Agentive Modality and the Structure of Modal Knowledge

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An important part of our epistemic lives is dedicated to consider things that are not a part of our nearest surroundings. When thinking of home when abroad, for example, the distance is spatial. When thinking about the future and the past, the distance is temporal. When we consider what could have happened or could yet happen (what if I had done things different? what if I do this instead of this?), the distance is *modal*. We guide our action in our surroundings by judgments about these more remote matters. We want to say that we do it with reason, or justification, but what does it mean to act justifiably on the light of reasons about something that is not, at least on first sight, in our most direct grasp? The question also applies to theoretical concerns. Philosophy itself is plagued by questions about modal subject matters—and for questions that are not obviously modal, often it is useful to use modal devices. Why does this make sense? And how can we justify those judgments? Arguably, the first question is metaphysical, while the latter is epistemological.

This thesis is an attempt to approach this general issue from an epistemological perspective. However, this does not mean that other dimensions of the problem can be abstracted away fully. Rather, the approach I have taken is integrationist, in the sense that I have tried to bring to the fore questions about how the epistemological questions can integrate into the larger context of the philosophy of modality. For this reason, I do not think that modal epistemology is just the study of the mechanisms by which we form justified modal opinions. In my reconstruction, in fact, modal epistemology has to contemplate four clusters of problems:

1. the problem of describing the structure of modal thought (the *structure* question),
2. the problem of identifying the function of modal thought (the *function* question),
3. the problem of characterizing the justification mechanisms for modal thought (the *source/justification* question), and
4. the problem of the amelioration of modal thought (the *revisionary* problem).

Traditionally, the focal point of modal epistemology has been the source question. In this thesis, and in particular in Part I, however, I have focused rather on the structure and functional questions. I do this for several reasons. *First*, because the answers to these questions induce constraints on the kinds of theories that we can propose about the source question. If we think of modal thought as a structured whole with multiple parts, one may ask if a

single source of justification is indeed at work in all of them, or if on the contrary, we should think that there is a plurality of potential sources of justification. This may also bear on the standards that we use to ascribe modal knowledge in different contexts. In effect, the approach I take towards the descriptive question makes it natural for me to see the source question as misguided when it is taken as a quest for *the singular* source of modal knowledge and justification. Furthermore, I am tempted to grant that all candidate sources of justification for which we have evidence of (unlike, let's say, "rational intuition") are viable sources of justification for our modal opinions; I might even grant that there might be yet undiscovered sources of justification—mechanisms that perhaps *some* agents could apply that are entirely out of reach to *us*. The real questions about the plurality of potential sources of modal justification are not if they are viable, but if they are *any* good, and if they are, *how good* they are. *Second*, I focused on the descriptive and function questions because they act as the interface between modal epistemology and the adjacent disciplines, like metaphysics and the philosophy of mind/cognitive science. On the one hand, one might have the impression that modal thought matches, in some cases and somehow, some important facts about the world–how we think about how the world could be depends on how the world is. Obviously, we cannot make sense of this idea without some idea about the metaphysical facts involved. On the other, modal thought is a natural phenomenon, with a natural history of sorts, that we can try to reconstruct by examining the functions that it serves and making informed hypothesis about the mechanisms by which it could have evolved. [1]

So, what are the functions of modal thought? In the thesis I approach this indirectly, by identifying the projects where modal thought is involved which are indispensable for us as rational agents—projects that we cannot fail to engage in unless we defect on our responsibilities as rational agents. The idea of a rationally required project (RRP for short) I take from Enoch & Schechter (2008). They identify 4 RRPs: a) the project of making sense of the world, b) the project of deliberation, c) the project of planning, and d) the project of self-evaluation. Arguably, modal thought is necessary for all these projects. Given this, it follows that the indispensability of modal thought for these projects gives epistemic support to modal thought as a whole. But clearly, if we think of modal thought as a complex structure, then more fine-grained distinctions need to be made about what parts of modal thought are indispensable: the general argument for the indispensability of modal thought does not vindicate all expressions of modal thought except in a generic way. In order to

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1   There is a third reason which I don't pursue explicitly in the thesis, but that I think it is important to mention. By focusing on the structure and functions of modal thought, we get in a position to consider modal thought as what we might call an *engineering* target. We can ask what it takes for an agent to have modal thought in the sense of the question of how, if we could, one would endow an agent with the capacity to make modal judgments. While it is not clear whether such investigation would yield any positive results, adopting the perspective that it requires seems to afford many fascinating questions. There is something to the idea that to understand a mechanism deeply one often has to try to implement it on one's own. On this idea I take inspiration from Dretske's "A Recipe for Thought" (2002) and Peter Langland-Hassan's *Explaining Imagination* (2020).

make the necessary distinctions we need to introduce additional concepts of indispensability that are relative to ways of carving out modal phenomena, either within those ways of carving them out or between ways of carving out modal phenomena. I argue that this is exactly what happens in some debates about the necessity of essentialist thinking for modal thought–for example, in Roca-Royes' (2012) criticisms of Williamson (2007).

