

5

Art and Modal Knowledge

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It has been argued that art cannot give us propositional knowledge. Alternatively, it has been proposed that any knowledge acquired via art is cognitively trivial. Finally, assuming the first two challenges can be met, it has been argued that, while art may provide us with propositional knowledge, it does not do so in any special or effective way. In other words, any knowledge obtained via art can be obtained elsewhere, and more efficiently and reliably to boot (Stolnitz 1992; see also Wilson 1983; Lamarque and Olsen 1994). Thus we have:

(K) the knowledge challenge: art cannot provide propositional knowledge.

(T) the triviality challenge: even if art can provide propositional knowledge (i.e. even if (K) is false), any knowledge so provided is cognitively trivial.

(P) the proficiency challenge: even if art can provide non-trivial propositional knowledge (i.e. even if both (K) and (T) are false), it does so via means which are cognitively or epistemically inferior.

Conjoining (K) through (P) presents us with a strongly non-cognitivist position – a rejection of the view that art is the kind of thing that can have significant cognitive value. Call this position *the skeptical position*.

The skeptical position can and should be rejected. Art provides us with non-trivial propositional knowledge. Art enables modal knowledge, in particular, knowledge of or about possibility. The argument for this claim will involve three steps corresponding to the above three skeptical claims. First, we reliably form beliefs about modal truths based upon our experiences with art; as a result, the knowledge challenge is rejected. This claim will require considerable discussion of the prospects for modal knowledge. Second, it is argued that such knowledge is non-trivial: knowledge of possibility has legitimate cognitive value. The triviality challenge is thus rejected. Finally, the proficiency challenge is also rejected. I argue that art is especially adept at providing us with knowledge of modal truths. Novels, films, theater productions, and paintings represent counterfactual possibilities, the experience of which leads to the acquisition of modal knowledge.

Modal Epistemology

A number of important and difficult questions emerge from the debates surrounding modal epistemology. We will focus on just two. First, what can be said about modal truth? What, if anything, would make a proposition of the form, ‘it is (im)possible that p’ true? Second, how could a belief with content that is relevantly similar to the aforementioned proposition be justified? That is, are the mechanisms responsible

for our modal beliefs reliable (or truth tracking)? Providing answers to either of these questions, let alone both, is no easy task. Nevertheless, if modal knowledge has any epistemic legitimacy, both questions must be given some positive answer. Proposals about modal knowledge from art will stand or fall with accomplishing this task. I am thus obligated to provide a modal epistemology, or at least an answer to the truth-question and to the justification-question with respect to modal belief. At best, I meet this obligation half way, offering a sketch of how modal beliefs might be reliably formed and of what would render such beliefs true. This may be a good start, but a sketch is, after all, just a sketch.

Types of Modality and Types of Modal Knowledge

The two questions are made more tractable by first distinguishing types of modalities and types of modal knowledge. Following Kripke (1980), we can distinguish *epistemic* from *non-epistemic modality*. Epistemic modalities are relativized to some epistemic position. For all I know, it could be ten degrees Celsius in Victoria right now, the governor of Kansas might be a Democrat, and the White Sox might have only one left-hander on their pitching staff; these are possibilities from *my* epistemic perspective. Non-epistemic possibilities are not so relativized. We may also distinguish *nomological modality* from *non-nomological modality*. Some proposition *p* is nomologically possible or necessary relative to natural laws as current science posits them. Philosophers appeal to a variety of other modalities – *conceptual, logical, metaphysical* – that are not bound to such laws. Tamar Szabo Gendler and John Hawthorne offer the following example: “it is possible in none of these senses that something is both red and not red, logically but not metaphysically possible that something is both red and non-extended, metaphysically but not physically possible that something travel faster than the speed of light, and possible in all three senses that something travel faster than the space shuttle” (Gendler and Hawthorne 2002: 5; see also Chalmers 2002: 159–71). As should be clear, teasing apart modalities is tricky business. But this isn’t a trick we need pull off for present purposes. We need only make the two distinctions discussed above, settling on a modality that is non-epistemic and non-nomological. As is standard in these discussions, this notion of possibility involves an appeal to talk of possible worlds; call it – again, following the standard formulation – *metaphysical possibility*. It is *metaphysically* possible that *p* if there is some possible world where *p* obtains or where *p* is true.

