**From Modal Skepticism to Modal Empiricism**

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**0. Introduction**

It’s common practice in philosophy to appeal to our considered judgments as data for theory construction. And when it comes to theorizing about matters modal epistemic, the most obvious source of such data is our considered judgments about what’s metaphysically possible and what isn’t. However, an initial concern is that there are a number of possibility claims about which there is much controversy: some philosophers seem to see possibilities where others do not.

Not to worry; we can sidestep this problem by restricting ourselves to *Moorean* possibility claims as the primary data for theory construction. Here I’m appealing to the familiar notion of a Moorean claim in epistemology proper. To follow David Lewis’s characterization, they are “those things we know better than we know the premises of any philosophical argument to the contrary”.[[1]](#footnote-1) Moorean claims are (nearly) universally held by non-philosophers and philosophers alike, and in virtue of the doxastic and epistemic force and vivacity they seem to enjoy. They are the ones we know if we know any at all in the domain at issue, and they retain their resilience and buoyancy in the face of skeptical worries. Now the paradigm case of a Moorean *perceptual* claim is of course G.E. Moore’s famous example of his knowledge that his hands exist. But of course there are also very many Moorean *possibility* claims as well. Clear examples include the following: I can cross the street now without being hit by a car; the chair in your office can be moved about; my car can be painted pink; that child’s ball can get stuck on the roof; the lime in the kitchen can be cut in half.[[2]](#footnote-2) By contrast, clear examples of non-Moorean possibility claims include those about disembodied souls, zombies, group consciousness, personal fission, and maximally perfect gods. The latter *aren’t* universally (or nearly universally) held by both non-skeptical philosophers and non-philosophers alike; they *aren’t* among the possibility claims we know if we know any at all; they *don’t* have the kind of doxastic and epistemic force that renders them resilient and buoyant in the face of skeptical worries.

One might object to the current proposal on the grounds that the relevant Moorean data is too meager to serve as the basis for a modal epistemology robust enough to justify the “remote” possibilities involved in some philosophical thought experiments. I reply that this shouldn’t be of primary concern to the modal epistemologist; she should rely for her theorizing on data of the highest quality, and let the epistemic chips fall where they may. Now it’s of course tempting (and thus understandably common), when theorizing about our knowledge of possibility, for philosophers to rush past consideration of possibility claims we take for granted in everyday life, and head straightaway to the task of justifying claims about possibilities in the modal stratosphere.[[3]](#footnote-3) But I think this approach gets things precisely backwards: start with the nearby, and get to the remote if you can manage it.

The latter will therefore be the approach I will take in this paper. I will sketch an epistemology for ordinary possibility claims taken for granted and relied upon in daily life by the philosopher and the non-philosopher alike. I will argue that such claims trace back to empirical sources, such as observation and observation-sensitive theory. A happy consequence will be that the account explains and vindicates perhaps most of the possibility claims of interest to the armchair philosopher. The plan of the chapter is as follows. In section 1, will consider the extant account that accords most closely with our desiderata: Peter van Inwagen’s modal epistemology.[[4]](#footnote-4) In section 2, I will argue that while his account draws the boundaries of modal knowledge in plausible places, it lacks the resources to plausibly ground such knowledge. In section 3, I sketch the rudiments of an adequate account of our knowledge of possibility, according to which our knowledge of possibility traces back to empirical sources via deductive, inductive, and abductive inference. Finally, in section 4, I briefly discuss the theory’s theoretical virtues that make it epistemically attractive.

**1. Van Inwagen’s Modal Skepticism**

Peter van Inwagen argues for a position he calls *modal skepticism*. However, van Inwagen is a modal skeptic of a peculiar sort.[[5]](#footnote-5) To see of just what sort he is, it will help if we first say a few words about the sort of skeptic he is not. A common form of skepticism starts with the idea that we can know nothing with respect to a certain class of beliefs, because the kind of evidence that issues from the source that individuates that class is *inherently* incapable of conferring sufficient justification. One notorious version of this form of skepticism identifies the class of *perceptual* beliefs -- beliefs about the external world based on perception -- as unknowable, due to the inherent evidential shortcomings of perceptual experience. Thus, I don’t know if I have hands, or even whether there are material objects at all, for my evidence for such beliefs – my perceptual experiences – just doesn’t have what it takes to render external-world beliefs known or knowable. Call skepticism of this sort, *Radical Skepticism*.

