

CONCEIVABILITY AND MODAL KNOWLEDGE

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I

ONE sort of thought experiment is the attempt to conceive of something's being true. Typically, it is thought, if you can conceive of a man's being 50 feet tall then, you're entitled to conclude, it's possible that he is. Conceivability is an evidential guide to modal reality:

- (1) If a proposition p is conceivable for a person S then S is justified in believing that p is possibly true.

And inconceivability is supposed to function analogously. If you can't conceive of a man's being 50 feet tall then you're at least not entitled to conclude that that state of affairs is possible. Indeed, maybe you're even entitled to conclude that the state of affairs is *impossible*. This stronger reaction is the more typical of the two. It makes inconceivability, like conceivability, an evidential guide to modal reality:

- (2) If a proposition p is inconceivable for a person S then S is justified in believing that p is not possibly true.

(1) and (2) capture an epistemic use S can supposedly make of his conceiving or failing to conceive of p . Their antecedents report p 's conceivability or inconceivability for S ; their consequents report some modal state of affairs being justifiedly believed by S .

Now, epistemologists typically treat propositional knowledge as justified true belief.¹ On that account the consequents of (1) and (2) do not as yet accord S any modal knowledge, since they do not say (respectively) that p is possibly true and that p is not possibly true. They attribute only a justified belief, not a justified true belief. That being so, the question arises as to whether or not conceivability and inconceivability are anything more than *evidential* links to modal reality. In particular, there are two theses that we should distinguish from (1) and (2), and which we should also investigate:²

- (3) If p is conceivable for S then it's possibly true;
- (4) If p is inconceivable for S then it's not possibly true.

For argument's sake, let the justified-true-belief account of knowledge be true. Then if (1) and (3) are true p 's conceivability provides S with modal knowledge—knowledge of p as possible. And if (2) and (4) are true then p 's inconceivability also gives S modal knowledge—knowledge of p as impossible, knowledge of not- p as necessary. The relationship between conceivability and modal knowledge is my concern in this paper, and I'll focus the discussion by considering the truth values of (1)-(4).

II

We need a specimen account of conceivability; I'll use what looks like Hume's. He says (1978, p. 43), "Whatever can be conceived by a clear and distinct idea necessarily implies the possibility of existence." For instance (*ibid.*, p. 32),

- (5) If S clearly and distinctly represents to himself a golden mountain then possibly a golden mountain exists.³

If we view the representation here as of propositional form ("A golden mountain exists") then (5) is an instance of (3). At any rate, it is, so long as Hume thought that

- (6) p is conceivable for S if and only if he represents it to himself with clarity and distinctness.⁴

(6) then licenses (5) as an instance of (3). It also licenses (7) as an instance of (1):

- (7) If S clearly and distinctly represents to himself a golden mountain then he's justified in believing that possibly a golden mountain exists.

(7) seems intuitively reasonable and this, I presume, is because clarity-plus-distinctness functions as a form of epistemic justification. By analogy, consider these:

- (8) If S clearly and distinctly observes a golden mountain then he's justified in believing that a golden mountain exists;
- (9) If S observes, but unclearly or indistinctly, a golden mountain then he's not justified in believing that a golden mountain exists.

Observation stands to non-modal reality, I suggest, somewhat as representation stands to modal reality. Clear and distinct observation perhaps gives us justified beliefs about the non-modal world; unclear and indistinct observation doesn't. Similarly, clear and distinct representation will perhaps give us justified beliefs about the modal world; unclear and indistinct representations won't.

How far does this analogy extend, though? On one reading—a success-reading—the antecedent of (8) will entail that a golden mountain exists. Clear and distinct observation-that- p will entail the obtaining-that- p :

- (10) If S clearly and distinctly observes a golden mountain then a golden mountain exists.

And the analogous reading of clear and distinct representation will apparently say that (5) is true. We thus find ourselves explicating the plausibility of (7) in a way that seems to make (5), and hence (3), equally plausible.

III

And in so doing we might have moved too quickly. What interests me here is that in (8) and (10) the antecedent and the consequent are concerned with the *same* proposition (by, except in (10)'s consequent, embedding it within the relevant propositional attitude)—namely, that a golden mountain exists. To make this more obvious, (8) and (10) could be rewritten as follows (where p_1 is the proposition that a golden mountain exists):

(8a) If S clearly and distinctly observes that p_1 is true then he's justified in believing that p_1 is true;

(10a) If S clearly and distinctly observes that p_1 is true then p_1 is true.

