

## Counterfactuals, Modal Knowledge, and Understanding\*

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**ABSTRACT.** In this essay, I attempt to diagnose and show the importance of a structural problem that affects Williamson's counterfactual epistemology of modality. First, I provide a general, even if somewhat heuristical, description of the requirements that a realist epistemology of modality must fulfil. The requirements are analyzed and used for interpreting various controversial choices that Williamson and other philosophers make when theorizing modal knowledge. I then proceed to explain why a more thorough examination of the integration of Williamson's view of understanding and of his restrictive epistemology of modality leads to the uncovering of a tension that jeopardizes Williamson's robust realist tenets. I argue that a similar problem (or perhaps different problems with similar underlying reasons) befalls other realist accounts and show why various extant solutions are insufficient. The paper concludes with a reappraisal of the tasks that modal epistemologists have hitherto ignored or treated only collaterally, which may also be interpreted as a critical analysis of the limits of older and newer conceptions of metaphysical modality.

**Keywords:** modal epistemology, realism, metaphysical modality, philosophy of language, understanding, counterfactuals

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## 1. Introduction

The counterfactual epistemology of Williamson (2007) has been one of the most hotly debated contemporary accounts in modal epistemology. Despite the ample attention this theory has received, I contend that one fundamental problem of Williamson's epistemology has not been discussed conclusively in the literature. Besides diagnosing the problem in its specific articulation in Williamson's work, I aim to show that this difficulty is the symptom of a more general deficiency that affects many realist accounts of modalities. The crux of my argument against Williamson's counterfactual-based account is the following: the way in which modal knowledge is explicated must quite plausibly align with the way modal expressions are used in linguistic exchanges. However, the minimal constraints Williamson imposes on meaning seem to be at odds with the very strict conditions that Williamson's analysis applies to the way we develop counterfactual scenarios. In order to deliver the wanted logical equivalence between metaphysical modality and certain counterfactual conditionals, Williamson has to maintain that we preserve a set of constitutive truths in every counterfactual scenario we imagine, a constraint that seems too strong, therefore implausible, especially against the background of his view on meaning and understanding. As we will see, similar and equally implausible constraints were proposed in related imagination-based theories of modal knowledge.

In what follows, I will briefly describe Williamson's view on the connection between counterfactuals and metaphysical modality. Then, I will discuss the main requirements that an adequate realist epistemology of modality must fulfil, and I will put into perspective some of the criticisms that Williamson's theory and other accounts have received. I will proceed with a description of Williamson's view of understanding, which I will subsequently apply to modal expressions. Section 6 contains the full explication of the tension that appears when we attempt to integrate Williamson's perspective from the philosophy of language with his very demanding epistemology of metaphysical necessity. An investigation of other realist accounts encounters similar quandaries. The final part will attempt a reappraisal of this difficulty from the perspective of important tasks and solutions that have been hitherto overlooked or minimized in modal epistemology.

## 2. Williamson's account of modal knowledge

Williamson aims to give an account of our knowledge of modality that is grounded in our ordinary cognitive capacities. The main thesis of this account is that our capacity to handle metaphysical modality (that is, to form modal knowledge) is a

byproduct of our natural ability to develop and entertain counterfactual suppositions (Williamson 2007, 162). Williamson argues that the following relations hold between metaphysical modalities and counterfactual conditionals:

$$(N) \Box A \equiv (\neg A \Box \rightarrow \bot)$$

$$(P) \Diamond A \equiv \neg (A \Box \rightarrow \bot)$$

In Williamson's own words, "we assert  $\Box A$  when our counterfactual development of the supposition  $\neg A$  robustly yields a contradiction" and "we assert  $\Diamond A$  when our counterfactual development of the supposition  $A$  does not robustly yield a contradiction." (Williamson 2007, 163) While the relation between modalities and counterfactuals is given in terms of an equivalence, in the order of explanation counterfactuals are prior, as Williamson holds that "the epistemology of metaphysically modal thinking is tantamount to a special case of the epistemology of counterfactual thinking." (Williamson 2007, 158).

