Counting Possibilia

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ABSTRACT: Timothy Williamson supports the thesis that every possible entity necessarily exists and so he needs to explain how a possible son of Wittgenstein's, for example, exists in our world: he exists as a merely possible object (MPO), a pure locus of potential. Williamson presents a short argument for the existence of MPOs: how many knives can be made by fitting together two blades and two handles? Four: two, at the most, are concrete objects, the others being merely possible knives and merely possible objects. This paper defends the idea that one can avoid reference and ontological commitment to MPOs. My proposal is that MPOs can be dispensed with by using the notion of 'rule of an art'. I first present a solution according to which we count instructions describing physical combinations between components. This account, however, is not completely satisfactory and I claim that one can find a better one: in answering Williamson's question, we count classes of possible worlds in which the same instance of a general rule is applied.

Keywords: Williamson, merely possible object, possible world, rule, artifact.

I

Williamson (2002) supports the *prima facie* highly implausible thesis that every possible entity necessarily exists: if, in a possible world w, there is a son of Ludwig Wittgenstein's, then he necessarily exists and so he exists in our world too; necessarily everything is necessarily existent: $\Box\forall x\, \Box\exists y\, (x = y)$.

Even admitting this may be so, Williamson still needs to explain how a possible son of Wittgenstein's, let us say W_{jr}, exists in our world, the actual world @. He writes: "[...] necessarily this table is something only if it is a table. Isn't that obvious? What else could a table have been? Answer: a possible table" (Williamson, 2000a, p. 334). So W_{jr} exists in @ as a possible son of Wittgenstein's even if he is neither a man nor a son. In fact: is W_{jr} —something that could be a son of Wittgenstein's— identical in our world to an actual person *a*? No. If one's parentage is essential to one —as Williamson maintains— *a* could not have been a son of Wittgenstein's. Is W_{jr} perhaps identical to a non-human animal, or a plant or even a stone? No, because things of these kinds cannot be a man let alone a son of Wittgenstein's. Therefore he is not a concrete object. Finally, W_{jr} in @ is not even an abstract object, because no abstract object can be a physical object in some world.

So what kind of object is he? In order to clarify his ontological status, one needs the notion of *merely possible physical object*. Let us start with the general case of a merely possible F (where F is a sortal predicate):

$$x \text{ is a merely possible}_{\text{attributive}} F =_{df} \neg Fx \,\&\, \Diamond Fx.^{1}$$

[1] Williamson (2000b, p. 202) distinguishes between an attributive and a predicative reading of the notion of merely possible F. There is no need here to enter into this distinction.

Note that Philip Roth, for example, is a merely possible lottery winner: he could have won the lottery but he did not; and he is also a merely possible government minister: he is not a government minister but he could have been.

But obviously there are important differences in @ between Philip Roth and W_{jr}. Roth has interesting non-modal properties[2]: *being a man*, *being a novelist*, *being American* and so on. In our world, instead, W_{jr} has only trivial non-modal properties such as *being something* or *being self identical*, general formal properties shared by every entitity[3]. The crucial features of W_{jr} in @ are his modal properties; if you want to know what W_{jr} is in our world, you have to know what he could be: Wittgenstein's son, man, Pope, journalist, pilot, etc. This is because W_{jr} in @ is not only a merely possible son of Wittgenstein's, but also a merely possible physical object (MPPO). Williamson defines an MPPO as an object that "is not a physical object [...] but could have been a physical object" (Williamson, 2002, p. 247).

Are there —according to Williamson— merely possible *abstract* objects (MPAO)? Williamson does not address this issue, but consider these two cases: 1) $\{W_{jr}\}$ is perhaps, in our world, an abstract object, a set; but given the nature of its element in @, it may seem better to see it as a merely possible set and so an MPAO; 2) Williamson (2000b, p. 203) maintains that fictional characters are cultural artifacts: as artifacts they seem to be created by writers and storytellers; moreover they are obviously non-concrete entities: it is very tempting —and not uncommon— to see them as abstract objects in some sense[4]. In a world w different from @, there will be fictional characters such that no one creates them in @: being necessary existents, as Williamson claims, they have to exist in @ and presumably they will be merely possible fictional entities and MPAOs.

