**Abstract: From Modal Skepticism to Modal Empiricism**

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**1. Introduction**

This paper sketches a defense of an account of the nature and scope of our knowledge of metaphysical possibility. Toward that end, I do two things. First, I sketch a case for a mitigated form of modal skepticism: we have knowledge of “nearby” possible words (about, e.g. my daughter’s ball getting stuck on the roof, my car being painted red, Gettier cases, etc.), but we lack knowledge of metaphysical possibilities even modestly remote from what we can justifiedly believe about the actual world (about, e.g., Anselmian beings, zombies, disembodied minds, and perhaps even Putnam’s twin water). Second, I offer a diagnosis of our limited knowledge of possibility in terms of the hypothesis that our access to it is limited to empirical sources.

**2. Against “Remote” Modal Knowledge**

The first is a critical task. Here I argue out that extant modal epistemologies that aim to justify possibilities even modestly remote from the actual world (e.g., Putnam’s twin water) are subject to a formidable dilemma: either they’re so permissive that they admit too many false positives, or they’re so restrictive that they entail that such claims are unjustified. I illustrate the problem by evaluating two standard accounts of the epistemology of modality, viz., those of Yablo and Chalmers. Below is a sketch of their accounts and my critique.

*2.1 Yablo*

Yablo’s account can be thought of as a “modal telescope” account, as its core idea is that modal claims are justifiable in virtue of imagining possible worlds that make them appear true to one. This amounts to imagining a world that verifies the target possibility claim, where Yablo’s account of verification involves two sorts of seemings or appearances: (i) the appearance that the world imagined is metaphysically possible, and (ii) the appearance that the de-modalized target claim is true in it. To illustrate: consider the claim that, possibly, a ball can get stuck on a roof. I can imagine a world at which a beach ball is wedged behind a chimney. This world appears possible to me; thus, clause (i) is satisfied. Furthermore, my imagining the ball wedged behind the chimney makes the claim, “there is a ball stuck on a roof” appear true to me; thus, clause (ii) is satisfied. Therefore, according to Yablo’s account, the original possibility-claim is justified for me.

Unfortunately, Yablo’s account can’t justify possibility claims even modestly remote from ordinary experience. This is because imaginings of remote possibilities face a dilemma: either we allow mere stipulations to count as part of such imaginings or we don’t. If we do, then while such imaginings satisfy clause (ii) of his account of modal verification, they fail to satisfy clause (i). But if we don’t allow mere stipulations to count as part of such imaginings, then while they satisfy clause (i), they fail to satisfy clause (ii). Therefore, either way, his account can’t justify even modestly remote possibility-claims.

Let’s illustrate the dilemma with a modestly remote modal claim, viz., that twin water -- i.e., an alien substance that plays the watery role -- is metaphysically possible. Now to evaluate this claim via Yablo’s method, we need to objectually imagine a world that meets the following two conditions: (i) it appears to us as metaphysically possible, and (ii) it appears to us that ‘there is an alien substance that perfectly plays the watery role’ is true in it. Unfortunately, while I’m able to objectually imagine a world in a way that meets either one of Yablo’s two conditions, I’m unable to objectually imagine a world in a way that simultaneously meets both.

Thus, suppose I objectually imagine a world *W* in which I’m standing in front of a swimming pool full of gently undulating clear liquid on Twin Earth. Suppose further that I imagine a chemist in a lab coat in *W* pointing to the pool and saying, “Don’t be fooled: that watery stuff is XYZ, not H20”. Would *that* count as verifying the possibility of twin water? Pretty clearly not. For what I imagine of *W* is compatible with the claim that the chemist *mistakenly* or *deceptively* refers to the liquid in the pool as XYZ. Therefore, while *W* appears to me as metaphysically possible, and thus passes on (i), the de-modalized target claim, viz., ‘there is an alien substance that perfectly plays the watery role’, neither appears to me as true nor as false in *W*, but rather as *undecided*. My objectual imagining thus fails on (ii).

Now you might say that the only problem with the imagined world is the bit about the chemist. For if I take him out of the scenario, I remove the dubious intermediary between my judgment and the objectual representation of XYZ. However, this merely replaces one dubious judge for another. For consider a world *W’* just like *W*, but with the chemist removed. So now it’s just the pool of undulating clear liquid and I. How am I to decide, just by objectually imagining the liquid in the pool, whether it’s XYZ? For the objectual content of the scenario regarding what’s in the pool does not represent itself to me as XYZ. Rather, it merely represents itself to me as *clear (undulating) liquid*. But if so, then since this aspect of the imagined world is *all I have to go on* in determining whether the stuff in the pool is XYZ (as opposed to, e.g., ordinary H20), my *labeling* it as XYZ is nothing more than a shot in the dark. Thus, my competence in correctly labeling the liquid is no more to be trusted than the word of the imagined chemist. Therefore, as with *W*, my objectual imagining of *W’* passes on (i), but fails on (ii).

