Theses and Dissertations

May 2018

Conceiving as Evidence of Possibility

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CONCEIVING AS EVIDENCE OF POSSIBILITY

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree of

Master of Arts

in Philosophy

at

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

May 2018

CONCEIVING AS EVIDENCE OF POSSIBILITY

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The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2018
Under the Supervision of Professor Joshua Spencer

In this thesis I argue that at least one type of conceiving, namely imagining, provides reliable

evidence of non-actual metaphysical possibility. My argument requires two main tasks. I need to

show that conceiving can provide evidence *at all* of mere (non-actual) metaphysical possibilities.

To put it another way, how could what we imagine or otherwise conceive stand in any

representational relation whatsoever to a mere possibility? I argue by analogy with perception

that the contents of our imaginings correspond with (some) merely possible states of affairs.

Imagination is not perception of merely possible objects, of course. If one imagines that an F is

G, the imagining indicates that a certain class could be non-empty—namely, the class of Fs that

are G. This position is meant to avoid the specificity problem famously raised by Quine (1948)

and emulated by Paul Tidman (1994). I also need to explain how conceiving that p, where p is a

proposition, can reliably lead to true beliefs about p's possibility. I do not have a unified or

knock-down argument to this effect, but I do offer several reasons to think that such a connection

obtains.

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Conceiving as Evidence of Possibility

1.   Introduction

The notions of possibility and necessity are invoked frequently in philosophical debate. Consider

the following argument against materialism about mental states:

> If mental states are identical with brain states, then *necessarily* mental
> states are identical with brain states.
>
> But mental states are *not* necessarily identical with brain states because
> possibly pain exists without C-fiber stimulation, for example, or vice versa.
>
> Therefore, mental states are not identical with brain states.[1]

Due to Saul Kripke, this argument famously relies on the necessity of identity between co-

referring rigidly designating expressions. It also relies on the possibility that mental states and

brain states come apart. Kripke argued extensively for claims of the form of the first premise but

offered scant support for the second premise. Nor will I defend that premise here. Instead I will

address a more general question: can a proposition's conceivability justify belief in its

possibility?[2]

I argue that conceivability is a fallible and incomplete but nonetheless reliable source of

such evidence. My argument requires two main tasks. One thing I need to show is that

conceiving can provide evidence *at all* of mere (non-actual) metaphysical possibilities. To put it

another way, how could what we imagine or otherwise conceive stand in any representational

relation whatsoever to a mere possibility? I argue by analogy with perception that the contents of

our imaginings correspond with (some) merely possible states of affairs. However, I hope it will

be clear that imagination is not perception of merely possible objects. If one imagines that an F is

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[1] Reconstructed from Kripke (1980), pp. 144-155.
[2] I will frequently use the terminology of propositions. When I do, most of what I say can easily be replaced by talk
of sentences (or statements) or, in the other direction, states of affairs (or situations or scenarios).

G, the imagining indicates that *a certain class could be non-empty*—namely, the class of Fs that are G. To take a trivial example, if one imagines a frog that is green, this indicates that there could be green frogs. (Of course, we already know that there actually are green frogs). This position is meant to avoid the specificity problem famously raised by Quine (1948) and emulated by Paul Tidman (1994).

The other main task of this thesis is to explain how conceiving a proposition p can reliably lead to true beliefs about p's possibility. I do not have a unified or knock-down argument to this effect; rather I offer several reasons to think that such a connection obtains. (This is not to say that conceiving is infallible, just that it is *likely* to indicate genuine possibility.)

The first section comprises a brief introduction. In the second section I set out the question I try to answer. In the third section I give three arguments for the reliability of conceiving. One is from compositionality, another from Nathan Salmon's remarks on modal induction, and the third against arguments from the identity of necessity. In the fourth section I set out two requirements that we must meet to get evidence of possibility from conceiving. First, we must be able to conceive the possibility, and second, we must be able to recognize what we are conceiving. In the fifth section I explain how we meet these requirements in perception. In the sixth section I extend this explanation and argue that we can meet both requirements in imagining a possibility. In the seventh section I argue that our imagining is connected with modal reality; this means imagining delivers reliable evidence of possibility. I conclude in the eight section.