Think of modal knowledge as dividing into three types. (It is convenient to speak of these as types of *knowledge*. However, since we haven’t yet modeled modal knowledge, one might prefer to think of what follows as types of *purported* modal knowledge or, weaker still, types of modal beliefs.) Anything that is actual is necessarily possible. We thus have, for lack of a better term, *actual modal knowledge*, which consists in deriving possibility from actuality. Necessarily, any proposition that is actually true is possibly true. My dog, Gatsby, is actually napping on my bed, so it is possible that he is napping on my bed. Barring skeptical worries of the peskiest sort, if I can know the first, then I can know the second. So in this way, there are many modal truths to be known. But actual modal knowledge seems to get modal

truths on the cheap and, moreover, the truths in question aren't the ones that metaphysicians and epistemologists worry themselves over. The possibilities that do interest such parties, and that interest us for present purposes, are those which do not strictly derive from actuality – what are often called *counterfactual* possibilities. So if the actual state of affairs is one where Gatsby naps on my bed at *t*, is some other counterfactual state of affairs possible, one where Gatsby, at *t*, chases his tail, or surreptitiously eats a box of Twinkies, or writes a paper on doggy modality? How do we know whether these are real possibilities and thus whether the corresponding modal statements are true?

A number of philosophers working on modality have identified analogies between modal belief or judgment and perceptual belief or judgment. Just as features of our environment strike us as basically true or obviously the case, there are basic modal truths that have a similar intuitive knowability-status (Yablo 1993: 3–7; Van Inwagen 1998: 70; Bealer 2002: 73–5). So, just as propositions like 'there is a tree before me,' 'I have two hands,' and 'this apple is red' are basic truths about the world around us, propositions such as 'I might have had salmon instead of tuna for lunch,' 'it might have rained for five minutes longer than it did,' and 'the Yankees could have lost game seven' are also basic truths. These are facts about how the world could have turned out. Just as we can make judgments about the external world, we can make judgments about these basic modal facts. Such judgments are, as Van Inwagen puts it, *non-inferential*, requiring no conscious exercise of reason. Rather, we *just see* things in the world and we *just see* certain counterfactual possibilities: I *just see* that there is a tree before me and I *just see* that the Yankees could have lost. Both judgments plausibly amount to knowledge. Just as we can have basic perceptual knowledge, we can have what we will call *basic* modal knowledge. We get the first through vision or some other sense modality and the second through modal intuition. This is perhaps a Moorean fact about us and our relation to the world.

But perceptual judgments are notoriously fallible, the skeptic will challenge. Since you have had false beliefs about the world in the past or since there is always a possibility that things are not as they appear, how can you make reasonable claim to perceptual knowledge? In like manner, the skeptic will press, modal judgments are fallible, and so modal knowledge is in at least as bad a position as perceptual knowledge. (Notice, however, that much of the skeptic's challenge presupposes that there are modal facts, that, for example, it is possible the 'barn' before you is not after all a barn, but a barn façade. One can see the obvious tension between perceptual skepticism and modal skepticism: the perceptual skeptic needs some modal beliefs or knowledge to get his attack off the ground. Perhaps a clever skeptic can finesse this problem, but it is at least *prima facie* inconsistent to maintain both forms of skepticism.)