If this is so, then we would have the following general definition of *merely possible object* (MPO):

$$x \text{ is an MPO} =_{df} \neg \text{Object}^*(x) \,\&\, \Diamond \text{Object}^*(x)$$

where the predicate "Object*" veridically applies to all concrete and abstract objects. So an MPO is something which is neither concrete nor abstract, but could be a concrete or an abstract object[5]. Such an object is a pure locus of potential —*vid.* Williamson (2002, pp. 250-251): it lacks spatio-temporal location and causal relations, and its non-modal properties are mostly trivial.

In what follows I will *always* use "MPO(s)" and "merely possible object(s)" according to the above definition: MPOs therefore are not objects which don't exist but

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[2] "[...] a modal property is one expressible only by use of modal terms" (Williamson, 1998, p. 266).

[3] Williamson also considers negative properties such as *not being a person* or *not being a city*, and intentional properties such as *never being thought of*.

[4] Ideas of this kind have been put forward by many philosophers; among them, Kripke, Salmon, Schiffer, Thomasson.

[5] Therefore MPOs don't obviously coincide with contigently non-concrete objects (See Linsky & Zalta (1996)). If there are no MPAOs, then MPOs are just MPPOs, that is to say contigently non-concrete objects. Note that nothing in what follows hinges on this issue.

could exist, nor existing but non-actual objects; an MPO, instead, is an actually existing object that can be concrete or abstract but is not.

II

At first, Williamson's theory of MPOs appears quite peculiar. It posits a 'third realm' of objects which are neither concrete nor abstract and are indistinguishable with respect to their non-modal intrinsic properties; one may well have the impression that it is not difficult to find conclusive objections to this. But, I suspect, if one tried to find them, one would discover that it is not such an easy task as it might seem.
In any case, one can reasonably be justified in being perplexed and reluctant to admit MPOs in our ontology: Williamson's theory may even be consistent, but it may also look like an *ad hoc* move elaborated to solve the troubles of his thesis about necessary existents.

However, Williamson (1998, 2000a) offered an independent and short argument in favour of MPOs: "Merely possible members of a kind are needed to make sense of some counting questions." (Williamson, 1998, p. 267). The questions Williamson has in mind are of this kind: "How many possible Fs could be made from c_1, ..., c_n?", where F is a sortal predicate for artifacts (such as chairs, clocks, tables...) and c_1, ..., c_n are typical components of an F.

In particular, Williamson offers two parallel examples concerning suits and knives. Suppose that we have two blades, B1 and B2, and two slotted handles, H1 and H2, at a time t before they are fitted together by workers in a factory: how many knives can be made by fitting them together? In one sense the answer is "two" because in no single world could more than two knives made of these parts co-exist. "But in another readily intelligible sense of the question the answer is four" (Williamson, 2000a, p. 335): B1 inserted in H1, B1 in H2, B2 in H1 and B2 in H2. According to Williamson in cases like this there are four possible knives, and we are counting just these objects: at most two are concrete physical knives, the others being merely possible knives and merely possible objects, entities that are neither knives nor concrete objects but that could be.

Second example. A suit consists of a jacket and a pair of trousers. Consider two jackets, J1 and J2, and two pairs of trousers, T1 and T2. How many possible suits could be made from these components? The question, again, has a reading according to which the answer is four, even though it is impossible for more than two suits made from the given components to co-exist in space-time.[6]

III

According to Williamson, therefore, we can only give the correct answers to some counting questions because we count MPOs. But even considering Williamson's rea-

[6] In these cases we count merely possible knives (see Williamson, 2000a, p. 336) and merely possible suits: in fact, even though "we should not assume that every object is a possible object of reference by us", "we can refer to specific merely possible suits" (Williamson, 1998, p. 267) and "in principle we can name at least some such objects" (Williamson, 2000b, p. 207) i.e. merely possible knives.

sons for admitting these objects, the impression remains that they are really odd entities, being —as I have said— neither concrete nor abstract and indistinguishable with respect to their non-modal intrinsic properties; is there a way to reduce them to metaphysically more respectable entities? Williamson himself suggested some initially plausible candidates for reduction — *vid.* Williamson 2000a, p. 336; 2000b, p. 207.

