Philosophy 190: David Lewis

Short Writing Assignment 3
Due Thurs., Apr. 24.

Instructions

Note: this assignment is for students in Group III *only* (see syllabus for a list of group assignments).

Please respond to the following question in two pages or less (double spaced). (Needless to say this should be your own original work.)

On pp. 157–65, Lewis discusses two problems with the descriptive power of the alleged "worldmaking language" required by the position he calls linguistic ersatzism. (Recall that, according to linguistic ersatzism, what exists is not unactualized possible worlds, but only complete descriptions of such worlds in some worldmaking language; not parts of unactualized possible worlds, but complete descriptions of unactualized possible individuals.)

Both of the problems involve taking the things that meet some description and, so to speak, renaming them such that they still meet the description.

In the first case, it is possible individuals: in the eternal recurrence world with infinite quasi-Napoleons, say whatever you want about one of them ("Blapoleon conquers such-and-such countries, Blapoleon lives after an infinite number of quasi-Napoleon predecessors, Blapoleon is part of a world where XYZ, etc., etc.") and it will be true of all the others; i.e., just rename one of the others Blapoleon and what you said will all still be right.

In the second case, it is possible worlds with "alien properties" (properties such that nothing in the actual world has them): say whatever you want about one of them ("Blorld contains a property called blavor that does so-and-so, and a properity called blolor that does so-and-so, etc. etc.") and it will be true of the other; i.e., just rename the other one "Blorld" and its alien properties "blavor," "blolor," and so forth, and what you said will still be right. (See especially the discussion of "Ramsified" descriptions, pp. 161–4.)

You might say, very roughly, that the first case involves changing the extension of a predicate (in the case of a proper name: changing the one thing that it names), whereas the second involves changing the intension of a predicate (*why* — by virtue of what property — it names the things it does).

Explain why, according to Lewis, the first problem is only a problem about possible *individuals within a world*, whereas the second is only a problem about possible *properties at different worlds*. (Hint: look around where he says "It is otherwise for properites," p. 159, and see more generally his discussion of the "harmless" versions of each problem, p. 157 and pp. 158–9.)