

“Rick, Can We Not Leave Without my Sister?”

“Urgh. You Have Infinite Sisters, Morty.

Not that I Want to Spend the Rest of My Day Looking for Another One.” On the Metaphysical Foundations of *Rick and Morty*



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Introduction

The series *Rick and Morty*, which so far consists of four seasons, is about an extraordinary couple, the scientist *Rick Sanchez* (Rick C-137) and his grandson *Morty*, who experience together (sometimes with the other family members *Beth* (daughter/mother), *Jerry* (father in law/father) and *Summer* (granddaughter/elder sister) dozens of adventures utilizing a technological Sophistication: the portal gun.¹ With the portal gun, the protagonists repeatedly reach different parts of the multiverse and meet hundreds of their counterparts. Two different types of portal guns appear in the series: A blue portal gun allows the user to travel from place to place in the very same universe, while a green portal gun allows the user to travel between different universes in the same multiverse.² In the fandom it is often claimed that the series *Rick and Morty* is closely related to David Lewis' *concretism*

(see for example Kokoszynski, 2018). But is this statement justified? Is the multiverse of the series really a Lewisian modal-realistic one? These questions will be explored in the following short paper.

Lewis' Concretism and Rick and Morty

First of all, there is indeed some evidence to support the thesis that there is a conceptual link between the series and Lewis' *concretism*, i.e., *modal realism*. Charles Chihara characterizes David Lewis' modal realism as follows: “Modal Realism [...] maintains that these other possible worlds are not mere abstractions or descriptions – they contain things that are just real and concrete as things like tables, chairs, people, and trees in the actual world.” (Chihara, 1998: 76). Closely related to Lewis' modal realism is his *counterpart theory*. In *On the Plurality of Worlds* from 1986, Lewis writes: “A world is the mereological sum of all possible individuals that are parts of it, and so are worldmates of one another. [...] [I]f two things are spatio-temporally related, then they are worldmates.” (Lewis, 1986: 69, 71).

For Lewis, if worlds are characterised by the spatio-temporal interrelatedness of their individuals, individuals never can exist in more than one world. They seem to be worldbound (cf. Lewis, 1986: 114). Therefore, Lewis claims in *Counterpart and Quantified Modal Logic*:

¹ In the episode *The Ricks Must Be Crazy* (2:06) a microverse in a universe also appears and even a mini-universe in a micro-universe in a universe. These micro- and mini-universes are also part of the multiverse, but only because they are part of a universe, respectively a mini-universe in a universe.

² In *Mortynight Run* (2:02) the viewer is confronted with a natural wormhole, which also allows ‘traveling’ between universes similar to the green portal gun and which has all the characteristics of traveling with the portal gun. This phenomenon will not be discussed further in this article.



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Where some would say that you are in several worlds, in which you have somewhat different properties and somewhat different things happen to you, I prefer to say that you are in the actual world and no other, but you have counterparts in several other worlds. Your counterparts resemble you closely in content and context in important respects. They resemble you more closely than do the other things in their worlds. But they are not really you. For each of them is in his own world, and only you are here in the actual world. Indeed, we might say, speaking casually, that your counterparts are you in other worlds, that they and you are the same; but this sameness is no more a literal identity than the sameness between you today and you tomorrow. It would be better to say that your counterparts are men you would have been, had the world been otherwise. (Lewis, 1983: 28)

Especially the episode *Rixty Minutes* (1:08) seems to be best suited to be considered as an application of Lewis' modal realism and his counterpart theory. In this episode, a bored Rick is sitting in front of the TV together with Morty and his family. When Rick cannot stand it any longer, he connects a multiverse receiver to the TV, which allows it to access not only boring *intraverse* but also all the infinite amount of *transworld* programs of other parts of the multiverse. When Jerry zaps through the transworld TV programme he discovered one of his counterparts in a Cloud-Atlas-world. The whole family (except Rick and Morty) become obsessed with what their counterparts are doing in other universes. In order to continue enjoying transworld TV alone, Rick throws inter-dimensional goggles into the kitchen, whereupon Beth, Summer and Jerry make off.³ The inter-dimensional goggles allow the users to

³ The *inter-dimensional goggles* appear for the first time in episode *Rick Potion #9* (1:06), when Rick and Morty, after their original world has been 'crownberged' and is therefore uninhabitable, search with inter-dimensional glasses for a new reality worth living in.

observe the lives of their other 'selves' in other universes from a first-person perspective. This brings Jerry and Beth to the brink of divorce: They see what they could have done differently and what their lives would have been like had they not married and raised a family. The destinies of their counterparts are obviously different from their own, and that is precisely where the special charm of using inter-dimensional glasses lies. The other selves are counterparts that differ from Jerry and Beth in at least one characteristic, namely that Beth's counterpart is not a veterinarian but a medical doctor and Jerry's counterpart enjoys an active sex life stimulated by cocaine.

