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Chapter 15

THE EPISTEMIC IDLENESS OF CONCEIVABILITY

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The world comprises all things. 'Thing' here should be understood with the utmost generality, referring to any existent in any category. Some claims about these things are *necessary* simpliciter, in that what they represent *must*—in the broadest sense—be true. Some claims are *possible* simpliciter, in that what they represent *might* or *could*—again, in the broadest sense—be true. Thus, what is necessary indicates the principles of the world, and what is possible indicates its limits. Call knowledge of what is necessary or possible simpliciter *modal knowledge.*[1] Such knowledge may also include what knowledge of necessity or possibility provides. Knowing ~p is necessary yields knowledge that p is *impossible* (i.e., could not be true). Knowing ~p is possible, though what p represents is actually so, yields knowledge of the *contingency* of p.

If one knows anything, one is supposed to be in the position to have at least some modal knowledge. If one knows p, it is uncontroversial that one is able to infer justifiably and know that what p represents is possible. Some knowledge of necessity and impossibility is, with minimal logical ability or conceptual capacities, likewise uncontroversial; for example, it must be that if p *and* q is true, p is as well, and it is impossible that there is a round square. Plausibly, one has more modal knowledge than these apparently trivial examples. I can know, it seems, that the stroller before me could fit in the back of my car, that I could not ride a bicycle up my own nose, that water must be H_2O. Many claim to have even more modal knowledge than such mundane examples. Some claim to know, for instance, that there could be a perfect being, that one could exist without one's body, that there could be a physical duplicate of a (conscious) person that lacks consciousness, that one must originate from the sperm and egg from which one actually did. Such esoteric modal claims are often central to arguments taken to show what in fact exists and what or how certain phenomena actually are, and so are central to many philosophical issues of perennial interest.

One's involvement with the world seems to be limited merely to things as they are; hence, modal knowledge—trivial, mundane, or esoteric—should be perplexing. A thoroughgoing epistemology should, however, account for all of it. Traditionally, the notion of *conceivability* has been regarded as crucial to an account of modal knowledge. The conceivability of, say, a proposition is supposed to provide at least some evidence that what that proposition represents is possible. This idea is prominent in seminal writings of Anselm and Descartes, and Hume later articulated a well-known explicit connection between what is conceivable and what is possible.[2] Conceivability is regarded as no less crucial in contemporary discussions of modal epistemology.

Indeed, Stephen Yablo remarks, "if there is a seriously alternative basis for possibility theses [i.e., claims about what is possible] philosophers have not discovered it."[3] Despite the assumed significance of conceivability to acquiring modal knowledge, there is no received account of what exactly it is to conceive a proposition.

I believe one has a good deal of modal knowledge, though perhaps less than others presume one has. However, I think conceiving is utterly idle in acquiring such knowledge: the conceivability of a proposition can provide no evidence whatsoever that what it represents is possible. To show this, I first examine the basis of modal knowledge. I consider what conceivability in general is supposed to be and argue, in light of the preceding considerations, that conceivability is not epistemically efficacious, in the sense of providing evidence, on any proposed specific account. I then maintain that there could be no account of conceivability on which it is epistemically efficacious, that the very idea of the conceivability of a proposition being evidential is misguided. I conclude with some brief recommendations for pursuing a satisfactory modal epistemology.

15.1 The world and the ontological basis of modal knowledge

Again, modal knowledge is knowledge of what is necessary or possible *simpliciter*. Clearly, such knowledge pertains to the world—all knowledge does—but if the world is just all the things there are, it is by no means obvious how one can acquire knowledge of what *must be* or of what *could be* from what merely *is*. Without some account of how necessity and possibility inhere in or arise from the things there are, there seems little hope of illuminating modal epistemology, in general, or assessing the role of conceivability in acquiring modal knowledge, more specifically. An account of the ontological basis of modal knowledge would provide, then, some insight into with what one needs to engage in order to have such knowledge and how accessible it is.

Given that the world is nothing more nor less than all things (including the relations in which things stand), modal knowledge can be understood to be knowledge of the *constraints* among things. Knowledge of necessity is knowing that a thing must be as it is (at least in some respects) or that certain things must relate as they do. Knowledge of possibility is knowing that something could be different than how it actually is or that it could relate to others in ways it does not. It might also be knowledge that some of the things that exist could fail to, or even that there could be different things than there in fact are.