Well, skepticism is the kind of problem that never really goes away. We can either deny it, perhaps via Moorean means (which really amounts to ignoring it), or we can learn to live with it, perhaps via some *contextualist* stance (which really amounts to ignoring it on some occasions, but not others). Moore's (1962) thought is simply that our knowledge of the external world is more firmly rooted than are the intuitions which underwrite skeptical challenges. According to contextualists, knowledge is elusive: it

shifts given the epistemic context. If skeptical worries are, as it were, in the neighborhood – that is, if alternative possibilities that would defeat one’s evidence for believing some proposition *p* are not appropriately eliminated – then the standards for knowledge will be quite high. If such alternative possibilities are properly ignored, say in more humdrum, everyday circumstances, then the standards for knowledge will be much lower (DeRose 1992, 1995; Lewis 1996; S. Cohen 1998). No matter which tack we employ in answering the skeptic, one thing seems clear: modal knowledge, at least of the basic sort posited by Van Inwagen and others, seems to be no worse off than perceptual knowledge. Assuming that our basic modal judgments are, like perceptual judgments, non-inferential and intuitive, then skepticism seems to be no more a problem for the first type of judgment than for the second. In other words, assuming that we can answer (or ignore) the skeptical challenges to perceptual knowledge, there is no reason to think that the same means cannot be employed for basic modal knowledge.

Lest we get too excited with the illustration and defense by analogy offered above, we should be reminded that the analogy holds only between basic, intuitive modal judgments and basic perceptual judgments, both of which are non-inferential. This kind of basic modal knowledge is mildly more interesting than reading possibilities off actuality. But what about non-intuitive modal knowledge? Are there modal facts that we don’t *just see* and if so, how do we know them?

Another analogy with perceptual belief will prove helpful. We often reason from our perceptions and from other known facts about the world. Based upon my perceptual judgment that the apple in my hand is red, and my knowledge of facts about apples, I can infer that the apple is ripe and so safe to eat. This is a fact I can know. In like manner, based upon an intuitive modal judgment combined with known facts about the actual world, we can amplify our modal knowledge beyond the basic. Van Inwagen offers the following example:

Suppose, for example, that we know that it is not possible for water to be a different physical stuff from the physical stuff that it is – that no *other* physical stuff would be water (an example, perhaps, of ‘basic’ modal knowledge); and suppose we know that water is the physical stuff composed of molecules formed by joining a hydrogen atom to hydroxyl radical (a ‘fact about how the world is put together’); then – or at least many have argued – we can validly conclude that water is *essentially* hydrogen hydroxide (1998: 82, n. 6).

From a basic modal belief and a basic belief about actuality we reason that it is impossible that water be some physical stuff other than hydrogen hydroxide. This is a general schema for inferring modal facts. We thus have in non-basic modal knowledge the analysandum most relevant for our project: any non-trivial modal knowledge gotten via art is likely to be of this type. And so we must ask of non-basic modal beliefs the truth-question and the justification-question. How do we form non-basic modal beliefs and what makes them true or false?

Modal Truth

At risk of begging various tricky questions and conflating purported distinctions, I have opted for ‘metaphysical modality’ to individuate the relevant modality – non-epistemic and non-nomological. Opting for non-epistemic modality invites realism since, accordingly, propositions do not derive their modal status from some epistemic perspective or other; their modal status is therefore mind-independent. Modal truths are thus mind-independent, metaphysical facts as real as physical facts about that actual world around us.

This position is indeed suggested by the choice of non-epistemic modality. And there are in fact good reasons to endorse modal realism. One such reason is motivated by a dilemma discussed by Hawthorne (1996). On one hand, if we do not commit to the ontological reality of possibilities, then we inherit a semantic problem, namely, making sense of our everyday talk of possibility. On the other hand, if we commit to the ontological reality of possibilities (in a strong Lewisian sense or in a weaker sense, e.g. some type of ersatzism), we inherit an epistemological problem, namely, one of explaining our epistemic access to possibilities from which we are causally disconnected. As Hawthorne puts it, we make one problem tractable only at the cost of making the other seemingly intractable. As some of the following discussion will betray, I am compelled to take on the second horn of the dilemma: I incline to the metaphysical reality of possibilities and so have an epistemological story to tell. One should note that this dilemma roughly mirrors Benacerraf-type problems with respect to abstracta, and so opting for realism with respect to possibilities puts one in no worse a position than opting for realism about mathematical entities, properties, or other abstracta (Benacerraf 1965, 1970; Field 1980, 1989).

