

## Modal Agnosticism

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**M**ODAL agnosticism is the account of possible worlds formulated by John Divers. With this approach, he hopes to be able to secure “at least some of the benefits” associated with modal realism, without the cost of having to accept the existence of a plurality of possible worlds (“Agnosticism About Other Worlds: A New Antirealist Programme in Modality” 660).

In this essay I will attempt a critical examination of Divers’ position. I will start with a brief discussion of the use of possible worlds, and the stances one can take on the issue of modal metaphysics. By doing so, I will make clear the motivation behind Divers’ modal agnosticism. I will then discuss whether modal agnosticism can provide a satisfactory account of modality by looking at the assertibility deficit—the range of modal statements that the modal agnostic, because of her agnosticism, cannot assert to be true. I will argue that the assertibility deficit is actually a bigger problem for the modal agnostic than Divers allows. I will conclude that although the theory proposed by Divers is a tempting stance to take on the issue of modal metaphysics, modal agnosticism will only be able to succeed if we can find an account of modal epistemology to support it.

### Modal Realism

Possible worlds are primarily used in providing an account of modality by translating modal sentences into possible world (PW) sentences. Using PW terminology, we obtain the following biconditionals:

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- (1) It is necessary that  $p$  iff  $p$  is the case in all possible worlds.
- (2) It is impossible that  $p$  iff  $p$  is the case in no possible worlds.
- (3) It is possible that  $p$  iff  $p$  is the case in at least one possible world.

These translations give inferential benefits by allowing us to do our modal reasoning “by proxy” in first-order quantificational logic (Divers, “Agnosticism” 665). The question that must then be answered is what possible worlds *are*.

There are many varieties of realism about possible worlds, but the best known is that of David Lewis. Divers terms Lewis’s position “genuine” modal realism (GR). According to GR, possible worlds are concrete, independently existing entities of the same kind as our own world.<sup>1</sup> Possible worlds are spatiotemporally and therefore causally isolated from each other.

I will give an example of how this works. Take the modal statement:

M1: It is possible for my mind to exist without a body.

According to GR, this is to be translated as the PW statement: “there (really) exists at least one concrete possible world, distinct from our own, in which [my mind] exists without a body.”

I have replaced “my mind” from the modal statement with “[my mind]” in the PW statement in order to reflect Lewis’s counterpart theory. Since an individual cannot exist in more than one possible world, it is not, strictly speaking, *my mind* that exists without a body in some non-actual world, but a counterpart of my mind. A counterpart of an entity,  $x$ , is an entity which is similar to  $x$  in certain relevant respects which will depend on the meaning of the modal statement in question, and the context in which it is uttered (Lewis 8). “[ $x$ ]” is therefore to be read as: “a counterpart of the entity to which ‘ $x$ ’ refers.”

The alternative to GR has generally been to adopt one of the various forms of what Divers classes “actualist realism” (AR). Essentially, AR differs from GR by taking possible worlds to be some sort of abstract entity. Adams, for example, identifies possible worlds with “maximal consistent [sets] of propositions.” In other words, a possible world is a set of propositions which contains “one member of every pair of mutually contradictory propositions, and which is such that it is possible that all of its members be true together” (225). According to this view, M1 will be true if and only if

<sup>1</sup>For Lewis, our world includes everything at any distance from us in space or time (1).

there is a maximal consistent set of propositions (i.e., a possible world) that includes the proposition: “my mind exists without a body.”

Many philosophers have found some form of AR to be a more palatable option than what they consider to be the unintuitive, or blatantly incredible, theory of David Lewis. However, GR delivers indisputable theoretical benefits. Most notably, it is the only theory which seems able to provide a completely reductive account of modality. To see this, consider again the modal sentence, M1. It is translated into the PW sentence:

PW1: There is a possible world in which [my mind] exists without a body.

Now, according to Lewis, there is a possible world for every way things could have been (2). This means that whether or not there is a possible world like that postulated in PW1—whether or not M1 is true—is a matter of objective fact, rather than a matter of what we believe to be possible. Because possible worlds are not stipulated by us but are independently existing entities, they do not depend on our notions of modality and are described in non-modal terms. Lewis’s bi-conditionals therefore succeed in providing a reductive, non-circular analysis of modality.