### 3. What should a realist about modality want from modal epistemology? Counterfactuals and realism about metaphysical modality

I take *ontological realism about modality* to be any view according to which modal truth is objective, i.e. there are modal facts (or a modal reality) that are mind-independent.<sup>1</sup> Naturally, it would not make much sense if one were to uphold such a view without also believing that we have knowledge of at least some such modal truths. Realism about modality should and does extend from metaphysics to epistemology. In this sense, Williamson is an ontological realist about modality.

In what follows, I will propose a list of requirements that an epistemology of metaphysical modality must fulfil in order to provide an acceptable account of modal knowledge from a realist standpoint. The list may be incomplete, or the requirements may overlap to some extent, yet every desideratum exhibits a different reason for formulating and structuring modal epistemology in a certain way. These requirements should clarify why some accounts are successful, but I think the requirements are even more useful for explaining the failure of certain accounts or at least the dissatisfaction that might arise when confronted with certain attempts to explain modal knowledge. So, here are the requirements for a serious modal epistemology:

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<sup>1</sup> For more distinctions along these lines, see McLeod (2005).

- i. Modal epistemology should explain our knowledge of a distinctive type of metaphysical modality (not reducible in any sense to other types: logical, conceptual, natural, etc.). The famous examples of necessary *a posteriori* truths from Kripke (1980) appear to provide us such *putative* cases.
- ii. Modal epistemology should justify knowledge of metaphysical necessity, which is a distinct task from accounting for knowledge of metaphysical possibility.
- iii. Modal epistemology should account for our knowledge of sufficiently many (typical) modal claims.
- iv. Modal epistemology should clarify at least some cases of extraordinary modal claims, including necessary *a posteriori* truths.
- v. A certain *robustness* should be attributed to modal statements/notions: one wants modal truth *explained but not explained away*.

As said above, I believe that the list contains the reasons for the success, but more importantly, for the failure of some theories. I will now elaborate on these requirements and illustrate how we can use them to assess the merits or shortcomings of epistemological theories about modality.

Requirement *i*. is needed in order to account for a type of modality that is not grounded in anything that may be regarded as ultimately conceptual or theoretical. Kripke's cases of necessary *a posteriori* truths (the identity of Hesperus and Phosphorus, various purportedly essential property attributions, such as origin or composition) are widely considered as successful examples of such a distinctive type of modality, that is called "metaphysical (sometimes real or absolute) modality." Epistemological theories may assign too much weight to *i*., therefore engendering a certain type of circularity of justification. That is, they take examples of metaphysical modality such as Kripke's as being established beyond controversy or criticism, but these cases remain putative, both metaphysically and epistemologically. Theories are subsequently formulated in order to accommodate these purported metaphysical truths that we are also supposed to have knowledge of.

A circularity charge has also been leveled by Boghossian (2011, 490, n.1) against Williamson's account. This circularity (if it exists) is connected to a need to fulfil something more than requirement *i*. The most daunting challenge for an epistemology of modality remains accounting for our knowledge of (metaphysical) necessity. Apparently, the fact that possibility and necessity are interdefinable (e.g., "it is necessary that *p*" is definable as "it is not possible that not-*p*") should make matters easier, but this does not happen. The temptation is to think that once we have an epistemology of possibility, we should also have an epistemology of necessity, due to the interdefinability of the two notions. And, of course, an epistemology of possibility seems like a rather simple task, as we have an uncontroversial and knowable

stock of possible truths to start from: actually true statements. However, accounting for metaphysical necessity is a different and much more strenuous task than accounting for metaphysical possibility.<sup>2</sup> Although its radical conclusion might be ultimately resisted, Kant's famous dictum from the *Prolegomena*, §14 encapsulates this significant challenge for an epistemology of metaphysical necessity: "Now experience teaches me what there is and how it is, but never that it necessarily must be so and not otherwise. Therefore it can never teach me the nature of things in themselves." (Kant [1783] 2004, 46) One does not have to agree with Kant that we cannot find in experience a source of justification for our knowledge of metaphysical necessity, but what seems harder to reject is the point that there is no direct experience or confirmation of necessity in experience. Therefore, the main issue for a modal epistemological account is to find an adequate explanation of our purported knowledge of metaphysical necessity while taking experience as a starting point (where needed, of course; e.g., for essential property attribution, such as origin or composition).