One can, however, opt for the first horn of the dilemma: one can deny modal realism and instead wrestle with the related semantic issues. With a bit of qualification, this move is consistent with maintaining non-epistemic modality. If the broad modal status of propositions is not real or objective in the mind-independent sense, then on what mind does it depend for its existence? It certainly does not depend upon any one epistemic perspective: this would be epistemic modality of the most local variety. Instead, when the anti-realist talks about the broad possibility or necessity of some proposition, she appeals to what we may call a *global epistemic modality*. Propositions are possible and necessary relative to a set of concepts, beliefs, and theories relevant to those propositions. The modal profile, for example, of water depends upon our linguistic practices, folk beliefs, and scientific theories with regard to water. This may sound a great deal like conceptual modality, and perhaps it is. Call it ‘global epistemic modality’ or ‘conceptual modality:’ either way, the crucial point is that such modality is not bound to any one mind or epistemic perspective. It is inter-subjective and locally mind-independent and thus in a good sense non-epistemic. Moreover, the semantic problem notwithstanding, this model benefits from certain theoretical features of possible worlds but does not entail commitment to the reality of possibilities.

A robust modal epistemology requires some account of modal truth: something must determine the facts of the modal matters. As the above discussion reveals, there are realist and anti-realist options here:

we should hesitate to infer that any robust modal epistemology entails modal realism. For the realist, modal facts are, straightforwardly, metaphysically determined; it's the epistemology that is hard. For the anti-realist (perhaps of the instrumentalist or fictionalist variety), the epistemology is easier and the modal facts derive from conceptual and theoretical frameworks (rather than the other way round, as for the realist). Here it's the semantics that is hard. What is common to the two approaches is that broad modal profiles are non-epistemic and non-nomological. Modal truths are objective or agent-independent: they are facts about the world that do not depend upon you or me specifically. Modal truths are thus no less truths than truths from other domains such as history, physics, or mathematics. This is all we need to answer the truth question.

Modal Beliefs and Justification

Reasoning about modality has been called *modal intuition*, *modalization*, and *conceivability*. What's common to the usage of these terms is some assumed or defined relation between the relevant mental operation and possibilities: conceivability and its ilk purportedly hook up with possibility in some way. The nature of this relation has been disputed since the early modern period, receiving considerable attention in the writings of Descartes and Hume, among others. Consider the following two theses.

(S) Conceivability entails possibility. If S can conceive of some state of affairs p, then p is possible.

(W) Conceivability is a reliable guide to possibility. If S can conceive of some state of affairs p, then S has good evidence, and thus good reason to believe, that p is possible.

(S) suggests a very strong conceivability/possibility link, (W) a considerably weaker one. After considering a variety of glosses on (S), David Chalmers endorses a strong conceivability/possibility link (2000). Alternatively, Stephen Yablo endorses something like (W) (1993). One might be motivated to endorse (S) for a variety of reasons: it provides a schema for identifying *conceptual* modal truths; it suggests a means by which to *verify* modal truths; it satisfies strong internalist justificatory requirements or justificatory requirements for metaknowledge. These are reasonable aims but none of them are ours. Our aim is to sketch a model of justified true (first-order) modal belief. If modal truths are objective and (at least) locally non-epistemic then they do not depend for their truth upon our knowing them. The only remaining task then is to identify the means of accessing such truths. I take conceivability, in a sense to be clarified below, to provide such access: I endorse (W). What does it mean to conceive of a state of affairs where p and why should we think that such conceivings provide reliable evidence of possibility?

