

THE COUNTERPART ARGUMENT FOR MODAL SCEPTICISM

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ABSTRACT: Surely, it is possible that you believe falsely about this-or-that modal matter. In light of the various ways the world could be arranged, it is plausible that there is a nearby possible world, which would be *almost* identical to the actual world, *if it were actualized*, where you and your modal counterpart disagree over modal belief *p*. You might be tempted to think that your modal belief is true, while hers is not. It is not clear why this is so; after all, you would each have the same evidence, cognitive abilities etc., *if you were both actualized*. This point generalizes to all of your modal beliefs, this seems to strongly imply that the probability that you have true modal beliefs appears inscrutable. Thus, you have *some reason* to withhold belief, on modal matters.

KEYWORDS: modality, modal scepticism, counterparts, inscrutability

Introduction

In this paper, I argue that you are probably already sympathetic to modal scepticism. This is because the modal scepticism I defend, in this paper, can be motivated with very simple modal and epistemic claims: you and your modal counterparts are equally skilled at evaluating modal matters, but you disagree; it seems an inscrutable matter as to which of you is right. Thus, you should withhold assent on modal matters. Call this the **Counterpart Argument**.¹ This argument can be motivated by rudimentary epistemic and modal beliefs; indeed, that is a big part of its appeal. Throughout this paper, **modal scepticism** is the position that there is *some reason* to withhold assent on modal claims for lack of evidence, i.e. you have *some reason* to think that you may not know that *p* is possible or necessary, such that the probability you are right, on any particular modal claim, is inscrutable. I argue that you are already committed to a species of modal scepticism, *to some degree*, in light of what you already believe; or, at least, what you are already inclined to bring on board doxastically.

¹ I am using the term ‘counterpart’ in a way that is consistent with a variety of modal metaphysical views, e.g. modal realism, ersatz modal realism, etc. We need not endorse any particular metaphysics of modality to feel the pull of counterpart argument, especially since there are other, related, ways to get to the species of modal scepticism I have in mind – an exception to this might be modal fictionalism.

§ 1

Surely, you accept that it is at least *possible* that your modal beliefs could be false. For instance, it may be that your belief that *p* is necessarily true is false; that is, it may be that *p* is only contingently true. We might put the matter like this: there is a nearby possible world which would be *nearly* identical to the actual world, *if actualized*, where you have a modal counterpart. The only difference between the actual world, and the possible world I am talking about, is this: you disagree over the modal claim that *p* in the sense that she affirms that *p*, while you deny it – and all that this difference entails. So, for instance, although you believe that for any arbitrary *p* throughout modal space, it is necessarily such that *p* is identical to *q*, your nearby modal counterpart disagrees. Simply put: it is possible that I have false modal beliefs. Call this claim **Diverge**.

There are several *good* reasons to accept Diverge.

First, it seems that Diverge is *possible*. There is a possible world, very similar to the actual world, in which your modal counterpart has a different modal belief than they actually do. Put differently, I can imagine a situation which I take to verify the following: there is someone, incredibly similar to me, in a world *almost identical* to the actual world, who disagrees as to the truth of my modal belief that *p*. Perhaps, we have diverging intuitions on the matter *for whatever reason*. The imaginability of this scenario should provide *some* evidence that there is nothing to prevent the world from having been arranged that way; the rule I have in mind is this: if I can imagine scenario *p*, then probably *p* is possible.² Surely, this is *some reason* to think that Diverge is possible.

Second, there is less obvious reason to accept Diverge: we already accept that we are fallible about so many other doxastic matters, e.g. perceptual and mathematical beliefs. It would odd to suppose that when it comes to our modal beliefs, it is not *even possible* that they could be wrong. The doxastic fallibility of other kinds of beliefs provides *defeasible* reason to suppose that for just about any kind of belief, it is possible that those beliefs *could be* wrong. So, for instance, I accept that it is at least *possible* that my external world beliefs are false, e.g. it might only seem that there is a pine tree in front yard, even though this is not so. Or, to take another example, it is at least *possible* that my mathematical beliefs are false. In other words, there are possible worlds, *if not the actual world*, in which I have false perceptual and mathematical beliefs. Unless modal beliefs are of a

² Consult: David Chalmers, “Does Conceivability Entail Possibility?”, in *Conceivability and Possibility*, eds. Tamar Szabó Gendler and John Hawthorne (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 145–200; and Stephen Yablo, “Is conceivability a guide to possibility?”, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 53, 1 (1993): 1–42.

different epistemic kind altogether, and I see no reason to think that is so, we have *some* reason to think it is *possible* that I have false modal beliefs; that is, there are no doubt instances, somewhere in nearby modal space, if not the actual world, where I suffer from modal-doxastic fallibility.