Imagination-based modal epistemology is typically the most burdened in this respect, as we seem able to entertain in an apparently coherent way counterexamples to various truths that philosophers deem metaphysically necessary. One can, *pace* Kripke, imagine a table made of wood being made of plastic, or of a different type of wood, or of different chunks of wood and so on, at least when one does not know what the table is made of. This lack of limitations of our imagination creates a different type of circularity in modal epistemology. Imagination-based accounts have an inborn tendency to become error theories<sup>3</sup>, their main purpose being not to describe and explain modal knowledge, but rather to explain away modal illusions, that is, the reasons why some (but not all) of our imaginings should not count as counterexamples to purportedly necessary truths. The trouble is that this theoretical enforcement of restrictions to our imagination is made in order to salvage certain intuitions or a certain established view but appears ultimately ineffective and artificial, as I will attempt to show later. Recently, the issue of finding appropriate constraints for modal knowledge has been dubbed by Vaidya and Wallner (2021) the *Problem of Modal Epistemic Friction* (PMEF). Vaidya and Wallner claim that modal epistemological theories will typically appeal to a set of constraints (such as fixed background knowledge, essences, *a priori* principles, etc.) in order to account for the way in which we acquire knowledge. The main aim of this paper is to argue that Williamson's sources of friction are untenable when connected to other views he holds about the way (modal)

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<sup>2</sup> See Van Inwagen (1998, 74) for a similar point.

<sup>3</sup> See Kung (2016, 21).

language works. Subsequently, I will attempt a diagnosis of the deeper causes of this issue which seems to be encountered by other imagination-based realist theories of modal knowledge as well.

The same type of circularity discussed in the previous paragraph is imputed to Williamson's epistemology. While Williamson's account is not solely imagination-based, it runs into the same trouble that imagination-based epistemology faces. No contradiction is apparent in counterfactual scenarios that contain impossible situations. For example, there is no contradiction if we suppose that the Queen was the daughter of Ernest Hemingway and then build a counterfactual scenario accordingly, or that gold has a different atomic number from the one it actually has, and so on. Williamson's view of the nature of imagination is that it typically proceeds as "realistically" as it can and thus it may exploit all our background knowledge (Williamson 2007, 143). Still, this is not enough in order to yield a contradiction. Williamson's solution to this quandary is encapsulated in the following passage:

If we know enough chemistry, our counterfactual development of the supposition that gold is [not] the element with atomic number 79 will generate a contradiction. The reason is not simply that we know that gold is the element with atomic number 79, for we can and must vary some items of our knowledge under counterfactual suppositions. Rather, part of the general way we develop counterfactual suppositions is to hold such constitutive facts fixed. (Williamson 2007, 164)

Circularity would arise for the counterfactual epistemology of Williamson because, apparently, one has to know already what is metaphysically necessary in order to know what to hold fixed across counterfactual scenarios. Williamson (2011, 505-506) has replied by claiming that his is not a reductive account, which means that it cannot be circular in the sense that modalities would actually be reduced to themselves by way of counterfactuals.<sup>4</sup> I think that Williamson's reply is successful, at least from a technical standpoint, but I will try to formulate a different type of critique that is effective even if we take Williamson's account to be non-reductive.