My characterization of conceivability borrows from the accounts of Chalmers (2002) and Yablo (1993). First, a relevant notion of conceivability can be gleaned from something Hume tells us: "whatever the mind clearly conceives, includes the idea of possible existence" (1739–40/2000: 1.2.2.8). Yablo takes this to be an analysis, if only a partial one, of conceivability. He proposes that, just as perceiving involves

the appearance of truth, “*conceiving involves the appearance of possibility*” (1993: 5). Conceiving of some proposition *p* involves the appearance that *p* is possible: that *p* is possible is part of the content of the mental state in question. Second, conceiving is imagining: to conceive that *p* is to imagine some world where *p* obtains – where that world can be truly described in terms of *p*. In order to be a reliable guide to possibility, this imagining will need to be more robust than mere supposition or what we might call *bare propositional imagining*. We need not only to imagine that *p*, but also to imagine a fairly coherent situation where *p* is true, one where we are able to fill in arbitrary details without revealing any contradictions. In a way analogous to gathering evidence for beliefs, the more details we fill out, the better our epistemic situation with regard to the modal status of *p*. In Chalmers’ terms, our imagining will need to stand up to *rational reflection*. In Yablo’s terms, *p*’s possibility must *representatively appear* to us. If we are able to so imagine *p*, then we have good evidence that possibly *p* and so good reason to believe that possibly *p*.

The notions of *coherence* and *consistency* are doing important work here. Why should we think that a coherent, consistent imagining somehow tracks what is possible? We find our answer by considering the kinds of things that possible worlds are purported to be. According to realists, possible worlds are *coherent, consistent, and complete*. In fact, even anti-realists who nonetheless recognize the theoretical utility of the possible worlds apparatus maintain these three features. Whatever else we should say about the relevant semantics, ontology, or epistemology, these three features – call them the ‘three Cs’ – are conceptually constitutive features of possible worlds. The first two of these features are also features of imaginings which justify modal beliefs. If imaginative attempts to access the modal status of *p* should prove incoherent or inconsistent, then one lacks evidence for the modal status of *p*. However, a coherent and consistent imagining of a situation where *p* is true provides evidence that *p* is possible; if one fails to imagine a coherent and consistent situation where *p*, one has evidence that *p* is not possible. In other words, one has evidence that there is some possible world where *p* if one’s imagining a possible world where *p*, after some reasonable amount of reflection, reveals no contradiction or incoherence. Similarly, one has evidence that there is no possible world where *p* if revelations of inconsistency or incoherence occur without fail. One is thus more or less justified in forming the belief that possibly (or not possibly) *p*. The fundamental thought here is that certain features of epistemic perspectives mirror the facts that they track. Coherence and consistency are essential features of possible worlds, and if imaginings are to justify modal beliefs they should themselves be coherent and consistent. It is in this way that coherence and consistency are justificatory marks for modal conceivings and thus for modal beliefs.

Consider one more analogy with perceptual belief. If my perception that the tomato is red is to justify my belief that the tomato is red, then the perceptual state had better, in some sense, be red. Now this, understood literally, is a notoriously bad way of understanding perception: my perceptual state is no more red than it is round or two feet tall or polka-dotted. But the content of this state is characterized as red: if prompted I would respond ‘yes, I sense red’ or ‘I see red.’ And it is this perceptual characteristic

that justifies (at least in part) my belief that the tomato is red. In like manner, if an imagining can be characterized as coherent and consistent, then such features will justify (at least in part) beliefs formed on the basis of such imagining.

