Contingent identity. On the one hand, we have the intuition that things can be either necessarily identical (a thing and itself) or contingently identical (a thing and “another” thing). Examples? On the other hand, we have a proof that x and y are necessarily identical if identical at all. Our Kripke-based strategy: try to explain away the first intuition as not really about things (de re) but statements (de dicto). Illustrate the strategy with a regular, non-identity, intuition. It’s a de re necessary property — sometimes called an essential property — of that person, say, that she human. But we have the intuition that the person could be, or could have been, a non-human robot. Kripke thinks this is a mistake.

How does the mistake arise? Well, it is only contingently true that the occupant of that chair is human. Big deal, Kripke says, that’s because someone else could have been the occupant of that chair. That a robot could have been sitting there hardly shows that the person who is sitting there could have been a robot. Moral: it’s only if term t is RIGID — only if it picks out the same object in all possible worlds — that we can argue like so

It could have been true that t was R

“...”

How does the mistake arise this time? It’s not that a certain dictum, Kate is a robot, could have been true; the truth of that dictum really would imply that Kate wasn’t essentially human. It’s rather that we could have been looking all this time at another individual, Kate*, a spitting image (epistemic counterpart of) Kate, where this other individual Kate* was a robot. The intuition that Kate could have been a robot arises out of one or the other of these two confusions.

Same now applies to the intuition of contingent identity. Why does it seem that Hesperus might not have been Phosphorus, water might not have been H₂O, etc? First explanation: it is indeed contingently true that the planet seen in such and such a place in the evening = the planet seen in such and such a place in the morning; there could have been two planets visible at those times and there turned out to be one. But the definite descriptions here aren’t rigid, so to say that two planets could have satisfied them doesn’t show that the planets that actually do satisfy them could have been two. Second explanation: it is not contingently true that Hesperus = Phosphorus. But we could have been looking all along at two objects Hesperus* and Phosphorus* that really were distinct.

Transworld identity. Talking about modality we reach naturally for possible worlds. De dicto modality is directly definable from them:

necessarily S iff for all possible worlds w, S is true at w
possibly S iff for some possible world w, S is true at w.

What about de re modality?

x is necessarily φ iff at all possible worlds w containing x, x is φ
x is possibly φ iff at some possible world w containing x, x is φ.

It looks from this as though the individuals we know and love here in actuality are leading double (or multiple) lives. So, in this world I had lunch today, but I also inhabit the next world over, and in that
world I didn’t have lunch. A lot of philosophers (Lewis) have found this problematic and tried to avoid it. Kripke summarizes their complaint like this:

Look, you’re talking about situations which are counterfactual, that is to say, you’re talking about other possible worlds. Now these worlds are completely disjoint, after all, from the actual world….So, before you talk about…such an object as Richard Nixon in another possible world at all, you have to say which object in this other possible world would be Richard Nixon. [Consider] a situation in which, as you would say, Richard Nixon would have been a member of SDS. Certainly the member of SDS you are talking about is someone very different in many of his properties from Nixon. Before we even can say whether this man would have been Richard Nixon or not, we have to set up criteria of identity across possible worlds. Here are these other possible worlds. There are all kinds objects in them…some of them resemble Nixon in some ways, some of them resemble Nixon in other ways. Well, which of these objects is Nixon?

An extreme view has even been held that, since possible worlds are so disjoint from our own, we cannot really say that any object in them is the same as an object existing now but only that there are some objects that resemble things in the actual world, more or less. We should not really speak of what would have been true of Nixon in another possible world but only of what “counterparts” (the term David Lewis uses) there would have been…. 

Kripke says, “All of this talk seems to me to have taken the metaphor of possible worlds much too seriously in some way.” It amounts to saying worlds have to be specified in qualitative respects, as opposed to just directly specifying what goes on in them. Worlds aren’t discovered with giant telescopes, they’re stipulated, and why can’t I stipulate that this is a world where Nixon joins SDS?

This connects with one’s view of possible worlds, of “ways things could have been.” Lewis thinks they’re big concrete objects, I and all my surroundings. Then there really is an argument for denying Nixon inhabits this other world. Even Kripke admits this: “David Lewis’s view seems the most reasonable if one takes this picture literally. No one far away on another planet can be strictly identical with someone here.”

But there’s an intuitive cost. Lewis’s account of de re modality has to be this: \( x \) is possibly \( \phi \) if at some possible world \( w \) containing a counterpart \( x^* \) of \( x \), \( x^* \) is \( \phi \).

Kripke’s response:

According to Lewis, when we say, “…Nixon would have gotten Carswell through,” we really mean, “Some man, other than Nixon but closely resembling him, would have gotten some judge, other than Carswell but closely resembling him, through.” Maybe that is so…but that would not comfort either Carswell or Lewis, nor would Nixon kick himself and say, “I should have done such and such to get Carswell through.”

[“Probably, Humphrey could not care less…”]

Lewis’s counter-response. What does Kripke mean by possible worlds? Ways things could have been are properties the actual world could have had, e.g., the property of being a world where Nixon gets Carswell through. But Nixon is no more an inhabitant of these property-worlds than my concrete worlds! Both sides say: rather than \( x \) literally being \( \phi \) in \( w \), rather \( x \) is \( \phi \) according to \( w \). And I can say that too: my theory of according-to is that \( x \) is \( \phi \) according to a concrete I-and-my-surroundings world iff that world contains a counterpart \( x^* \) of \( x \) that really is \( \phi \).

Identity an equivalence relation. Counterparthood needn’t be. “I enjoy a generality he cannot match.” Possibility of being twins. Modal sorites paradox; accumulation of small changes across worlds. Could I have been a poached egg, then? Intransitivity of counterpart relation.