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Modal Epistemology Without Detours

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Abstract

Many common approaches to modality pose problems for accounts of modal knowledge that are no less severe than those thought to plague David Lewis's account in terms of a plurality of concrete worlds. Typically, these theories are framed in terms of the wrong kinds of thing and their defenders misdiagnose the failings of Lewis's plurality. These considerations provide the foundations for modalist accounts of modal knowledge, where modality is not primarily a matter of *recherché* objects.

Keywords: modality, epistemology, integration, ersatzism, Benacerraf, Lewis

1 Introduction

The metaphysical foundations of modality have most certainly occupied great prominence in late twentieth century and early twenty-first century philosophy. The possible worlds framework has itself been the most prominent amongst the developed metaphysics of modality. What began as a formal development took on philosophical seriousness with David Lewis's *Counterfactuals* (Lewis, 1973) and fuller development in *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Lewis, 1986).¹ His, of course, was not the only development of the framework. Lewis maintained that possible worlds are spatio-temporal wholes, but Robert Adams thought of them as sets of propositions (Adams, 1974), Alvin Plantinga took them to be states of affairs (Plantinga, 1969, 1974), and for Robert Stalnaker they were properties (Stalnaker, 1976, 1984).

Though some philosophers stared at Lewis incredulously because he embraced many isolated space-time wholes ((Lewis, 1973, p. 86) and (Lewis, 1986, pp. 133–135)), I will argue that similar reactions are warranted not only to other versions of the possible worlds metaphysics, but also to other more traditional metaphysical frameworks that have been deployed to account for the metaphysics of modality. The well-founded incredulity arises from rather fundamental epistemological problems due to what the proponents of those frameworks themselves say about their own proposals. The problematic features of those frameworks are not hidden from view but are typically explicit features, oftentimes thought to possess merits that make them more suitable for the epistemology of modality than are Lewis-style worlds. Some nearby variations of these accounts are also subject to an under-appreciated complaint.

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¹For a history of the formal developments of this approach, see (Copeland, 1996).

2 A Challenge, A Dodge, and A Problem Revisited

2.1 Peacocke's Integration Challenge

A quite general constraint on any metaphysical component of a theory is that it meet what Christopher Peacocke calls “the integration challenge” (Peacocke, 1999, Ch. 1). This challenge requires that a philosophical theory makes plausible how it is that, if the world is the way the theory says it is, the likes of us could ever be in a position to know that it is that way. Not only must the theory account for how we could know that there is some class of objects, but if the structure of that class is to be correlated with details of our own beliefs, then some accounting of how that correlation is something rather more than a cosmic coincidence is also required.

Metaphysicians tend, somewhat understandably, to focus only on establishing some claim of the form: there are *F*s. What is usually given no explicit attention is how it is that the relevant premises of the argument for *F*s could provide the kind of warrant for claims made about the kind of objects that *F*s would be, were there to be any. Perhaps some semantic or syntactic considerations are advanced. Perhaps these considerations are quite plausible in a range of uncontroversial cases concerning *G*s, for instance. These uncontroversial cases might render those semantic or syntactic considerations plausible grounds for embracing *G*s because not only do we have those semantic or syntactic considerations to go on, we also have other means of gaining access to the items in the relevant range of ‘*G*’, typically empirical observations. Behind the scenes and largely unarticulated—often because the matter is so painfully obvious that we all have better things to do with our time than to belabour these obvious details—is some accounting of how it could be both that *G*s are as they are and that we have come to do the things we do with *G*-related words that they serve as reasonably reliable markers of both the existence and characters of *G*s. Precisely because we interact with *G*s in all of their variety and splendour we come to communicate about them as we do.

The integration challenge, however, is not addressed in a satisfactory manner if, observing that similar semantic or syntactic facts characterise our uses of ‘*F*’ as characterise our uses of ‘*G*’, we proceed to think that those facts about our uses of ‘*F*’ suffice for warrant the claim that there are *F*s or that the *F*s are this way and that. The challenge does not require that the specifics of our beliefs and uses of language regarding *G*s be applied to the case for *F*s. After all, if *F*s and *G*s are not the same there must be some differences at the level of very fine details. When the concern is over the existence of lions, and tigers, and bears, the gory details do not matter because, again, for obvious reasons, it is no great mystery how the interplay between our experiences of lions, tigers, and bears might differ in the fine details yet be sufficiently similar in ways that would explain how those animals could be as they are, our beliefs could have come to be as they are, and the deeply embedded features of our language could have come to be as they are in ways that make the latter reliable indicators of how things are.

So, the challenge is very general. If the slogan is “Metaphysics and Epistemology Unite!” it is not a very prescriptive command. Indeed, so far as I am concerned here, it is not even the demand that someone somewhere eventually work out the hard, tedious details of both the metaphysics and the epistemology of *F*s. It is really the barest of challenges: at the very least, say enough to dispel the utter mystery of how *F*s, our beliefs and attitudes about *F*s, and our language pertaining to ‘*F*’ could come to be sufficiently in sync that our beliefs, encoded in our languages as they might be, bear some semblance to reality. That is hardly too much to ask.

2.2 Philosophical Misdirection

When defending some version of the truth-conditional theory of meaning, I complained that “anti-realist” semantic theories were misguided because the theory entailed that typical declarative sentences are about what they were plainly not about (Shalkowski, 1995, esp. pp. 521–522). Someone hears me say something, but is unsure how to interpret my remarks. That person explicitly queries my meaning. In the lion’s share of cases, I am the speaker and I am the one who intends to convey some information. To that extent *I* am important to a conversational exchange. Beyond that, though, I am unimportant. It might well be that I am too self-absorbed for anyone’s good and that this vice leads me to speak too much about myself too often. These are lamentable biographical facts about me, but these and many other facts about me are not what even most of my own utterances are *about*. However self-centred I might be, when I say ‘snow is white’ nothing about me (and because on this count I am definitely not special, nothing about you either) enters into the picture about what I mean when I use that sentence on the most typical occasions. It is not about me. It is not about you. It is not about us, about our actual, hypothetical, or counterfactual experiences, or about our current, possible, or ideal theories, either. That much seems plain.