There is a final reason: *the breath and fine-grained nature of modal space*. This is because modal space is supposed to *exhaustively* represent each and every way the world *could be* arranged. Thinking about possibility and necessity in spatial terms often does a lot to clarify the issues. Indeed, here is a simple heuristic for thinking about how modal space is populated: if it is possible that the world could have been arranged p-wise, then there is a possible world, somewhere in modal space, arranged p-wise. Thus, if it is possible that p, there is a possible world in which p holds, somewhere in modal space. Further, modal space represents the similarities and dissimilarities between *some* possible world and the actual world. These differences are captured, in part, by placing possible worlds, with greater similarity to the actual world, closer to the actual world in modal space and possible worlds with greater dissimilarities, farther from the actual world, in modal space.

Within nearby sectors of modal space, there are people who would be nearly identical to you and I, *if they were actualized*, except for a few minor details like whether they suppose that modal-claim-p is true or false. Now, if you think that *you* have the ability to evaluate the truth values of various modal claims, by stipulation, so would this subset of modal counterparts, *if they were actualized*, just in virtue of being nearly identical to you. So, for example, counterpart-Jimmy, who resides in nearby modal space, is only a bit different from me. If we were *both* actualized, we would have the same intellect, abilities, and methods at our disposal, for evaluating modal claims, even though the differences between the actual world, and the nearby possible world, are that we disagree over the necessity-of-p, and all that this entails; for the sake of the example, suppose that I think that p is necessarily so, but counterpart-Jimmy disagrees. There may be those who think that if Counterpart-Jimmy and I have the identical ability to conceive of such-and-such, it is hard to see how we come out with different, conflicting beliefs. There is a simple solution to this challenge: it need only be that although the possible world features epistemic agents, namely counterpart-Jimmy and I, with comparable epistemic abilities, it might be that one of us has a screwy way of forming modal beliefs. Without an epistemic tie-breaker, it would be arrogant of me to suppose that I am right about the necessity-status-of-p, but my counterpart in nearby modal space would be wrong, *if he were actualized*; indeed, this appears to be a kind of metaphysical chauvinism in that it

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grants greater epistemic weight to agents that are concrete, rather than *merely* modal. If we have the same epistemic abilities and evidence, then he deserves his share of the epistemic benefit of the doubt; this is because he is as likely to be right as I. This generalizes to all of our modal beliefs.

We might approach this point somewhat differently. Think about the possible truth and falsity of my modal beliefs for instance, as if they were placed along a spectrum. On one end of the spectrum, I have all false modal beliefs, while on the other end I have all true modal beliefs. If we move, one unit in either direction, along the spectrum, I either trade a true modal belief for a false one, or vice versa. At the dead center of the spectrum, I have half true and half false, modal beliefs. If we average out my true and false modal beliefs, across the spectrum, the average is half true, and half false, modal beliefs. Since, as I have already argued, we cannot know where we are located on the spectrum, we should conclude that it is equally likely, as not, that any arbitrarily chosen belief we have is true. This problem generalizes to *your* modal beliefs. Call this **the placement problem**.

It might help clarify if we might think about the matter like so: suppose that there are two possible worlds, Alpha and Beta, placed next to each other in modal space. There are only a few relevant differences between, namely: in Alpha, the residents have true modal beliefs, while in Beta, the residents have false modal beliefs – and all that those differences entail. Other than that, Alpha and Beta would be nearly identical to each other, if they were actualized. As a result, residents of these respective worlds would have access to all of the same evidence, methods for evaluation, and such – assuming that Alpha and Beta are actualized. If you know nothing else, as to your location, then it seems you have about a fifty percent chance of deciding whether you are a resident of Alpha or Beta. Surely, this is precisely the situation where you find yourself. Although the situation is not as simple as the thought experiment makes it out to be, my point is made.

Consider the following challenge to my project: there is an assumption which informs the placement problem. Namely, it says that we should treat each of the many ways, the world could have been arranged in a way that involves me believing this-or-that, with respect to modal matters, as equally likely to be actualized. But this is ridiculous. We have good reason to suppose that *probably* we are right we respect to many of our modal beliefs – we have evidence for our modal beliefs; the *mere* possibility that we could be wrong about them is *not* good reason to suppose that each possible world, in nearby modal space, is equally likely to also be the *actual* world. Call this challenge **Possible**.