By contrast, there is another sort of skepticism that doesn’t write off the relevant class of beliefs due to general worries about its source or basis -- the source or basis in question may well be capable of yielding knowledge or justified belief. The problem is that the source’s capacity to justify beliefs is *severely limited*; in fact, its justification-conferring ability is limited to beliefs involving the practical concerns of daily life. So according to this form of skepticism, we may well have lots of knowledge regarding matters “close” to the practical concerns of daily life. But the source’s justificatory power drops precipitously when it comes to beliefs significantly remote -- and perhaps even modestly remote -- from the familiar realm of common experience. Van Inwagen gives a helpful illustration of this sort of skepticism in terms of our judgments of distance by means of unaided sight.[[6]](#footnote-6) Such judgments are fairly accurate when it comes to short-range distance claims, such as “that bookcase is about 10 feet from my desk”, “my house is about 50 yards from the intersection”, and even “that mountain is about 25 miles away”. But when it comes to sight-based distance judgments about objects of significant distance, such as claims about the distance of our moon from the Earth, our capacity for making accurate judgments drops precipitously. Call skepticism of this sort, *Remoteness Skepticism*.

In light of the previous distinction, we may categorize Van Inwagen’s modal skepticism as of the Remoteness sort. Thus, Van Inwagen does *not* think that our sources of modal justification are *inherently* incapable of giving us knowledge or justified belief about what’s impossible, possible, or necessary. Indeed, he is at pains to point out that we have lots of modal knowledge about matters that figure prominently in the practical concerns of daily life.

However, when it comes to modal matters remote from these concerns, we’re kidding ourselves if we think we can know such things, or even have reasonable beliefs about them.[[7]](#footnote-7) Thus, I can know such humdrum modal claims as that my car is capable of being red, that my table doesn’t have its current location of absolute necessity, and that there could’ve been fewer cats than there are. On the other hand, my powers of modalization are just too feeble for me to know such things as whether the property of maximal excellence is possibly instantiated or whether there’s a possible world in which I exist and yet nothing material exists -- or even whether there could’ve been naturally purple cows; as such claims are remote from the practical concerns of daily life.

As mentioned above, Van Inwagen thinks we know the truth-values of many modal propositions, and beyond those we can know, there are many that enjoy various degrees of justification. Whence comes such knowledge and justification? Van Inwagen gives different answers, depending on the sort of modal claim in question.[[8]](#footnote-8) On the one hand, there are lots of modal claims that most philosophers, Van Inwagen included, take to be non-mysterious and unproblematic. Thus, consider the following claims:

1. It’s necessary that all bachelors are unmarried.

2. It’s impossible that there is a barber who shaves all and only those men

 who don’t shave themselves.

3. It’s necessary that 2+3=5.

(1) is known by reflection on the meanings of words; (2) is known by rules of deductive inference; and (3) is known by mathematical reasoning. Thus, for these sorts of modal claims, Van Inwagen sees no mystery as to their sources.[[9]](#footnote-9) Although it’s a bit inaccurate, let’s refer to these sorts of modal claims as *analytic*. Thus, call a modal claim *analytic* if its truth-value is determined, if determined at all, by such things as concepts and logical or mathematical principles, and call a modal claim *non-analytic* if its truth-value cannot be so determined.

Further, we can *extend* our modal knowledge by combining our analytic knowledge with propositions known via observation. Thus, consider

4. Possibly, there are cows.

(4) isn’t purely “analytic” in the sense that (1)-(3) are. For while (4) involves a deduction from actuality to possibility, it wouldn’t be justified without perceptual knowledge of cows. Thus, we also have non-mysterious modal knowledge grounded in a mix of analytic and empirical sources.

