Overcoming Modal Skepticism via Conceptual Engineering

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Abstract

The paper defends the view that that a significant part of metaphysics should be understood as conceptual engineering, and explores its epistemological advantages and metaphysical implications. It discusses the challenge raised by moderate modal skepticism, which points out the lack of reliable methods for verifying modal statements through thought experiments. As I argue, a normative stance on metaphysical methodology, understanding it as engaging in conceptual engineering project, justifies the use of this method. By adopting an approach where the method of cases offers reasons for adopting specific normative constraints on concept usage, the method becomes justifiable. Consequently, it can be employed to justify the revision of conceptual schemes and, in turn, validate certain modal claims about entities falling under the scrutinized concepts. The paper explores how this approach can methodologically enrich conceptual engineering-focused perspectives in metaphysics and examines its metaphysical consequences. In particular, it demonstrates that despite the mind-dependency of the method of cases results, it still leaves room for a metaphysically realistic viewpoint.

Metaphysics is concerned to a large extent with questions about modal facts. However, its methodology has been challenged by modal skepticism (e.g. van Inwagen 1998; Nozick 2001; Machery 2017, 2023), which casts doubt on our ability to justify claims about necessities, fundamentally questioning the extent of our metaphysical understanding. Therefore, modal skepticism not only impacts the methods of evaluation of metaphysical theories but also calls into question the value of existing theories concerning the structure of reality itself, challenging the foundation upon which metaphysical knowledge is built.

The recent version of modal skepticism (Alexander, Weinberg 2007; Machery 2017, 2023) highlights the foundational role of thought experiments in exploring metaphysical modal facts. It challenges the assumption that thought experiments can reliably lead to knowledge about metaphysical possibilities and necessities due to demographic differences and framing effects regarding verdicts on hypothetical cases.

In the paper, I discuss a reinterpretation of metaphysical methodology, arguing for a perspective where debates on metaphysical modality are understood as being partly normative and ameliorative. Under this understanding, the proper way of doing metaphysics is engaging in a conceptual engineering enterprise. I defend this approach by discussing a re-

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interpretation of thought experiments that is coherent with it. I show how adopting a normative account of the methodology of metaphysics can justify and show the method of thought experiments in a different light. According to this view, when we argue about the essential attributes of entities, we are not merely describing how things are but advocating for how we should conceive of them. In particular, by considering hypothetical examples while evaluating metaphysical theories, we impose normative constraints on our concepts. As I demonstrate, the arguments made by moderate modal skeptics require the adoption metaphysical methodology seeing it as conceptual engineering.

Section 1 presents the arguments of modal skeptics regarding the reliability of the method of cases. Section 2 introduces a motivation for reinterpretation of metaphysical methodology, suggesting that modal disputes concern normative claims about how we should construct conceptual schemes that partly determine modal properties of entities rather than merely descriptive facts about what these properties are. Finally, section 3 presents how the use of counterexamples in thought experiments can be justified within the proposed reinterpreted metaphysical approach and discusses its metaphysical consequences, especially concerning the mind-(in)dependence of its results.

1. The Challenge from Moderate Modal Skepticism

The starting point for modal skepticism is the observation that philosophers, when arguing in favor of a claim concerning metaphysical possibility or necessity, often refer to hypothetical situations and judge whether a certain state of affairs is possible, impossible, or actual. For example, to argue that placing a stone on Mars is possible, one might consider a scenario where a stone is placed on Mars and conclude that it is plausible (probably yes). Similarly, to argue that a bachelor being married is impossible, one could imagine a bachelor getting married and then assess whether he remains a bachelor (likely not, setting aside legal technicalities or undisclosed divorces).

The thought experiment is a method in which we examine a hypothetical scenario and make judgments about it for certain epistemic purposes. Such purposes vary; some thought experiments illustrate theories, others provide puzzles that advance scientific or philosophical discussions. A particularly significant use of thought experiments, the method of cases, is to provide

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counterexamples (think e.g. about Gettier Cases, or thought experiments discussed within the discussion on personal identity). Below, when I will talk about thought experiments I'll have that particular kind in mind, limiting my considerations to that one, although influential, kind of thought experiments.