Note that the third ‘c’ has not been mentioned as required for reliable modal imaginings. As *complete*, determinate entities, possible worlds have countless details. But given our finite cognitive capacities, this feature of possibilities should not motivate a criterion for modal imagining. When doing metaphysics, we never *determinately* characterize a possible world in its entirety. Rather, we characterize part of a *determinate* possible world, focusing only upon the details relevant to the issues at hand. In like manner, to coherently imagine that p we do not *determinately* imagine a world where p obtains, but rather, we imagine a *determinate* world where p obtains. As Yablo puts the point, we imagine “a *fully* determinate situation whose determinate properties are left more or less unspecified” (1993: 28). A determinate situation or object is one that has a kind of higher order property of determinacy, one where for each of its determinables there is an underlying determinate property. Yablo gives the following helpful example. In imagining a tiger, you imagine a determinate tiger even though you do not imagine the tiger as being striped in some particular way. In other words, the content of your imagining “is satisfiable by *variously* striped tigers, but not by tigers with *no* determinate striping” (1993: 27–8). Again, we only imagine the first: a determinate object or situation, not the second: each of its determinate properties. Completeness is thus not a justificatory mark for modal conceivings and beliefs.

Summary

Consistent and coherent imaginations reliably track modal truth. Beliefs formed on the basis of such imaginings are justified. Modal truths obtain independently of any one epistemic agent. Thus if one believes possibly p upon the basis of a consistent and coherent imagining of a situation where p, and p is in fact possible, then one *knows* that possibly p. The account here is an externalist one: knowing that p requires only that certain facts obtain in the world and that one has formed the relevant belief(s) in reliable ways. Having knowledge does not require knowing that you’ve got it; having knowledge does not require showing or being able to show that you’ve got it. The first is a requirement for metaknowledge, the second and third, strict internalist requirements for knowledge.

(Open questions abound. How much rational reflection is required? What degree of conviction is required for knowledge-constituting modal beliefs? What is the metric for coherence? What about the fallibility of coherence judgments? The fallibility of introspection generally? Varying logical sensitivities of imaginers?)

Art and Knowing Possibilities

Recall that the skeptical position says that art cannot provide propositional knowledge (K); even if it can, any such knowledge is cognitively trivial (T); finally, even if art can provide non-trivial propositional knowledge, it is not proficient at doing so (P). These challenges will be considered in turn.

The Knowledge Challenge

Assuming then, that modal knowledge is something that can be gotten, how does art help us get it?

Consider the imaginative projects involved in reading a novel. Much of a fictional world is counterfactual and often far-fetched. The narrative prescribes that we imagine things that we know are not actually true. However, the counterfactual propositions that populate fictional narratives might be true in a different sense, namely, when understood modally as statements about possibility. Fictions, and more generally, works of art, present candidate modal truths. Moreover, they provide an imagined situation in which various propositions and their potential for modal truth can be considered. This is something that art works do very well and for which they should be valued.

But why should we think providing these fictional propositions and situations is going to reliably track modal truth? We shouldn't. We should not (and usually do not) just read a novel and then conclude – since the story made reasonable sense – that any of the various fictional propositions are conceivable and thus likely possible. This will not be a reliable means of acquiring modal knowledge, since art works often depict things that are in fact, not (metaphysically) possible. The claim, therefore, is *not* that artists are reliable authorities on modality.

The claim, rather, is that art works get us well on our way to determining the conceivability of various propositions. If a coherent and consistent imagining of a situation where *p* is true is required for the justification of a belief that possibly *p*, then art works do a great deal of the work for us. Art works (a) offer various candidate possibilities for consideration and (b) offer candidate situations or worlds in which such propositions might be true. Motivating (a) is straightforward: representational art works are chock-full of depicted counterfactual situations. But (b) requires a bit more care. Art works often depict their subject matters in ways that are coherent and consistent. (There are obvious exceptions to both: Burrough's *Naked Lunch* and much of Faulkner's stream of consciousness narratives are deliberately incoherent; further, fictions often tolerate inconsistencies, sometimes central sometimes not. See Walton 1990; Currie 1990.) Art works thus possess at least *prima facie* or surface coherence and consistency. Insofar as we are responsible epistemic agents, to reflect upon such situations or worlds is to determine whether surface coherence and consistency stands up to deeper reflection: we must conjoin various aspects of the situation and various aspects of the larger story or work, bring to bear our knowledge about the actual world and our knowledge about basic modal facts, and so on. If upon such reflection we are left with a coherent story where *p* obtains (or if, alternatively, we fail to come up with such a story), then we have a good reason to believe that possibly *p* (or that not possibly *p*). Should (not) possibly *p* be true, we

have acquired a piece of modal knowledge. And the artist has played a crucial role in this process; she has facilitated our modal knowledge.