If modal knowledge is knowing such constraints, a satisfactory modal epistemology turns on them, on their source(s) and means. There can be, it seems, just two alternative accounts of these constraints. On one, constraints are present in each thing itself: a thing must be as it is (at least in some respects) and could be certain other ways simply in existing, in being what it is. On the other account, constraints arise only through the interaction between some privileged kind(s) of *constraining* thing and other *unconstrained* things. The most familiar version of the latter is one on which minds constrain the other things in the world via their activity. (A variation of this, also familiar, is an account on which a single divine mind constrains all other things.) Note that any mixed view, on which things constrained in themselves are also constrained by minds, is irrelevant to present purposes. Of interest here is necessity and possibility *simpliciter*; the constraints imposed by minds on inherently constrained things would yield only a secondary necessity and possibility.

The first, robustly realist account, on which things are necessarily or possibly as they are independently of any conscious being, has been present since the outset of Western philosophy and has long been associated with Aristotle. The second account has had many guises in the history of Western philosophy. In the modern era, it is familiar from Hume, who maintains that necessary connections are projected onto things by one's expectations acquired through

experience, and from Kant, who can be understood as maintaining that one's mind supplies the constraints on the world that make any of it knowable. These positions underlie many in the analytic tradition from those of W. V. Quine (1953: 22; 1951: 176) and Rudolf Carnap (1947), who deny that things are necessarily or possibly ways independently of how they are described or referred to, to contemporary conventionalist views, like those of Alan Sidelle (1989) and Amie Thomasson (2007), on which the basis of necessity and possibility is the means conscious beings have of classifying things.

If one is to have modal knowledge, one must ultimately engage with different things depending on which of these two accounts of the source of the constraints among things is correct. Either one must engage with things that are in themselves necessarily or possibly certain ways, or one must engage with the means that conscious beings use to describe or refer to or classify things. The latter seem accessible via reflection. If, however, things themselves are the source of the constraints in the world, mere reflection obviously would not suffice for modal knowledge.

In light of these considerations, if conceiving a proposition is presumed to be instrumental to modal knowledge, the account on which the ontological basis of such knowledge is the activity of minds seems more promising, for whatever it is precisely to conceive something, doing so is a mental activity. This account, however, is in the end untenable; the ontology it requires is incoherent. This bold claim requires more thorough justification than can be provided here, yet two considerations can be adduced that should render it quite compelling.

First of all, if all the constraints that yield necessity and possibility *simpliciter* arise from the activity of minds, then the constraints on any mind itself, and there surely are some, must arise from the activity of a mind. This seems ultimately to require that some mind constrain itself. Yet anything that constrains must be sufficiently determinate—that is, constrained—to act at all and, a fortiori, to act in a way that is constraining. An unconstrained thing coming to constrain itself is incoherent; therefore, this account, which requires such a thing, is inconsistent. So there must be some constraints among things independent of the activity of any mind (or any other privileged constraining kind).

A second, independent consideration corroborates the inconsistency of the account in question. On this account, minds are supposed to impose constraints on a world lacking any. This world might be characterized as amorphous *stuff*, or as a teeming hodgepodge of unconstrained "things". Yet a truly amorphous stuff or an utterly unconstrained thing is incoherent. Such stuff, or such a "thing", is not any way necessarily, so it need not be unconstrained. It could, then, be constrained: it could be an unconstrained constrained "thing". For that matter, since what is possible for an utterly unconstrained "thing" is posterior to a constraint imposed upon it (in this case, by some mind), prior to such imposition, that "thing" could not be any way, not even unconstrained. Thus, prior to being constrained, it would be an unconstrained "thing" that is not unconstrained. This is contradictory.

I conclude that any account on which the constraints that yield necessity and possibility *simpliciter* are not inherent to each thing itself is unacceptable. Thus, there are constraints in the world independent of any mind (except, of course, those constraints inherent to minds). If one is to have modal knowledge, it must come, in the first instance, by engaging with these constraints and, hence, theirs sources, viz., things themselves. Nothing else would suffice.

15.2 What, in general, conceivability is supposed to be

As noted in the introductory section, the conceivability of propositions has long been regarded as crucial to discussions of modal epistemology. Although there is a good deal of controversy regarding what the apt, specific account of conceiving on which the act is epistemically

efficacious is—and whether there is such an account at all—what conceiving in general is supposed to be is clear enough from its many appearances in various philosophical contexts over the centuries and the multitude of examples presented therein.

To conceive a proposition, p, requires one to at least perform a mental act that results in one being in a mental state with content p. Conceiving p is, then, an essentially representational act, one that does not require one to have ever perceived or have had immediate cognitive access to all the things represented by that proposition. Moreover, conceiving p is a non-factive act, given that it is supposed to be compatible with the world actually being such that $\sim p$ is true, so one can successfully conceive p although what p represents is not the case.