AR analyses, on the other hand, seem unlikely to succeed in providing a reductive account of modality. In Adams’ case, for example, this is because the set of propositions that constitutes a possible world must be consistent—i.e., “It must be possible that all of its members be true together” (225). Which propositions can possibly be true at the same time, however, is obviously a question of modality. The problem this causes for AR is that if you must rely on modal notions to say what possible worlds there are, then you cannot use possible worlds to analyse modality without your analysis being circular.

Proponents of a given form of AR, however, generally argue that their theory postulates a more acceptable ontology than GR—something which they take to weigh heavily in their favor. One might argue, for example, that if our ontology already contains propositions, then Adams’ account of possible worlds will not be ontologically problematic.

However, Divers argues that AR *does not* actually succeed in articulating a more acceptable ontology than GR. As far as Divers is concerned, the real problem with the ontology of GR is the causal isolation of non-actual possible worlds from our own. Since we can come into no causal contact with such worlds, our knowledge of them cannot be *a posteriori*.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, our knowledge of the existence of a plurality of concrete possible worlds

<sup>2</sup>I accept Divers’ definition of *a posteriori* knowledge as “any knowledge that requires the existence of some (appropriate) causal connection between the truth-making fact and any knower” (*Possible Worlds* 58–59).

would have to be *a priori*; but, it is unclear whether such knowledge could actually satisfy the conditions *necessary* to be *a priori* knowledge. Now, since the possible worlds postulated by AR are abstract and thus causally isolated from us, we find just the same difficulty in that we must explain how it is that we could have *a priori* knowledge of them. In neither GR nor AR do we stand in relations to possible worlds that are “(normally) considered necessary for us to be able to refer to things and to know about them.” Divers thinks that the ontologies of both brands of realism are therefore “epistemologically queer” (*Possible Worlds* 230).

Divers concludes that AR is no better than GR in producing an acceptable ontology, but that GR is definitively superior theoretically. He concludes “if we are to be realists about possible worlds then we should be genuine realists” (*Possible Worlds* xiii). However, due to the epistemological problem discussed above, Divers remains unconvinced that we should be realists *at all*. It seems that we simply have “no warrant for believing in the existence of any possible world other than the actual world,” leaving agnosticism as the “default epistemological position” in addressing the question of the existence of the non-actual possible worlds postulated by GR (“Agnosticism” 668–69).

Given this conclusion, it is tempting to see if it is possible to formulate a theory with which one avoids the ontological commitment of GR, while retaining some of its benefits. Since Divers has rejected the usual way of trying to achieve this as equally epistemologically problematic, he concludes that “those who would persist in the use of possible-world talk and avoid commitment to genuine realism should look beyond actualist realism to the antirealist options” (*Possible Worlds* 297).

### Modal Antirealism

In “Agnosticism about Other Worlds,” Divers begins to formulate his brand of modal antirealism against the backdrop of GR, concentrating solely on the use of possible worlds in providing an account of modality.<sup>3</sup> The problem for the modal antirealist can easily be seen in the example of a Lewisian translation that I gave above:

PW1: There is a possible world in which [my mind] exists without a body.

This is (or at least appears to be) what Divers calls a “contested” sentence. A contested sentence is a PW sentence which meets two conditions which I have labeled “(a)” and “(b)” (“Agnosticism” 17):

<sup>3</sup> Divers’ discussion generally concerns metaphysical modality, as will mine.

(a) it looks as though its use would conventionally be taken as (or as entailing) an assertion of the existence of a possible world that satisfies a certain non-modal condition.

(b) it is accepted (and may be presumed known) by all parties that the actual world does not satisfy the non-modal condition in question.

Given these two conditions, if we take any contested sentences to be true, then we appear to be committed to the existence of a non-actual possible world.

There are several ways of dealing with contested sentences in order to avoid such a commitment. Modal antirealists usually argue that the contested PW sentences do not mean what they appear to mean. This essentially involves trying to show that, even though contested sentences meet condition (a), they only *look* as though they make existence assertions and therefore are not actually ontologically problematic. One can do this by arguing either that PW sentences are not truth-apt,<sup>4</sup> or that their semantic structure does not permit “valid inference of the existence of non-actual possible worlds”<sup>5</sup> (Divers, *Possible Worlds* 22).