Consider, to begin with, sets and mereological sums.

Set C has as elements B1, B2, H1, H2: there are exactly four subsets of C with exactly two elements such that one element is a blade and the other element is a handle. And there are four mereological sums whose parts are a blade and a handle: B1+H1, B1+H2, B2+H1 and B2 +H2.

However, as Williamson plausibly argues, this solution "does not generalize properly to cases in which more than one possible artifact could be made of exactly the same subset of components" (Williamson, 2000b, p. 336). Here is an example of mine. Suppose we have a handle H^2 with two slots, s and s*, and a blade B. In this case there seem to be two possible knives whereas there is only one set whose elements are a blade and a handle: {H^2, B}; the same holds for mereological sums: given B and H^2 we have only the sum B+H^2.[7]

Perhaps, to get the right answers, one should appeal to sequences rather than to sets or sums of components. In fact, sequences are well-suited to the case just considered: <H^2, B> and <B, H^2> are two ordered couples corresponding to the two possible knives. But what about Williamson's knives example? In this case, we would have eight ordered couples and only four possible knives. Moreover, suppose we had a blade B and a handle H^3 with three different slots; the two ordered couples would be <H^3, B> and <B, H^3>, while the possible knives would be three in number.

Finally, one could attempt to consider possible situations or possible worlds rather than merely possible objects. But, Williamson maintains, even this proposed solution does not work: "One gets the right answer only by individuating possible situations according to the identity of the possible knives in them" (Williamson, 2000a, p. 336)[8]. It is plausible to read this passage in the following way: we count possible artifacts and so we know how many merely possible knives there are, let us say four; then one considers all possible worlds, and among them one individuates those worlds in which these objects exist in space-time: to be sure there are four kinds of these worlds, but counting possible worlds presupposes having individuated MPOs.

So, it seems, there is no way to reduce merely possible objects to more respectable entities; reference to MPOs cannot be explained away as a case of reference to sets,

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[7] Why not say that a) there is only one knife, and b) it is such that it can have the blade in s and can have the blade in s*? Three points: 1) This seems to me neither the intuitive nor the ordinary answer. 2) Maintaining that we are counting the set {H^2, B} (or the sum B+H^2) needs a plausible story to account for b). 3) Even if "one" is the right answer and there is a responce to 2), one still needs to address the *general* point Williamson makes. At the very least, however, this paper offers an alternative to Williamson's ideas for those who have some doubts —reasonable doubts, I think— about the viability of the sets/sums strategy.

[8] "Possible knives" here are "possible knives which are not in fact knives", MPPOs and MPOs.

mereological sums, sequences or possible situations: it seems that we should admit MPOs in our ontology.

I think, however, that this conclusion can be resisted. In §4 I present a way to avoid MPOs based on the notion of 'rule of an art': I will argue that there are no obvious objections against it and that it could be endorsed. In §5 and §6 I will present, endorse and defend a refinement of the account introduced in §4 which seems to me more natural and persuasive.

IV

As we have seen, Williamson favours formulations in which the word "possible" figures; but why not try and avoid these expressions? After all, expressions concerning ways, rather than possible things, recur frequently in our ordinary talk:

— There is more than one way to read a book.
— There are many ways to reach London from Edinburgh.
— How many ways are there to make a knife from B1, B2, H1, H2?

These sentences, of course, are quite ordinary: we routinely and naturally quantify over ways, and it is very easy to paraphrase sentences that apparently concern possible things in terms of ways. So, one can argue, it is not necessary to resort to MPOs.

But are ways metaphysically more respectable than MPOs? It would seem not. If their metaphysical nature proved as puzzling as that of MPOs, we would not have reached a satisfactory solution to our perplexities about Williamson's theory[9].