Conceiving p and, consequently, the susceptibility of this proposition to the performance of this act, is supposed to be epistemically efficacious in the sense that doing so provides some defeasible evidence that what p represents is possible. Some have maintained that the insusceptibility of p to the performance of this act provides some evidence that $\sim p$ is necessary. However, this claim is much less widely accepted than the former. Many recognize that there are numerous reasons, based on one's own cognitive limitations, that one might fail to conceive p (e.g., its complexity) and, hence, failure to do so might be more about these limitations than the necessity of what $\sim p$ represents (see, for instance, Tidman 1994: 297) So I focus herein on the claim that the conceivability of a proposition is (defeasible) evidence for the possibility of what it represents.

If conceiving p is supposed to be the evidence by which one comes to know that the arrangement of things p represents is possible, and one has such modal knowledge, then, obviously, one must be able to perform this act of conceiving p. Were one unable to do so, then the conceivability of p clearly could play no (direct) epistemic role in one's knowing that what it represents is possible. Moreover, one must be able to cognize when one is conceiving p (or when one has done so), otherwise the evidence supposedly provided by doing so would be unavailable. Thus, conceiving p, if it is to be epistemically efficacious with respect to modal knowledge, must be accessible to one, in being both performable and consciously so. Finally, and significantly, conceiving p is not supposed to complement other evidence one might have for accepting that what p represents is possible. Rather, it is supposed to be one's *only* evidence and, a fortiori, one's primary and basic evidence. If one knows that what p represents is possible, it is only via conceiving p. For those, then, who regard conceivability as crucial to modal knowledge, a plausible account of what it is to conceive is indispensable to a satisfactory modal epistemology.

What has been said so far about conceiving is accepted by anyone who regards the conceivability of a proposition as epistemically efficacious. However, this account certainly does not suffice for a satisfactory modal epistemology. There are ever so many consciously performable representational activities whereby one comes to be in a mental state with a given propositional content—speaking, thinking, believing, supposing, considering, entertaining, etc.—and this general account provides no insight into which of these specifically is the one that is epistemically efficacious with respect to modal knowledge. Still, this general account does present some conditions on the apt specific account. The earlier discussion regarding the ontological basis of modal knowledge presents more. Most importantly, that discussion presents the condition that the apt specific account of conceiving must make it perspicuous how, in conceiving p, one is engaged not merely with p but with those things it represents. For it is the constraints inherent to these (non-representational) things in the world that determine what is possible (and necessary), and if conceiving p is one's only evidence for the possibility of what p represents, this evidence must be of and, hence, come from those inherent constraints.

In the next section, I show that no heretofore proposed account of conceiving meets all these conditions; in the one following, I show that no account of conceiving could.

15.3 There is no apt specific account of conceivability

In this section, I canvass many specific accounts of what it is to conceive a proposition, *p*, in order to show that on none is doing so plausibly epistemically efficacious with respect to knowledge of the possibility of what *p* represents. Earlier, at the outset, I stated that I think one has a good deal of modal knowledge. Here, for the purposes of argument, I assume some uncontroversial examples of it, in particular, knowledge of certain propositions representing what is impossible. My primary strategy is to show that on a given specific account of what it is to conceive *p*, one is able to conceive a proposition that represents an arrangement of things that is impossible. Showing this indicates that that account should be rejected as one on which conceiving is epistemically efficacious with respect to knowledge of possibility. If, on a given account, one were able to conceive both propositions representing what is possible and those representing what is impossible, one would need some further means of distinguishing among the conceivable propositions the ones that represent what is possible. The conceivability of a proposition is, however, supposed to be the sole source of evidence regarding the possibility of what it represents.

Some might be unmoved by the successful implementation of this strategy. If I am able to show that on a given account of what it is to conceive a proposition, one is able to conceive both those representing what is possible and what is impossible, then, one might claim, all I have shown is that that account is *fallibly* epistemically efficacious, that in some cases it might provide adequate evidence for the possibility of what is represented by *p*, but in other cases not. Unless there is evidence for the impossibility of what *p* represents, the conceivability of that proposition should be taken as evidence for the possibility of what it represents. Given the widespread acceptance of fallibilistic views of knowledge in contemporary epistemology, such an account of conceiving might be deemed good enough for modal knowledge.

This sort of response is mistaken. The conceivability of a proposition, *p*, does not provide fallible (or prima facie) evidence for the possibility of what *p* represents; it provides no evidence at all. In each case in which a specific account of conceivability is shown to be compatible with conceiving both propositions that represent what is impossible and ones that represent what is possible, this laxness can be accounted for in terms of a lack of engagement with those constraints inherent to things that are the ontological basis of necessity and possibility simpliciter. Thus, conceiving on that account has, literally, nothing to do with the basis of modal knowledge and so cannot be epistemically efficacious with respect to it.[4]

There have been many proposals for what, specifically, it is to conceive a proposition. These can be distinguished as *negative* accounts or *positive* ones.[5] On a negative account of conceiving, a proposition, *p*, is conceivable if, in considering *p*, one does not discern it to be contradictory. On a positive account, *p* is conceivable if one is able to perform consciously an act that presents what is represented by *p* as being the case.