Divers thinks that such approaches involve a “devious” reinterpretation of PW sentences, and threaten a loss of the theoretical benefits provided by GR. For one thing, it seems unlikely that we will retain a reductive account of modality and also, crucially, if we reinterpret the meaning of PW discourse, we “risk compromising the capacity of the sentences to play the inferential role that we value” (“Agnosticism” 665–66).

Divers therefore proposes that the antirealist investigate an alternative course. He suggests that we take PW sentences at face-value (666)—and accept that PW sentences which meet condition (a) really *do* assert the existence of possible worlds—but refuse to accept the *truth* of any contested sentences. Contested sentences might be true for all we know, but if we wish to remain agnostic about the existence of non-actual possible worlds, we cannot hold them to be true (668). Furthermore, modal agnostics accept the Lewisian translations as truly analytic of our modal talk (666), so they must also remain agnostic about the truth-values of the modal statements which are translated into contested sentences. From now on I will refer to such modal statements as “disputed” modal statements.<sup>6</sup>

This, essentially, is Divers’ modal agnosticism (MA). He hopes that it will enable him to develop an account of modality which stands at no disadvantage

<sup>4</sup> Expressivism about possible worlds.

<sup>5</sup> Fictionalism or modalism about possible worlds.

<sup>6</sup> Divers also uses this terminology.

to GR in providing a reductive account of modality which is inferentially adequate. I will discuss whether or not I think he can succeed.

### Modal Agnosticism

Divers starts by showing that MA does not entail a complete agnosticism about modality, because only some modal sentences are translated into PW sentences that satisfy condition (a). The type of agnosticism that the modal agnostic holds is what Divers terms “moderate” agnosticism. Moderate agnostics can believe that certain entities within the realm about which they are supposed to be agnostic do *not* exist (Divers, “Agnosticism” 669). For example, one could be a moderate agnostic about unobservables, while denying the existence of particles that have both positive and negative charge. This sort of agnosticism allows the modal agnostic to use negative existential knowledge to assert a wide range of modal claims.

For example, the agnostic can hold that, *whether or not there exist non-actual possible worlds*:

PW2: There are no possible worlds in which there exist objects which are both red and not-red.

Thereby allowing the agnostic to assert the modal statement:

M2: It is impossible for something to be both red and not-red.

Since necessity can be defined in terms of impossibility, a wide range of necessity claims can also be held by the modal agnostic.<sup>7</sup> Divers argues that negative existential knowledge can be used to handle various statements of relative necessity and impossibility, and—most significantly—to put the agnostics at no disadvantage to the realist at all with regards to their ability to assert “intuitively true counterfactuals” (“Agnosticism” 673).

Many possibility claims will be translated into PW sentences which fail to meet condition (b). The modal agnostic can certainly assert statements of the form “possibly *p*” if *p* is true in the actual world (i.e., the actual world satisfies the non-modal condition in question). Divers then proposes that same-world counterparts could be used in certain instances of modality *de re* to allow the agnostic to hold “possibly *p*” to be true where *p* is *false* in the actual world (674). Take, for example, the following modal claim:

M3: I could have been a doctor.

This can be translated into the following PW sentence:

<sup>7</sup>The agnostic can hold that *p* is necessary, because there are no worlds at which not-*p*.

PW3: There is a possible world in which [I] am a doctor.

PW3 could be made true by same-world counterparts of me who are doctors.

I think that the use of same-world counterparts could be justified in a variety of everyday situations, proving a very useful resource for the modal agnostic. Often when contemplating *de re* possibilities the counterparts required will be fairly vague. For example, when wondering whether M3 is true, probably what I *really* want to know is whether an individual sufficiently similar to me in certain relevant respects—intelligence, background, funding, etc.—could be a doctor. Sufficiently similar counterparts of me in this world could clearly do the job here.