Granted, we often do not rationally reflect when engaging with art. Enjoyment of a novel or a film does not usually consist in our considering whether depicted situations are possible – that would miss much of the point of fiction. Most likely, rational reflection or modal consideration takes place when we step out of the fictional world, either as a kind of interlude in the engagement or perhaps after the initial engagement altogether. Nevertheless, it is the art that serves as facilitator of knowledge.

The Triviality Challenge

Assuming that the above account is convincing, why think that the modal knowledge gained is valuable rather than, as Stolnitz puts it, “cognitively trivial”? This challenge can be parsed into two distinct challenges, one general and one art-specific. First, why think that modal knowledge is cognitively valuable? Second, why think that the modal knowledge obtained via art is cognitively valuable?

The reply to the general challenge is straightforward. Modal knowledge is anything but trivial: employment of modal knowledge in theoretical reasoning is extremely useful and powerful. Scientists and philosophers would be lost without appeal to thought experiments involving counterfactual possibilities (Horowitz and Massey 1991; Sorensen 1992; Gendler 2000). For example, in attempting an explanation of a newly discovered physical phenomenon, it might prove important that a physicist not restrict herself to nomological possibilities – to the physical laws as currently understood – since the phenomenon might not be explainable in such terms. The explanation might, in other words, require a new set of laws. The philosopher of mind needs to consider broadly possible ways that consciousness could arise and not just the ways, given the actual world and its physical laws, it could – thus the ubiquity of thought experiments involving zombies, brains in vats, and homunculi. Progress often results from consideration of a wider scope of possibility rather than limiting oneself to the narrower, nomological realm. Knowledge of metaphysical possibility is thus of significant theoretical value. This is sufficient to disarm the general triviality charge.

The cognitive value of modal knowledge is not limited to the theoretical. In acquiring such knowledge, we hone the imaginative skills required for consideration of more mundane, nomological possibility. Ordinary circumstances often require knowledge of what could happen or could have happened. A successful dinner party requires consideration of the tastes and dietary needs of one’s guests. In the courtroom, an attorney will make constant appeal to what might have happened. Plotting a war strategy will require consideration of what the enemy is capable of doing. Modal knowledge can aid – and thus be valued in a second sense – in these reasoning tasks as well. Modal knowledge requires imagination. Thus the acquisition of broad modal knowledge will exercise and improve our imaginative skills. More particularly, we sharpen our skills of rational reflection and thus improve our ability to recognize the conceivability or inconceivability of various states of affairs. The same kinds of imaginative

skills are at work in considerations of all possibility, whether metaphysical, epistemic, or nomological. The more practice we have at coherently imagining metaphysical possibilities, the better we will be at coherently imagining a narrower scope of possibilities. Through the process of acquiring some ‘knowledge *that*’ – that is, propositional knowledge – we improve certain skills, thereby gaining or enhancing a kind of knowledge *how*.