If not about me/you/us, what then? Snow and its colour, of course. What else? Yet, according to the semantic theory I was arguing against, the meaning of a sentence was its use or its verification conditions. So, according to versions of this semantic theory, when I tell you that snow is white, that Paris is in France, or that the Moon is Earth’s only natural satellite, I am saying something (no doubt complex and very implicit) about how ‘snow is white’ or ‘Paris is in France’ or ‘the Moon is Earth’s only satellite’ is used or how things would appear to me or to you or to typical observers were they to look outside at the appropriate time and place or to where they must travel to view the Eiffel Tower or possible orbiting vantage points from which to observe Earth.

Each version is problematic. On the “meaning as use” theory, the sentence itself enters into what it means. That is more than odd; it is downright perverse. We might well concede that the Liar Sentence (‘This sentence is false.’) is self-referential, but ‘snow is white’ and most other sentences are not. Part of the peculiarity of the Liar is its apparently self-referential character. Any theory that makes this peculiarity ubiquitous is suspect. ‘Snow is white’, as it were, says nothing about itself, but something about snow. Not only does it say nothing about itself, it is not about *any* sentence at all. It is about something not at all linguistic. It is about something with a chemical structure, most typically H₂O, in frozen form, common in well-known places during well-known times of year, and the like. So, in answer to the question “What does ‘snow is white’ mean?” any answer that takes as its main subject the mentioned sentence itself is an instance of philosophical misdirection. Sentences are typically “transparent”. They disappear from view under normal usage. Like windows, they do their jobs best when they are not themselves the subjects of attention. Any theory of meaning entailing that sentences are inevitably, or even typically, opaque in this respect by calling attention to themselves points us in the wrong direction regarding meaning.

Unbeknownst to me at the time, Mark Johnston had already produced a very thorough discussion of verificationist theories of meaning, which make *us* part of the meanings of sentences ostensibly having nothing to do with us at all (Johnston, 1993). How did we become part of the story of sentence meaning? There are, no doubt, many truths about us regarding ‘snow is white’. Many of us think it true, think that we verify it in well-known ways in the well-known conditions, and much more besides. That there are many truths about both us and ‘snow is white’, though, does nothing to show

that what the sentence *means* has anything whatsoever to do with us. Even if we use it, verify it, manifest our understanding of it, and acquire and pass on our linguistic practices in various ways—and even if all of these things are essential components of a comprehensive theory of language—none of those, individually or severally, shows that ‘snow is white’ *means* that any of those things are so. None of those facts are the content of what I convey to you when I tell you that snow is white. You will likely give little, if any, thought to me when I tell you that snow is white. When I manage to do so, ‘snow is white’ is transparent in the way I and most others almost always intend it to be.

This “philosophical narcissism”² against which Johnson argued is an example of the more general phenomenon of philosophical misdirection. Philosophical misdirection occurs when we begin thinking about something and we re-frame the issue in terms that do not really suit the original subject matter, but the new terms of the discussion become the orthodox way of thinking about or expressing ourselves about the original subject matter. Many of the past fifty years’ discussions of modality has been examples of philosophical misdirection. We began by wondering about what, if any, was the modal difference between 12 being the sum of 7 and 5 and Nixon having visited China, if we are philosophers. If we are logicians, we began by wondering how to account for the validity of certain forms of inference and whether there is some semantic framework that could permit us not only to provide formal “definitions” of validity when the validity depends upon modal expressions not available in first-order predicate logics but also, if there is, how some such framework can account for the differences in the various axiomatisable systems of modal inferences. We started with what look to be reasonably “down to Earth” concerns and ended up, quite literally, transforming them into rather other-worldly concerns. Consequently, the details of the possible worlds frameworks themselves became the objects of intense scrutiny, resulting in widespread philosophical distraction.

2.3 The Original Problem

More than two decades before Peacocke formulated his integration challenge, Paul Benacerraf presented what came to be known a “the Benacerraf Problem”. This was merely a more focused version of the challenge. Benacerraf encouraged us to look carefully at the details of the various philosophical accounts of mathematics. The apparently natural semantics for mathematical sentences seemed to commit users of mathematical discourse to the existence of objects of which there was no good account of knowledge or even reliable belief, while accounts of mathematical knowledge that promised to deliver any such knowledge required mathematics to be about something other than what it plainly seemed to be about (Benacerraf, 1973). What gives the Benacerraf Problem its traction is careful attention to the specifics of the the relevant families of philosophical theories about mathematical objects.

While we are being quite informal, there is, of course, no impropriety in using ‘ $7 + 5 = 12$ ’, whatever one’s philosophical proclivities. That sentence under its typical, informal interpretations is unquestionably a portion of established, completely uncontroversial mathematics. It is only when one gets all philosophical about mathematics that problems arise. Platonists tell us that mathematical objects are abstract, but in the absence of an account of how the abstract and the concrete “meet” in ways that account for mathematical reliability for those in the know, the theory is incomplete. The allegation is not merely that not every ‘i’ is dotted nor every ‘t’ crossed in platonistic accounts

²Johnson’s term for the philosophical vice behind these theories of meaning.

of mathematical knowledge. The allegation is that there is not even an outline of how a mathematical epistemology could go, *on the platonists own terms*. Of course, all acknowledge that standard mathematical proofs are part of establishing or refuting mathematical claims. The platonist failing is to give no story at all about *how* standard mathematical practices could be the right practices (or, at least sufficient practices, if one makes allowances for others), if mathematical reality is as platonists say it is. It is one thing to propose an epistemology that not all embrace, thus losing converts along the way. It is quite another to have friend and foe alike completely flummoxed about how even to begin to do platonist mathematical epistemology. For this reason, modelling modal epistemology on the barest rudiments of platonist epistemology is rather unfruitful.³

The obvious alternative to platonism is some nominalistically-acceptable account of what mathematics is about so that its subject matter, properly understood, is amenable to reliable beliefs by the likes of us using the methods the likes of which both mathematicians and those doing much less sophisticated computations actually use. We keep our eye on the mathematicians' gold standard and propose:

I A mathematical claim is true iff there is a proof of that claim.