On the other hand, suppose we try to cut to the chase and just *stipulate* that the stuff in the pool in *W’* is XYZ, and not water. Given this stipulation, satisfying (ii) is trivial. However, the problem now is that I can’t objectually imagine *W’* in a way that satisfies (i). For in this case, the non-XYZ watery stuff in *W’* appears to me as neither possible nor as impossible, but rather leaves its modal status *undecided*.

*2.2 Chalmers*

Chalmers’ account is similar to Yablo’s, in that he views imagination as an independent source of justification for modal beliefs, and that he accepts a similar account of verifying a possibility-claim: imagining a possible world at which the de-modalized target claim appears true to one. Chalmers’ primary innovation lies in his wedding of Yablo’s account with the two-dimensionalist distinction between considering a world as actual and considering a world as counterfactual. To give a very rough and brief illustration: Suppose I imagine an XYZ-world – i.e., a world at which XYZ is the stuff that plays the watery role. If I consider the imagined world *as actual*, I consider it as a hypothesis about how the actual world could turn out to be for all I know *a priori* -- I suppose that XYZ, and not H20, turns out to be the *actual* occupant of the watery role. Call this *counteractual conceivability*. On Chalmers’ view, the counteractual conceivability of XYZ watery stuff is prima facie evidence for the metaphysical possibility of XYZ watery stuff. Call this *counteractual possibility*. By contrast, when I consider the imagined XYZ world *as counterfactual*, I hold the actual, H20 world fixed, and imagine (or attempt to imagine) that XYZ is *water*. Call this *counterfactual conceivability*. Of course, XYZ water seems to be counterfactually impossible, but when something *is* counterfactually conceivable, that’s evidence that it’s a counterfactual possibility.

Chalmers’ main motivation for his two-dimensionalist twist on Yablo-style modal epistemology is to handle the problem of *a posteriori* necessities raised by Kripke and Putnam. Thus, Chalmers’ diagnosis of the problem of *a posteriori* necessities is that one is prone to modal error when one illicitly uses counteractual conceivability as a guide to counterfactual possibility, as when one imagines a world with XYZ as the occupant of the watery role and mistakenly takes it as depicting a world with XYZ *water*. And Chalmers’ solution to the problem of *a posteriori* necessities is to use counteractual conceivability only as a guide to counteractual possibility, and to use counterfactual conceivability only as a guide to counterfactual possibility.

I argue that while Chalmers’ account is clearly an advance over Yablo’s in virtue of handling the problem of *a posteriori* necessities, it nonetheless succumbs to the same dilemma that applies to Yablo’s account. Thus, consider the claim that, possibly, there is XYZ watery stuff. Now if we apply the relevant sort of conceiving to evaluate this claim – counteractual conceiving – we are to verify a world at which XYZ plays the watery role. The problem is that we reach a dilemma at this point. For either we include the stipulation that the clear liquid we imagine is XYZ or we don’t. If we do, then while the de-modalized claim appears true to us, the scenario fails to appear possible (nor does it appear impossible; it’s undecided). But if we don’t add the stipulation, then while the world with clear liquid appears possible, the de-modalized claim that there is XYZ watery stuff doesn’t appear true; rather, only the weaker claim that there is watery stuff (whether water or XYZ or…) appears true.

**3. Toward an Empiricist Account of Modal Knowledge**

While the first task of the paper is critical, the second is constructive. Here I offer a positive account of the sources of justification for possibility-beliefs. First, I argue that the fairly tight correlation between our degree of confidence in a given possibility candidate and its similarity to the actual world and its operations provides non-trivial abductive evidence that our justification for such claims is grounded in our knowledge of the actual world. Second, I sketch several ways in which our possibility-knowledge traces back to our knowledge of the actual world: deductions from actuality to possibility, enumerative and intuitive induction, analogical inference, and our folk and scientific theories of how the world works. Finally, I argue that the account has several virtues that make it attractive: it explains, in a natural way, our knowledge of humdrum possibilities; it explains the epistemic force of paradigm cases of successful modal thought experiments (e.g., Gettier counterexamples to the traditional analysis of knowledge); it provides a principled distinction between humdrum and recherché thought experiments; and it explains why exotic thought experiments are perennially contentious.