Requirements *iii.* and *iv.* will not be discussed in detail, as I hope they are clear and intuitive. Of course, we want most of what we consider typical modal truths to be accounted for in our theory. For instance, we want something like me being in Rome today, even though I am not actually there, to be a possible truth that is also knowable. Perspectives may vary on what we regard as typical modal truth and theories may again give rise to circularity, but there is no need to dwell

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<sup>4</sup> Deng (2016) elaborates convincingly on the availability and force of such a reply on the part of Williamson.

on this further. As for requirement *iv.*, I submit that the modal epistemologist should want to account not only for the typical, but also for the extraordinary. Van Inwagen (1998) gives some examples of such extraordinary modal claims (the possibility of immaterial beings, of transparent iron, etc.). I contend that Kripke's examples of necessary *a posteriori* truths are also extraordinary in the sense that they need theoretical elaboration, much in the same way that the (im)possibility of a zombie or of a disembodied mind does. Modal epistemologies fail here by accepting implausible modal claims or by discarding plausible ones. This is caused by a more subtle, but ever-present pitfall of modal epistemology, that of accepting implausible restrictions or incorporating too much content in the theory in order to accommodate our intuitions or objectives.

Finally, requirement *v.* may be seen as a controversial addition to the list. Even if one believes that the concept of metaphysical modality lacks robustness, one can still be a realist about this type of modality, believing as well that it represents something objective in our world. However, there would not be much use in maintaining such a view. If metaphysical modality is reducible to other notions, then its philosophical importance seems rather thin, and the debates surrounding it pointless. Counterfactual epistemologies of modality may assume this lack of robustness of traditional modal concepts, as Kment (2014) does, or may attempt to work their way around it, much like Williamson does. An emphasis on the non-reductive nature of Williamson's account works as a rejection not only of circularity charges, but also of possible counter-arguments concerning the lack of robustness of modal notions. To be fair though, the gist of many of the critiques that have been formulated against Williamson is not that his modal concepts are deficient, but rather that knowledge of metaphysical modality is already needed in order to entertain epistemically efficient counterfactual scenarios. If it is not metaphysical modality that grounds itself *via* counterfactuals, then it is constitutive knowledge which does the job, as Roca-Royes (2011) and Tahko (2012) argue. But then we do not need the mediation of counterfactuals, as constitutive knowledge already has the modal consequences we are in search of. As said above, my critique of Williamson's account will follow a different line.

#### 4. Williamson on understanding

Before proposing his counterfactual epistemology of modality, Williamson (2007, 85-98) argues in his lectures against the view that mere linguistic competence, i.e. understanding of a statement, is apt to provide insight into the truth of that statement. As we will see, Williamson's requirements on understanding are minimal.

In order to understand Williamson's view better, I will discuss here only a fragment of his lengthy and intricate case from *The Philosophy of Philosophy*, that is, his Peter and Stephen examples that purport to show that the understanding-assent link breaks down even in the case of analytic statements. Williamson considers an example of an uncontroversial logical truth:

(1) Every vixen is a vixen.

Peter and Stephen hold views of quantification that are different from the standard one. Peter believes that the universal quantifier is existence-committing, so for (1) to be true, there has to exist at least one vixen. Stephen, in his turn, believes that borderline cases constitute truth-value gaps, so (1) cannot be true if "vixen" is a vague notion (Williamson 2007, 86-88). Yet, Williamson argues that Peter and Stephen's deviant beliefs do not make them understand quantificational expressions differently from the community of English-language speakers. Their "every" has the same meaning as what we mean by "every." Peter and Stephen are part of the linguistic community and engage in fruitful linguistic interactions with other speakers. Even if their views on quantifiers are incorrect, they have learnt words like "every" in the same way most of the members of the linguistic community have. As Williamson puts it,

The argument that Peter and Stephen mean what we mean by their words exemplifies two interlocking themes: Quine's epistemological holism, on which the epistemological status of a belief constitutively depends on its position in the believer's whole system of beliefs, and Putnam and Burge's semantic externalism (...), on which the content of a belief constitutively depends on the believer's position in a society of believers. Epistemological holism explains how unorthodoxy on one point can be compensated for by orthodoxy on many others, so that overall Peter and Stephen's usage of the key terms is not beyond the pale of social acceptability; since they remain participants in the relevant linguistic practice, semantic externalism then explains how they can still use the terms with their normal public senses. But neither epistemological holism nor semantic externalism figured as *premises* of the argument. Rather, the argument appealed to features of the relevant systems of belief that make epistemological holism plausible, and to features of our ascription of beliefs that make semantic externalism plausible. (Williamson 2007, 91)