What should we make of the right-hand side of this biconditional that links mathematical truth with proof? There *is* a proof? To retain a relatively robust intuitive sense that the best mathematicians are in the business of discovery and not invention, such proofs must be (composed of) abstract objects, making this attempt simply a version of unembarrassed platonism that merely exchanges more typical mathematical objects' characters and relations for proofs. So, this not usually the intention of a biconditional linking mathematical truth and mathematical proof. This way of understanding this attempt to link conditions of truth with conditions of knowledge, then, usually is not even considered, since it solves no problem that platonism allegedly left unsolved.

An under-explored option for retaining the objectivity and discovery features of platonism while collapsing mathematical truth and proof is to locate the business ends of things in the mind of God, as does Brian Leftow when thinking about God and necessity (Leftow, 2012). This has the virtue, if it is a virtue, of making proofs concrete. It also has the virtue of providing the basis for at least gestures toward how the likes of us could be reliable about the likes of these proofs that constitute (the basis for) mathematical truth. God created us to be able to find compelling the divine beliefs that are the most basic truths and to be able to reason sufficiently reliably from those basics to the contents of further reaches of God's mind. Even if God has no need to reason from one claim to another, God thinks the logical relations and can construct us so that we can wend our ways through the logical pathways, so that our thoughts can be, in content, God's thoughts. Because they defend their own views in terms of theoretical utility and because, arguably, Leftow's has no less theoretical utility than many other total philosophical packages, by their own lights more philosophers should take seriously some theory such as his. I will, however, leave this view to one side.⁴

Perfectly obviously and understandably for those ignoring Leftow's preferred option, the collapsing of mathematical truth into mathematical proof brings with it the recognition that the frontiers of mathematics are less about discovery than they are about construction, invention, or creation. Not willy-nilly, of course, since intuitionists observe well-known limits on mathematical construction. The restriction to proofs actually produced by the

³For more on this, cf. (Bueno and Shalkowski, 2015).

⁴In the context of the nature of modality rather than its epistemology, I discuss Leftow's view, with special attention to how it fares compared to Lewis's modal realism in (Shalkowski, 2015).

likes of us has the virtue of solving the epistemological component of the Benacerraf Problem, but at the cost of philosophical narcissism. I left implicit what must be perfectly explicit, if it is to express clearly a genuinely nominalistic alternative to standard platonisms. The existence of the relevant proof must be due to the mathematical activity of the likes of one of us and not merely a different independently existing abstract object for which the Benacerraf Problem arises yet again. That is what it *is* to be a mathematical truth, according to this alternative, and we should not hide that feature from view. It is right and proper now to look at the relevant biconditional in all its glory.

I' A mathematical claim is true iff someone has proven that claim.

Many will judge that when we take I' seriously on its own terms, we play too great a part because 12 was the sum of 5 and 7, well before anyone had managed to prove this, particularly if it needed to have been proven within the framework of set theory, using Hume's Principle, or any of the other going strategies, since they came onto the scene very late in the day.⁵ We can try a fix.

I'' A mathematical claim is true iff someone proves that claim.

Let 'proves' be a timeless verb so that someone proves something iff someone proves it at some time or other. 12 was the sum of 5 and 7 by virtue of someone sometime proving it. In the same way that spatial location is thought to be irrelevant, so perhaps is temporal location. If not going from the frying pan into the fire, this attempted fix of the initial problem requires resolution of other matters. Backward causation to rescue truth prior to proof? A block universe to keep the truthmaker in place? At the very least, it is somewhat odd that the proof of an abstract *mathematical* claim (as contrasted with a mathematically-formulated empirical claim) should impose requirements on the structure of space-time. Thus, the implications of this strategy should make us think that we have acceded to philosophical misdirection, if we follow this general development of a philosophy of mathematics. It is not that reality is different from how we thought it was or even could be, it is that we are thinking incorrectly about reality when led to think that these aspects of reality are intertwined in these ways.

3 The Fundamental Ersatzist Problem

After much stage setting, let us return to our main subject: modal epistemology. The ersatzist programmes regarding possible worlds were attempts to do two things: (1) to make the proposed modal ontology plausible and, (2) to make the specifics of modal epistemology somewhat more tractable than they were alleged to be for Lewis's ontology of concrete, spatio-temporally isolated worlds.⁶ The first was accomplished because the ersatzists' ontologies were already widely embraced. They were widely embraced because it was perfectly obvious that we have propositional knowledge since we wield that-clauses regularly, we come to know some of what states of affairs obtain by ordinary empirical observation, and we observe objects possessing all manner of properties. All

⁵We should be wary of this reason for rejecting I', since it is cavalier in rejecting a claim about truth—a metalinguistic attribute—on the basis of how things are. We can avoid this particular problem if we refuse the semantic ascent and we restrict ourselves to instances, such as I^{*}: $7 + 5 = 12$ iff someone has proven that $7 + 5 = 12$. I do more to expose this confusion below and in (Shalkowski, 2014).