The worry with Possible is that it treats different possible worlds differently, vis-à-vis their likelihood of capturing how the actual world hangs together, on the basis of the conviction that we largely have true modal beliefs. Unfortunately, in the absence of good reason, this serious resembles special pleading. This is because Possible violates a *defeasible* heuristic for dealing with members of the same kind: if there is no good reason to treat token F differently than G, it seems arbitrarily to treat F differently than G. For example, it would be arbitrary to treat job applicants differently, if all I knew about them was their job-applicant status. Think about it like this: if I assume that my having largely true modal beliefs, rather than my counterpart, in nearby modal space, this is just like claiming that I am in a better epistemic position, than my nearly identical counterpart, when it has already been stipulated this is not so. It is not clear how I would be in any better epistemic position, than my modal counterpart, as there are plenty of them who would be nearly identical to me, *if they were actualized*, when it comes to their epistemic resources for evaluating the truth and falsity of modal claims, e.g. they would be as intelligent, with the same epistemic tools for investigating modal space, and evaluating modal claims. If we are identical, in these capacities, it is not clear *how* I could *rightfully* claim to have any kind of an evidential edge, over some of my counterparts in nearby modal space. Indeed, Possible looks like a hand waving dismissal. Unfortunately, hand-waving dismissals of scepticism are too common in philosophy.

For instance, Jessica Wilson writes:

Nor have recent answers to the Cartesian skeptic been much better. Moore ... maintains that we may rest with what we naturally believe, or presuppositions thereof; but in context, this seems to beg the question, or at least not properly engage the skeptical concern, and similarly for views on which we need not rule out every conceivable defeater of our ordinary beliefs. Russell ... maintains that we may infer to the existence of the external world, as the best explanation of the pattern of our sense experience; but what qualifies the usual explanation as 'best'? Comprehensive skeptical scenarios also explain this pattern, and some on arguably simpler grounds. Relatedly, attempts ... to dismiss these scenarios as 'irrelevant' presuppose that we have some independent handle on what is actually the case; *but this presupposition is exactly what the skeptic's cases aim to undermine.*³

Expressed a bit differently, if the nature of nearby *merely* modal space were not epistemically relevant to the actual world, scepticism, in its many guises,

³ Jessica Wilson, "The regress argument against Cartesian skepticism," *Analysis* 72, 4 (2012): 668 – emphasis mine.

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would lack philosophical punch.⁴ After all, many sceptical scenarios (e.g. the evil demon hypothesis) merely posit alternative explanations for our experiences, and thus try to place the burden on us to explain our preference for the conventional explanation rather than its scepticism-inducing competitors. However, it seems that scepticism generally does *not* lack philosophical punch, even if we are not sceptics *per se*. Thus, merely modal possibilities are, *at least sometimes*, epistemically relevant to the actual world.

I've established that there is *some* reason to suppose we have a placement problem, i.e. a problem about where we are located in modal space, vis-à-vis the truth and falsity of our modal beliefs, which is something more than a *mere* possibility. In the next section, I want to explain why, in light of the placement problem, we should think the probability of our having true modal beliefs is inscrutable, and why, that is good reason to think we are inclined toward a species of modal scepticism.

§ 2

So far, I've argued for the following conclusion: we have *some reason*, on the basis of what we already accept, to think there is a placement problem. If you recall, the placement problem says that we have few epistemic resources for placing ourselves, in modal space, when it comes to the truth or falsity of our modal beliefs. However, this might not seem like enough to motivate modal scepticism. As such, in this section, I want to make two moves that I think will explain why the placement problem, provides good reason to think that modal scepticism *of some kind* is motivated.

The placement problem gives us *some* reason to think that the likelihood of our having true modal beliefs is inscrutable, i.e. things could fall out either way, according to the evidence; for one thing, it is hard to know exactly how probability maps onto the relevant parts of modal space – e.g. it might turn out that the actual world was far more likely to be than its possible world neighbors; if had a clear picture of probability space, and how it relates to modal space, this would be a whole different story. It might be that there are extra-good reasons to suppose that our having true modal beliefs are a good deal more likely, than our having false ones, however I do not know what they would be; indeed, I wouldn't even begin to speculate. Or, at least, it is not clear that we have all that much to go on in terms of knowing how modal space and probability relate to one another. This is a good reason to think that the probability of our having truth or false

⁴ Cf. Fred I. Dretske, "Epistemic Operators," *Journal of Philosophy* 67, 24 (1970):1015-6.

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modal beliefs, or a reliable cognitive process by which we produce modal beliefs, is inscrutable at least where our evidence is concerned. Put differently, the probability that we have largely true modal beliefs is inscrutable in this sense: it seems as though the epistemic facts of the matter could fall out either way, even while consistent with our evidence, e.g. conceivability, thought experiments, intuitions, and such. This suggests that there is no good evidence that justifies us making this, rather than that, estimate of the probability that we have true modal beliefs.

Consider what Plantinga says:

Suppose I believe that I have been created by an evil Cartesian demon who takes delight in fashioning creatures who have mainly false beliefs (but think of themselves as paradigms of cognitive excellence): then I have a defeater for my natural belief that my faculties are reliable ... *It suffices for me to have such a defeater if I have considered those scenarios, and the probability that one of those scenarios is true, is inscrutable for me – if I can't make any estimate of it, do not have an opinion as to what that probability is.* It suffices if I have considered those scenarios, and for all I know or believe one of them is true.⁵

There is an intuition that inscrutability is an obstacle to knowledge. The intuition is this:

You cannot know that x , if x is as likely to be true as false, on the basis of the totality of your evidence, whether this evidence is consciously accessible or not. Call this intuition *Withhold*.