Here is a possible answer to the problem of clarifying the nature of ways.

Williamson's examples concern counting questions about artifacts namely things produced by art: a certain thing is an artifact because it is produced according to the rule of an art (e.g. the art of shoemaking). It is plausible that the rules of arts are mentally represented even if, after a long period of practice, they are often applied "unconsciously"[10].

Knives[11] are artifacts put together according to particular instances of an obvious and general rule for making knives:

(R) Put a blade x into a slot y of a handle z/Stop.

Given instructions for physically combining a particular handle H, with some slots $s_1,..., s_n$, and a particular blade B, the rule of the art tells us how many legitimate instructions there are: the rule in the craftsman's head[12] only selects certain instructions, the ones which, given the rule, prove to be legitimate instructions.

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[9] Hayaki (2006) proposes quantifying over ways, but gives no explanation of what ways are.

[10] A reader of Kripke (1982) can be sceptical about the existence of mentally represented rules. Even in this case, however, he can still accept a suitably modified version of my arguments in sections 4, 5 and 6 as long as he accepts that competent members of a community agree a) on what counts as a correct application of a rule and b) on what counts as a correct description of a correct application of a rule. Even a Kripkean sceptic, I think, accepts both a) and b).

[11] At least knives relevant in this context.

[12] Or in the head of whoever has learnt it, even if he is not able to use it to make artifacts.

Consider two handles with one slot, H1 and H2, and two blades, B1 and B2; the rule of the art filters all and only the legitimate instructions for physically combining them. These *four* instructions are simply those which are particular instances of (R); among them there will be, for example,

(IR1) Put B1 into the slot s of H1/Stop.

An instruction such as "Put B1 six feet above H1/Stop" is not an instance of (R) and therefore is not a legitimate instruction.

So according to this view: a) we count ways of making artifacts; b) these ways are identified with legitimate instructions; c) legitimate instructions are not established as legitimate by means of their output, but via their conformity to (R); d) conformity to (R) is none other than being an instance of (R).

I see at least three problems that this view has to address.

1) Consider this instruction:

(I) Put B1 six feet above H1, hide H1 and B1 somewhere for exactly three minutes, put B1 into the slot s of H1/Stop.

One might think that (I) is in fact a legitimate instruction on the grounds that, if applied, the outcome is a knife. But if this is true, then we should count more than four instructions.

I think one might answer this objection in two ways[13].

a) (I) clearly is not an instance of (R), and so it does not count as legitimate.

b) (I) is simply a "redundant" instance of (R), namely a redundant version of (IR1).

We could say that we count classes of instances of (R): to each of these *four* classes belong a minimal instance ((IR1), for example) and the redundant versions of it[14].

2) Consider these two questions:

— How many possible human beings can result from these two sperm cells and these two eggs? (Williamson, 2002, p. 249)

— How many possible numerical combinations could result when rolling two dice?

These are modal counting questions not concerning artifacts, and the approach just outlined does not seem to generalize to these different cases.

This worry certainly deserves an answer —and I think there is an answer—, but I will postpone it until §6 when discussing a different but related alternative to Williamson's thesis. The answer I will give there applies equally to the present case.

3) How can we be so sure that "four" is the right answer? Of course, only because we know, in some way, that there are no other possible instances of (R) besides the four we have considered: it is not possible for there to be an instance i of (R) different

[13] What I am offering here is only the outline of a solution to a difficult problem; the brief remarks I make are clearly not the whole story: there is more to the solution than this.

[14] Of course one should define redundant versions in such a way as to exclude instructions like this: "...put B1 into the slot s of H1...take B1 out of slot s of H1/Stop".

from the four instances already counted which are the only *possible instructions* conforming to the general rule.

But —so the objection goes— possible instructions seem to raise just the same perplexities one has about MPOs, and this being the case, we do not have a convincing alternative to Williamson's own position.

However one can reply that possible instructions are less problematic than MPOs: they can be reasonably seen as abstract entities, and this would certainly settle a difference between them and MPOs.