⁶For philosophical neutrality, let us treat 'ersatzist' as merely a label and nothing more. The disputes between Adams, Lewis, Plantinga, and Stalnaker were over who embraced the real things and who were distracted by mere reasonable facsimiles.

that remained for the ersatzist programmes was to demonstrate how the various roles possible worlds might fill are best filled by groups of propositions, states of affairs, or properties. What has received too little patient attention is that each of the ersatzist options fares no better than Lewis's plurality of concrete worlds, when an analogue of the Benacerraf Problem is pressed for possible worlds theories.

Certainly, ersatzists' preferred objects had their share of respectable advocates, going back to the ancient Greeks, but it would be merely an argument from authority were one to think that fact made those objects any more philosophically respectable than Lewis's plurality. All options present the very same kind of problem as do mathematical objects. If there is difficulty in seeing how to rise to the integration challenge for Lewis, the problem arises no less for ersatzists. Historically, the problem was hidden for the reason just given. It just seems obvious to so many philosophers that, unlike Lewis and his worlds, we have knowledge of propositions, states of affairs, and properties and it seems either heroic or foolish to maintain otherwise. This initial rationale for the incredulous stares directed at Lewis arises from encountering a kind of philosophical duck-rabbit.

We encounter a philosophical duck-rabbit when an object possesses both a philosophically innocent or neutral aspect and also a philosophically contentious aspect. The duck-rabbit induces error when those aspects are not treated separately, since each demands a quite different degree and character of justification than does the other. In the same way that there is no impropriety in affirming that 12 is the sum of 7 and 5 when we are being informal and not trying to articulate a claim suitable for philosophical scrutiny, there is no impropriety in speaking of properties, states of affairs, or properties, if we like. No nominalist is guilty of bad faith when doing so. The beginnings of some philosophical mistakes occur only when we help ourselves to the obvious plausibility by first looking at pre-philosophical understandings of expressions like 'proposition', 'state of affairs', and 'property' and then add onto those understandings, philosophical characterisations of each. Not to be confused with the philosophical task of tidying up and systematising common opinion and rendering it into a sophisticated, rigorous theory, the failing arises when we neglect the required subsequent epistemic updating. We err when take ourselves to be entitled to retain much of our pre-theoretical understanding of and confidence in the relevant matters after the philosophical characterisations and systematisations have been done. Failing to do the requisite updating, ersatzists mistakenly thought that their preferred accounts of possible worlds were more conducive to the project of modal epistemology than was Lewis's.

Let us begin with propositions and by agreeing that propositions are expressed by that-clauses of English sentences.

J: Jones believes that snow is white.

According to **J**, Jones believes a proposition. On a platonist account of propositions, this means that Jones bears a relation to an object: SNOW IS WHITE. According to those who embrace them, propositions are abstract objects. There may be much more to say about them, but this is all that need concern us here. Being abstract, propositions raise no fewer problems regarding our relations to them than do platonists's numbers or Lewis's worlds. The problem is not with the pre-theoretic, rather unregimented idea that propositions are expressed by that-clauses. The problem arrives with the the platonist's philosophical overlay. Once the theory of propositions incorporates the idea that that-clauses are designators for abstract items in an ontology, the problem arises. In general form, the problem is the very same as the Benacerraf Problem for mathematical objects.

We fall prey to a duck-rabbit when thinking about propositions as more innocuous than Lewisian worlds. There can be no controversy whatsoever over embracing propositions as what is expressed by that-clauses. We can take that as stipulative. Propositions, in this very limited way, have advantages over sentences. I believe that snow is white and so do you. There is some respect in which we are correct to say that at least on this matter we believe the same thing. We wish to maintain this also about those with no facility at all with any language that any of us speaks, so it is no good to try articulating what they and we believe by framing things in terms of sentences to which people assent. They do not assent to any sentence to which we assent and we may return that dubious favour. So, a first pass at a linguistic formulation in terms of sentences will not do.

The second and third passes might be in terms of how our sentences are intertranslatable or to which sentence(s) of some specific language one *would* assent, were all else the same save that one spoke that particular language. Either of these strategies is an example of philosophical misdirection. Even if each of these claims is true, it is plain that the vast majority of our beliefs do not take as their objects linguistic items, if our phenomenology is anything by which to go. Referents to linguistic items are not parts of the contents of most beliefs. Those beliefs are not about those sorts of things at all. Those beliefs are about snow, rain, and hail, about prime ministers, presidents, and popes, or about any manner of other things, but they are most definitely not about words, sentences, or even utterances. The great plausibility of the idea that any of these nominalist-friendly options is an instance of philosophical misdirection prompts the search for *something* else and propositions seem to fit the bill.

Both the platonist and the nominalist, however, are guilty of misdirection. Both answers distract. When I believe that snow is white it is not because I am related to **SNOW IS WHITE** or because I or we do or would do some things with the words 'snow is white'. When I believe that snow is white I represent the world to myself in the relevant way. When I believe that snow is white, no specific object, linguistic or otherwise is involved in my belief. I believe that Nixon went to China and there is at least one object involved in that belief, but it is not **NIXON WENT TO CHINA**, it is Nixon. Similarly, for other beliefs. The distraction is not that objects are (sometimes) relevant to our beliefs, but that the wrong objects are thought to be relevant to our beliefs.