So a good deal of our modal knowledge isn’t mysterious. However, we also have modal knowledge whose sources are unknown. As one might have guessed, this sort of modal knowledge is non-analytic in character. All modal propositions in this category are of two sorts: claims about unactualized possibilities, and claims about non-analytic necessities.[[10]](#footnote-10) Thus, consider

5. I could’ve bought a PC instead of a Mac.

6. Necessarily, water is H2O.

On Van Inwagen’s account of modal knowledge, (5) – a claim about the ability to do otherwise -- is a piece of “basic” modal knowledge, in the sense that one can know it, or at least be *prima facie* justified in believing it, without inferring it from other beliefs. Furthermore, the warrant-conferring basis of (5) is utterly unknown according to Van Inwagen.[[11]](#footnote-11) By contrast, (6) isn’t a simple case of basic modal knowledge. To see this, consider the following deduction:

5.1. It’s impossible for something to be composed of different stuff.

5.2 Water is composed of H20.

6. Therefore, water is necessarily H20.

How do we come to know or justifiedly believe (5.1) and (5.2)? Well, (5.1) is a piece of basic non-analytic modal knowledge, which is equivalent to the claim that things have their fundamental composition of metaphysical necessity. And (5.2) is a fact about how the world is put together; we learn from scientists that water is composed of hydrogen hydroxide. This is of course a piece of empirical knowledge. We can thus put these claims together to deduce the modal claim that water is necessarily H20. In this way, we can extend our modal knowledge and justified belief considerably.[[12]](#footnote-12)

At this point, we have a complete list of the sorts of modal claims Van Inwagen takes to be justified:

1. The “analytic” cases, which consist of claims that can be determined to be necessarily true or false by means of reasoning with logical, semantical, and mathematical principles.
2. Inferences from actuality to possibility.
3. “Basic” non-analytic modal knowledge concerning practical matters of daily life.
4. Inferential non-analytic modal claims reasoned out from a combination of basic non-analytic modal knowledge and empirical facts about how the world is put together.

By now, one might well be wondering whether Van Inwagen can meaningfully be considered a modal skeptic at all: aren’t the classes of modal claims listed above sufficient to derive the truth-value of just about any modal claim we wish? Thus, consider modal claims of type (iii): the class of basic, non-analytic modal knowledge. We’ve seen, via (6) above, that Van Inwagen takes us to know that determinism is false, due to our basic modal knowledge that we could’ve done otherwise. But if he allows modal knowledge as substantial as *that* to count as basic, then isn’t the sky the limit?

No. For recall our characterization of Van Inwagen’s modal skepticism as a form of Remoteness Skepticism: we may well have plenty of modal knowledge, but it’s restricted to matters close to the practical concerns of daily life. Well, according to Van Inwagen, our basic knowledge of our ability to do otherwise is a belief of just this sort. By contrast, there are very many philosophical claims -- claims involving, e.g., the possibility of Anselmian beings[[13]](#footnote-13), disembodied existence[[14]](#footnote-14), zombies[[15]](#footnote-15), personal fission[[16]](#footnote-16), and conscious cognitive systems composed of the population of China[[17]](#footnote-17) -- that are remote from such concerns; as such, and unlike the belief that we could’ve done otherwise, they are beyond the reach of justification. Therefore, Van Inwagen has a principled way to differentiate properly basic from improperly basic modal beliefs, and he can do so in a way that entails a worrisome degree of skepticism about modal claims.

In light of these distinctions, we are now able to give a tolerable characterization of Van Inwagen’s Remoteness Modal Skepticism: Say that a modal claim is *High* if it’s remote from the practical concerns of daily life (e.g., that maximal greatness is possibly exemplified); *Low* if it’s close to such concerns (e.g., that my car could’ve been painted red); and *Middling* if it’s somewhere between High and Low in terms of remoteness (e.g., that naturally purple cows are possible). Then we can characterize Van Inwagen’s modal skepticism broadly as the thesis that *the vast majority of High and Middling non-analytic modal claims aren’t knowable or capable of* prima facie *justification*. This, then, is Van Inwagen’s modal skepticism.

**2. Worries for Van Inwagen’s Account**

What to make of van Inwagen’s modal epistemology? As a starting point for evaluation, recall that according to Van Inwagen, we have at least some non-analytic knowledge of various possibilities, and that such knowledge isn’t based on other propositional evidence – at least not completely. Rather, such knowledge is basic, in the sense that it’s non-inferential and yet *prima facie* justified. However, as we’ve seen, Van Inwagen has no positive account of the *sources* of the justification for these beliefs. This is of course unsatisfying with respect to our current inquiry into the nature and scope of our knowledge of possibility. But more to the present point, it makes Van Inwagen’s account subject to two related problems.