Any negative account of what it is to conceive a proposition faces immediate and seemingly conclusive objections. Consider *p*, the proposition that the man next door is not the man I saw at the grocery store, where the man I saw at the grocery store is in fact, yet unbeknown to me, the man next door. Given that the man next door *is* the man I saw at the grocery store, what is represented by *p* is impossible; no thing could fail to be itself. Nevertheless, I can come to be in a mental state with content *p*, consider that content, and not be able to discern a contradiction in it. Thus, *p* is conceivable, on this account, though what it represents is not possible. There are many similarly problematic propositions. Consider *g*, Goldbach's conjecture, that every even number greater than two is the sum of two primes. Goldbach's conjecture is a mathematical claim and, as such, is plausibly either necessary or impossible; it has not been proven true, nor has

a counterexample been produced.[6] One can consider *g* and not discern a contradiction, but one can also consider ~*g* and not discern a contradiction. Both *g* and ~*g* are, then (negatively) conceivable, yet what is represented by one is impossible. Consider, as well, the propositions that water is not H_2O, that an object is entirely red and entirely green (at the same time), that a man metamorphoses overnight into a giant sentient insect. In considering these, one can discern no contradiction, so each proposition is (negatively) conceivable. However, what each represents is, presumably, impossible.

A negative account of conceivability is compatible with conceiving what is in fact impossible. But perhaps this is not surprising, for this sort of approach is misguided in principle. First of all, one might fail to discern a contradiction in a given proposition, *p*, because of one's own cognitive limitations or because of the complexity of *p* rather than because *p* is free from contradiction; in which case, *p* would be conceivable though what it represents is impossible. This casts doubts on the reliability and scope of this approach. Much more importantly, though, when considering whether a proposition is contradictory, one reflects on the concepts associated with the terms that express that proposition. These concepts, the representational means one has to cognize and recognize and classify (non-representational) things in the world need not be—and most often are not—based on or attuned to those features of things that can plausibly be regarded as the inherent constraints that are the ontological basis of necessity and possibility. It is to be expected, then, that there is a lack of correspondence between how one conceptualizes things and how those things must be or could be in themselves.

Indeed, it is this lack of correspondence that enables one quickly to find many examples of (negatively) conceivable propositions that represent what is impossible. One can conceptualize a particular thing, e.g., a man, in ever so many ways that are independent of the constraints inherent to that thing, and so there are propositions about it that are not contradictory, yet nonetheless represent an impossible arrangement of things. Likewise, water need not be conceptualized as H_2O, although that stuff itself—water, i.e., H_2O—cannot fail to be H_2O, and so the proposition that water is not H_2O is not contradictory, yet nonetheless represents what is impossible. Similar points can be made with respect to the other examples of negatively conceivable propositions that represent what is impossible.

Given the gap between how one conceptualizes a thing and the constraints inherent to that thing—the basis of what is necessary and possible for it—any negative account of conceivability, which depends on discerning contradictions and, hence, the concepts representing a thing, is abortive. Still, some attempt to defend the epistemic efficacy with respect to modal knowledge of a negative account of what it is to conceive. Thus, to this end, Chalmers introduces the general distinction between *prima facie* and *ideal conceivability* (Chalmers 2002: 147–149; Menzies 1998). This distinction presupposes some specific account of conceivability. Supposing, then, a negative account like the one just considered, a proposition, *p*, is prima facie (negatively) conceivable if it is conceivable to one on first appearances or even some consideration; in this case, *p* is prima facie negatively conceivable if, after some consideration, one does not discern *p* to be contradictory. A proposition, *p*, is ideally (negatively) conceivable, if it is conceivable on "ideal rational reflection", that is, if a perfect rational agent fails to discern a contradiction in *p*.

The distinction is thought to be helpful to those who wish to defend the epistemic efficacy of conceivability, for if one maintains that in order for the conceivability of a proposition, *p*, to provide evidence for the possibility of what *p* represents, *p* must be ideally conceivable, then one is able to dismiss at least some of the examples of (negatively) conceivable propositions that represent what is impossible. Both Goldbach's conjecture and its negation are not ideally conceivable. A perfectly rational agent would, presumably, eventually identify some contradiction in

the false proposition and would also discern a contradiction in any other false proposition from an apriori domain. Maintaining that it is only ideal (negative) conceivability that is epistemically efficacious with respect to knowledge of possibility would also address the concern, noted earlier, about the reliability and scope of negative conceivability in light of cognitive limitations and the complexity of some propositions.