Underlying that debate there are also concerns about the structure of the justification of modal beliefs. In particular, there is a background concern about whether some ways to justify modal claims involve a vicious form of circularity. I treat this problem in chapter 3 of the thesis. It is a plausible (foundationalist) requirement of a complete theory of the justification of modal claims that, at its most basic level, it does not rely on background modal beliefs; the rejection of this constraint represents the adoption of a form of holism.[2] However, fulfilling this requirement is enormously difficult, in part because modality is itself something that we use in order to explain the nature of all sorts of things; it seems to be a feature of our most basic conceptual apparatus (a Kantian thought that people like Brandom (2008) take in stride). From a purely synchronic perspective (if we consider modal thought and its structure at as slice in time—as it presently stands, for example), it is tremendously difficult to avoid some form of holism. From a diachronic perspective, however, the problem might be tractable. Our capacity to make reliable modal judgments might have evolved from the use of our capacity to make reliable non-modal judgments of other sorts.

Chapter 4 sketches an account of how that would go, by providing a genealogy of the conceptual devices that underlie modal thought. Taking inspiration from a model by Manolo-Martinez (2015) where agents acquire the capacity to track modal truths in their environment by purely bodily mechanisms, I propose that we should think of the modal conceptual framework as an extension of an earlier conceptual framework dedicated to the production of judgments about the future. Predictions can be justified and still fail. Rationalizing those failures, agents can come up with the idea that those failures were contingent, in the sense that they could have succeeded—the associated notion of possibility (proto-possibility) is that of an alternative course of events. The notion of this notion of possibility corresponds to the origin of the conceptual framework of modality. In order to connect this proto-possibility concept our most usual notions of possibility, the notion needs to be extended as to cover also the actual case as a possibility. Further extensions of the framework are needed to capture the diversity that modal phenomena exhibit for agents like us. In particular, it is important to generate modal notions that, unlike the types of modality associated with courses of action, make no reference to agents—modality as a feature of the world as it were. Following Vetter (2016), but introducing some differences, I argue that this could be done by

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2   This dilemma is at the base of some debates between empiricist and rationalist modal epistemologies. For some empiricists, for example for empiricists who appeal to our capacity to track affordances in perception, it may be important to find mechanisms for justifying modal claims atomically, without reference to other modal claims.

appealing to a process of abstraction, with some potential caveats. In any case, my proposal provides an answer to the question of how we could arrive at a modal conceptual framework without having to recourse to previous modalizing competences. On the other hand, it also suggests that the introduction of modality into a conceptual framework could change the overall character of previously possessed concepts; this is something that might hold in the model for temporal notions, for example.

The picture that emerges of modal thought places special importance to what we might call agentive modality: the kind of modalities involved in action, such as ability and know-how. In my preferred construal, our modal framework is an extension of a more limited modal framework dedicated to handling these modalities. Part II of the thesis deals with various problems that emerge from trying to understand this type of modality. The main takeaways from this part of the thesis are these: a) agentive modality is often sensitive to context—arguably, it is necessary to characterize abilities in terms of something like situations or positions (I offer an analysis of relative imaginability in terms of being in a position to imagine something), b) agentive modalizing involves the evaluation of *ways*, which have a modal profile but don't seem to be reducible to possibilities, which forces us to look into ways to make sense of non-trivial ways to handle states which are not necessarily possible, and c) that in order to make sense of how things could behave in impossible states, we need to make sense of the subject matter of the counterfactual talk that we use to describe those states, which is not an easy task and for which many existing theories of subject matters are to various degrees inadequate (cf. Yablo 2014). Above all, these points suggest that even if agentive modality can be seen as the source of our modal conceptual frameworks, it is not in any way a simple or primitive system of distinctions. Rather, describing it to any moderate degree of satisfaction (at least it seems to me) requires that we deploy and even design more sophisticated tools for analysis. To do so is to enter plainly into the domain of what Strawson called revisionary metaphysics—or in more recent jargon, conceptual engineering. It also is work for another day.

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