First, it makes the selectiveness of his modal skepticism seem *unprincipled and ad hoc*. For on the one hand, he wants to hold onto common sense, and say that we have at least some knowledge of possibility, viz., that of the humdrum sort. But on the other hand, he wants to say that the extent of such knowledge doesn’t go beyond – or not much beyond – the humdrum. The former is basic, while the latter is not, and thus the latter requires justification in terms of inference and argument. Now if he had a view about the source of justification for possibility-beliefs, then he could say that the former issue from that source, while the latter do not. And in this way, he could provide a principled basis for saying that some possibility-beliefs are justified, while others are not. However, Van Inwagen thinks we are completely *in the dark* as to the sources of justification for these beliefs.[[18]](#footnote-18) Now one might think that an answer to this question is staring him in the face. For there are a plethora of accounts of the basis of our knowledge of possibility, and at least one of these may well be correct. However, for a number of reasons, van Inwagen finds all such accounts unsatisfactory.[[19]](#footnote-19) Thus, without an account of the sources of justification for our possibility beliefs, his selective skepticism is unprincipled, and thus appears *ad hoc*.

This unprincipled selectiveness gives rise to the second problem with his view: it’s *unstable*. To see this, consider the following commonly assumed rationale for why conceivability must be at least *prima facie* evidence for possibility:

**The Popular Argument**: If conceivability isn’t at least *prima facie* evidence for possibility, then we aren’t justified in believing even humdrum possibility claims (e.g., that my coffee table could’ve been two feet to the left of where it is now). But obviously, we *are* at least *prima facie* justified in believing humdrum possibility claims; therefore, conceivability is at least *prima facie* evidence for possibility.

What I’m calling ‘the Popular Argument’ is analogous to a Moorean response to Radical Skepticism about perceptual knowledge. Thus, one might respond to the latter sort of Radical Skeptic by saying that if we’re not entitled to trust our perceptual experiences as a basis for our beliefs about the external world without first justifying the reliability of perception, then I’m not entitled to hold such humdrum perceptual beliefs as that this is a hand. But obviously, I do know that this is a hand. Therefore, I am entitled to trust my perceptual experiences as a basic source of information about the external world. And while such experiences are not infallible, in that they do not entail the existence of the actual external world, they are nonetheless a source of defeasible, *prima facie* justification for such beliefs.

Similarly, the proponent of the Popular Argument responds to the Radical Modal Skeptic by saying that if he’s not entitled to trust our conceivings as a basic source of information about what’s possible, then he’s not entitled to hold such humdrum possibility claims as that his table can be moved about, that his car can be painted a different color, or that his daughter’s ball could get stuck on the roof. But obviously, he does know such claims. Therefore, he’s entitled to trust his conceivings as a basic source of information about what is metaphysically possible. And while such conceivings are not infallible, in that they do not entail that their putative referents are metaphysically possible, they are nonetheless a source of defeasible, *prima facie* justification for such beliefs.

The Popular Argument, then, when combined with van Inwagen’s mysterianism about the source of our knowledge of possibility, poses a credible threat to the plausibility of Van Inwagen’s Remoteness Modal Skepticism. For (i) if he admits that we have at least some non-analytic possibility-knowledge, (ii) if he has no account to take the place of the accounts of conceivability he rejects, and (iii) if The Popular Argument gives us reason to think that it *must* come from conceivability if we are to have any such knowledge at all, then there’s pressure to reason, in G.E. Moore Shift fashion, that *something* must be wrong with Van Inwagen’s case against conceivability as evidence of possibility, even if we can’t say what that is. Therefore, without a positive account of the source of our knowledge of possibility, Van Inwagen’s modal skepticism looks to be unstable.

In short, Van Inwagen holds to a form mysterianism about the source of our knowledge of non-analytic possibilities. This leaves him open to the charge of holding to an unprincipled selectiveness in his skepticism about certain sorts of possibility claims. And this, in turn, raises serious worries about the stability of his position. Therefore, if our tentative hypothesis of Remoteness Modal Skepticism is to survive the criticisms that plague van Inwagen’s view, we will have to come up with a positive account of the sources of justification for our possibility-beliefs.