2.   Possibility and Its Objects

In this section I characterize the terms 'possible' and 'conceivable.' I am interested in possible

propositions that are neither necessarily true nor actually true since it is clear how we can know

that possibly p when necessarily p or actually p. I will often use 'conceiving' and 'imagining'

interchangeably since I am primarily interested in imagining as an instance of conceiving.

There are many sorts of possibility. 'It is not wrong to charge interest on money lent'

expresses moral possibility (permissibility). 'It is possible to fly to the moon' expresses physical

possibility. 'Goldbach's conjecture[3] may be true' expresses epistemic possibility; the conjecture

has yet to be proved or disproved, so we do not yet know whether it is true or false. Any

statement is logically possible if it is consistent. And 'Unicorns are possible' expresses

metaphysical possibility.[4] I am concerned with the latter. A metaphysical possibility is a way a

possible world is, to invoke realist talk about possible worlds, or a way the (actual) world could

be, or could have been, to speak with the actualists. I am interested in how we gain knowledge of

the truth about metaphysical possibility.

Three types of metaphysical possibility can be distinguished: possibilities that follow

from necessary truths, possibilities that follow from actual truths, and possibilities that follow

from neither necessary truths nor actual truths. I am interested in propositions p such that

possibly p but not actually p and not necessarily p. (I will call these merely possible truths, or

mere possibilities.) It is clear how we come to know the first two types of possibility. In the first

case, *actually p* entails *possibly p*. For instance, the proposition expressed by 'Richard Nixon

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[3] The (mathematical) assertion that every even integer greater than two is equal to the sum of two prime numbers. This is a favorite example in the literature at least in part because if the conjecture is true, then it is necessarily true, and if it is false, then it is necessarily false. The example illustrates epistemic possibility since logical and metaphysical possibility are not in play.

[4] One's view of whether unicorns could exist depends on what modal metaphysics one embraces and/or on one's philosophy of language. I will not argue here for adopting a particular modal metaphysics or philosophy of language.

was president of the United States in 1970' is actually true, so it is possibly true. If it were not possibly true, it could not be actually true. In the second case, *necessarily p* entails *possibly p*. For instance, the proposition expressed by '2 + 2 = 4' is necessarily true, so it is also possibly true. If this proposition were not possibly true, it could not be necessarily true.[5]

What makes mere possibilities interesting is that no such inference leads to knowledge of them, so it is unclear how we come to know them. There seems to be more than one source. In some cases, an intuition is sufficient. I know intuitively that I could have set my coffee mug just to the left of where I actually put it. As to questions such as 'Could there have been unicorns?', however, our answer should not rest on intuition alone. Even in trivial examples like the coffee mug case, intuition is problematic. What exactly is it? How does it explain our modal knowledge? The worry is that intuition is mysterious. For that reason we should consider other sources of modal knowledge.

Before arguing for conceivability as a source of evidence about possibility, let me give an initial characterization. A proposition p is conceivable if and only if someone at some time can conceive p. That much is by definition. However, the terms 'conceivable' and 'inconceivable' have more than one use. It seems plausible that the way we conceive of abstract objects is not the same way we conceive of concrete objects. In this paper I will focus on conceivings of propositions involving concrete, sensible objects and properties. Say S conceives that p if, though not only if, S has an imagining that corresponds with p. If I imagine a tiger sleeping on an elephant, for example, I 'see' (experience a visual image that depicts) a tiger sleeping on an

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[5] 'Actually p entails possibly p' requires only reflexivity. 'Necessarily p entails possibly p' holds by definition in any model with one world and reflexive accessibility or an accessibility relation between two (or more) worlds.

elephant. If I imagine a new piece of music, I will 'hear' (experience an aural image that represents) how it would sound were it played aloud.[6]

While 'conceives' will mean 'imagines' throughout this paper unless noted otherwise, it is worth remembering that there are other senses of conceivability. A proposition is conceivable in some sense if it is consistent. This sense of conceivability as consistency is noteworthy because, provided contradictions cannot be true, inconsistency is proof of impossibility. Thus, if I conceive a proposition p and thereby find an inconsistency in p, I am obliged to accept that p is impossible. This holds for any source of evidence for possibility, including conceivability.