The remaining statements that Divers confesses are likely to cause problems for the agnostic are claims that “possibly *p*” when it is not known that actually *p* (“Agnosticism” 684). These are the modal claims which are translated into PW sentences which could well be members of the contested set. As a result, the agnostic will have an assertibility and belief deficit over a “significant subclass of possibility and contingency claims when compared with both the realist and the folk” (674).

However, although Divers admits that the assertibility deficit poses a challenge for the agnostic, he argues that the onus should be on modal realists to justify their problematic ontology by showing that the deficit “matters.” Divers thinks that the assertibility deficit will only matter if it has “implications for what we have reason to do, either practically or intellectually” (684). There is a danger that the assertibility deficit could indeed have such implications, because our modal beliefs are often “rationally efficacious”—our beliefs about what is possible are vital in our decisions regarding what to do and what to think. Divers thinks that the agnostic program must therefore involve attempts to prove that “all of those disputed beliefs that are rationally efficacious are also rationally dispensable” (678). In other words, Divers hopes to show that these disputed beliefs are ones that we can live without. If the assertibility deficit will not prevent the agnostic from modalizing effectively in everyday situations, then Divers thinks that it will not matter after all.

### Divers’ Assertibility Deficit

I will be concentrating on Divers’ attempts to tackle the assertibility deficit for *de re* possibility statements. Divers’ expected realist objection takes the following form (“Agnosticism” 678):

(P1) Sometimes we take it that we have reason to *d*.

(P2) We only have reason to *d* if we have the disputed belief that it is possible that *s*.

∴ Being entitled to believe that it is possible that *s* is rationally indispensable to our doing *d*.

(P3) The modal agnostic is not entitled to believe that it is possible that *s*.

∴ Modal agnosticism renders us irrational.

An “important and commonplace” instance in which this will apply is where *d* is an attempt to *s* (“Agnosticism” 680). Divers gives an example to illustrate the agnostic’s problem here. When driving, Divers claims, we only take ourselves to have reason to attempt to overtake another vehicle if we have the following possibility belief:

M4: It is possible for me to overtake successfully.

The PW translation of this statement is presumably:

PW4: There is a possible world in which [I] overtake successfully.

PW4 looks as though it could be a member of the contested set. Divers says that the modal agnostic must argue either that the rationally efficacious belief expressed by M4 is not a disputed belief, or that the belief is rationally dispensable (681).

In cases like this the modal agnostic might succeed by pursuing the first option. PW4 is not necessarily a contested sentence. It fulfils criterion (a), in that its use appears to assert the existence of a possible world which satisfies a non-modal condition—namely the condition that it contains a counterpart of the driver which overtakes successfully. However, PW4 fails to satisfy criterion (b)—we do not know that the actual world fails to satisfy this non-modal condition.<sup>8</sup> This is because the non-modal condition could be satisfied *in the future*. One is trying to decide whether it would be rational to attempt to overtake. One does not know if he or she will even try yet—let alone be successful in any attempt. If one *does* try and *is* successful, then—since everything is a counterpart of itself—this will make PW4, and M4, true.

We must remember that for Lewis the actual world includes everything at any distance from us in space and time. It is important to note

<sup>8</sup> Divers also suggests something along these lines involving the use of same-world counterparts, but admits that “to rely on the availability of such a response in general, would be to demand too much of agents’ actual *a posteriori* . . . beliefs” (“Agnosticism” 681).

that rationally efficacious beliefs are essentially forward looking. We take ourselves to have reason to act if we think—or at least hope—that by our actions we will cause certain situations to be realized in the future in the *actual* world. Everything that happens in the actual world is clearly possible, but since we do not yet know what will happen in the future, we do not yet know whether assertions such as M4 necessarily commit us to the existence of a non-actual possible world, or only to the existence of our own.

I do not think that these are the sorts of possibility claims that will cause the greatest problems for modal agnostics. Insofar as agnostics have warrant to believe that in the actual world, *if they do d, then it will be the case that s*; agnostics also have warrant to believe that, *if they do d, then it is possible that s*. I will now explain where I think the real difficulty for modal agnostics lies.

### The Real Assertibility Deficit

The beliefs that are *really* going to cause problems for the modal agnostic are not necessarily rationally efficacious ones. The most difficult statements for the agnostic to handle are statements of the form “possibly *p*” where we know that “not actually *p*.” By concentrating on rationally efficacious beliefs, Divers neglects to discuss this problem.