We’ve seen that van Inwagen’s mysterianism about the sources of possibility-knowledge undermines one’s credence in his views about the scope and limits of such knowledge. However, despite its inadequacies, it appears to point in a promising direction. For although our knowledge of non-analytic possibility claims isn’t quite captured in terms of closeness to one’s practical concerns, the broader, more promising idea in his account is that *there is a strong connection between knowledge of possibility and our actual experience*. I’ll try to sketch a more accurate account of that connection in the next section.

**3. Toward A Positive Account of Sources**

In what follows, I will follow our approach to modal theorizing by sketching an account that aims primarily to capture the data of Moorean possibility claims. We will therefore look at a number of cases in which it’s clear that we have knowledge, or at least justified belief, about the relevant possibility claim. To give away the punch line, such claims have at least one thing in common: they all trace back to our knowledge of the actual world.

To start with the simplest sort of case, I know that

1. The color of my car’s paint is silver.

is possible, since I know that it’s *actual* – I’ve seen my car, and the color of its paint is silver. My belief that (1) is possible can therefore be supported via a direct inference from actuality to possibility. So here is a simple, but clear, limiting case of knowledge of possibility grounded in knowledge of the actual world.

Moving to only slightly less unremarkable cases, consider:

2. My desk is moved to the middle of my office.

3. My car is painted blue.

Like (1), only the most radical sort of modal skeptic would deny that we can know that (2) and (3) are metaphysically possible (at least for anyone in my epistemic position). And like (1), belief that (2) and (3) are possibly true can be supported by our knowledge of the actual world. But unlike (1), neither (2) nor (3) is *actually* true. In what way, then, are they grounded in our knowledge of actuality? One way to account for such knowledge is via an inductive inference from actual to non-actual *tokens*. To be more specific, one may support their belief in the possible truth of (2) and (3) by reasoning as follows: based on perception, I know that other tables have been moved around in rooms, and that other cars have been painted different colors. Those states of affairs are therefore possible, since they’re actual. From such observations, I reason inductively that since a number of tokens of those types of states of affairs are possible, the token states of affairs denoted by (2) and (3) are probably possible as well: it’s probable that my office table can be moved to the center of my office, and that my car can be painted blue.

 However, even if one *could* reason in the way sketched above, it seems much less natural and much more tentative than an alternative way of reasoning from types to tokens when it comes to cases like (2) and (3). Thus, one might instead justify the possibility of such claims as follows: we can conceive of various types of states of affairs. Some of these are possible and some are not. However, we don’t know *which ones* are possible unless or until we observe some of their actual tokens. Actual tokens of a type of object or state of affairs thus function as demonstrations of the intrinsic metaphysical possibility of objects or states of affairs of that type – whether there is just one such token or infinitely many. Therefore, the possibility of conceived types of objects or states of affairs can be justified when they are backed by observational knowledge of one or more actual tokensof them, via *rational or intuitive induction*.[[20]](#footnote-20)

But what if I haven’t observed the tokens of types of states of affairs relevant to assessing (2) and (3)? It seems that I may yet be able to have knowledge or justified belief about those statements. For someone else may *tell me* that they’ve seen such things. My modal knowledge would thus be derivable from the observations of others via *testimony*.

Now suppose I have neither observational nor testimonial knowledge of cars being painted new colors or tables being moved around. Am I then unable to have knowledge, or justified belief, about the two claims? No. For if I’ve seen other sorts of objects moved around and painted, I can use these observations as a partial basis of a *folk theory* of how the world works. Our folk theory includes not only a folk physics about the behavior of inanimate objects, but also a folk psychology about the mental states and behavior of oneself and others.[[21]](#footnote-21) The theory receives confirmation in the usual ways that scientific theories receive confirmation, such as its ability to explain and predict the world as we experience it. On the basis of our folk theory of how the world works, then, I can reason that since ours is the sort of world in which middle-sized solid objects can be moved around and painted different colors, it’s possible for my table to be moved to the center of my office, and for my car to be painted blue.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Suppose the sorts of cases discussed above largely exhaust our knowledge of possibility. Still, it seems that we nonetheless have some *justified beliefs* about various possibility claims that go, at least to some degree, beyond them. Thus, consider van Inwagen’s naturally purple cow case.[[23]](#footnote-23) Van Inwagen is pessimistic about having reasonable belief about the possibility of naturally purple cows. He asks us to consider the following modal proposition:

4. Possibly, there are naturally purple cows.

He then points out that:

“A philosopher will confidently say that a (naturally) purple cow is possible. But he or she will not in fact have devoted any thought to the question whether there is a chemically possible purple pigment such that the coding for the structures that would be responsible for its production and its proper placement in a cow’s coat could be coherently inserted into any DNA that was really cow DNA – or even “cow-like-thing-but-for-color” DNA…Either the structural formula for such a pigment is already there, lurking Platonically in the space of chemical possibility, or it is not. And – so far as I know – no one has any reason to assign any particular subjective probability, high or low or middling, to the thesis that it is lurking there.”[[24]](#footnote-24)

Van Inwagen thus concludes that the epistemic status of (4) is inscrutable. However, this seems to be too extreme. For, granted, we may not *know* whether (4) is possible, and for the reasons he mentions here. But it’s hard to agree with him that (4) is *inscrutable*. For while it’s true that there are no naturally purple cows, there are nonetheless *cows*, and we know that these are naturally of various colors, though not, of course, purple. But if so, then there is good reason to be confident that the type of state of affairs involving the existence of naturally purple cows is *relevantly similar* to the actual states of affairs involving cows of various colors that we find in the actual world. And given that arguments from analogy are legitimate, we have reason to think that since the latter are possible (because they’re *actual*), so, probably, are the former.[[25]](#footnote-25) In this way, (4) receives at least *some* epistemic support from an argument from analogy between states of affairs involving actual cows and those involving naturally purple cows.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Now of course it’s often a messy and difficult task to determine whether the analogues in such arguments are sufficiently similar, and in the relevant observed respects, to justifiedly conclude that they are probably similar in the unobserved respect of being possible. However, this is true of arguments from analogy *in general*, and thus poses no *special* problem for arguments from analogy when applied to possibility claims.

So far, we’ve only used our account to justify relatively uninteresting possibility claims. However, as I will now argue, such methods can be extended to a number of philosophically interesting cases as well. So, for example, consider the claim that:

5. There is justified true belief without knowledge.

Can the possibility of (5) be supported solely by information about how the actual world works? I think it’s clear that it can. To see this, consider the following variation on Keith Lehrer’s Nogot/Havit case: Nogot, one of your colleagues, doesn’t own a Ford, but you have excellent but misleading evidence that he does: he’s long expressed the wish to own one, and you’ve seen him drive one to work for the last several weeks; you’ve seen something that looks just like a registration form with his name on it, etc. From this evidence, you justifiedly form the false belief that Nogot owns a Ford. And from the latter belief, you validly infer that *someone* at your work owns a Ford. As it happens, but unbeknownst to you, your colleague, Havit, owns a Ford. So your deduced belief is true and justified, but not knowledge.[[27]](#footnote-27)

The Nogot/Havit case is clearly different from the last two. In particular, it involves certain sorts of elaborate deception that few have experienced in the actual world. Nevertheless, our knowledge of its possibility can be supported by what we know of the actual world, and for reasons similar to those discussed in the previous cases. Thus, we have experience of people owning things, including cars; we have experience of ourselves having evidence for a false belief, as well as the testimony of others having such evidence; we have experience of people intentionally tricking others with false or misleading evidence; we also have experience and testimony of cases where people infer true things from false things. Finally, we have knowledge of our own psychology that we sometimes believe misleading evidence, and make fallacious inferences. We can thus use our observations and the testimony of others as the partial basis of a folk theory that justifies our belief in the possibility of the Nogot/Havit case.

**4. Virtues**

I have sketched an account of modal knowledge and justified belief. It builds off of the basic insights of van Inwagen’s work on the topic, but attempts to advance it, at least to some degree. Thus, like van Inwagen’s account, mine implies that our knowledge of non-analytic possibility is limited, for the most part, to the relatively humdrum. It therefore occupies the same genus with his account, as both are species of Remoteness Modal Skepticism.

On the other hand, our account of the epistemology of possibility is an advance over van Inwagen’s in a number of ways. First, ours gives *a positive account* of the sources of justification for our possibility-beliefs. As we have seen, van Inwagen offers no such account. We’ve also seen that this is a significant deficiency in his account, as the lack of a principled basis for distinguishing between modal knowledge and modal ignorance, when coupled with the Popular Argument, threatens to undermine the plausibility of his position.