3.   Initial Plausibility

In this section I defend the initial plausibility of the claim that conceiving indicates genuine possibility. In particular I defend the claim against standard objections from the necessity of identity. These, it turns out, are not as difficult to meet as one might think. I also give two positive reasons to think that there is a reliable connection between conceiving and genuine possibility. One draws an analogy with the compositional theory of language: we can recognize indefinitely many possible sentences in our language, and this, together with empirical research, supports the thought that we can recognize indefinitely many possible sensible states of affairs. The other positive reason elaborates on remarks by Nathan Salmon about negating a possibility claim: the negation of a possibility claim is a necessity claim, which is of course much stronger than a possibility claim. This suggests a *prima facie* presumption in favor of possibility claims.

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[6] I am following Yablo (1993) by focusing on conceiving as imagining. Unlike Yablo, I am taking imagination to involve concrete images. We do not imagine a state of affairs, on my approach, unless we 'hear' the music with our inner ear or 'see' the tiger with our inner eye.

3.1   Modal Induction

I argue for a defeasible presumption in favor of the truth of merely possible propositions. That is, there is reason to presume for any proposition p that p is possible unless p is inconsistent. Hence this argument amplifies any sort of evidence for possibility, although I suggest this is especially so for the contents of imagining.

The argument is based on classical first-order modal logic (in particular, the law of excluded middle). The argument is that for any merely possible proposition p, either possibly p or not possibly p. We can establish 'possibly p' even if just one object in one possible world satisfies p, even if we cannot individuate that object, provided p is a singular or existential proposition. On the other hand, since 'not possibly p' entails 'necessarily not p', this can be established only if every object in every possible world fails to satisfy p.[7] No matter how difficult it is to establish that p is possible, doing so is comparatively far easier than establishing that p is impossible, provided p is a singular or existential proposition. Indeed, it seems that the only way for finite creatures to establish that *necessarily not p* for any p is to show that p is inconsistent.

This argument is similar to one made by Nathan Salmon (1981) in a brief piece called "A Problem in the Epistemology of Modality."[8] The problem, according to Salmon, is that while we can make sound inductive inferences to general propositions about the actual world, we cannot make sound inductive inferences to general propositions about all possible worlds. But whenever we assert a necessity, we are asserting something about all possible worlds. So we cannot gain knowledge of necessary propositions inductively. The reason is that while we can make an

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[7] I will sometimes talk of satisfaction, which is typically taken to be a relation between sentences and objects rather than between propositions and objects. However, I will ignore this subtlety since what I say in terms of propositions can be rephrased in terms of sentences.
[8] Salmon (1981), pp. 253-255.

adequate number of observations for induction in the actual world, the case is different for possible worlds. We can only make an observation of one relevant instance: the actual world. A single instance is not enough to support an inductive generalization about all possible worlds.

Let me flesh out my version of the argument. The law of excluded middle (LEM) is relevant because it makes reasoning about the possibility that p a decision problem. LEM says that as a logical and therefore necessary truth, either p or not p, for any p. As an instance of LEM, possibly p or not possibly p. Classically,[9] 'not possibly p' entails 'necessarily not p.'[10] Hence we have a well-defined choice: possibly p, or necessarily not p. Putting this choice in terms of possible worlds, the options are (a) p being true at a possible world, and (b) p being false at all possible worlds. The latter option is stronger than the former in two ways. First, (b) is a claim about all possible worlds, as Salmon notes, whereas (a) is only a claim about one or more possible worlds. Second, (b) is a necessary negation, whereas (a) might involve no negation at all. Now substitute 'Some x is F' for p. Then (a) becomes (a′) 'Possibly, some x is F' and (b) becomes (b′) 'Necessarily, no x is F'. Classically, (b′) entails (b″) 'Necessarily, every x is not F'. The difference in strength between claims (b″) and (a) is at least as great as the difference in strength between claims (b) and (a). This suggests that there should be a presumption for the truth of propositions of the form *possibly p*.