In the end, I think the view I have just presented, and partly defended, is an acceptable alternative to Williamson's ideas. I also think, however, that it suggests a somewhat different —and better— account according to which we don't consider, in a rather abstract way, which instances of a rule can or cannot exist. Instead one can say, more naturally, that we count possible situations —or worlds— in which (R) is applied. In the following two sections I shall clarify and defend this idea.

V

Consider a blade B and a handle H^2 with two slots, s and s*. When we ask how many knives can be constructed from these components, and we correctly answer "two", we are counting —I claim— possible situations or possible worlds. To clarify: we consider all possible worlds in which H^2 and B exist; among them there are worlds in which B and H^2 are combined according to particular instances of the general rule (R); these worlds will be of two kinds, [W1] and [W2], corresponding to two different applications of (R): in [W1] —let us suppose— B will be in s, in [W2] B will be in s*.

So, I maintain, what we are counting, when we rightly answer "two" to the counting question under consideration, are kinds or classes of possible worlds[15]. We count, to be more precise, kinds of possible worlds in which the same instance of the general rule (R) is applied to B1 and H^2.

What of Williamson's example with B1, B2, H1, H2? In this case we have four categories of possible worlds whose intersection is non-empty. Suppose that category [W1'] is characterized by the worlds in which B1 is inserted in H1, and category [W2'] by worlds in which B2 is inserted in H2: those worlds in which there are B1 in H1 and B2 in H2 belong to both categories.

Williamson, as I said earlier, did not overlook the case for possible situations. But according to him this idea has to be rejected because —he says— we are able to count possible situations or worlds precisely because we have identified the relevant MPOs. The view I have just presented, instead, allows us to avoid this objection: we select the relevant possible situations, or the relevant possible worlds, on the basis of the general rule (R) and its particular applications. So, counting possible situations or worlds does not presuppose having identified merely possible objects.

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[15] Despite their arguable difference, here I use "kinds", "classes" and "categories" interchangeably to talk about groups of possible worlds.

I think this solution is the right one, but for it to be fully satisfactory, a further qualification is needed. This qualification will emerge when discussing the first of the two objections I am going to answer in what follows[16].

Objection 1 It is obviously true that, in a possible world different from @, an actual handle with two slots can have only one slot; and surely the same handle could have had three slots as well. If we really consider all possible worlds in which H^2 and B exist, we need also to consider worlds in which H^2 exists as a handle with three slots – s, s* and s'; and among these worlds there will be some in which a blade B is in the s'-slot of H^2 and so we need to count a third application of (R) and a third class of possible worlds.

Reply 1 "How many knives can be made from H^2 and B?". In answering this question we consider the actual component H^2, a handle with two slots, and a blade B. Then we consider all those possible worlds in which H^2 and B exist, *and among them we select a class C to which belong only those worlds in which H^2 and B exist with some relevant actual features, namely the features that are relevant for the art of knife-making.* For example: a world w in which B has a different color from the one it actually has, will be a member of C, whereas a world w' in which H^2 has three different slots will be excluded. This seems reasonable: some features of certain actual objects are made relevant by the rules of an art; so, for example, given a handle, the number of its slots is relevant while its weight is not; and the counting question literally asks us to count possible knives given certain actual components with certain specific relevant features. So, I claim, we consider these components in all possible worlds in which they exist with exactly the relevant actual features[17].

Objection 2 Your thesis —the objection says— is committed to the idea that an object, a component of an artifact, can exist in different possible worlds. You have not explicitly endorsed a specific account of trans-world identity, thinking, perhaps, that for your present purpose any one among the available accounts will do. However, one cannot be totally neutral on this matter. Consider Lewis's counterpart theory: it allows that, in a possible world w different from @, the handle H^2 has two or more different counterparts (Lewis 1986, pp. 252-253), and this means that the number of the knives is going to increase dangerously. In this case one should give a different —and wrong— answer to the relevant counting question.