Consider again the sentence:

PW1: There is a possible world in which [my mind]  
exists without a body.

If this is a contested sentence, then the modal agnostic has to remain agnostic about its truth-value, and therefore must also remain agnostic about the truth-value of M1. However, what if I am convinced that M1 is true? Suppose that I think M1 is true because I have what I believe to be a well-developed theory of epistemology which allows that whatever I can clearly and distinctly conceive is possible. Suppose I then claim that I can clearly and distinctly conceive of my mind existing without a body.<sup>9</sup> The modal agnostic is going to have to engage with such a position, and either show how this belief is justified from the agnostic viewpoint, or give a satisfactory argument as to why I am wrong to think that I know that M1 is true.

On the first line of approach, the modal agnostic could try to use same-world counterparts to show that PW1 is not really a contested sentence. Perhaps M1 could be made true by the fact that my mind will exist without a body in the actual world after I die. However, what if I maintain that although no human mind in the actual world will ever exist without

<sup>9</sup>This reasoning might sound familiar (Descartes 16).

a body—because this is nomologically impossible—it is nevertheless metaphysically possible for my mind to exist without a body. There are therefore no same-world counterparts of me that could decide this matter. It appears that M1 really does express a disputed modal belief.

Divers suggests that, when faced with disputed modal beliefs, the tactic which “offers the best prospect of generalization” for the agnostic is to try to show that the beliefs are rationally dispensable if replaced with counterfactual claims which can act as surrogates (“Agnosticism” 682). However, even if Divers is right in his assertion that the agnostic is just as well equipped to deal with counterfactuals as the realist, dealing with them would require finding an  $x$  such that:

M5: If  $x$  had been the case, then my mind would have existed without a body.

And I think that I could reasonably maintain that it is metaphysically possible that my mind could exist without a body, but not know what, exactly, such an  $x$  would be.

Therefore, it appears that the modal agnostics must remain agnostic about the truth-value of M1. The same goes for all *de re* possibility claims which are translated into contested sentences. Modal agnostics, by refusing to accept that we could know the truth-values of disputed modal claims, are therefore seen to be open to the “obvious and serious objection” that their theory “delivers radically revisionary . . . consequences for the range of modal statements that we are entitled to hold true” (Divers, “Possible-Worlds Semantics Without Possible Worlds: The Agnostic Approach” 190 fn.16)—whether rationally efficacious or not. It has never before been suggested that the range of modal statements that we are entitled to hold true—that our modal epistemology itself—is determined by the fact that accepting the truth of certain modal statements would genuinely commit us to accepting the existence of a non-actual, concrete possible world that we cannot know to exist. The modal agnostic must therefore provide us with a satisfactory reason for thinking such a revision to be accurate.

### Can Modal Agnosticism Justify the Assertibility Deficit?

Let us call somebody who thinks that we can know the truth-values of disputed modal claims a “modal believer.” I do not think that modal believers will be in any way convinced if the modal agnostic’s only argument against their position is that it commits them to the existence of a non-actual possible world (which we cannot know to exist). Modal believers can just deny that modal agnostics are in possession of the correct translations of their modal statements.

I think that Divers must avoid letting his account of possible worlds determine our account of modal epistemology to too great an extent. Although generally when we use biconditionals to provide an analysis of some sort of concept, the direction of explanation gives priority in truth-value to the analysans as presumably more basic, this should not be the case here. If priority is given to the truth-values of PW sentences, the translation of modal statements into statements about possible worlds might actually begin to be detrimental to our modal epistemology given that we have not yet been completely vindicated in our use of PW discourse to explain our modal concepts.<sup>10</sup>

Possible worlds were supposed to elucidate our modal concepts and make them consistent; to be an aid to our modal reasoning, not an absolute limit to our modal epistemology. If we are to maintain agnosticism, we must not only accept that we do not know that any disputed modal claims are true, but that we could not know. We could not know because if we did know that a disputed modal claim was true then we would also know that there exists a non-actual possible world, and according to the agnostic we simply cannot possess such knowledge. But I do not think we should give up trying to decide whether we are correct in thinking that things might have been different—whether we are justified in asserting the truth of certain modal statements—just because we cannot know whether or not the corresponding possible worlds exist.