But this attempts to respond to the relatively trivial objections to negative conceivability while leaving unaddressed the most telling one, and by means that are ineffectual. It is by no means clear what "ideal rational reflection" is, but it is clear that human persons do not reflect in any ideal way, nor could they given their many unavoidable shortcomings. One of the conditions on the epistemically efficacious account of conceiving is that one be able to perform the act, but if what it is to conceive a proposition is to ideally conceive it, one cannot. So the notion of ideal conceivability is really of no use in a satisfactory modal epistemology.[7] Moreover, the most telling objection against negative conceivability is that one can (negatively) conceive a proposition—like that water is not H_2O—that represents what is impossible yet is not contradictory. It is not as if this proposition, or the others presented to this point, might contain a hidden contradiction; it is straightforward enough to see that it does not. Thus, it is undeniably negatively conceivable, though it represents what is not possible.

Whatever it is to conceive a proposition, it seems hard to deny that a proposition like that water is not H_2O is conceivable. It is too simple, too ordinary. So propositions like this have vexed those who maintain that (negative) conceivability is epistemically efficacious with respect to modal knowledge since Kripke and Putnam and others began discussing so-called *aposteriori necessities*; propositions like that water is H_2O, that gold has atomic number 79, that Hesperus is Phosphorus, that this wooden lectern is not made out of ice. The negations of all these propositions, which represent impossible arrangements of things, are negatively conceivable.[8] In response, defenders of the epistemic efficacy of negative conceivability have proposed another way of distinguishing acts of conceiving. One can consider a proposition (say, for the purposes of determining whether it is contradictory), focusing merely on the concepts associated with the terms expressing that proposition and ignoring how the world actually is. Or one can consider a proposition (say, again, for the purposes of determining whether it is contradictory), taking into consideration the concepts associated with the terms that express that proposition, but also considering to what those concepts in fact apply. Chalmers call the former *primary conceivability* and the latter *secondary conceivability*.[9]

The negation of a necessary aposteriori proposition, such as that water is not H_2O, is not secondarily (negatively) conceivable, for when one takes into consideration that water is indeed H_2O, one immediately discerns a contradiction. There is a sense, then, in which one can deny that a proposition like that water is not H_2O is conceivable. Still, there are other propositions—like that an object is entirely red and entirely green (at the same time) and that a man metamorphoses overnight into a giant sentient insect—that are secondarily conceivable and that represent what is impossible. So secondary conceivability does not address the most telling objection to negative conceivability. When one primarily conceives a proposition, p, one ignores the world, considering only the concepts associated with the terms expressing p. Such an account of conceiving is certainly of no use in acquiring modal knowledge, for such knowledge must come by engaging with things in the world. It is the constraints inherent to these that are the basis of necessity and possibility. The distinction between primary and secondary conceivability is, therefore, a red herring with respect to modal knowledge.

I conclude that the immediate objections to any negative account of what it is to conceive a proposition, in a way that is supposed to provide evidence for one's knowledge of possibility, are indeed conclusive. Despite the proposed distinctions (viz., prima facie v. ideal, primary v.

secondary), there remain propositions that are negatively conceivable and yet represent what is impossible. No positive account, though, is any more useful to a satisfactory modal epistemology.

On a positive account, one will recall, p is conceivable if one is able to perform consciously an act that presents what is represented by p as being the case. This characterization does little to specify the general account of conceivability articulated in the previous section. A number of suggestions have been made over the years, though, as to what the specific representational act is that presents what is represented by p as being the case. It has been suggested, then, that what it is to conceive a proposition, p, is to *understand p* or *believe p* or *entertain p* (in the sense of including p, with other propositions it entails, in a coherent description)[10] or *conjecture p* or *suppose p* or *mentally simulate p*, etc. (see Gendler and Hawthorne 2002: 7–8 for further suggestions.) However, even those who accept that the conceivability of a proposition provides some evidence for the possibility of what it represents recognize that these suggestions are futile. One can readily perform these acts with a proposition that represents an impossible arrangement of things. One can understand that an object is entirely red and entirely green (at the same time); one can believe that Hesperus is not Phosphorus; one can entertain the proposition that a man metamorphoses overnight into a giant sentient insect, etc.