By contrast, with our positive account of knowledge of possibility as grounded in our knowledge of actuality, we can at once explain the possibility-knowledge we do have, and offer a principled basis for distinguishing it from that which we don’t. In fact, our account provides a way to make the High/Low/Middling distinctions much more precisely than on van Inwagen’s account, and in a way that *explains* why Low and Middling possibility claims are justified, while High possibility claims are not. Thus, let’s distinguish between the three classes of possibility claim as follows. First, say that a possibility claim is *Low* iff it’s grounded in our knowledge of the actual world in the ways mentioned in (i)-(iv). Second, say that a possibility claim is *Middling* iff it’s not a Low possibility claim, but it’s nonetheless grounded in our knowledge of the actual world in the way mentioned in (v). And finally, say that a possibility claim is *High* iff it is neither a Low nor a Middling possibility claim – i.e., it can be properly grounded in none of ways (i)-(v) listed above. Then we can say that a possibility claim is justified iff it’s a Low or Middling possibility claim. In this way, we can give a principled basis for accepting humdrum possibility claims, while not accepting the exotic claims. And if so, then we can fend off the worries of a selective and unprincipled skepticism that plague van Inwagen’s mysterian version of Remoteness Modal Skepticism, and thus resist the force of the Popular Argument.

I’ve adopted a broadly Moorean approach to constructing a theory of our knowledge of metaphysical possibility. The account explains and vindicates both ordinary possibility claims and many philosophically interesting ones. These are clearly points in its favor. Beyond this, though, even a brief sketch of its theoretical virtues indicates its promise from an epistemic point of view. First, the theory is a very simple one, in that it only appeals to sources of evidence that are already accepted, viz., perception and the other sources we use to acquire knowledge of the actual world.

Second, the theory is conservative. For example, it makes no appeal to a suspicious or otherwise mysterious faculty of modal intuition to explain the data of Moorean possibility claims. Nor does it conflict with such data.

Third, the theory appears to have wide explanatory scope. On this score, we’ve already seen that it explains and vindicates the Moorean modal claims. We’ve also seen that it can explain our knowledge of possibility for at least one philosophically interesting sort of case, viz., standard Gettier cases. But a little reflection allows us to see the potential of our account to explain our knowledge of possibility in a large number of other philosophically interesting cases, such as: Kripke’s (1980) Godel/Schmidt case, Perry’s (1979) grocery store case, and Burge’s (1979) “tharthritus” case in the philosophy of language literature; Locke’s (1975) locked room case, and Frankfurt’s (1969) “Black and Jones” counterexamples against the principle of alternate possibilities in the free will literature; Goldman’s (1976) fake barn case in the epistemology literature; the ship of Theseus case in the personal identity literature; Singer’s (1972) shallow pond case, Thompson’s (1971) violinist case, and Foot’s (1967) trolley problem cases in the applied ethics literature; etc. These thought experiments and many others can be justified by inferences from the actual to the possible, where this is understood in the ways sketched above.

Before we leave the topic of the theory’s explanatory scope, it’s also worth noting that the theory provides a natural explanation for *why remote possibility claims aren’t Moorean*. In other words, it explains the widespread and perennially entrenched disagreement about “far out” possibility claims, such as those about the possibility of Anselmian beings, personal fission, disembodied souls, zombies, etc. For if all of our knowledge of possibility traces back to our sources of knowledge of the actual world via deductive, inductive, and abductive inference, then we would *expect* such claims to remain perennially contentious. For on the face of it, such sources can’t justify such claims. By contrast, this is surprising on modal rationalism. For *prima facie*, it is mysterious as to why our modal insight should peter out at all. It’s also *prima facie* mysterious, on the rationalist hypothesis, why the Moorean status of possibility claims would peter out at just the point where inferences from actuality peter out.

Fourth, our theory has significant unificatory power and fit. For the theory meshes nicely with what we have reason to believe in other areas, such as modal psychology, evolutionary explanations of the etiology of modal knowledge, etc. So, for example, Williamson (2007) and Nichols (2006) have argued independently that the ability to reason about nearby (but not remote) possibilities is conducive to survival, in virtue of giving us the ability to evaluate risks and opportunities. More could be said here, but perhaps what I’ve said is enough to suggest that a strong abductive case could be made for our theory of our knowledge of Moorean possibility claims.