This fragment shows the main features and sources of Williamson's minimal view of understanding. Of course, there is much to be discussed regarding understanding, linguistic competence, and their relations to the views or theories we have about language. This type of discussion is, for instance, present nowadays in the debate surrounding the experimental philosophy of language. One important thread in the critique of the importance of some experimental results for philosophy of language has been precisely this: it does not matter what theories about language (reference, in particular) speakers prefer. Language use is not connected to implicit or explicit assent to a certain theory about language or to having certain metalinguistic intuitions.<sup>5</sup> Now, I do not intend to seek an adjudication of these controversies in this paper. Nevertheless, the point I will make as follows seems to show that matters are not as simple as Williamson's holistic social externalism makes them look. The reason is rather straightforward: an underdetermination of meaning may lead to an underdetermination of fundamental notions and the theories we build with/for them.

## 5. What about modal expressions?

The first question that must be posed is the following: are there examples analogous to Peter and Stephen in the case of modal expressions? There most certainly are. First, there are Willard, David, an older Hilary and others, who hold philosophically unorthodox views regarding modalities.<sup>6</sup> Then, we should also note that everyday uses of modal expressions are not carefully distinguished or unitary, and if, as Williamson (2007, 94) himself notices, division of linguistic labor cannot save the day in Peter- and Stephen-like cases, then for similar reasons it cannot do much for modalities either.

My strategy here is to assess the impact Williamson's view of understanding has on the status of modal notions that the same Williamson aims to defend robustly. So, let's apply Williamson's own lessons to modality. Modalities are, of course, designed by expressions in language. According to Williamson's view, one does not need the "correct" beliefs about modality in order to use modal expressions correctly. But remember now that the constraints on counterfactual suppositions that we purportedly need for obtaining metaphysical necessity are, according to Williamson, general. Constitutive facts (such as chemical composition, natural laws,

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<sup>5</sup> Martí (2009) criticizes Machery et al. (2004)'s experiment on these grounds.

<sup>6</sup> Unorthodox when compared to the dominant realist perspective in post-Kripkean analytic philosophy.

etc.) are held fixed across *all* scenarios in *all* cases by all or most moderately knowledgeable members of the linguistic community. But how do we know that these constraints are in fact general, that there is a uniform or almost uniform counterfactual development practice in the linguistic community? If these constraints are not general, then counterfactuals will not suffice to provide an explanation of our knowledge of metaphysical modality, not by Williamson's lights, at least.

### *5.1. Which counterfactual practice is dominant?*

If modalities arise one way or another from counterfactual practice (it is not clear in Williamson's account how that happens precisely<sup>7</sup>), then it is of the utmost importance what type of counterfactual practice is dominant. If we follow Williamson's account, the dominant way of setting up counterfactual suppositions should also determine the meaning of our modal expressions.

Roca-Royes (2011) has attempted an answer to this question by comparing two epistemologies of counterfactuals: Williamson's (W) and EC, which proceeds much like Williamson's account, but does not require that we hold constitutive facts fixed across all scenarios. According to Roca-Royes (2011, 551), EC is efficient as an epistemology of counterfactuals and is more plausible from a naturalistic perspective. I will not focus on Roca-Royes' arguments here, but her paper shows at least that there may be different accounts of counterfactual practice that explain it efficiently without acquiescing to Williamson's more radical tenets. What Roca-Royes does not do, however, is provide a definitive answer to the question which counterfactual practice is dominant.

Whichever answer is the right one, it should be rather clear that we cannot proceed only by doing armchair philosophy at this point. Counterfactual development practices should be investigated, both for laymen and experts, and criteria should be proposed for deciding which methods of building counterfactual scenarios are preeminent when these practices diverge for different groups (experts vs. non-experts, different classes of experts, etc.). Plausibly, not all types of notions should be treated in the same way; modal notions are nevertheless a case where a clear-cut (empirically-informed) answer concerning our use is not readily available, as it might be the case for quantificational expressions. Neither Williamson nor Roca-Royes provides sufficient reasons for deciding their account is better.