Essentially, it does not make sense for agnostics to retain the Lewisian translations at all unless they have good reason to think that the resulting biconditionals, when combined with agnosticism about possible worlds, will still link statements with the same truth-values—whether they are true, false, or unknown. There is no point in trying to retain the inferential benefits of GR by taking its claims at face-value, if you will be forming inferences for modal sentences to which you assign the wrong truth-values. If our opinions about which modal statements we can take to be true start to diverge too much from which of their translations into quantification over possible worlds we can take to be true, then we must ask ourselves whether these translations can legitimately be retained.

Divers appears to be in trouble here even by his own standards. He says of GR that the truth-values of PW sentences must match the truth-values of the modal sentences they are translating; “the latter being assigned, by and large, on the basis of our prior modal beliefs” (*Possible Worlds* 106–7). He asserts that if our “prior modal beliefs” fail to exert substantial constraints

<sup>10</sup> Divers actually mentions “abstentionism”—refraining altogether from the use of possible worlds to provide truth-conditions for modal statements—as an option “for which we should allow” (*Possible Worlds* 19).

on our analyses of possibility, we will be left open to the charge of having “(arbitrarily) redefined [our] subject matter” (107 fn. 3).

Many people—ordinary folk and philosophers—are modal believers. They believe that their mind could have existed without a body, or that there could have been talking donkeys, or that the laws of physics could have been different, or that there could have been a planet exactly like this one except that the substance called water is not actually H<sub>2</sub>O. Such beliefs may be backed up by accounts of modal epistemology, or may simply rely on folk intuitions about what is metaphysically possible or necessary. Either way, MA must maintain that such beliefs are unjustified, and the only reason the modal agnostic can give as to why these beliefs are unjustified is that, according to the MA analysis, they commit the believer to the existence of a non-actual possible world. However, given that the PW analysis of modality was designed in order to represent our modal beliefs, our PW analysis itself cannot require us to extensively revise our modal beliefs without being open to the charge of arbitrarily redefining the subject of modality.

One of the strengths of GR is Lewis’s insistence that there is a possible world for every way things could have been. This is supposed to make possible worlds independent of our modal notions, but much scope is left for us to use his theory to reflect our modal beliefs. Being obviously unable to check what other possible worlds are like, we must use whatever account of modal epistemology we accept to try to figure out what possible worlds there are; to try to figure out what is possible, or necessary, with the help of the inferential GR framework. Once we accept the existence of a plurality of possible worlds, we are not at risk of our modal epistemology being prey, in the wrong manner, to our metaphysical commitments. No matter what our account of modal epistemology, if we know that certain modal claims are true, then we know that the possible worlds they require must exist.

If MA is to be an account of possible worlds that can really rival GR, modal agnostics must show that they are not securing the benefit of a “safe and sane ontology” (*Possible Worlds* 227) at the cost of an arbitrary revision of our modal epistemology. In order to do this, MA must refute the charge of arbitrariness by providing independent reasons to conclude that we do not know whether or not any of our disputed modal beliefs are true. If MA is to be successful, we must give up on the attempt to justify our prior modal intuitions and indulge in a revision of which modal claims we are justified in believing and asserting to be true. The modal agnostic is going to have to give an account of modal epistemology.

### Modal Epistemology

Modal epistemology has, until fairly recently, been a “radically under-developed region of analytic philosophy” (*Possible Worlds* 164). Our modal

knowledge, given that we even have such knowledge, is notoriously difficult to explain. One of the problems we face is that it seems as though experience can only ever tell us what is actually the case.

Modal agnostics can, nevertheless, attempt to argue in favor of a form of modal epistemology that would support their position. One way of doing this would be to work with the empiricist epistemological framework proposed by Sónia Roca.<sup>11</sup> The modal empiricist is essentially one who rejects the rationalist claim that “all knowable modal truths are knowable *fundamentally a priori*”<sup>12</sup> (Roca 164), and instead defends the “aposteriority of modal knowledge” (20)—the claim that experience *can* tell us more than what is actually the case.