If we were to consider (8a)'s truth value we would, by factoring out the constants, find ourselves matching up these two notions: (a) clear and distinct observation, and (b) justified belief. And to the extent that we can reasonably say that (a) is a form of (b), or, at least, that (a) implies (b), then (8a) would itself seem reasonable.

But while an analogous reasonableness applies to (7), it breaks down for (5). Consider these rewordings of (5) and (7):

(5a) If S clearly and distinctly represents to himself that p_1 then Possibly(p_1);

(7a) If S clearly and distinctly represents to himself that p_1 then he's justified in believing that Possibly(p_1).

Analogously to (8a), if we were to consider (7a)'s truth value we would find ourselves comparing (a) clear and distinct representation with content C and (b) justified belief with content Possibly(C). And it does seem that this (a), too, is either a form of, or implies, this (b). The observation/representation analogy goes this far.

But it doesn't suffice for (5a). In (10a) S 's observation is directed *towards* the proposition that is therefore true. That's why observation can be *veridical*: the observation-that- p_1 is veridical because p_1 is true and p_1 is the content of the observation. In (8a) and (10a) the only proposition in question is p_1 : that one proposition reappears. In (5a), though, the representation is directed towards a proposition that *isn't* the one that's therefore true. The representation is of p_1 ; the representation's then being clear and distinct implies the truth of Possibly(p_1), not p_1 . Since clarity and distinctness surely grace an observation much as they grace a representation, it isn't clarity and distinctness that makes the difference between the consequents of, on the one hand, (8a) and (10a), and, on the other, (7a) and

(5a). It must be, once again, the difference between observation and representation themselves (i.e., clear and distinct, or not).

But why should there be thought to be *such* a difference? I suggest that we take the observation/representation analogy seriously enough to allow *veridicality* to function analogously in the two cases. Thus, compare (5a) and (7a) with these:

- (11) If *S* clearly and distinctly represents to himself that Possibly(p_1) then Possibly(p_1);
- (12) If *S* clearly and distinctly represents to himself that Possibly(p_1) then he's justified in believing that Possibly(p_1).

Structurally, (11) and (12) differ from (5a) and (7a) just in the proposition embedded within their antecedents, and from (8a) and (10a) just in the propositional attitude mentioned in their antecedents. This two-fold difference captures our applying veridicality in the same way across observation and representation: both of these are directed to propositions that can thereby be true or can thereby be justifiedly believed to be true.

This makes for a structurally streamlined picture. More than that, I think it's on the right lines. Thus, I think (11) might be true, whereas (5a) certainly isn't. (5a) is an instance of this:

- (5b) If *S* clearly and distinctly represents to himself that p then Possibly(p).

And (5b) is false. We see this by considering, for example, one of M. C. Escher's famously paradoxical pictures. These are, intuitively, representations of situations that are impossible. Let *S* in (5b) be either Escher or one of us, and let p be p_2 , the proposition that the situation portrayed in some particular Escher paradox-picture is actual. It's plausible to hold that, in drawing such a picture, Escher has represented clearly and distinctly p_2 's obtaining. The pictures are graphic—extremely clear and distinct—in their detail, yet they remain representations of impossibilities. I see them as counter-examples to (5b) and, equally, to any instantiation of (5b), such as (5a).

They're not problems for (11), though. (11) instantiates (11a):

- (11a) If *S* clearly and distinctly represents to himself that Possibly(p) then Possibly(p).

And (11a) is unaffected by the pictures. For they are representations of p_2 obtaining, not of its *possibly* obtaining (or, if this is different; of Possibly(p_2)'s obtained). The notion of possibility is only used explicitly when *S* is considering p_2 's modal status (as we are doing now; as, I think, someone trying to conceive of p_2 in order to understand its modal status is doing; and as Escher, the representer of p_2 obtaining, isn't therefore doing).

This worry is generalizable. (5a) was a rendering of (5), which was, given

(6), an instance of (3). Then, clear and distinct representation being but one form of justification, (6) is itself an instance of this:

- (13) p is conceivable for S if and only if the representation-that- p is justified for S .

And I'm arguing that (3) will be false unless we replace (13) by (for a start)

- (14) p is conceivable for S if and only if the representation-that-Possibly(p) is justified for S .

This will favor (11a), hence (11), over (5a), and that's to its credit. However, will even (11a) and (11) be true? Will the appropriate generalization of (11a), namely

(11b) If S justifies the representation to himself of Possibly(p) then Possibly(p), be true?