A more stringent account of what it is to conceive is needed, one that does not permit one to conceive a proposition that represents what is impossible. One proposal, present since at least Hume, is that what it is to conceive a proposition, p, is to *imagine p*. Understanding conceivability in terms of imaginability has come to be standard in contemporary investigations of modal epistemology through the work of Stephen Yablo (1993) and subsequent highly influential discussion (see, e.g., van Inwagen 1998; Chalmers 2002). On this sort of account, for a proposition, p, to be imagined, it is not necessary that one form a visual mental image of what p represents. Imagining, in the relevant sense, need not involve any sensory image, for one is supposed to be able to imagine propositions that are not sensible at all, such as that there exists an invisible being that leaves no trace on perception (Chalmers 2002: 151) or that God is omnipotent or that there is now a sound beyond the range of one's hearing.[11] To imagine a proposition, p, then, one must merely call to mind a scenario in which p is true (see Yablo 1993: 29 and, following him, Chalmers 2002: 150). Doing so is thought to provide some evidence that what p represents is possible.

If this is all there is to imagining in the pertinent sense, however, it seems one can easily imagine propositions, such as that water is not H_2O or that Hesperus is not Phosphorus, that represent what is impossible. Famously, though, Kripke and many following him maintain that one *cannot* imagine these propositions. With respect to, at least, the negations of aposteriori necessities, one can only imagine propositions that represent qualitatively indiscernible arrangements of things (see Kripke 1980: 103–4). Despite one's efforts, one does not imagine Hesperus, i.e. Phosphorus, when attempting to imagine that Hesperus is not Phosphorus; rather, one imagines distinct planets that merely look like Hesperus (Phosphorus). According to Kripke and his followers, then, one can be mistaken about what it is that one takes oneself to be imagining.

This raises the question of what exactly one must do to imagine a proposition in the way that provides evidence of the possibility of what that proposition represents. The question becomes even more pressing in light of Peter van Inwagen's discussion of the matter. van Inwagen accepts that the imaginability of a proposition, p, provides some evidence of the possibility of what p represents. However, since the basis of possibility is in things, in accepting the possibility of what p represents, one is committed to a coherent reality incorporating that possible arrangement of things among a world of others. Recognizing this limits what one is supposed to be able to imagine. To imagine, say, that there is a naturally occurring purple cow—a proposition that most

would not hesitate to accept as representing a possibility—one would have to be competent with a great many details of chemistry or bovine genetics that no one currently is. This is because, according to van Inwagen, in order to really imagine that there is a naturally occurring purple cow, one would have to have some idea how such a thing is in the world, how, for instance, purple pigment is encoded in cow DNA (see van Inwagen 1998: 78). Some find this an unreasonably high standard for imaginability, prompting the proposal of less demanding accounts. For example, Heimir Geirsson proposes one on which to imagine a proposition, p, one must enhance with sufficient detail the scenario called to mind in which p is true, enough to show that it contains no obvious feature that would undermine the plausibility of the possibility of what p represents, but not so much as to demonstrate how it is possible (see Geirsson 2005).

I think that any question about what one must do to imagine a proposition, p—how much detail one must call to mind in order to do so and, relatedly, whether one is, in fact, imagining p when one takes oneself to be—indicates confusion. These questions are simply inconsistent with one's familiar intentional capacities. To call to mind a scenario in which proposition p is true, one must merely bring p before one's mind. To do so, one need only consider p. If there is any question as to what exactly one is considering (and it is hard to see, setting aside the present context, how any such question could ever arise), one need only *stipulate* what is before one's mind. Hence, when I imagine that there are carnivorous rabbits on Mars, I simply bring to mind, via this very proposition, a scenario in which there are carnivorous Martian rabbits, that is, one in which it is true that there are these rabbits.[12] I think that the strongest grounds for what I am maintaining here can be obtained just by calling to mind a proposition, any proposition, and considering how farfetched it would be for another to claim that one has failed to call precisely that proposition to mind.[13] There is, therefore, no room for doubt regarding what one calls to mind and whether one can call to mind a scenario in which a proposition is true.