As a matter of fact, philosophers use the method of cases to establish modal facts. For instance, when Chalmers (1997) argues against physicalism's claim that consciousness is necessarily reducible to physical states, he presents a counterexample through a thought experiment involving an entity with the same physical structure as a conscious person but lacking phenomenal experience. Similarly, Gettier (1963) challenges the notion that knowledge is necessarily justified true belief by offering thought experiments where someone has a justified true belief on some proposition, but does not know it. These examples highlight the initial step in the argument for modal skepticism: metaphysics relies heavily on thought experiments to justify modal claims.

However, some proponents of modal skepticism argue that this method is unreliable. They point to empirical studies showing demographic differences or framing effects on thought experiment verdicts (Machery 2017; Feltz & Cokely 2019; Machery & Stich 2023; Sękowski et al. 2023; but see also: Knobe 2021; 2023). They further argue that if we reject the idea that e.g. the personality of the thought experimenter determines whether indeterminism is necessary for free will, we should conclude that investigating hypothetical scenarios is an unreliable tool for establishing modal truths. Therefore, just as we would discard measuring instruments in scientific practice if they were imprecise or inadequate, so too should we abandon the method of cases. This brings modal skeptics to the following conclusion: the methodology of metaphysics is in a serious trouble, since the foundational method to establish modal truths should be rejected (Alexander, Weinberg 2007; Machery 2017, 2023). An important feature of this critique I aim to overcome is the presupposition inherited from the traditional philosophical methodology picture that the primary aim of method of cases is to uncover modal facts, similarly to scientific experiments that seek to discover empirical facts.

Note that the skeptical challenge refers specifically to the method of cases, and a specific kind of modality, namely, metaphysical modality (as opposed to e.g. nomological modality). This specificity is why Machery labels such a

perspective moderate modal skepticism. Nevertheless, given that metaphysical modality is central to the interests of metaphysics, just as thought experiments are fundamental to its methodology, the argument presented poses a significant challenge to both metaphysics and its methodology.

2. From Challenge to Change: Towards Normative Metaphysics

The solution to addressing modal skepticism is to reinterpret metaphysical methodology. In this section, I explore the motivations behind the view that metaphysics should be viewed as conceptual engineering. I discuss Machery's proposal, suggesting an alternative interpretation of thought experiments, and I show why his approach, while enriching the project of normative metaphysics, falls short for those seeking to employ the method of cases to justify certain modal claims.

Conceptual engineering is a methodological approach that has gained a lot of attention in the last few years. According to it, philosophers rather than being focused on establishing conceptual truths, should aim at evaluating or changing our concepts understood in a linguistic or psychological way (Isaac et al. 2022). Thereby, it provides a way of thinking about philosophical problems in a normative way rather than a descriptive one.

Such an approach has been adopted in the past by a lot of philosophers, among others by Carnap in his project of explication (Carnap 1950), the proponents of the Lvov-Warsaw School, while providing arguments for constructing concepts (Łukasiewicz 1905/2022) or Foucault in his projects of conceptual genealogy (Foucault 1971). Additionally, it has been argued that actually a lot of philosophical debates might be understood as metalinguistic negotiations (Plunkett 2015, Thomasson 2017). When it comes to the advantages of such an approach, a normative view of philosophical methodology, seeing it as a kind of conceptual engineering, has been supported by a variety of its methodological, epistemological, and metaphysical benefits (Thomasson 2017; 2020, forthcoming; Sękowski 2022a). Let us focus now on a particular epistemological advantage of such an approach: a way to address the challenge of modest modal skepticism.

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A step towards such a methodological turn has been made by Machery himself, (2017), who also defended the recent version of modest modal skepticism. He states that since we can't defend the method of cases as providing justification to modal claims, we should think about whether we can use that method to justify a prescriptive project that aims at replacing concept-constitutive beliefs with new ones in line with a certain (social, ethical, theoretical, etc.) aims. The method of cases 2.0, as he calls it, as an empirical method of studying responses to thought experiments can provide a first step for this project. It reveals possible ways in which the concept may play the role, by showing what kind of inferences people are inclined to draw from the use of that concept. That step might fuel the conceptual engineering either by suggesting desired revisions, if the discovered inferences are in line with certain aims, or revealing the needed-to-be-fixed fallacies, if, given certain aims, these inferences are intrusive.