Roca concentrates on *de re* possibility. She thinks that “the interesting cases of possibility-knowledge are cases in which we know that [possibly] *p* is true even when *p* is not known to be true” (242)—the very cases that are causing difficulties for the modal agnostic. Roca, like Divers, allows for same-world counterparts connected by a similarity relation (229). She suggests that our “everyday life” modal knowledge is based on reasoning using “conceptual resources, cognitive capacities, nomic knowledge, and empirical knowledge about *other* entities” (252–53).

Roca gives the example of the modal claim:

M6: John Kennedy could have died from a heart attack.

She suggests that we know that M6 is true by reasoning roughly as follows (249): For some *a*, we have empirical knowledge that *a* died of a heart attack. From this we infer that it is possible that *a* dies from a heart attack. We then abstract *a* to get the open sentence:

O6: It is possible that *x* dies from a heart attack.

Roca argues that the set of modal counterparts determined by O6 will be “the class of individuals that are modally analogous to *a* regarding *a*’s possibility of dying of a heart attack” (249). She thinks that this set includes all individuals with a heart (this is supposedly derived from our nomological knowledge that all hearts are analogous in causal powers). Kennedy is a member of this set, so confirming the truth of M6.

Essentially, what actually happens to an individual tells us what *can* happen to its “modal analogues” or counterparts. Roca points out that her use of counterparts does not commit us to GR “because all counterparts

<sup>11</sup> Roca is an RCUK fellow at the University of Sterling. I cite her PhD thesis—written in part while a visiting research student at the Arché Centre, University of St. Andrews (The Metaphysics and Epistemology of Modality project, 2003–2005)—with her permission.

<sup>12</sup> For example, by attempting to equate possibility with some sort of conceivability.

on which we extrapolate belong to the actual world and, therefore, for all we know about counterparts, there is only one concrete world” (250–51).

So for the modal empiricist, just like the modal agnostic, we can assert the truth of *de re* modal claims when the relevant non-modal condition is satisfied in the actual world by a same-world counterpart. Roca acknowledges that this method is, however, limited in scope. Our experience of what actually happens to individuals will not help us in “remote cases” (255). This is due to our being unable to know what the appropriate set of modal analogues will be.

For example (256), we do not know whether it is true that:

M7: John Kennedy could have been a cat.

Because we cannot decide whether John Kennedy is a member of the set of modal analogues determined by:

O7: It is possible that x is a cat.

This will depend on whether essentiality of kind is true—something which we do not know. This claim therefore goes beyond what we can currently know empirically,<sup>13</sup> and Roca argues that the correct stance to take towards the truth-values of such claims is agnosticism (257).

If we really do obtain our knowledge of modality *de re* by appealing to same-world counterparts, then it appears that modal agnostics have an account of modal epistemology which might provide some support to their stance on possible worlds. The only *de re* possibility claims we can know to be true will not be members of the disputed set, and we will have to remain agnostic about the truth-values of disputed *de re* possibility claims. There is the possibility, therefore, for modal agnostics to avoid the charge of arbitrariness—at least with regards to their account of possibility *de re*.

## Conclusion

Divers’ MA is an interesting new addition to the wealth of theories on possible worlds. However, whether you are willing to accept this theory will depend on whether you are willing—and think that MA provides you with satisfactory reason—to accept its constraints on the modal commitments that you can justifiably possess.

MA will stand or fall depending on our account of modal epistemology. We are in need of a “settled [and] plausible conception” of modal epistemology, with which the “metaphysics of modality can be held to

<sup>13</sup> Although Roca maintains that we cannot know that remote claims such as M7 will never be something that we can determine via empirical evidence (261).

account” (Divers, *Possible Worlds* 164). Maybe investigations into modal epistemology could come to suggest that Divers’ assertibility deficit actually matches the limits of our modal knowledge. Maybe I would be wrong to think I know that my mind could exist without a body. I have suggested one new approach to modal epistemology which modal agnostics could appeal to in order to back up their worldly agnosticism. However, standing alone MA does not provide a satisfactory reason for limiting our modal commitments, and it will not be convincing to those who think that we *can* know the truth-values of disputed modal claims.

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