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<sup>7</sup> Jenkins (2008) focuses on this criticism of Williamson.

The temptation here would be simply to reply that much like the users of language who hold deviant views of quantification without thereby using quantifier expressions with different meanings from the rest of the linguistic community, the users of modal expressions that engage in less/minimally restricted counterfactual suppositions will nevertheless mean what the rest of the community means by typical modal expressions. This might be correct, but the reply doesn't answer my concern. My main point here is (again) that there is no decisive proof that counterfactuals are restricted by constitutive knowledge in the way Williamson claims. To drive the point forward, I gather that we should maintain a distinction between *background knowledge* and *constitutive knowledge*. While it is only plausible to assume that any counterfactual supposition must be developed in accordance with some background knowledge, also assuming that a part of that background knowledge should be invariable constitutive knowledge seems to be an extra step which needs further justification. More simply put, not all background knowledge we hold fixed in a certain counterfactual scenario needs to be constitutive, and not all constitutive knowledge (even when acknowledged as such) must be held fixed in every counterfactual scenario. We need extensive (theoretical and empirical) justification in order to accept the claim that the actual situation conforms to Williamson's view.

## 6. The tension

There is, in my view, a deeper cause of the dissatisfaction one may feel when confronted with the counterfactual epistemology of modality. An underlying tension must be resolved, and not only in Williamson's case: that between an objectivist (realist) view of metaphysical modality and a view that makes meaning (or understanding) universally dependent on social practices. My aim is not to show that this tension is unsolvable, but rather to characterize this difficulty more thoroughly. So, what happens when we apply the moral of the Peter and Stephen cases to modal concepts? If the meaning of metaphysical modal terms is dependent on linguistic practices, then it is also dependent on the capacity of the community to develop the 'right' kind of modal concept, that is, the one that represents modal reality, i.e. the real modal properties of objects, and not something that our mind or our cognitive faculties impose on/add to the world. While it might be ultimately inconsequential to our view of the world which is the actual use of a quantifier or of a conditional expression<sup>8</sup>, not the same can be said about modal expressions.

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<sup>8</sup> This might be inferred retrospectively, after realizing that the differences among plausible competing views on quantification will not be reflected by any serious disagreement in the actual use of quantificational expressions.

But the question is: does any discussion about correctness make sense? Whatever social externalism teaches us, it is that the right concept is the one that can be drawn from use. So, in our case, if Roca-Royes' minimalist counterfactuals are dominant, then the right kind of metaphysical necessity is whatever necessity we can form out of this type of counterfactuals.

### 6.1. *Similar problems for imagination-based accounts and modal rationalism*

In order to make my point clearer, I will proceed with a brief detour into other accounts and their own troubles, which I take to be related to the one Williamson's account faces. For instance, imagination-based accounts are typically affected by what I call *the Problem of Excessive Content*. It is obvious that the imagination often goes beyond the lines drawn by the purportedly essential properties of things and thus provides an unsatisfactory guide to modality for realists. The solution is then to restrain the imagination in accordance with some criteria that, unsurprisingly, end up in providing us with precisely what we need in order to justify some previous modal intuitions. If necessity of origin or of composition must be accommodated, Kripke proposes we do that simply by positing that we cannot imagine something that violates these intuitions: "[G]iven that [the lectern] is in fact not made of ice, is in fact made of wood, one cannot imagine that under certain circumstances, it could have been made of ice." (Kripke 1971, 153). This is not the only passage where Kripke appears to propose such a radical solution, but the constraint seems either ineffective (because of its *ad hoc* character, most plausibly) or too strong.<sup>9</sup> If the restriction works, which is doubtful, then it goes against orthodox Kripkean intuitions about necessary *a posteriori* truths, by seemingly transforming every necessary truth into an *a priori* one. To see this better, we can examine Jackson's criticism of the idea that there are metaphysical impossibilities that are nevertheless conceptually possible:

Many who hold that the constitution of an object is an essential property of it argue that some particular object's not being made of wood, in the case where it is in fact made of wood, is metaphysically impossible. Suppose they are right. Should we then say that a possible world where this very table – the one I am now writing on, which is made of wood – is not made of wood is an example of a world that is conceptually possible but metaphysically impossible? No. For what makes the table, in the claimed conceptually

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<sup>9</sup> See Kung (2016) for a similar view.

possible world where it is not made of wood, this very table? If a table's constitution is an essential property of it, part of the answer must be its being made of wood. But then the world said to be conceptually possible is no such thing. A table made of wood not being made of wood is conceptually impossible. (Jackson 2010, 92)

Jackson does not push his idea to its ultimate conclusion, but if there are no metaphysical impossibilities that are conceptually possible, and we take – as it is traditionally done – conceptual possibility/necessity to mean *a priori* possibility/necessity, then a metaphysical impossibility must be an *a priori* impossibility, and a metaphysical necessity must be an *a priori* necessity. This seems the natural consequence of such a restriction on the imagination. I see no other way to restrict the imagination effectively in the way proposed by Kripke than to “transform” every constitutive knowledge into *a priori* knowledge. If the restriction proposed by Kripke is indeed general (as it appears to be) and if Jackson is correct in showing that restricting the imagination by way of essential properties makes metaphysical impossibilities conceptual impossibilities as well, there seems to be no escape from admitting that what appear to be *a posteriori* necessities turn out to be *a priori* (at least if their modal status is adequately recognized).<sup>10</sup> Many philosophers would probably still balk at such an argument. However, it is not essential for my point here that the constitutive knowledge is/becomes *a priori*, but rather that the restriction *restricts* too much by assigning too much force to our recognition of necessary truths. This attribution is not only excessive but also seems implausible in relation to the way imagination actually works.

Perhaps imagination is too fickle, and the problem can be solved by appealing to a more ‘serious’ faculty, all the while recognizing, but also limiting the role of the *a priori*. The modal rationalism of Peacocke (1999) is another philosophical doctrine inspired by Kripke's suggestions that aims to provide an answer to the predicaments of modal epistemology. We will define *modal rationalism* as the view that modal knowledge is underpinned by *a priori* principles. According to modal rationalists, our modal intuitions about necessity of origin, necessity of composition, etc. are encapsulated in *a priori* principles that determine the content of modal concepts. But a modal rationalist such as Peacocke also wants to be a realist about modality, which means that the principles must align with modal facts (as opposed to a certain

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<sup>10</sup> I have discussed this problem and its effect on Soames' interpretation of Kripke's *a posteriori* necessities in Rusu (2011). That discussion could be amended and extended. It is debatable if other seemingly conceptual possibilities beside the ones afforded by an object's essential properties do indeed exist (or are in fact about duplicates of the targeted object), but this issue would be beyond the scope of this paper.

conceptual scheme). Now, what the critiques of modal rationalism proposed by Wright (2002) and Roca-Royes (2010) show is that if modal notions are defined by the principles associated with them, every change in the principles determines a different modal notion, i.e. a different type of modal truth. Nevertheless, if one is a realist, there must be one correct modal notion, but then the question I put forth at the beginning of this chapter reappears in a different guise. How do we know that the most frequent modal doctrine (i.e., conjunction of principles about modality) is the *correct* one?

## 6.2. *The difficulty reappraised*

Does the same problem appear in the case of the counterfactual epistemology of Williamson? Yes, if modal notions are defined or just produced by our counterfactual practices. According to Williamson, constitutive knowledge makes us stop whenever we entertain a metaphysical impossibility in a counterfactual development. Contradiction appears simply because the imager confronts the scenario with the stock of constitutive truths she must carry from one scenario to another. Then it is paramount what type of properties are deemed constitutive: each different doctrine of the constitutive will define a difference in counterfactual practice and a different modal concept.

Finally, we return to the role understanding plays in the argument. Williamson's constraints on understanding are, as we have seen, minimal. Williamson's constraints on counterfactual suppositions are at the same time maximal, or else they cannot bring about modal knowledge (of necessity, in particular). But in order to understand modal expressions (i.e., use them properly), by Williamson's lights, one need not adhere to the strong epistemological constraints (or to the same constraints). This means that different notions of metaphysical necessity may coexist, along with different counterfactual practices, and the fact that the right modal notion (the one that conforms to modal reality) is dominant may be felicitous or, simply, our modal notion may not be the right one.