Furthermore, and more pointedly so far as the integration challenge is concerned, exactly how do I manage to get into the correct relationship to **SNOW IS WHITE**? If we think that the correct answer has something to do with having the relevant, personal mental representation along with its attending relations to other representations, attitudes, and tendencies, then we are inclined to the wrong *kind* of answer for platonists, even if not the wrong answer. The alleged interrelations of representations, attitudes, and tendencies are perfectly nominalistically acceptable. My representation is concretely mine as are my other representations and attending attitudes and tendencies. It is by virtue of all of these peculiarities that I believe that snow is white, but none of that addresses any of the peculiarities of a platonistic account, which must account for my relationship to **SNOW IS WHITE**. Of course, there may well be "propositional content" to many of those other mental states and there is no reason for anyone to deny that. The relevant states may be, after all, expressible by way of that-clauses. We are left with the fact that all that makes this account of belief a theory of various mental states with *platonistic* propositional content are objectual forms of words: that snow is white, the proposition that snow is white, the proposition that snow is white has different truth conditions than does the proposition that Nixon went to China, etc. There is nothing else to the theory that is especially platonistic. Since there is little else that counts as a

theory that pertains to the crucial platonistic aspects of the theory, we should dispense with the platonism. Those who resist this conclusion should at the very least face the challenge to say more, in distinctively platonistic terms, that will address the integration challenge, whether one puts propositions to work in a theory of modal reality or not.

The right response to this rejection of platonism, is not to redouble the effort to find some nominalistically acceptable alternative object(s). There is nothing philosophically interesting to substitute for platonist's propositions. When Jones believes that snow is white, Jones is not related to an abstract object, but neither is Jones related to some *recherché* linguistic object, sentential or otherwise. **J** indicates that Jones represents the world in a given way and that s/he has the requisite other attitudes and tendencies surrounding that particular representation to constitute believing something rather than merely wondering or wishing something. The philosophical misdirection occurs when we get distracted from the correct objects, if any, that are involved in the content of our mental attitudes. Believing that Nixon went to China, when true, relates one to Nixon in some circuitous manner. There being the relevant object to which the believer is related is part of what makes the belief true, but it is not what it is to hold a given belief. That is just to represent and to treat that representation in the right ways. What makes one person's beliefs "the same" as those of someone else is what would make them true, if the appropriate thing(s) were to exist and to be the requisite way(s), to put things metalinguistically. To avoid the metalinguistic characterisation and to put things more directly, people share the same belief, when they take the very same thing(s) to be the very same way(s). It is not that, however the concrete things turn out to be, both parties are related to yet another object. The existence and identity conditions that appear to be those of propositions are really those of the relevant objects and how they would be, were the various individuals' representations correct. Parallel remarks will apply to other candidates for ersatz possible worlds.

One might think that this accusation of philosophical distraction avoids commitments to propositions only to embrace another abstract object: states of affairs. The representations to which I gestured involved objects, if accurate, at the point of their "truthmaker". Plantinga, for instance, thinks of states of affairs as distinct from concrete states. A state of affairs *obtains* (as contrasted with *exists*) when concreta are suitably arranged. They are not themselves concreta suitably arranged. Thus, Plantinga happily embraces a plurality of worlds as states of affairs, but only one spatio-temporal whole of concreta suitably arranged. Thus, he is an actualist maintaining the obtaining of exactly one world, but also the existence of however many possible worlds there might be, since each of those are "merely" abstract. This brief sketch of Plantinga's ersatzism shows how it, too, falls prey to the integration challenge. It is the philosophical thesis that these objects are abstract and not really just concreta suitably arranged that presents the problem.

Properties, understood as they usually are by those who oppose nominalism, are like propositions and states of affairs by being objects to which one is related when possessing the relevant property. We are all familiar with the vocabulary typically used to express philosophical claims about properties, at least as universals. An object is red when it "participates in" or is suitably related to Redness. If 'participates in' is not merely a *façon de parler*, then it must be a verb expressing a genuine relation between a red object and Redness. This is supposed to do some important, substantive philosophical work. That is the whole *raison d'être* of the philosophical machinery. If the machinery is fit for purpose, then there must be more substance to it than serving merely as an innovative way of saying that something is red. That there is precious little more to be said besides

that participation in the universal Redness is really what it is for something to be red, demonstrates that this theory, too, fails the integration challenge and so too does the ersatzism built upon it. The relevant verbs used to express our alleged relations to these abstract objects differ, but they are all mostly just placeholders to signify that there is some relationship. In distinctively platonistic terms that is pretty much the end of the matter, so far as what grasping or believing or obtaining or participating in comes to.

There would not, perhaps, be such a challenge were ‘proposition’, ‘state of affairs’ and ‘property’ merely pieces of pre-theoretic vocabulary with no philosophical ontological overlay. Were each merely a *façon de parler*, there would be no problem, but there would also be no interesting philosophical theories of mental states, truth makers, predication or possible worlds framed in terms of them that are at all friendly to platonists and conducive to the ersatzist projects. The problem arises precisely when the details of that overlay are specified and the overlay is put to work explaining or defining things in a way that is supposed to be “deeper” than the mere appearances that can be articulated with any of the pre-theoretical vocabulary, all the while inheriting the epistemic credentials of the pre-theoretic vocabulary.

4 How Did We Manage That?

4.1 Forgetfulness

There are, perhaps, many components to an explanation of how and why philosophical misdirection occurs. One component may be simple forgetfulness or inattention. It may be that, as I think it is in the philosophy of modality, a *façon de parler* is either not recognised as such or else is forgotten to have been such. It seems fairly clear that ‘possible world’ was introduced as a *façon de parler* when the formal semantics for modal logics was given as some variation of Kripke’s ordered triple $\langle \mathbf{G}, \mathbf{K}, \mathbf{R} \rangle$, \mathbf{G} being a member of \mathbf{K} and \mathbf{R} a relation defined over the members of \mathbf{K} (Kripke, 1963). It was quite natural, dating well before Kripke’s elegant and popular presentation of this general semantic approach to modal logics, to think of it as involving the set of all possible worlds, the actual world and some relation(s) amongst worlds.⁷

As a mere manner of speaking, of course, there is nothing wrong with thinking of \mathbf{K} as a set of worlds, or even as a set of less complete possibilities or possible situations. Formally speaking, all of this is a matter of indifference. Nothing hangs on it. The manner of speaking aids those of us who are less technically proficient to grasp why this formal structure and not some other is used or why these specific conditions are imposed on the relation \mathbf{R} and not some others.