Consider the following example:

Suppose that Jones is about to bet a good deal of money on a game of dice. If he picks even, for instance, and the dealer rolls an odd number, then he loses his money; if, on the other hand, his pick matches what the dealer rolls, he doubles his money. During the night, it is clear to Jones that there is no discernible pattern as to what the dealer will roll, i.e. the dealer is just as likely to roll an even, as she is to roll an odd – or so Jones' evidence suggests.

Surely, it is implausible for Jones to suppose that he knows that the next roll will be even, or odd; if anything, he has good evidence that he cannot know such thing. This example supports *Withhold* in the following sense:

If x is as likely to be true as false, as far as your evidence is concerned, or there is no way to tell, you should withhold ascent that p .⁶

⁵ Alvin Plantinga, "Naturalism Defeated," 1994, http://www.calvin.edu/academic/philosophy/virtual_library/articles/plantinga_alvin/naturalism_defeated.pdf, 12 – emphasis mine.

⁶ Consider the following argument for this claim:

The inscrutable probability that x is true or false, falls under the purview of Withhold. Thus, we have *some* reason to withhold assent to any claim where its truth or falsity are inscrutable. But withholding assent that such-and-such, for lack of evidence, is a form of scepticism, if anything is. After all, withholding belief for lack of evidence is roughly what the Cartesian sceptic thinks I should do in light of the competing explanations for my external world seemings. Although, what I've been discussing may not be a robust form of scepticism, like the evil demon hypothesis, it appears to be scepticism enough.

Now, we are in a position to flesh out the **Counterpart Argument**. Crudely sketched, the argument amounts to this: *first*, I have any number of counterparts, in nearby modal space, who would be just as skilled as I am, in evaluating modal claims, if they were actualized. *Second*, there are a number of equally qualified modal counterparts, who either agree or disagree with me, on such-and-such modal claim. *Third*, in light of these claims, it seems arbitrary to suppose that I am right, on any particular modal matter, while my equally qualified counterparts who disagree with me, are wrong – at best, it seems that the probability that I am right in my modal beliefs is inscrutable; indeed, the nature of modal space guarantees that there will be counterparts who disagree with me on such-and-such modal claim. *Fourth*, if the probability that I am right about this or that modal claim is inscrutable, then I should withhold belief that such-and-such modal claim; this response to the inscrutable probability of my modal beliefs being true, seems like a species of scepticism. Thus, *fifth*, I have *some* reason to accept a species of modal scepticism.

As I've already spent much of the paper defending the premises of the Counterpart Argument, I will conclude this section with the following: it seems that much of what I have argued, in preparation for laying out the Counterpart Argument, should be readily accepted by most of my readers; it seems much of the philosophical background for this argument, follows from basic modal and epistemic beliefs, e.g. if the probability that claim p is inscrutable, there is *some* reason not to take p doxastically on board. Surely, this is good reason to distrust our seemings to have true modal beliefs. Even if seemings confer *defeasible* justification, and it seems that this-or-that modal claim is true, there is good

If you think you can take on beliefs that could be as likely true as false, then you should have a far greater number of beliefs than you do. But you don't, obviously, i.e. you refrain from believing any number of propositions because you lack good evidence for this, e.g. the belief that there is a little man, in every black hole, who is impervious to gravity, trying to find a light switch. So, you do not think you should take on beliefs, as part of your doxastic inventory, if they are as likely to be true as they are false.

reason in the background to be suspicious of our seemings; at least, there is *some* reason to think their likelihood-of-being-true is inscrutable. If anything is a defeater for taking the claim that p doxastically on board, this kind of inscrutability qualifies.

§ 3

Before closing, I want to address the following worry: it appears that my modal scepticism presupposes the very modal knowledge that I deny others. Thus, it may appear that my argument is self-defeating. I have a simple response: I only need those in my audience to have beliefs about the nature of modal space, and such, which are conducive to my sceptical strategy. Or, I could assume what I need to make my argument, like a *reductio ad absurdum*, without committing to it, simply to illustrate how such commitments lend *some* support to a species of withholding-style modal scepticism.

Consider what Hume has to say:

Reason first appears in possession of the throne, prescribing laws, and imposing maxims, with an absolute sway and authority. Her enemy, therefore, is obliged to take shelter under her protection, and by making use of rational arguments to prove the fallaciousness and imbecility of reason, produces, in a manner, a patent under her band and seal.⁷

If you accept my starting points, you have *some* reason to accept a kind of modal scepticism.

⁷ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896), 186.