If this is so, one can imagine any proposition one can express; as I have said elsewhere, the imagination is utterly promiscuous.[14] So I can imagine any number of propositions that represent impossible arrangements of things: that I am a pastrami dip, that I am a pastrami dip that is not identical to itself, that $2 + 2 = 5$, that there are round squares. Some, however, have suggested that there are indeed limitations on what one can imagine or that imagining, despite being stipulative, is not entirely idle with respect to modal knowledge. One is supposed to be unable to imagine "morally deviant" propositions, such as that hurting a child for the fun of it is not wrong, and other outré propositions similar to the sort I just listed (see Gendler 2000; Weatherson 2004; Kung 2010: 629). Yet I seem to have no difficulty imagining such propositions. The suggestion (or assertion) that I cannot is inconsistent with the intentional capacities with which I am so familiar. I am dubious, then, that there are considerations that could render the suggestion even remotely plausible. Peter Kung recognizes that what one imagines is largely stipulative (see Kung 2010). Nonetheless, he maintains that what one imagines, when it is accompanied by a mental image, contains a qualitative core—which is not stipulated—that can provide some evidence regarding the possible arrangement of things. But with any mental image, its interpretation requires stipulation; one must stipulate the lighting in which the image is supposed to be viewed, the perspective, the curvature of space, etc. Kung, then, seems to underestimate the extent to which what one imagines is stipulated. Therefore, I see no limits on the utter promiscuity of the imagination, nor any part of an act of conceiving qua imagining that is epistemically efficacious with respect to modal knowledge.

Accounts of what it is to conceive a proposition, p, in a sense that is epistemically efficacious with respect to knowing that what p represents is possible are either negative—requiring one to fail to discern a contradiction in p—or positive—requiring one actively to present what is represented by p as being the case. The foregoing discussion shows that any proposed specific

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account, negative or positive, is consistent with one conceiving a proposition that represents what is impossible. There is, therefore, no specific account of conceivability that is relevant to acquiring modal knowledge. This failure of all accounts is some indication that the very idea that conceivability is pertinent to a satisfactory modal epistemology is mistaken.

15.4 There could be no apt account of conceivability

To some, the preceding section might have seemed like a gratuitous, even frustrating, interlude. The insuperable problems for any specific account of what it is to conceive a proposition, on which its conceivability is supposed to provide evidence for the possibility of what it represents, might have been apparent given merely what conceivability in general is supposed to be and the discussion of the ontological basis of modal knowledge. Indeed, I think direct and compelling arguments for the epistemic idleness of conceivability can be made on these grounds. But the idea that conceivability is epistemically efficacious with respect to modal knowledge is so prevalent and so entrenched in philosophical tradition that any such direct argument would likely be judged facile and dismissed. Now, in light of the futility of a host of specific accounts of what it is to be conceivable in an epistemically efficacious way, I hope the force of these direct arguments can be appreciated. The considerations they raise illuminate why the specific accounts fail.

The ontological basis of modal knowledge is (and must be) the actual constraints inherent to the things in the world, the constraints whereby these things are necessarily or possibly certain ways. Any evidence for the possibility of what some proposition, p, represents must indicate those actual constraints inherent to the things represented by p (whereby those things are possibly certain ways). A mental state that is epistemically efficacious with respect to knowing that what p represents is possible must, then, indicate those actual constraints. Conceiving p is an essentially representational act, one that is non-factive. One can successfully conceive p without what p represents being the case. The things p represents might not be as p represents them, or they might not even be at all. Of course, the conceivability of p is not supposed to provide evidence that what it represents is in fact the case; it is supposed merely to provide evidence that what it represents is possible. However, the possibility of what p represents is determined by the actual constraints inherent to those things p represents. If one can conceive p even in the absence of the things p represents, then conceiving p is not sufficiently grounded in those things to indicate *any* of their features, neither their mundane qualities nor those inherent constraints whereby they possibly are certain ways. Therefore, if conceiving p is non-factive with respect to what p represents, it is also non-factive with respect to the possibility of what p represents. In which case, the conceivability of p provides no evidence for that possibility.

A further and perhaps deeper problem with the idea that the conceivability of a proposition, p, provides evidence for the possibility of what p represents is that conceiving is an essentially representational and crucially propositional act. The general issue here is that a state that represents propositionally, that is, presents some thing(s) as being a certain way, cannot itself be evidence that what it represents is so, because there is *always the question of whether the things it presents are in fact as presented.*[15] Thus, even if, somehow, despite conceiving p being non-factive, in conceiving p one comes to be in a representational state that presents the things that p represents as having those inherent constraints whereby they possibly are as p represents them, this would not suffice as evidence for those things in fact having those inherent constraints. This is because the question would remain whether those things do in fact have the inherent constraints they are presented as having. To answer this question requires direct, non-representational engagement with those things themselves—engagement that reveals that they indeed have those inherent constraints. Yet conceiving p is supposed to be the *only* evidence one has that what p represents

is possible and, hence, the only evidence one has that the things p represents have the inherent constraints whereby they are possibly as represented by p. Conceiving p, therefore, presents no evidence that what p represents is possible.