If the function of the model-theoretic modal semantics is to *model* modal inference, it just does not follow that one proposing that model is at all serious about the existence and characters of those so-called worlds, any more than one constructing a model of an internal combustion engine should become concerned with the melting point of various kinds of plastics. Models are models; engines are engines. When working with an engine, one must be concerned with the melting points of various metals and plastics, since those facts make metals preferable to plastics for many parts of a functioning engine. The concerns about what to use for a functioning model, however are not the same as the concerns for what to use for a functioning engine. Where the model will not model the combustion features of an engine, ice may be sufficiently suitable.

⁷The Introduction to (Copeland, 1996) provides a useful history of these matters.

To model modal inference successfully, it hardly matters what is used. The “possible worlds semantics” were typically formulated in set-theoretic terms. There were two ways in which the character of those models do not matter. First, it does not matter that sets were used. A point to which I will return at the end, modal inference is not about sets, just as my belief that snow is white is not about SNOW IS WHITE or about ‘snow is white’. The sets were used not because that is what modal inference is (always!) about, but because the set-theoretic language permits us to abstract away from so many specifics about so many objects and relations that we are free of those details and are, thus, able to focus only on the mere identity of members of sets and some few relations amongst those members. The language enables us to express how it could be that this inference is valid and that one invalid. It also permits us to model the differences between logics. Were the things over which we wanted our modal inferences to be valid like this or that, then we can see the differences between them and we can see how some logics form a hierarchy of strength ($K, T, S4, S5$, the core of *normal* modal logic) and how that hierarchy is related to some others.

Not all agree with me that ‘possible worlds’ for very long was a mere *façon de parler*. They will think that the kinds of arguments advanced by Adams, Lewis, Plantinga, or Stalnaker show that even if the formal models were mere models, they became more than that when put to philosophical work very soon thereafter. They came to be tasked with articulating important aspects of modal reality. I will not rehearse arguments I have given elsewhere against Lewis’s use of theoretical utility arguments and the like as failing to warrant his metaphysics (Shalkowski, 2010), (Shalkowski, 2012), which will apply suitably adapted to the other programmes.

Even if I am right that treating ‘possible worlds’ as a referential expression and not as a mere manner of speaking is unwarranted, note that Lewis’s use does not fall into the distraction that is philosophical narcissism. Though his worlds involve us and our counterparts in some well-known respects, we do not become the central players in modality when the specifics of the theory are not merely gestured toward but spelled out in fine detail. Indeed, the incredulous stares inflicted upon Lewis were born partly out of the fact that his theory was modest in this regard: his worlds have so little to do with us that his account appears to fall afoul of Peacocke’s integration challenge. Other versions of the general framework were typically thought not to be so “extreme” and so, I gather, were thought to fare better regarding that challenge and in fairly obvious manners.

What seemed to generate the mistaken idea that Lewis fared worse than did ersatzists was the idea that Lewis’s major epistemological problem was generated because his worlds, other than our own, were merely possible. They were not part of our world and, so, inaccessible to us. The ersatzists’ favoured alternatives were actual objects and, (apparently) so, were accessible to us. The source of the fundamental problem for Lewis, though, was not an object’s actuality or mere possibility; it was its accessibility. Ersatzists never took seriously the task of sketching accounts of how it could be that if their favoured objects were as they were said to be they were any more accessible than were Lewis’s merely possible worlds.

Indeed, Lewis’s own attempt to integrate abstracta into his programme placed them outside of his spatio-temporal wholes (Lewis, 1983). They were literally neither here nor there. They were in no possible world, so, strictly speaking, they were not actual objects, no matter which possible world one inhabited. The ways Lewis and his critics would have articulated the isolation of abstracta from parts of spatio-temporal wholes would have differed, but they would have agreed on the essential point. They are not spatio-temporal objects. Ersatzists assumed that their framework permitted them to say, correctly at least by their own lights, that abstracta were actual objects and that this

sufficed to overcome without argument at least one of the problems posed for Lewis. Their claim that abstract objects are actual objects, however, does nothing more to satisfy the integration challenge, properly understood, than did Lewis's denial.

4.2 Failure to Update

The main explanation for instances of misdirection, however, is the failure to update. A constraint on rationality is that one's beliefs be sensitive to changes to one's evidence. When things thought to be true are later thought to be false or vice versa, one ought to go through a process of updating one's other beliefs in light of new information. At least, one ought to do so on occasion and when matters are sufficiently important. In the case before us, it was the failure to update that permits an initially plausible and uncontroversial claim to retain credibility when it should not.

For propositions, states of affairs, and for properties, it is easy to see how this could happen. Since it is nearly a point of early stipulation that propositions are the content of that-clauses, saying that Jones believes the proposition that snow is white is, then, merely a verbose way of saying that Jones believes that snow is white. We may even permit a kind of counting. Jones also believes something else, a different thing. Jones believes that grass is green and, so, from our stipulation, Jones believes the proposition that grass is green. Believing that snow is white is quite plainly not the same as believing that grass is green, so to the same degree of plainness believing the proposition that snow is white is different from believing the proposition that grass is green and that is so because the proposition that snow is white is distinct from the proposition that grass is green. Another portion of grist for philosophical mills is the idea that we have just used several different forms of English sentences to express what Jones knows. To the extent that that-clauses are used to express Jones's beliefs and the content of propositions, then it is clear that propositions so understood have something to do with what Jones knows and to what Jones has access.

Say no more and there is nothing about which philosophers should dispute. Apart from the stipulation about 'proposition', nothing is philosophical. This is all the very kind of thing that any philosophical account of mental states, linguistic meaning, and the metaphysics of such must account. It is, therefore, philosophically neutral precisely because it is not yet at all philosophical.