The principal difference between my version and Salmon's is that Salmon sharply separates induction about possible worlds from induction about objects in the actual world, whereas I see the two as more closely related. (b″) involves not only worlds (or modality otherwise construed) but also objects and properties in each world, including the actual world—

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[9] By "classically" I mean 'according to classical logic'.
[10] I am omitting use of corner quotes; I intend to refer to relevant instances of the string between the single quotes.

and yet it is a legitimate modal proposition.[11] Because modal claims like (b″) point both to possible worlds and to objects and properties within worlds, I think there is room in modal induction, so to speak, for existentially quantified general propositions about objects in non-actual possible worlds. This only reinforces the presumption in favor of *possibly p* as opposed to *not possibly p*.

Imagining provides evidence for just such propositions because the content of our imaginings is like that of an existential generalization: We imagine *some* object x (and some property F) such that x is F. If Fx is not actual, then our imagining corresponds to a merely possible proposition, provided the proposition is possible at all. And if we conceive that some (non-actual) x is F, then we have an input for the decision problem outlined above. That is, we already have the presumption in favor of possibly p, and if p is conceivable, then there is evidence that possibly some x is F. One way to tap into the latter is by conceiving p.

3.2   Conceiving Contra Contradiction

In the last sub-section I observed that, given a standard view of metaphysical possibility, the only apparent way to counter possibility claims is to show them to be inconsistent. For if any claim is inconsistent, it cannot possibly be true. The usual way to show that some p is inconsistent is to show that p itself, in virtue of logical form, leads to a contradiction or has no model. One is therefore tempted to think that as long as we avoid inconsistency in logical form, any conceiving that p should indicate that possibly p.

There is a well-known argument from claims of possibility to conclusions of impossibility, however, which does not rely on the logical form of the possibility claim. This is

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[11] One could reply that (b″) is no stronger than 'Necessarily, every x is G', if no negation appears in G. But that is beside the point. I am only asserting that 'Necessarily, every x is not F' is similarly strong.

the form of argument due to Kripke and Putnam which relies on the necessity of identity. It is not enough on this objection to avoid inconsistency in logical form when making possibility claims, whatever the source of those claims (whether from conceiving, intuition, supposition, or whatever). One also needs to avoid inconsistency related to a Kripke-Putnam argument from necessity of identity. The statement 'Possibly water is not H_2O', for example, while not inconsistent in virtue of logical form, still implies a contradiction given that necessarily water (itself, the water we know in the actual world) *is* H_2O.

This has the makings of a knock-down objection. Unless I can separate those possibility claims that are vulnerable to Kripke-Putnam arguments from those that are not, *any* possibility claim might be vulnerable. And if any claim might be vulnerable, then the value of conceiving as a source of possibility evidence will be reduced if not entirely undone.

Fortunately, there is a way to vindicate conceiving. The necessary truth of an identity statement involves an identity symbol (operator or predicate) and two terms that stand to each other in the identity relation. An identity statement gains the modal strength of necessity if both of these terms are rigid designators.[12] To use the previous example, 'water' and 'H_2O' are rigid designators and the claim that 'Water is (identical with) H_2O' is actually true. Therefore, the identity statement is necessarily true. Hence there are two ways to avoid the consequence that an identity statement is necessarily true: either one of the terms is not rigid, or the terms do not actually satisfy the identity symbol.