And what of the art-specific triviality challenge? This challenge can be answered by ostension, with science fiction providing a wealth of relevant examples. Consider George Orwell’s *1984* or Robert Heinlein’s *Stranger in a Strange Land* or the popular film series *The Matrix*. After considering such works, we recognize that there are possible worlds where entire populations are systematically monitored and controlled via radically advanced technologies, where human beings (or beings like humans) tap into a variety of surprising physical abilities like *grokking*, where computers have enslaved humans in remarkably Cartesian experience machines. Some of these worlds are very close to our own, some are very far away. Some of these situations are metaphysically possible but not nomologically possible; others are possible in both senses. Either way, the counterfactual setting of science fiction facilitates important reflection upon the human condition. Even when the situations or propositions are nomologically impossible (i.e. where *that* couldn’t actually happen) we learn – through considering them – about the actual world, and our scientific and philosophical theorizing stands to benefit from such learning. The non-actuality and perhaps nomological impossibility of *Matrix*-type situations does not undercut lessons about human knowledge, experience, and consciousness. The nomological impossibility of much of the physics in Heinlein’s books does not bar us from learning about human psychology and society. One of the most frightening things about *1984* is its proximity to actuality: Orwell depicts a close possible world, teaching us about the potential dangers of technology, human power struggle, and oppressive government. So it is that, through our engagement with art works, we both acquire valuable knowledge of possibilities (metaphysical and nomological) and improve our skills of modal imagining and reflection.

The Proficiency Challenge

Finally, assuming that the knowledge and triviality challenges have been disarmed, what can we say about the provision of modal knowledge? Recall that the proficiency challenge (P) is that any useful knowledge obtained via art can be more efficiently or more reliably gotten elsewhere. How can this challenge be answered?

If the discussions to this point have proven persuasive, the proficiency challenge is the easiest to answer since it has, at least indirectly, been handled above. I offer a handful of considerations, various conjunctions of which are sufficient to show the relevant proficiency of art works. As already discussed, art works are rich sources for both candidate modal truths *and* situations for consideration of such propositions: art works explore counterfactual situations in complex and interesting ways. They thus

provide us with a significant portion of the materials needed to responsibly ask questions like: ‘what if such-and-such?’ ‘could the world have been this way?’ ‘could this happen?’ Answering these kinds of questions invokes modal conceiving or imagining and herein lies another virtue of art works. Philosophers such as Kendall Walton and Gregory Currie have made a convincing case that representational art works invite and guide imaginings (Walton 1990; Currie 1990). Da Vinci’s *The Last Supper* invites us to imagine various things about Christ and his followers; *Moby Dick* guides our imaginings with regard to a sailing crew and a giant whale; *Citizen Kane* leads imaginings about an ambitious man and his rise to success and solitude. Representational art works both trigger the mechanism of imagination and exercise this mechanism: novels, films, and paintings ask us to imagine and our imaginative skills improve when we comply. Moreover, these skills are exercised and improved through repeated engagement with a variety of works. Art works are not the only sorts of things to function as guides to our imaginings, but this does not speak against their proficiency in this capacity.

The final point is a general observation about the nature of engaging with art. Art works are cognitively arresting: they get our attention and make us think; they get under our skin, move us, shake our worlds. Various media accomplish this effect in various ways. The multi-modal nature of films sustains attention; the formal and contentful features of painting and sculpture are often revealing and surprising; information presented by narrative methods proves more effective for long-term retention (as Friend argues in this volume). This virtue of art works does not relate directly to the provision of modal knowledge, but it does indicate that art works, being the sorts of things that sustain cognitive interest, are well-suited to provide us with knowledge. The simple fact that we attend to, and think about, works of art makes them exceptionally effective at providing epistemic materials, modal or otherwise. This point alone sheds serious doubt upon the proficiency challenge; conjoined with any or all of the others, it should render the challenge entirely implausible.

Art works enable reliably formed modal beliefs. The resulting knowledge is of significant theoretical and practical cognitive value and art is especially adept at enabling the acquisition of such knowledge. The proposed skeptical position is thus diffused. As these things typically go, however, the skeptic will not take his leave so easily: doubts surely remain. Fair enough, but this paper should secure, at the very least, the following modest purchase. The connections between modal knowledge and art works and the potential cognitive values therein should be recognized as fruitful domains of inquiry. A much-deserved analysis of these connections might well shed interesting light both upon modal epistemology and upon our cognitive engagement with art works. These are possibilities worth reflecting on.

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