Machery's method of cases 2.0 is undeniably a valuable tool for a proponent of the normatively-oriented metaphysics. However, it also significantly diverges from the goals of the original method of cases. The difference between the method of cases and its 2.0 version lies not solely in the shift from revealing conceptual or modal facts to becoming part of an ameliorative project. The difference lies in the fact that while the method of cases 2.0 can provide reasons to initiate concept revision or inspire it, it doesn't directly justify any modal claims traditionally the method of cases was aimed at. Furthermore, while it is an intriguing approach for the future, it does not apply to past philosophical practices, since as an empirical method, and contrary to the way in which thought experiments have been used, the method of cases 2.0. requires a huge sample of verdicts on thought experiments.

Presenting a method that not only enriches the methodological toolkit of conceptual engineering-focused metaphysics but also captures the core of previous philosophical ways of acting lends greater plausibility to the project of understanding metaphysics through the lens of conceptual engineering. This insight aligns with arguments posited by those who argued that conceiving philosophical methodology as conceptual engineering is not only a fitting guide for future endeavors but also provides a plausible interpretation of what philosophers have largely been engaged in history (Thomasson 2017, forthcoming; Andow 2020; Sękowski 2022a, 2022b). The significant advantage

of this perspective is that it introduces a new picture of philosophical methodology that remains compatible with the history of philosophy, treating conceptual engineering as a seamless continuation of the philosophical tradition. Consequently, conceptual engineering can draw upon the richness of past philosophical achievements, enhancing its methodological foundation. Interpreting past theories and arguments along the conceptual engineering lines has the potential to inform future projects by offering results received in the past and argumentative strategies applicable to forthcoming philosophical enterprises.

3. Method of Cases in Service of Normative Metaphysics

Similarly to Machery, I propose reinterpreting the method of cases as a part of conceptual engineering endeavour. In contrast to him, I aim to show how this method can be reinterpreted to justify its past uses, thereby connecting the conceptual engineering turn more closely to the historical philosophical tradition. The defended interpretation illustrates how the method of cases can justify conclusions in metaphysical arguments. Let’s turn to the details of this approach, its ability to address skeptical challenges, and its implications for metaphysics.

Contrary to the presupposition of the debate on the method of cases, according to my proposal, the primary aim of the method of cases is not to uncover modal facts but to offer reasons for reevaluating our conceptual frameworks. These changes concerning the modal features of entities under ameliorated concepts result in modifications to the modal discourse, and the way in which these concepts are used. Normative arguments are presented for adopting a specific conceptual scheme that entails certain modal commitments. These arguments don't rely on direct insight into modal reality but are justified by expectations of the roles scrutinized concepts or conceptual schemes should play, advocating for a shift in the norms governing their use (see Sękowski 2022a; 2022b).

To grasp this idea, note that the textual analysis of a lot of thought experiments reveals that when presented, their verdicts aren't solely justified by their obviousness but by arguments. Proponents of the so-called mischaracterization objection argue that intuitions don't play a justificatory

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role in the method of cases or in philosophical methodology overall (see, for example, Cappelen 2012; Deutsch 2015; Horvath 2022; 2023). Since intuitive verdicts on thought experiments are justified by arguments independent of their intuitiveness, there's no need to rely on intuition as a source of justification for the claim a thought experiment aims to support. According to proponents of the mischaracterization objection, this addresses the skeptical challenge. If thought experiment verdicts don't justify the modal claims concluded from arguments with their help, empirical results on the unreliability of those verdicts don't undermine the use of the thought experiment method.

However this response comes into trouble when considering the justification for the premises of arguments supporting thought experiments' verdicts. Consider the argument that Smith in Gettier's thought experiments doesn't know that p because he is right about p merely by luck (Horvath 2022). As e.g. Chudnoff (2017) or Nado (2016) suggest, the premise that one cannot be right on p by sheer luck if one knows it seems to be justified by its intuitiveness, not by further justification. In response, Horvath argued that there's no experimental philosophy works on intuitions about general features of concepts, so although we can be skeptical towards the reliability of our verdicts about thought experiments, there's no reason to doubt the reliability of our intuitions of concept's general features (see Horvath 2023). However, this answer is unsatisfactory due to research beyond experimental philosophy, particularly from developmental psychology, that show significant demographic variations in judgments about the general features of concepts, e.g., knowledge (Baxter Magolda 200; Karabenick, Moosa 2005).

