

Report  
“Another World is Possible”  
Conference on David K. Lewis  
University of Urbino, Italy, 16 – 18 June 2011

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The conference in celebration of David K. Lewis was held in Urbino, Italy, from June 16 to June 18 2011, and was organized by the University of Urbino, Faculty of Humanities and Philosophy, Department Of Communication Studies, Department of Basic Sciences and Foundations, together with APhEx, Analytical and Philosophical Explanations. The conference hosted five invited speakers, namely Andrea Bottani (University of Bergamo), Sònia Roca-Royes (University of Stirling), John Collins (Columbia University), John Divers (University of Leeds), Vincenzo Fano (University of Urbino), and a number of contributed papers. Aim of the conference was to explore further implications of Lewis’ long-lasting impact on the fields of logic and metaphysics beyond the ones already established, while at the same time offering to young philosophers the opportunity to exchange views on related topics and the results produced by their own researches.

David Kellogg Lewis (1941–2001), as it is well known, was one of the most influential American philosophers of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. His brilliant academic career was made at Harvard, where he worked under the supervision of W.V.O. Quine, UCLA, and Princeton. His long lasting love for Australia brought him to visit the country almost every year starting from the early seventies to the untimely end of his *actual* life. He made fundamental contributions to metaphysics and philosophy of mind, as well as significant contributions to areas as disparate as philosophy of language, philosophy of mathematics, philosophy of science, decision theory, epistemology, meta-ethics and aesthetics. As to the metaphysical side of his endeavours, two highly influential positions must be recalled, namely a Hume-inspired reductionism

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about the nomological known as ‘Humean supervenience’, and a stance toward modality known as ‘modal realism’, according to which the best account of modality would be one which posits the existence of a plurality of concrete possible worlds. In philosophy of mind he defended a new version of materialism which motivated the view currently known as ‘analytic functionalism’, and offered original accounts of mental content and phenomenal knowledge. Besides an irritatingly high number of papers, he published four books: *Convention* (1969), *Counterfactuals* (1973), *On the Plurality of Worlds* (1986), and *Parts of Classes* (1991). The occasion for the conference was provided by the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of David Lewis premature departure.

An attempt at providing an exhaustive account of all the talks delivered at the conference is way beyond the reach of this short review, which is rather intended to sketch a brief outline of the main theses defended by some of its contributors, and which will focus primarily on the contributions of young scholars.

Sònia Roca-Royes presented a paper titled *Conflation, Primitive Modality, and the Humean Intuition*. She explored some of the pros and cons of two different views concerning the nature of possible worlds, namely Linguistic Abstractism and Lewisian Concretism. While the former is the view according to which possible worlds are sets of maximally consistent propositions, and hence abstract entities, the latter holds that they are concrete entities, ontologically on a par with our actual world. In particular, she argued for the existence of an unavoidable internal tension in Lewisian Concretism, which would not be present in the *ersatz* accounts of modality. According to her view, Lewisian Concretism would be problematically committed to the presence of necessary connections between different existents. The existence of such necessary connections would in fact undermine that very same Human principle which Lewis relies on in order to support his Principle of Plenitude. This last principle, as a matter of fact, is crucial to his account, insofar as it confers a higher descriptive power to Concretism over Ersatzism. If she were to be right, then this would significantly weaken Lewis’ general abductive argument in favour of Concretism.

John Collins’s paper, titled *The Parsing of the Possible*, was intended to address the question of whether it is possible to carve the logical space of possibility more finely than the tools of counterfactual analysis permit. He started by reviewing fundamental arguments aimed at rejecting the conditional

analysis of dispositions, such as the arguments from *finkish* and *masking*. *Finkish* cases are, roughly, those in which the conditions for an object’s acquiring or losing a disposition coincide with the conditions of its manifestation. *Masking* cases would be those in which the manifestation of the disposition is not removed but simply masked by something else. He then argued, contra Lewis, that rejecting *masked* dispositions would represent a significant loss of descriptive power for a satisfactory metaphysical account of component dispositions. Building on such premises he finally hinted toward a new counterfactual theory of causation.

Michael De (University of St. Andrews) presented his paper *A Modal Realist Defense of Presentism*, whose main aim was to show that modal realists have the resources required in order to avoid the major objections traditionally raised against Presentism. The objections which De decided to focus on are: the singular proposition objection, according to which there are singular propositions about past objects; the cross-temporal relation objection, according to which present objects can stand in specifiable relations to past objects; the causation objection, according to which the causes of events are past events; and the truth-making objection, according to which the truth-makers of some propositions are past objects or facts. In his view modal realists are in the position to consistently claim that the entities to which all these objections refer are not strictly past entities, but rather other-worldly ones.

Marco Nathan (Columbia University) presented a paper titled *Lewisian Themes in Molecular Biology*. His general aim was to show the relevance of Lewis’ thought for the philosophy of science. Lewis’ work on redundant causation and on the conditional analysis of dispositions, in his view, finds applications in current scientific practice. In order to show this, he discussed two examples from molecular biology, namely the operon model of gene regulation, and the instantiation of *finkish* dispositions and *masking* in some biological processes. Both examples, according to his view, respectively instantiate two central concepts of Lewisian metaphysics, namely *preemption* and *dispositions*. The moral to be drawn from these examples would be that philosophy of science and metaphysics are more closely related than is often assumed.

The above examples will be sufficient, we hope, to convey at least a rough idea of the deeply fascinating Lewisian themes dealt with during the conference both by young researchers and well-established authorities in the field. The highly original and far-reaching ideas of the great American

philosopher, it seems, have not ceased to inspire generations of new philosophers yet!