It depends, for a start, on how weak we allow the justification mentioned in (11b) to be. If it's non-deductive then (11b) is false. (That's one reason (11) and (11a) have some plausibility: clarity and distinctness seems like a sort of deductive justification.) And, equally, its being non-deductive will reflect the fact that the justification specified by (14) as part of p 's conceivability can itself be non-deductive. This will in turn render (3) false in the same way as befell (11b).

We might argue that conceivability does indeed require deductive justification. We might require that a representation be *so* complete, *so* detailed, that its constructibility entails the possibility of the proposition represented. Or, if we respect the Escher counter-example, then the representation will be *of* the possibility of some proposition and it will be that possibility that is entailed. The shoulders of the theorist who demands deductive justification will be burdened by the need either to view the Escher counter-example in the way I've suggested or to argue for a standard of representational completeness and detail that will dismiss the Escher representations as insufficiently complete and detailed to count as clear and distinct.

But in the absence of that argument we should read (14) more generally. And then, we've seen, (3) is false. There's a simple way around this, though. We can replace (14) by

- (15) p is conceivable for S if and only if the representation-that-Possibly(p) is justified for S and is true too.

(15) makes conceivability a success-concept, it validates (3), *and* it does so without requiring that its justification part be deductive.

IV

I won't exhaustively characterize the nature of a representation, but I will say something about the links between representations and beliefs. As they're normally viewed, representations can, while beliefs

can't, be partly pictorial. This suggests that representations aren't a kind of belief. On the other hand, representations, like beliefs, can be conceptual, even stipulative. I've been assuming that representations have propositional content; I'll continue to assume that. I'll assume, too, that to represent Richard Nixon being overdrawn on his checking account, for instance, I don't have to come up with an identifying description of him. I can supplement whatever description I manage with the stipulation that it's to be of Richard Nixon. (So how accurate the description is helps determine just how justified the representation is, not whether or not it is a representation.) If so then it's not evident that (15) isn't just a special case of

- (16) p is conceivable for S if and only if the belief-that-Possibly(p) is justified for S and it's true too.

But neither is it evident that it is.

In any case, I'm inclined to accept (16) over (15). If we're going to include a wide-scope possibility operator in the content of our belief or representation then we should probably be looking to a belief, not a representation. The main difference between the two notions is the capacity of the latter one to be at least partly pictorial. But how do we *picture* possibility? Picturing is analogous to observing. Observing-that- p is having a sensation, perhaps processing and developing it in a particular way (for example, making various more or less conscious inferences from it), and ending up with a representation of p . And a representation of p is equivalent to a representation of it as actual.

Relatedly, Hume says (*ibid.*, p. 66) that the idea of an object and the idea of it as existing are identical. But is this an idea of the object as actual (as actually existing)? Presumably it isn't, as the following shows (*ibid.*, p. 32):

'Tis an established maxim in metaphysics, That whatever the mind clearly and distinctly conceives includes the idea of possible existence, or in other words, that nothing we imagine is absolutely impossible. We can form the idea of a golden mountain, and from thence conclude that such a mountain may actually exist.

Thus, for Hume, the idea of a golden mountain "*includes the idea of possible existence.*" But possible existence isn't the same as actual existence. Indeed, Hume would surely take the one to exclude the other. So either (a) he is inconsistent, since the idea of a golden mountain will include both the idea of its possible but non-actual existence and that of its actual existence, or (b) he can't distinguish possible from actual existence.

Charity favors (b). And this is where the point about picturing possibility is relevant. For where is Hume to find appropriate (visual?) *impressions* of possibility to enable him to distinguish the idea of something as actual from the idea of it as possible? Maybe it's a distinction Hume can't accommodate. His attacks on stronger modalities are justly famous; perhaps the reason he's apparently less critical of the concept of possibility is that he

hasn't properly distinguished it from the concept of actuality. And maybe this is due to his brand of empiricism and the consequent conflict between an at least partly pictorial account of ideas and the desire to include the concept of possibility in some ideas. (And if so then his treatments of possibility and of necessity are ungroundedly asymmetrical.)

It might be better, then, to adopt (16) over (15). And when we do, we encounter something pretty. We find an account of conceivability that makes it a form of modal *knowledge*. For, by the justified-true-belief definition of knowledge we're working with, (16) is equivalent to

(17) p is conceivable for S if and only if Possibly(p) is known by S .

p 's being conceivable is its being known *as possible*. Conceivability will *give* a person modal knowledge precisely because it *is* a kind of modal knowledge. The existence of a golden mountain is conceivable for S just in case S believes that possibly one exists, is justified in holding that belief, and the belief is true.