Division of linguistic labor will not save the day, and the reasons are given by Williamson himself. Metaphysical modal notions are philosophical, which means that if division of linguistic labor is appealed to, as Putnam (1975) famously does, laymen should defer to philosophers, at least partially for expertise on modalities. But, as the extended and very complex debates in the literature attest, expert philosophers disagree on these issues, some of them quite radically. Which of the experts' opinions should we choose? Of course, there is no definite answer to this question. Moreover, we should point out another complication. If counterfactual

practices differ inside the community, then we must also establish which practice takes precedence in establishing the modal properties of objects. Scientists and philosophers may disagree over what must be held fixed in the counterfactual scenarios, much as experts from the same field may also disagree about the same issue.

## 7. Conclusion

The main aim of this paper was to diagnose a deeper ailment that is, in my view, responsible for the insufficiency of counterfactual epistemology as a realist account of modal knowledge. If we attempt to integrate the perspectives of the philosophy of language and epistemology, in the spirit of Peacocke (1999)'s Integration Challenge, we see that Williamson's view of understanding and his construal of the nature and role of counterfactuals in providing a naturalistic grounding for modal notions are incompatible. One is too weak, and the other is too strong. What is the take-home message and what are the perspectives for a successful realist epistemology of modality? Of course, Williamson's account is not the only realist alternative in current literature and not all theories are bound to run into the problems evinced here.

One of Williamson's aims is to flesh out an account that is not solely imagination-based, because imagination is notoriously hard to accommodate for the realist as an absolute source of modal truth. The content of theories and intuitions and various forms of reasoning are appealed to and used in counterfactual suppositions. The trouble is that this use seems much harder to unify and systematize when we go beyond Williamson's sketch and try to fill in the details. I believe, however, that Williamson is right on this very general issue: narrative justification seems to be the norm for modal epistemology, but we should want a more specific account which tells us what type of evidence is to be accepted, in which contexts and for what type of claims. Modal narratives may differ profoundly in relation to the specifics of the content (that is the problem of the multiple and irreducible sources of modal truth that we must recognize and characterize adequately). Nevertheless, if there is no metaphysical necessity that is not conceptual, logical, biological, physical, etc., then doubts about the importance of the metaphysical notion are justified.

A robust modal epistemology should include an epistemology of modal discovery, modal error and modal disagreement, in order to account for the factual nature of modal statements. If our modal statements are about facts that are independent of our minds, then it is only plausible that we encounter surprises,

errors and disagreements regarding this portion of reality, much as we do regarding other parts of reality. All these phenomena should be explained, and we should be provided with methods or at least guidelines for mending errors and settling disagreements. This type of inquiry is currently treated very sparsely and collaterally in the literature.

Generally, more needs to be done to study actual practices and norms for fruitful linguistic exchanges using modal expressions, and also how our modal thinking is shaped and used. In Williamson's case, it should be determined which counterfactual practices are dominant and how they are conducive to modal knowledge. One aspect that must be more thoroughly discussed is philosophical expertise. Perhaps there is an expertise defense available after all and laymen's modal thinking and discourse may be deemed unimportant/inconsistent/unsystematic. Maybe we should focus after all on experts' (but which experts?) use of modal notions.<sup>11</sup> This cannot be done, however, if stricter criteria are not imposed on the understanding of certain classes of notions, such as philosophical ones (as metaphysical modalities appear to be). More than thirty years ago, Yablo (1993) expressed a similar view. It still remains to be seen if this type of epistemic optimism is warranted.

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<sup>11</sup> Kilov and Hendy (2022) have recently argued based on experimental results that philosophers are not truly modal experts. For a more comprehensive view regarding the intellectual virtues/abilities a modal expert should have (including the ability to imagine possibilities), see Dragomir (2021).



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