At some point, though, someone insisted on getting philosophical and saying that propositions are abstract or that they are concrete. Regardless of how one becomes philosophical, the initial judgements about what Jones does/does not know must be revisited in light of the new theoretical apparatus. The new philosophical content, at the very least, demands that one ask (and answer!) how we can still be entitled to *both* the initial uncontroversial claims as well as to the distinctively partisan content introduced when one waxed philosophical about that matter. Updating is required to insure that what was taken as data to justify a theory can still be accepted *as* data, if the theory is embraced. It is easy to see how the updating process might require a configuration of the theory to account for what had been taken for granted or even rejection of something initially thought to be uncontroversial. In an extreme case, updating would actually defeat the theory.

Suppose the existence of something were taken for granted, perhaps because some observational claims are taken to be true. Suppose, further, that the theory ultimately developed entails that that thing does not exist. If the existence of the thing was central to the case for the theory, the theory was so poorly constructed that it was self-defeating. If the theory is correct, then the data for the theory are false. If the data are false, then

there is no case for the theory. So, if the theory is correct, there is no case for it. Not a good outcome.

I do not yet maintain that ersatzist views are similarly self-defeating. That is stronger than the arguments here warrant. I claim only that a substantial problem has been hidden from view and that its hiddenness is partly explained by the failure to recognise that the introduction of philosophical theory requires updating and that the details of the theory might render implausible what previously had been uncontroversial. Remarks similar to those about propositions apply to states of affairs and properties.

5 Other Misdirections

Of course, not everyone is fascinated with the possible worlds accounts of the nature of possibility. We should not ignore theories that ignore them altogether. One very natural way of addressing concerns over the epistemology of modality is to advance the claim that modal knowledge is a function of conceptual knowledge. Perhaps one can ignore altogether the issue of the nature of possibility and go straight for a solution to the epistemological concern. After all, the metaphysical wizardry should be in service of the quite mundane questions of how it is that I can know that were I to leave Leeds for Belgrade and travel on foot rather than by plane, it would take me far longer to arrive at my destination. Just answer that question and many are content enough, just as I need not know the nature of my television set and its remote control in order to know that pushing this button activates the television, pushing that button changes the channel, and pushing the other button lowers the volume. Children manage all of this and much more with equipment the workings of which they have no comprehension. So, perhaps going straight for conceptual issues will yield answers to knowledge questions.

In theory, perhaps, but not in practice. As soon as one articulates the claim that modal knowledge is (a function of) conceptual knowledge, we should insist on receiving more information. Tell me more about what concepts are. If they are sufficiently like Platonic Ideas, the very same Benacerraf-like challenge arises. If concepts are like that, how do we manage to acquire the conceptual knowledge that is the basis for modal knowledge?

Suppose they are not like Platonic Ideas. Suppose they are more like the components of our representations. More probing is still warranted. *Our* representations? The Platonic option had the advantage that if a concept exists and each of us is related to it, then there is an account of how that one concept could be a component of both your representation and mine. We are each related to the very same concept. If concepts are not like Platonic objects, are we still entitled to think that any single concept is a component of both my representation and yours? Certainly, not on accounts of concepts that make them quite person-specific. My mental representation of something is mine and it cannot be yours. Where exactly is the middle ground that avoids some version of the Benacerraf Problem and yet permits us to share concepts in the way required by an account of modal knowledge?

Perhaps that problem can be solved. More worrying, though, is that we must revisit the problem of philosophical narcissism. Why would one think that something like non-platonist concepts would be so much as relevant to the question of modal knowledge? Why would a thorough understanding of the painting in my front room provide anyone good grounds for thinking that any portion of reality is encoded in that painting? Indeed, since I have yet to tell you much about the painting, you plainly do not know whether it even has the appearance of being a piece of representative art. I tell you that it has

that appearance. The relations of colours resemble the relations of colour one might see somewhere in the world. That is still not nearly enough for thinking that it provides any information at all about reality. Having been to Venice, I can tell you that it resembles one portion of Venice. When I tell you that it is a print of a Canaletto, then if you know that he spent time painting Venetian scenery, you might conclude that at least some portions of the painting provide some useful information about Venice. The images of building, perhaps. I would not, though expect to go to that portion of The Grand Canal and see those very Gondoliers, even if they had been there when Canaletto painted the original.

Note the triangulation required to make plausible that just a modest amount of information about something beyond the painting could be taken from the painting. Mere inspection of the painting would not suffice. Some information about what Venice really is like, or at least what it was like, is required before the representation itself is any use at all. Without that information, no amount of inspection of any number of paintings would be much use, even if there was a great deal of consistency between them, as there almost surely is, since paintings have too little of both detail and comprehension to exclude the representational nature of other extraordinarily different paintings.

Taking modal knowledge to be conceptual knowledge runs the risk of importing to conceptual knowledge what is not yet warranted for it. Without something that counts as non-conceptual knowledge forming part of a more comprehensive theory about how concepts arise and exactly what they track, the inspection of concepts will be no more useful than the inspection of all the painting in my home (of which there are few) or even in the whole world. Philosophical narcissism can be avoided, but only if an accounting of concepts is given that shows how they track modally-relevant reality.

Avoiding the mental in favour of the linguistic will do no more than vary the specifics of the challenges and tasks for accounts of modal knowledge. Languages (and their constituents) construed as Platonic objects will face the Benacerraf Problem. Those avoiding the problem because languages are construed as perfectly concrete objects will face the question of why these things are even so much as relevant to questions of modal knowledge. If they are not themselves the constituents of modal reality, why would looking to them yield any information at all about modal reality? Once again, I do not say that this and related questions cannot be answered in a satisfactory manner. I call attention only to the relatively unnoticed but crucial question that should be answered at some stage of this kind of account of modal knowledge.