Reply 2 To defend my point, so the objection says, I would have to exclude those theories —let us call them "L-theories" (i.e. "Lewisian-theories")— that admit cases in which an object o, existing at the possible world w, can be identical (in a broad sense at least) to two or more different objects existing at a different possible world w'. Even if this were the case, I don't think it would be too difficult a commitment.

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[16] Note that both objections apply to Williamson's approach and this fact diminishes their dialectical strenght.

[17] Note that this qualification is in harmony with (but surely not only with) Lewis's modal metaphysics. We can say, with Lewis, that the counterpart relation is contextually determined. The counting question, I think, creates a context which excludes a counterpart of H^2 with a different number of slots.

First, the idea that something can be identical with two different things is strongly at odds with our considered intuitions and incompatible with the widely held necessity of identity and difference.

Second, even if my position had to exclude the Lewisian account —certainly the most famous among the L-theories— this would not be a good reason for preferring Williamson's thesis: notice, in fact, that Williamson's argument can only be an argument for the existence of MPOs because he implicitly excludes that the objects we are counting be considered 'Lewisian possible entities', and this implicit exclusion has its roots in an explicit criticism of Lewis's modal theory presented in a different context —see Williamson, 2002, pp. 239-240.

Third, it is not at all obvious that my position is not neutral with respect to L-theories. Consider again the case of H^2, a handle with two slots, s and s*, and a blade B, both existing in @. Let us concede that H^2, in a possible world w different from @, is identical with two objects —which will have two slots, s and s*, as explained in answering Objection 1— and assume the same for B; also assume that these objects are combined, in w, to make two knives.

Are there any more classes of worlds to be counted? There are not, one could reasonably say: even in w, the instances to be considered will be "put B in the s-slot of H^2", or "put B in the s*-slot of H^2" or both.

VI

In this last section I deal with two questions that might be considered troubling for the account I favour: its generalization to modal counting cases not involving artifacts and its ontological commitments.

Consider, again, the following question: "How many possible human beings can result from these two sperm cells and these two eggs?". It seems obvious that in this case there are no rules of any art. Does one have to admit, eventually, merely possible human beings and MPOs? I don't think so: the solution, in a nutshell, is to consider the law of nature that we know concerns the birth of actual human beings instead of rules for making artifacts. What we are counting, when we answer "four" to the question about eggs and sperm cells, are classes of possible worlds in which the same instance of a general law is exemplified[18]. This idea closely parallels the cases involving counting artifacts: Williamson would say, in both cases, that we are counting MPOs; I say, in both cases, that we are counting possible worlds using certain known norms (i.e. rules for artifacts or laws of nature).

Consider now this further question: "How many possible numerical combinations could result when rolling two dice?". In this case you do not have to consider the rules of any art or any laws of nature. On the other hand, it is not at all plausible to say that we count merely possible objects: do we really count merely possible dice different from the two dice we see on the table? And how many? Two merely possible dice

[18] Note that the answer "four" is the correct one only if one is implicitly ruling out twins (and only if one assumes *Sufficiency of Origins*). I think that even the complication of cases of twins can be treated within my approach.

which can assume many different configurations? Or perhaps thirty-five or thirty-six? A natural idea is that we are considering possible situations or worlds; we just count kinds or classes of possible worlds: we think of kinds whose worlds share a specific numerical combination (say, six and four or five and two). So, even in this case, we count classes of possible worlds and this parallels the cases involving counting artifacts and human beings.

Admittedly, the parallel is not perfect as it was in the previous case, but, it should be noticed, even Williamson's theory is in the same situation.

Furthermore I do not see why one should ask for, or expect, a sort of uniform theory of counting questions involving possibilities. After all there could be various different counting practices, and should this be so, no unified account would be required.

Be this as it may, my point in the present context is not to try and give such a general account (Williamson himself does not intend to do any such thing); rather it is to offer an alternative to Williamson's thesis according to which MPOs are required to make sense of our answers to some counting questions.