Any application of this brand of reasoning therefore has to face the following dilemma: Either a conceiving does not rigidly designate what it purports to represent, or it does designate rigidly but what it represents is not actually identical with anything. On the one hand, nothing is

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[12] A rigid designator is a term that refers to the same object in every possible world. Proper names are rigid designators because they refer directly to an object and will therefore refer to that object in any world. Natural kind terms like 'water' and 'H_2O' are considered rigid designators.

rigidly designated when a mere possibility is conceived. Consider my mental picture of a neon-pink pebble. (I'm assuming that there are no naturally occurring neon-pink pebbles.) The content of the picture includes mental images indicating size, weight, texture, shape, and color. The question 'Which possible pebble is this?' does not apply. My imagining is not of a *particular* merely possible object; rather, it is a representation of the class of Fs which are Gs, where Fs are pebbles and Gs are neon-pink things. The representation of these Fs being G says nothing about a particular individual; the representation is evidence that the class of Fs that are G is not necessarily empty. In other words, it indicates that possibly some Fs are G.

If nothing is rigidly designated by a conceiving, then the conceiving cannot support a necessary identity statement. But suppose on the contrary that you imagine a possible object and the object is thereby rigidly designated. You have a mental token that rigidly designates a talking frog, for instance—call him Kermit. Then your mental token will refer to Kermit in every possible world. But, alas, there is nothing in the actual world with which Kermit is identical. Your conceiving achieves rigid designation but fails to achieve actual identity. Therefore your conceiving still cannot support a necessary identity statement. Either way, conceiving does not support necessary identity statements and hence is not liable to objections derived from them.

3.3   Compositional Conceiving

One can grant everything for which I've argued and still deny the value of imagination as evidence of possibility. Even if Salmon's considerations of modal induction strongly favor possibility, and even if no objection from the necessity of identity can be brought to bear against possibility claims based on conceivings, why think that a conceiving itself gives us any positive reason to believe in a related possibility claim?

Humans can understand infinitely many sentences, including sentences quite unlike any previously encountered. Somehow, we manage to have immediate mastery of sentences that, until we hear or utter them, never existed. This is often attributed to the fact that our language abilities are compositional—the meaning of complex expressions depends on the meaning of simpler ones. We have a finite number of basic linguistic elements and a finite number of rules for combining them, but the number of resulting complex expressions is unlimited. My suggestion is that our perceptual abilities are similar and that our imagination piggy backs on those perceptual abilities. We can entertain infinitely many possible propositions because we can recognize infinitely many sensible states of affairs, including ones never encountered before; and we can imagine infinitely many sensible states of affairs, including ones that don't exist.

This claim about our perceptual and imaginative ability is backed up by empirical research. Logothetis and Sheinberg (1996) review studies showing the ability of normal mature humans to recognize tens of thousands of arrays of material objects. They note that mature humans are good at recognizing sensible objects in a broad range of cases, including novel situations. So, while the number of arrays tested is finite, we are good at recognizing sensible arrays that are non-trivially different from ones we've previously encountered. The upshot is that there seems to be something inherently modal about perception and imagination as there is about our language abilities. But further elaboration would take me too far afield. In the next section, I will get back to the dirty work of connecting particular imaginings to mere possibilities.

4.   Two Requirements (Tidman's Dilemma)

In order for the conceivability of a proposition p to have evidential value for an agent, the agent must be able to have a definite thought that she can (at least in principle) evaluate as true or false.

The agent must be able (i) to conceive that p and (ii) to recognize what is being conceived. I will call (i) the conceivability requirement and (ii) the recognition requirement. The following argument against conceivability as a source of evidence for possibility, adapted from Paul Tidman (1993), highlights the importance of these requirements. Where S is an agent and p is a proposition,

> (1) If S cannot conceive p, then S cannot gain evidence that p is possible by conceiving p.
>
> (2) If S cannot know what counts as a conceiving of p, then S cannot gain evidence that p is possible by conceiving p.
>
> (3) Either S cannot conceive p, or S cannot know what counts as a conceiving of p.
>
> (4) Therefore, S cannot gain evidence that p is possible by conceiving p.[13]

This argument is initially compelling. It has a valid form: constructive dilemma.[14] Moreover, the first premise, which corresponds to the conceivability requirement, is necessarily true. Since conceiving p is necessary for gaining evidence that p is possible *by conceiving p*, and the antecedent of (1) says S cannot conceive p, the consequent can never be false when the antecedent is true. Therefore, (1) cannot be false.