6 A Reminder: The Use/Mention Distinction

All of the programmes I have discussed are instances of philosophical distraction because, in the end, these are not what modality is or is about. Philosophical discussions of modality and our modal knowledge are most typically framed in distracting ways. Consider the most elementary of arguments:

1. All men are mortal.
2. Socrates is a man.
3. Socrates is mortal.

What is this syllogism about? At the very least, Socrates and some of his interesting characteristics. What it is not about is a proposition, a sentence, a concept, or even a mental representation. Recalling the distinction between using the language and

mentioning portions of it, it is clear that in their most typical uses, arguments are all use and no mention. Yet, so often when speaking about arguments, we lapse into presentations that are nearly all metalinguistic in character. We speak of the truth of the premises guaranteeing the truth of the conclusion. Or, the truth of the sentences used in or the propositions expressed by the premises insuring the truth of the sentence used in or the proposition expressed by the conclusion.

Having taught elementary logic and having at least once tried to keep all of my vocabulary in the object language, it became obvious why we lapse into metalinguistic formulations of analyses of the virtues and vices of even quite specific arguments. It is just easier. It takes fewer words to talk of the truth of the premises than to talk of conditions expressed by the premises. When we verbally gesture to the board or screen and ask students to inspect “premise 2”, we clearly refer them to a sentence. We know that they know what it means and because the implicit reference is to a sentence, it is perfectly natural to frame questions in terms of its truth value and to relate that value to those of other sentences.

Pedagogically, so far as teaching logic is concerned, there is absolutely no impropriety in any of this. It does, however, facilitate a kind of philosophical distraction to frame things in metalinguistic terms. The argument is not *about* sentences or propositions, so no perfectly serious and sober account of arguments should be framed in metalinguistic terms, in the final analysis. A metalinguistic presentation should be seen for the *façon de parler* that it is. When the logic is even more formal and natural language sentences give way to sentence letters, connectives, and perhaps quantifiers, variables, predicates, and functors it is even more natural to present things metalinguistically precisely because there *is* nothing that the relevant premises and conclusion are about. One of the points of formal logic is to isolate features of (in)validity that can be accounted for completely in terms of form, with no remainder for content to accommodate.

The very same point applies to modal inferences. Modal logic typically being treated as an extension of sentential or first-order logics, it is certainly no more natural to present new technical material in a way that reminds us that typical particular instances of modal inferences are all use and no mention and that truth values and their possible relations are relevant only derivatively. Thus, it is no surprise that most philosophical discussions suffer from deeply entrenched distractions and that we are here, and elsewhere, quite cavalier about the specifics of our accounts of the modal and of modal knowledge. All of this is so, even though strictly speaking, even according to the formation rules for formal modal languages, both ‘ \Box ’ and ‘ \Diamond ’ are no more metalinguistic than ‘certainly’. Grammatically, each can prefix a sentence to yield another sentence. Using none of those expressions turns the resulting sentence into something concerning metalinguistic matters.

By way of an extended discussion of matters bearing on the epistemology of both theories of modality and of specific modal claims, I recommend accounts that ultimately have nothing to do with possible worlds—ersatz or otherwise—propositions, states of affairs, properties, mental representations, concepts, or sentences, except in some derivative fashion. The use of modal inferences reveals a very this-worldly character about many of our uses. If Socrates not only is a man, but is one necessarily, the primary locus of concern is Socrates, what it is to be Socrates, what it is to be a male human, etc. What it is for ‘Socrates is a man’ to be necessarily true or for ‘Necessarily, Socrates is a man’ to be true or for the proposition that Socrates is a man to be necessarily true, or for Socrates necessarily to fall under the concept Man or for ‘is a man’ (suitably interpreted) to apply necessarily to Socrates are all subsidiary issues. At the very least,

ignoring the secondary issues will permit us to get on with the job of modal epistemology without detours.

It is worth noting that at least on this count, once again, Lewis was nearer the mark than were the ersatzists. He certainly expanded the domain over which to quantify, but his focus was always on the primary issue. What did or did not occur with Socrates (and perhaps his counterparts) is what mattered to resolving modal issues and the knowledge of what did or did not occur with Socrates (and perhaps his counterparts) is the primary issue of the epistemology of modality. The latter troubled so many about his possibilism, as it should have done. Nevertheless, with respect to where to look, at least his account of modal reality made the primary enterprise clearer than did many alternatives.

7 Conclusion

The task of modal epistemology must begin in the right place so that scaffolding and other aids that might help us in the task are seen as scaffolding and aids. There is a time and place to be fascinated with the details of scaffolding, so that it will serve well its intended purpose. Nearly all of the time, however, the scaffolding is discarded so that the building or the sculpture can be as intended and not obscured. Ersatz worlds, their constituents, or other actualist alternatives obscure our vision, whether by permitting us to indulge in philosophical narcissism or by some other form of philosophical distraction.

When doing empirical investigations, we could become similarly distracted. We *could* frame things for ourselves in terms of what propositions are or would be true, or what concepts fundamental entities fall under, and the like. We do not, however, because the empirical investigator is compelled to be much more conscious of doing things, not with words so much as with things. Labs must be financed, built, outfitted, staffed, and operated. Materials must be shipped in, stored, preserved, heated, cooled, melted, or burned. People must sometimes travel to witness events or to acquire materials for further study. One cannot be long fooled that primarily one is doing things with words, however much one might do things with words. Philosophers have little choice but to use their minds, formulate claims to themselves and others, assess claims by thinking through possibilities, etc. Our concern, though, is no less about things—ordinary things, and not *recherché* things. Whether that demands the embrace of the Aristotelian essentialism that Quine so reviled is a further matter. Whether our concepts actually do encode useful, even if revisable information about Socrates or human beings is likewise a further matter. It is important, though, to recognise it and related matters as the *further* matters that they are.

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