However, one can object, this alternative uses the possible worlds apparatus, and once one is ontologically commited to possible worlds, one has the problem of explaining what it means for the individual x to exist at a possible world w. Am I forced, eventually, to admit MPOs?

This is simply not the case. Consider two among the most fully developed theories of possible worlds: Lewis's and Plantinga's modal metaphysics —see Lewis (1986) and Plantinga (1974).

Lewis admits possible but non-actual objects: they inhabit spatio-temporal systems which are different from our world. A possible son of Wittgenstein's would be *a physical object*, a denizen of a concrete world w which is different from @, our world; so he is not an MPO.

According to Plantinga, on the other hand, possible worlds are abstract entities: states of affairs that are both possible and maximal. @ is the only possible world that obtains. An individual x exists at world w iff necessarily (if w obtains then x exists): to say that x exists-at-w, therefore, is not to say that x exists, but only that he would have, had w been actual. So, according to this view, talking of possible but non-actual individuals is a pure *façon de parler*: possible but non-actual individuals don't even figure in the inventory of what there is. Kripke who, as is well known, subscribes to possible worlds, made a similar point discussing the dice case: "[...] in no way do we need to posit that there are some thirty-five *other* entities, existent in some never-never land, corresponding to the physical object[s] before me" (Kripke, 1980, p. 17). So, if literally speaking there are no possible worlds denizens, one cannot even suspect that they are MPOs.[19]

To sum up. Williamson thinks that necessarily everything is a necessary existent and to support and clarify this idea he needs to introduce MPOs. It seems that the ex-

[19] Another example. In Rosen's fictionalist theory of possible worlds (Rosen, 1990), admitting possible worlds does not commit us to possible but non-actual individuals which *a fortiori* are not MPOs.

istence of MPOs is not just an *ad hoc* postulation because it can be independently motivated via the 'counting question argument': MPOs are required to make sense of some counting questions regarding artifacts. I claim that this argument can be resisted using the notions of 'rule of an art' and 'possible world'. A commitement to possible worlds can imply the existence of objects that don't actually exist (as in Lewis's modal metaphysics) but this is not at all obvious (Plantinga denies these objects). Be this as it may, I am neutral on this topic: what I need in the present dialectical context is just the fact that a commitment to possible worlds does not imply, by itself, a commitment to MPOs (and to my knowledge, all possible worlds theorists deny MPOs in Williamson's sense[20]). This is sufficient to answer the counting question argument.

As I have said, Williamson's counterintuitive thesis that necessarily everything is necessarily existent (NE) is clarified and made more plausible via those unusual entities that are MPOs. Thus, showing that the counting question argument does not give an independent reason to believe in MPOs weakens NE itself.

However, Williamson (2000a, pp. 336-337; 2002) offers at least two direct arguments for NE (and so indirectly for the admission of MPOs); moreover Williamson (1998, p. 263) remarks that, on the relativized domain approach to quantified modal logic, the restriction on quantifiers in the object-language appears arbitrary because it must not be applied to quantifiers in the metalanguage, and this remark can be read as an argument for NE as well.

These are indeed powerful and subtle arguments and if one is inclined to deny both MPOs and NE —as I am— one has to meet these challenges. I believe they can be met, but the (hard) work required to do this is far beyond the scope of this paper, which only offers a partial contribution towards a rejection of merely possible objects and necessary existents.[21]

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[20] Well, except Williamson himself. But if one wants to think that some denizens of possible worlds are MPOs, or even that possible worlds themselves are MPOs, one needs an independent argument for the existence of merely possible objects.

[21] I am grateful to an anonymous referee whose careful and insightful remarks helped to improve this paper significantly. A previous version of the paper was presented at the *XII Taller d'Investigaciò en Filosofia* in Girona: thank you to the organizers and to all the participants for creating a friendly and stimulating atmosphere. Among the participants, special thanks are due to Fernando Broncano, my discussant, and Ralph Bader. I would also like to thank Elisa Paganini for her advice and support. I started discussing the topic of this paper with Paolo Casalegno: sadly all I can do here is remember him. I very much miss his lucidity and his friendship.

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