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The counterpart-theoretical intuition on which the series is based is also particularly evident in all the episodes in which the so-called Citadel of the Ricks plays a role: *Close Rick-Counters of the Rick Kind* (1:10), *The Rickshank Rickdemption* (3:01) and *Tales from the Citadel* (3:07). It is the epicenter power within the multiverse and it is home of a society of different Ricks (for example *Fish Rick*, *Cowboy Rick*, *Wasp Rick* and *Morty Rick* (!)) and Morties (*Hammerhead Morty*, *Artist Morty*, *Fascist Morty* and especially prominent *Evil Morty*) of different universes within the one multiverse, which was formerly ruled and controlled by the *Ricks Council*.



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Some of the Ricks and Mortys live permanently in the Citadel, while others stay there only temporarily. In *The Rickshank Rickdemption* (3:01), Rick C-137 destroys most of the Citadel by teleporting it into a Galactic Federation prison complex, killing hundreds of Ricks and Mortys, including the Ricks Council. The citadel can then be repaired and transformed into a democracy. However, one of Morty’s counterparts, Evil Morty, who has already appeared on the sidelines in *Close Rick counters of the Rick Kind* (1:10), wins the elections. Evil Morty’s behavior and hints in *Tales from the Citadel* (3:07) indicate that he will autocratically rule the citadel.⁴

Probably the most moving scene with strong counterpart-theoretical traits can be found in the episode *Rixsty Minutes* (1:08). Because Rick and Morty unintentionally caused almost all the inhabitants (except Beth, Jerry and Summer) of their original universe C-137 to have ‘cronenberged’⁵ in the episode *Rick Potion #9* (1:06), leads to Rick and Morty leaving their universe and taking the place of their killed counterparts in a universe which is very similar to their original universe C-137 (called *Replacement Dimension*). In *Rixsty Minutes* (1:08), Morty (from C-137) shows his ‘new sister’ (from the *Replacement Dimension*) the place in the garden of the family’s house where Rick and

Morty (from C-137) have buried their killed counterparts (from the *Replacement Dimension*).

All three scenes clearly show that large parts of the story of the series are based on a strong counterpart-theoretical intuition. To sum up, there are two reasons why some in the fandom place the series *Rick and Morty* in conceptual proximity to Lewis’ concretism:

- (1) The other universes of the multiverse are of the same ontological quality as the ‘initial universe’ C-137.
- (2) All protagonists of the series have dozens of counterparts in other parts of the multiverse. The charm of the series lies in the fact that these counterparts repeatedly become part of important plot lines.

Why Rick and Morty are not Orthodox Lewisians

However, the series also contains some elements that obviously contradict Lewis’ concretism. In *On the Plurality of Worlds*, for example, Lewis writes: “Worlds are spatio-temporally and causally isolated from one another; otherwise they would not be whole worlds, but parts of a greater world” (Lewis, 1986: 84). For Lewis, an infinite number of concrete universes which are not ontologically (but epistemically) different from our world exist but all these worlds are causal and spatio-temporal “islands”. The existence of a portal gun which is essential for the series seems to be impossible in an orthodox Lewisian setting, because it allows a causal gateway to other universes. In a strict Lewisian setting the series would lose its special and unique charm, because interactions between Rick, Morty and their counterparts would be impossible.

⁴ Evil Morty controls his Rick by means of a neural receiver and turns around the relationship of dependency on Rick, which is an essential feature of the entire series. In *Close Rick-counters of the Rick Kind* (1:10) the receiver was discovered after death and subsequent autopsy of Evil Morty’s Rick. At the end of the episode, you see Morty slide his eye patch aside and remove the transmitter behind it. He throws it to the ground, crushes it and then disappears into the faceless mass of rickless Mortys who are forced to be deported.

⁵ The series *Rick and Morty* repeatedly absorbs different legacies of pop culture. For example, the inhabitants of universe C-137, after Rick distributed a transmissible aphrodisiac there, mutate into beings that bear an astonishing resemblance to the mutants in David Cronenberg’s movies.



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If there are obvious and essential differences between the series and Lewis' concretism, we are pushed to look for a modification of Lewis' concretism, which fits the requirements of the series and provides the following features:⁶

- (3) All universes of the same multiverse must be ontologically egalitarian.
- (4) In universes which are part of the same multiverse there exist counterparts of individuals of other universes.
- (5) The different worlds must not be causally isolated.