Despite the problems with the mischaracterization objection, we can adopt its perspective that verdicts do not serve as evidence for thought experiments' conclusions. We can also shift our focus to arguments that justify these verdicts, as they argue. However, to effectively address the skeptical challenge, we should move away from looking for a reliable source of evidence in the method of cases and instead adopt a view that demonstrates why it's useful to embrace a particular view on a scrutinized concept. I call for discarding the reliability-centric approach to thought experiment justification. The reason for this is, however, not the belief that our intuitions about thought experiment verdicts constitute modal facts (for such accounts, see Thomasson 2012; Ásta

2013). Even if we don't embrace them, adopting the stance that arguments formulated within the method of cases provides reasons to revise a conceptual scheme based on our needs makes the tracking of modal facts unnecessary. Consequently, there's no need to require reliability for thought experiment verdicts. The justification for the use of the method of cases lies in our expectations regarding the concept under scrutiny or the broader functions the entire conceptual scheme aims to fulfill. If one shares or finds these expectations useful, the entire argument is justified, pushing the project of ameliorating a certain concept forward.

This interpretation of the method of cases aligns with approaches to conceptual engineering that uses the functions a concept should serve as a guide for the project (e.g. Plunkett, Sundell 2013; Simion, Kelp 2020; Thomasson 2020; Queloz 2021; Nado 2021). Besides the methods outlined in such accounts, it illustrates how a traditional and widely-used method, like the method of cases, can be incorporated into these projects, adding to the toolkit of metaphysicians willing to think about that discipline along the lines of conceptual engineering that is function-based.

Let us focus on the metaphysical consequences of this perspective. A key and broad consequence is that claims about modal reality end up being partly dependent on our needs. For instance, whether it's necessary for a “conscious agent” to be a biological organism might be partly tied to what the concept of a "conscious agent" is meant to achieve for us. The purposes steering our current interest in the concept can vary widely, ranging from legal or scientific concerns to ethical or entertainment-related ones (see Burgess, Plunkett 2013). Consequently, the answer to the question of the necessary properties of consciousness may differ for those approaching the concept for legal purposes, considering the challenges of AI development, those developing software for entertaining online games, or cultural anthropologists interpreting cultures that worship personal God, or animated members of flora.

However, at the same time, it's crucial to recognize that despite metaphysical claims depending on contingent purposes, once we establish our expectations for the scrutinized concept or entire conceptual framework, it becomes independent of our choices whether a specific concept revision succeeds in fulfilling the established functions. Therefore, while, for instance, the decision

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to focus on the concept of consciousness for legal purposes, defending the rights of a certain group of artists in response to AI-generated products, is a choice, it's not a choice whether the law incorporating that concept successfully ensures income for artists when someone uses an AI-generated product based on someone's work (for similar arguments with respect to conceptual engineering in general see: Thomasson (2020).

The normative aspect of conceptual engineering-focused metaphysics is expressed through our expectations for the conceptual scheme. However, the application of this conceptual scheme to reality and its success in fulfilling its role are mind-independent. Moreover, the fact that the justification within the method of cases is based on normative reasons doesn't rule out that other methods in metaphysics might refer to a kind of justifications that refer e.g. to claims about the nature of things or relations between them. In this regard, the proposed project is realistic in a crucial sense and aligns with various realistic approaches which accept to some extent the mind-dependency with respect to the choice of conceptual scheme or the way in which we're interested in the world (e.g., Putnam 1987, Jago 2023). Nonetheless, it adopts a more epistemologically responsible approach, as it avoids an ambition to justify modal conclusion of the method of cases solely with reference to mind-independent facts about modal reality, while providing reasons to accept certain modal claims. This is just a more self-aware way to fulfill our needs of modal inquiry with the help of the method of cases.

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Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Amie Thomasson, Twan Stiekel and Niklas Dahl for reading previous versions of this paper and for a thoughtful discussion of the material during my research visit at Dartmouth College in 2024. The visit and the work were funded by the Kosciuszko Foundation Grant.