This kind of modal knowledge doesn't require indubitability. If, like most contemporary epistemologists, we relinquish any such constraint on knowledge in general, then no reason has emerged in the present discussion to alter that. Just as we await an argument for the justification mentioned in (16) being deductive, we await one for its being indubitable.

The final thing to point out here is the asymmetry between (3) and (4). I've argued for an account of conceivability that validates (3). That account, however, makes (4) false. Assume that, for some p , p is inconceivable for S . Assume, too, the equivalence of inconceivability and non-conceivability.⁵ From (16), since p isn't conceivable for S , we have this result: either Possibly(p) isn't believed by S or the belief isn't justified for S or it's false that Possibly (p). So it doesn't yet follow from p 's not being conceivable, or from its being inconceivable, that it's not possible. (4) is false.

And even if S does have a belief-that-Possibly(p) it still only follows, from p 's being inconceivable for S , that either S 's belief isn't justified or p isn't possible. And this disjunction entails that p isn't possible, only if its first disjunct does so—that is, only if the lack of justification for S 's belief does so, something that's not independently obvious. This entailment is equivalent to

(18) If Possibly(p) then S 's belief-that-Possibly(p) is justified for S ,

which says that at least part of modal reality is always knowable as such.⁶ And that's a *quite* substantive thesis. If (4) is true, then, it's not obviously true. Conceivability is at least a more direct link to modal reality than is inconceivability.⁷

NOTES

1. Since Gettier 1963, of course, many epistemologists have thought of knowledge as something *more* than justified true belief. In my 1987, Chapter 2, I've argued that this isn't quite the right reaction to Gettier's paper.

2. Horowitz 1976 brought them to my attention. I'll modify her versions by relativizing them to *S*.

3. I'm treating Hume's notion of an idea as a notion of a sort of representation. This is as much a systematically as an exegetically motivated move.

4. Note that there's an issue here about whether, to capture *p*'s being conceivable, (6) should talk about its being representable, as against its being represented. For my purposes a resolution of this isn't vital.

5. Even if they're not equivalent, inconceivability still entails what will then be the broader non-conceivability.

6. For suppose that Possibly(*p*) obtains. Then, by (18), the belief-that-Possibly(*p*) is justified. Hence, by (18), *S* has a justified true belief-that-Possibly(*p*). In other words, *S* knows-that-Possibly(*p*). So (18) requires that the portion of modal reality consisting of possibilities, as against necessities, be knowable as such.

7. One intuition (call it the evidence-intuition) we might have about the sort of justification required for a belief of the form Possibly(*p*) is that the content of the justification has to say something *about* possibility. The idea would be that the applicability of the notion of possibility is what is claimed by the belief, and that, for this to be justified, the believer *S* needs evidence about that notion, ideally about its applicability conditions. For example, *S* might have evidence consisting of (i) beliefs he could use to justify the belief-that-*p* plus (ii) the belief that if *p* then Possibly(*p*). Via (ii), his evidence explicitly mentions possibility.

This intuition is structurally similar to the one (call it the veridicality-intuition) we used above in arguing for the preferability of (11a) to (5b). The veridicality-intuition parallels the evidence-intuition by saying that if Possibly(*p*) is to follow from *S*'s clear and distinct belief then (unless *p* is the proposition that *S* has this clear and distinct belief) the belief has to say something about possibility.

What both intuitions share is an anti-reductionist spirit. In the veridicality-intuition this affects just the concept of possibility: possibility comes from possibility. (11a) is preferred to (5b), because, as far as reflecting the modal world is concerned, (11a) allows clear and distinct representations (or beliefs) to be *veridical*, in a way (5b) does not. And veridicality should be no more important a goal for non-modal beliefs in relation to non-modal reality than for modal ones in relation to modal reality. In the evidence-intuition a justified belief about possibility comes from a justified belief about possibility. This connection, unlike that specified in the veridicality-intuition, actually depends on two concepts, though—possibility *and* justification. More strongly, it relies on some sort of anti-reductionism about both. The move from (7a) to (12) was apparently made just in the spirit of the veridicality-intuition, and so what changed from (7a) to (12) was the *content* of the belief or representation that was, by (7a)'s antecedent, clear and distinct and, by its consequent, therefore justified.

This ignores the possibility of the evidence-intuition being important here too (and, for present purposes, that's fine). That intuition would provide at least as powerful a motive for preferring (12) to (7a) as would the veridicality-intuition. But we would need to see how defensible it is, and that task is beyond the scope of this paper. (This paper owes a great deal to the advice of Tamara Horowitz and Gerald Massey.)

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