A Modified Concretism

It is obvious that the series does not presuppose that Rick C-137 and 'his' Morty in other worlds exist transworldly identically. In the series *Rick and Morty*, the protagonists travel between the universes of the one multiverse. Hence, it is not the series' premise, that an individual occurs 'simultaneously' in different worlds. An individual just exists in a world w up to a certain time, and in another universe v it occurs from a certain

point in time. Rick and Morty travel via the portal gun from w to v . They are no longer part of w when they have used the portal gun, but are part of v .

Why does the causal and spatio-temporal isolation of the possible worlds play such a role in David Lewis' work? The spatio-temporal and causal relations between individuals give unity to a possible world. Spatio-temporal relatedness is the unifier of a world in Lewis' metaphysics of modality. Something is a possible world only if its parts are in spatio-temporal relations to each other and to nothing else. Hence, if one modifies Lewis' concretism and renounces the spatio-temporal and causal isolation of any world, another criterion is needed, which then 'holds a world together' and guarantees its unity: Thus, another demarcation criterion is required for possible worlds. There are modal realists who actually do not accept the spatio-temporal and causal relations as such demarcation criteria, such as Phillip Bricker (cf. Bricker, 1996). If it were actually possible to enter other possible universes, it would follow that the different universes would merely be different spacetime regions in a single multiverse. Therefore, Lewis writes in the passage from *On the Plurality of Worlds* already quoted above, that “[...] they [different worlds, JLP] would be not whole worlds, but parts of a greater world” (Lewis, 1986: 84). If one wants to have essential features of Lewis' concretism, such as the concreteness of worlds and counterpart-theoretical intuitions, but negating the spatio-temporal and causal isolation of worlds, what follows is what Lewis already predicted: a collapse of the formerly distinct worlds into one universe with different (possibly very distant) spacetime regions. It is therefore conceivable that the fundamental difference between the blue and green portal gun described above does not actually exist. The blue portal gun

⁶ That neither Lewis' concretism nor various forms of abstractionism can adequately metaphysically underpin the series *Rick and Morty* has already been noted by Elliot Knuths, who also pleads for a modification of concretism, but leaves open how this might look like (cf. Knuths, 2019: chapter 1, section 5).



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would only have a smaller range than its green equivalent. The latter would only allow for long ‘jumps’ into other regions of the one multiverse, but not for real journeys through different spatiotemporal distinct universes or dimensions. However, if one wants to have all useful features of Lewis’ concretism but wants to renounce the causal and spatio-temporal isolation of universes there is a price to be paid: One has to accept the clash of all worlds into one single multiverse which lead

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to necessitarianism, the doctrine that everything which is the case is the case necessarily. If all worlds clash into one multiverse then there exist no other possible worlds, which could be used for the extensionality of modal propositions. Lewis claims that the statement “Barack Obama could have been a famous pianist” is true, because there exists a counterpart of Barack Obama in a spatio-temporally isolated universe which is most similar to our Barack Obama and is also a famous pianist in his world. By negating spatio-temporal isolation no possible things exist in other worlds, which could make the proposition true. There is no sufficient distinction between what is possible and what is actual.

What is possible is therefore actual.⁷ The only things that exist are actual beings, which are all part of the same multiverse. And if only actual and no possible things exist, everything is necessary. The consequence of the modification of orthodox Lewisian concretism leads to necessitarianism which is highly problematic from a philosophical point of view, but seems to be compatible especially with Rick’s fatalism and pessimism (cf. *Rixty Minutes*, 1:08).

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the following should be noted: For the modal metaphysical foundation of the series the concretism of David Lewis seemed to be a suitable candidate at first, but the spatio-temporal and causal isolation of possible worlds has to be negated to make concretism compatible with essential features of the series and thus necessitarianism cannot be excluded. In addition, interdimensional travel by means of the green portal gun is in fact a travel to very distant, but not spatio-temporal and causal isolated spacetime regions of one and the same universe or multiverse.⁸ Only such a modification of Lewis’ concretism allows a profound ontological foundation and grounding of the essential features of the series: the concreteness of other dimensions and the counterpart-theoretical intuitions, but one has to pay a high ontological price: necessitarianism with its philosophically unpleasant consequences.

⁷ For David Lewis, too, everything is actual, though, because of the indexical analysis of actuality, cf. Lewis, 1986: 18.

⁸ If traveling with the green portal gun is indeed traveling to distant but spatio-temporal and causally connected spacetime regions, the series must “allow” traveling at superlight speed in order to avoid unpleasant time travel dilemmas.



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