**5. Conclusion**

I have argued for a version of modal empiricism for Moorean possibility claims. According to the account, knowledge of nearby metaphysical possibilities traces back to our knowledge of the actual world in several ways: (i) deductions from observed or testified-to actualities; (ii) inductive or track-record evidence from tokens of a type of observed or testified-to actuality (i.e., tokens a1-an of type F is possible (since actual), and so other tokens of F are probably possible); (iii) inferences via rational or intuitive induction from single tokens of observed actualities to all tokens of that type; (iv) our folk and scientific theories of how the actual world works; and (v) arguments from analogy or relevant similarity with the actual world. The account is attractive from an epistemic point of view: it’s a simple, conservative theory of wide explanatory scope and fit, and it offers a principled distinction between justified and unjustified possibility claims.

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1. Lewis (1999, 418). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Here I have given examples of Moorean *de re* possibility claims, but there are of course very many corresponding Moorean *de dicto* possibility claims as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A notable recent exception is Williamson (2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See, especially, van Inwagen (1998, 67-84). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The following discussion is based on Van Inwagen (1998), reprinted Van Inwagen (2001). All references below are to the latter version. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Van Inwagen (2001, 246). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Ibid*, 246-247: “My own view is that we often do know modal propositions, ones that are of use to us in everyday life and in science and even in philosophy, but do not and cannot know…modal propositions like [“It is possible for there to be a perfect being”, “It is possible that I exist and nothing material exist”, and “It is possible that there exist vast amounts of suffering for which there is no explanation”]. I have called this position “Modal skepticism”. This name was perhaps ill-chosen, since…I think that we know a lot of modal propositions, and…“skeptic” suggests someone who contends that we know nothing or almost nothing…however…there has been another sort of skeptic: someone who contends that the world contains a great deal of institutionalized pretense to knowledge of remote matters concerning which knowledge is in fact not possible…It is in this sense of the word that I am a modal skeptic.” [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The following discussion of Van Inwagen’s views about the sorts of modal knowledge we do have is based on *ibid*, 246-251. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Ibid*. Of course, one could rightly point out that mysteries remain here, but Van Inwagen’s point is that for a large class of modal claims to be individuated below, we lack even these *preliminary* sorts of answers regarding their sources of justification. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Here I have in mind Alvin Plantinga’s modal ontological argument. On this, see Plantinga (1974). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. I am of course here to the famous argument in Descartes (1985, CSM 2:54) for the real distinction between mind and body. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Chalmers (1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See, for example, Shoemaker and Swinburne (1984, 12-19). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Block (1976). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *Ibid*, 250: “Although I do not doubt that we have some modal knowledge, *I regard much of this knowledge as mysterious*. Some modal statements, I have said, we know by reasoning from what I have called “basic” modal knowledge – simple, obvious modal statements whose truth we are somehow in a position to know --… But how do we get started in this reasoning? How do we know the “simple, obvious” modal statements to be true? What is the ground of “basic” modal knowledge? *I do not know how to answer these questions*.” Italics mine. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. A systematic investigation and presentation of his reasons for rejecting such accounts falls outside the bounds of our current inquiry. However, I discuss his reasons in some detail in “Van Inwagen on Modal Epistemology” (ms.). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. There are no doubt reasonable worries about the *extent* of application with respect to this route to modal knowledge, but it should be less controversial that it applies at least to cases involving inferences to the possible existence of intrinsic qualitative duplicates of observed tokens of the type of entity at issue. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Timothy Williamson has independently appealed to our folk physics and folk psychology as at least a partial basis of our knowledge of possibility. The primary difference between his view and mine on this point is that Williamson ties our modal knowledge to our facility with counterfactual reasoning, whereas I make no commitment to such a connection. For a thorough exposition and defense of Williamson’s account of modal epistemology, see Williamson (2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Of course, if our modal claims can be supported by our folk theories, then it’s natural to think they can be justified by our scientific theories about how the world works as well. See the chapters by Fischer and Hanrahan in the present volume for detailed accounts of how this might go. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Van Inwagen (2001, 254). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. *Ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. See the chapters by Hawke and Roca-Royes in the present volume for excellent accounts of modal justification via analogy/relevant similarity. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. One could strengthen the justification here by combining different sources of modal evidence. So, for example, one could also appeal here to our folk theory of how the world works as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Lehrer (1965, 168-175). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)