

Explore the use of 'possible worlds' in philosophy, illustrating your argument with an example of a problem that involves the notion of possible worlds.

Philosophy is a wide area and deals with numerous different subjects, each of which prompts its own set of circumstances and questions in the real world. In discussing these subjects sometime its easier to imagine a change in such circumstances in order to make a point. For this reason the philosopher will use thought experiments and elaborate on such arguments by imagining the world in a slightly different way than it actually is. For this reason it is useful to use the idea of possible worlds in order to contrive a certain set of criteria which may make a point. For example a science fiction story about the perils of living forever may help us examine the manner in which we look at, and treat, our own mortality, or even question the existence and nature of God. Imagination plays a vital part in creating such possible worlds in being able to think outside the box, and in this respect philosophy differs from other sciences, where only rigour and technical discipline are needed. We need to be able to ask ourselves 'what would we do?' in such possible worlds.

Therefore the use of possible worlds helps us tackle issues we would otherwise find quite difficult to explain. According to the Routledge Concise Encyclopedia:

" Possible Worlds enable us to analyse and help us to understand a wide range of problematic and difficult concepts....."

However such possible worlds do not have to inhabit the realm of the fantastic such as the example above. We can imagine something more ordinary. For example, we could question our own life choices we have made and imagine ourselves in a different situation than we currently are. This may help may alter own own perspective on its current status. For instance, if I had not made a vocational choice of studying Engineering at University, would I be sitting in this house in Portsmouth now, as I work for IBM locally? If I had studied German and linguistics, would my wife be German and not from New Zealand, where I worked as they had an IT skills shortage there? If I was living in Berlin as an Irish Person, would I be so worried about Brexit?

Possible worlds can be conveyed through dialogs as well as stories, music, plays, even paintings and any suitable form of artistic impression. Adding some drama via such artistic license in such worlds can add atmosphere and tension to the stories and images being played out . As such, arguments via possible world scenarios, can appear more profound and hence have more impact on the reader.

This is evident in Crito by Plato. Even as Socrates is charged with corrupting the youth of Athens, he will not take the easy way out and leave Athens with the help of his friends. He refuses to choose exile from Athens, as he see it his duty to the City to live within its laws. Socrates imagines himself escaping from Athens to several alternative cities. He could be comfortable, but not completely satisfied and may feel he has sacrificed his own principles in fleeing Athens after living there all his life there, his reputation possibly tarnished. The possible world of him living in Thessaly which he portrays is very real in the sense that he could choose it, but wishes not to, literally on pain of death, due to his own ideals:

"...if you go away from well-governed States to Crito's friends in Thessaly, where there is great disorder and license, they will be charmed to have the tale of your escape from prison, set off with

ludicrous particulars of the manner in which you were wrapped in a goatskin or some other disguise, and metamorphosed as the fashion of runaways is – that is very likely; but will there be no one to remind you that in your old age you violated the most sacred laws from a miserable desire of a little more life?"

Such celebrity would not be in keeping with Socrates' ideals. One could roughly summarise the argument:

Premise 1: I, Socrates could flee to Thessaly and live there comfortably.

Premise 2: In fleeing I would be breaking the law of the city in which I have lived all my life and has treated me quite well.

Conclusion: Therefore I would not be a law abiding citizen of my own city and would not be living according to my own principles.

Therefore the use of possible worlds here adds colour to his argument and lightens the tone of Socrates' dogged obstinance. In our own practice of philosophy, what limits do we need to impose on our own possible worlds to make them believable though?

Returning to the Routledge Concise Encyclopedia definition:

"Yet, for all this, possible worlds may raise more problems than they solve. What kinds of things are possible worlds? Are they merely our creations or do they exist independently of us?"

Consequently the use of possible worlds may challenge the philosophers perspective and this may provoke an emotional or dismissive reaction. If the plausibility of a possible world is in doubt, can we consider it? For instance, what can the Beatles Yellow Submarine really tell us? One may be tempted to refute such worlds as overly contrived whimsy, sofistry or fallacy. Consequently they do not deserve to live in our imagination, but that's where the challenge for the philosopher lies. It is up to the philosopher to attempt to follow the logic of any argument contained in a possible world no matter how improbable it first appears. To not to do this would be to assume we are already aware of the limits of our own imagination and only encourage a limited view. Philosophical theories must be as rigorous as scientific ones in order to have credibility and no contradictions.

With current advances in Theoretical Physics we are told that our universe may just be one of an infinite number in a wider multiverse. Therefore the existence of some possible worlds could be real, but that's not the point. They do not need to be real, but they should always be treated as relevant. In the Plato's Apology Socrates said "The unexamined life is not worth living" . This author would add that the unexamined possible world should also never be left so.

References

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