If the view we’ve been calling ‘PAPEal OPTS’ does *that*, then who cares if it meets some stipulative definition?

Third try: ‘Part of the core idea behind PAPEism was that the possibility of things having certain features is grounded in the existence $^\diamond$  of things that *do* have those features, and *mutatis mutandis* for tense. But if you give up on the  $\sigma$ s, you give up on this core idea.’

I don’t think that’s right. If I’ve given up on the  $\sigma$ s, I’ve given up on *that particular way* of stating the core idea. But there are other  $\sigma$ -like principles that the PAPEal OPTSimist will endorse. For instance, he will roughly endorse the claim that, if there actually is no  $\phi$ -thing but there could have been one, then there is $^\diamond$  something  $x$  and is $^\diamond$  a world  $w$  where  $x$  is  $\phi$ -at- $w$ .

Fourth try: ‘Right, but being  $\phi$ -at- $w$  isn’t the same as being  $\phi$ . You’ve already shown us why not: On the view spelled out, it can be possible for something to be such that there be no people without there being $^\diamond$  anything which is such that there are no people.’

Well, yes. And if the PAPEist’s idea was that *every* open sentence that is possibly (but not actually) satisfied by something is in fact satisfied by something $^\diamond$ , well, PAPEal OPTSimists can’t have that. But that is an *extremely* strong grounding requirement, and it’s not clear any theory can satisfy it. Lewisian modal realism, for instance, doesn’t — and for the same reason PAPEal OPTS doesn’t.

Here’s what PAPEal OPTS can satisfy: a demand that every possibly true *atomic* predication  $\phi$  is grounded in the existence $^\diamond$  of something that is  $\phi$ . For atomic predications, being  $\phi$ -in-a-world is just being  $\phi$ .<sup>6</sup> From that basis the PAPEal OPTSimist systematically grounds the rest of our modal and temporal talk in a world- and time-relativized way. This looks like a perfectly suitable way to satisfy intuitive thought (2); I don’t see why anything stronger is required.

Fifth try: ‘Not *every* claim eventually grounds out in atomic claims the way you describe. Consider the claim that, possibly, it was the case that there was a talking donkey which existed<sup>@</sup>.<sup>7</sup> Since no actual talking donkey has been thus, there must be something $^\diamond$  which is a talking donkey and exists<sup>@</sup>. But then a talking donkey exists<sup>@</sup>, and so is actual, after all!

Ahh, now we’re getting to a real worry. Before we begin in earnest, a few observations.

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<sup>6</sup>Provided our language is reasonably well-behaved, that is.

<sup>7</sup>Thanks to Alex Skiles and Akiko Frischhut for pressing me on this objection.

To start, *if* it's a worry, it's a worry orthogonal to any concerns about 'mixed' ontological statuses, for it arises in the modal-only setting. The truth of 'Possibly, there is a talking donkey that exists@' is enough to generate the problem; no tense operators or temporal ways of being are needed.

Also, It's a worry only if we think '∃@' should be *shifty*. The would could have been different. If it had been different, would different things have fallen under '∃@'? There is some pressure to say 'yes': it seems as though, if the world had been different, actuality would have been different, and so '∃@' would have had to contain those different things. In that case, '∃@' is shifty. There is also some pressure to say 'no': PAPEal OPTS is a modal realist view, and this question sounds very close to asking whether the pluriverse could have been different. And there is pressure for the modal realist to say 'no' to that question. In this case, '∃@' is rigid.

Whatever we think about this question, though, the problem clearly arises in the temporal case. It's part of the moving spotlight picture that the spotlight *moves*: it *was* the case that the spotlight shone on dinosaurs, even though it is *no longer* the case that the spotlight shines on dinosaurs. If we understand the spotlight's glow to be a particular way of being, we'll have to understand this as the claim that, while it was the case that there were some dinosaurs that exist<sup>NOW</sup>, it is not now the case that any dinosaurs exist<sup>NOW</sup>. If we want to say the spotlight moves, we need to say that '∃<sup>NOW</sup>' is shifty. So PAPEal OPTS will face a temporal version of this problem.

The problem is not unique to PAPEal views; it besets moving spotlights generally. Moving spotlight views try to ground tensed claims in tenseless ones relativized to the spotlight's position. But in order to say that the spotlight *moves*, we have to use some tensed expressions — and we can't ground these in the spotlight's current position. Claims about the spotlight's motion are recalcitrant to grounding.<sup>8</sup>

The problem also is not that these views must say that there are (presently) dinosaurs. To avoid saying this, a moving spotlifter needs to restrict her grounding story: she will insist that, if there was a  $\phi$  (and  $\phi$  is atomic), then there is a past  $\phi$  — *unless*  $\phi$  is ' $x$  instantiates PRESENTNESS' (or ' $\exists^{\text{NOW}}y(y = x)$ '), in which case all bets are off.

The problem is ultimately about the *scope* of the moving spotlifter's grounding claims. Not *all* tensed truths are grounded in the tenseless; a select few have to be taken as brute. From the PAPEal perspective, the problem is that, once the view is made consistent, not *all* truths are grounded in what's real. A few truths — ones about what did or will exist<sup>NOW</sup> — aren't.

It's not clear this problem is insoluble. Kit Fine's (2005) fragmentationalism might provide one solution, and Ross Cameron (in preparation) will offer another. I can't consider here whether these views can be made sufficiently PAPEal for our purposes, but if they can, then PAPEism is as viable as ever.

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<sup>8</sup>See Cameron in preparation, chapter 2.

Even if the problem can't be solved in a PAPEally acceptable way, it's not clearly strong enough to vindicate either of Skiles and Frischhut's conclusions (MS13). If the problem is insoluble, that means (1)–(3) can't be made consistent. But (1) and (3) *can* be made consistent with

(2\*) The vast majority of truths are grounded in what's real.

The only truths not grounded in the real form a well-defined and well-behaved class. We're already familiar with the thought that not *all* of our pretheoretical commitments can be vindicated, and when they can't we often try to do justice to as many of them as we can. It's not crazy to think that PAPEal OPTS, by reconciling (1), (2\*), and (3) gets us as close to (1)–(3) as we can get, and to accept it on those grounds. If that's right, then we can't categorically state that it must be rejected. And if it's right we *also* can't categorically state that ontological pluralism hasn't helped with puzzle-solving: it got us closer to (1)–(3) than any non-pluralist view to date.

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