These two arguments illuminate why all the specific accounts of conceivability as epistemically efficacious with respect to modal knowledge fail: in conceiving, one is not appropriately engaged with the things in the world whose inherent constraints are the source of necessity and possibility. Consequently, on any specific account, one can conceive what is impossible. I see these arguments as giving expression to—and vindicating—a basic concern that nags anyone who reflects at all critically on the supposed connection between conceivability and modal knowledge. One wonders how the performance of a mere representational act can provide insight into how things in the world, existing independently of any mind, could be (or even are). What I have shown is that it cannot.

15.5 A better way

Conceiving a proposition, p, can provide no evidence for the possibility of what p represents. Conceivability, therefore, is epistemically idle with respect to modal knowledge. The notion does not deserve its long-standing centrality in discussions of modal epistemology; indeed, it seems not to deserve any role in any philosophical discussion. Given that one has modal knowledge, it must come by means other than conceiving propositions. Considering why conceivability is epistemically idle provides some guidance on how to pursue a satisfactory modal epistemology.

The actual constraints inherent to the things in the world are the source of necessity and possibility, so modal knowledge must begin with them. Since necessity and possibility have a common source, one should expect, and attempt to elaborate, a unified modal epistemology, one that accounts for one's knowledge of necessity and possibility in largely the same way. This account should make clear how one engages with the constraints inherent to things in themselves directly—relationally rather than representationally—and so should not rely crucially on one's conceptual or apriori capacities. It seems, then, that a satisfactory modal epistemology will share some similarities with the apt account of perceptual knowledge. This indicates that one can expect the intentional relation of *acquaintance* to play a pivotal role.[16]

Notes

1 For the purposes of the present discussion, I take modal knowledge to be propositional.
2 See Hume (2007: 26). For historical discussion of the putative connection between conceivability and necessity and possibility, see Boulter (2011), Alanen (1991), and Alanen and Knuuttila (1988).
3 Yablo (1993: 2). Yablo's paper has become a contemporary *locus classicus* in discussions of modal epistemology.
4 I should note, in this connection, that the problem with an account of conceivability on which one is able to conceive both propositions that represent what is possible and ones that represent what is impossible is not that on such an account one would not be able to know, merely by conceiving a proposition, p, that one knows that what p represents is possible (because conceiving p is compatible with what p represents being impossible). In other words, the problem with such a lax account of conceivability is not that it violates some so-called *KK Principle*, according to which, in order to know p, one must know that one knows p. Rather, the problem with an account of conceivability that is lax in this way is that this laxness indicates that conceiving is not engaged with the basis of modal knowledge in the requisite way for it to be epistemically efficacious.
5 This distinction is introduced in Chalmers (2002). Chalmers notes a connection here to James van Cleve's distinction between *weak* and *strong conceivability* (Chalmers 2002: 156), according to which p is weakly conceivable if one does not see that p is impossible and p is strongly conceivable if one sees that p is possible (see van Cleve 1983). The connection is tenuous. Whereas Chalmers's distinction is meant

to characterize different specific accounts of what it is to conceive, van Cleve's is meant to be an articulation of two such specific accounts. Moreover, van Cleve elaborates these accounts in terms of *intuition*: to see that *p* is possible is to intuit the truth of *possibly p*. A modal epistemology in terms of intuition is usually regarded as a competitor to any relying crucially on conceivability, and it raises distinct epistemic issues. Hence, I set aside van Cleve's discussion of weak and strong conceivability.

6 This much-discussed example was introduced, for the same use to which it is put here, in Kneale (1949: 79–80).

7 See Geirsson (2005: 291) for a similar point.

8 Indeed, Putnam makes the challenge explicit: "it is conceivable that water isn't H_2O. It is conceivable but it isn't logically possible [i.e., possible simpliciter]! Conceivability is no proof of logical possibility [i.e., possibility simpliciter]" (see Putnam 1975: 233).

9 See Chalmers (2002: 156–159). These two ways of considering what is expressed by a sentence is the basis of so-called *two-dimensional semantics*. See Jackson (1998: 47–52) for additional introductory exposition of this framework.

10 See Tidman (1994) for the sources of these suggestions. See, as well, van Cleve (1983: 36) and Yablo (1993: 9–12).

11 See Tidman (1994: 299). Yablo makes clear that he does not take imagining to require sensory images at Yablo (1993: 27 n. 44).

12 The example comes from Seddon (1972), who can be construed as denying that one can conceive such rabbits. Geirsson concurs. See Geirsson (2005).

13 Wittgenstein makes a similar point with respect to imagining King's College on fire. See Wittgenstein (1958: 39).

14 See Fiocco (2007). For similar animadversions regarding taking conceivability to be imaginability, see Byrne (2007).

15 In Fiocco (2019), I employ similar considerations to argue for a naïve realist account of perception; hence, perception must be *relational* rather than *representational*.

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