The second premise, which corresponds to the recognition requirement, is more controversial than the first premise because it imposes an internalist constraint on evidence. This constraint says in effect that in order to rely on a piece of evidence, one must be able to recognize that one has such evidence.[15] This internalist requirement is not problematic for my purposes, however, given the project of this paper. While I do not think that an agent has to know she has a piece of evidence in order to rely on it implicitly, I am concerned with cases in

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[13] See p. 299.

[14] I have omitted the step with the redundant disjunction: 'S cannot gain evidence that p is possible by conceiving p or S cannot gain evidence that p is possible by conceiving p'. This disjunction follows from the first three lines, and (4) follows by eliminating one of the redundant disjuncts. The argument as presented is semantically valid.

[15] This requirement comes from the antecedent of (2) saying S *cannot know* what counts as a conceiving of p, alluding (negatively) to the possibility of S knowing what evidence she has.

which an agent is consciously considering the possibility of a proposition. If one cannot

intentionally bring a piece of evidence to bear, one cannot explicitly use it to support an assertion

about the proposition's possibility. Hence I accept (2).

Since I disagree with the argument's conclusion, and the argument is valid, I have to

reject one of the premises. I reject (3). This premise says in effect that for any proposition, either

the conceivability requirement cannot be satisfied or the recognition requirement cannot be

satisfied. I argue that both requirements can be met for some merely possible propositions. In

particular, I rebut (3) by presenting counterexamples to it: merely possible propositions we can

conceive and know we are conceiving. These counterexamples will have greater force after

considering a parallel argument about perceiving, since it is hard to deny that we can perceive

some states of affairs and at the same time know what we are perceiving.

5.   Perceivability and Actuality

It may seem obvious that for some propositions p, we can conceive p and know what we are

conceiving. However, that is not an argument. To make an argument, I will rely on an analogy

between conceiving and perceiving. So, consider S *perceiving* p, as in sense perception, instead

of S *conceiving* p. (Because we perceive only what is actual, occurrences of 'possible' are

replaced with 'actual'.)

> (1′) If S cannot perceive p, then S cannot gain evidence that p is actual by
> perceiving p.
>
> (2′) If S cannot know what counts as a perceiving of p, then S cannot gain
> evidence that p is actual by perceiving p.
>
> (3′) Either S cannot perceive p, or S cannot know what counts as perceiving p.
>
> (4′) Therefore, S cannot gain evidence that p is actual by perceiving p.

The conclusion of this argument is obviously false. Even skeptics who deny that we can gain knowledge of the external world based on perception do not deny that we gain *evidence* of (what we take to be) the external world through perception. The argument's flaw cannot be its form since, as with Tidman's argument laid out in the previous section, its form is constructive dilemma. Moreover, (1′) and (2′) are either obviously true or plausible for the purpose of my argument. However, (3′) is clearly false. The problem with (3′), the perceiving dilemma, is that there are many states of affairs we can both perceive and at the same time know what counts as perceiving them. Moreover, we use such perceiving to gain evidence that the perceived states of affairs exist (from the fact that we perceive only what exists). I will consider each horn of this dilemma in turn.

The first horn of the perceiving dilemma is that for any actual proposition p, if S can know what counts as perceiving p, then S cannot perceive p. Any object that we cannot perceive satisfies this implication by satisfying its consequent. Admittedly, there are objects that humans cannot perceive, but clearly there are many actual states of affairs we *can* perceive, and we gather generally reliable evidence about the world from our perceptual experiences.

The second horn says that for any actual proposition p, if S can perceive p, then S cannot know what counts as perceiving p. It is not immediately clear how to interpret the expression 'what counts as perceiving'. I will take what seems to me to be the most straightforward view: S knows what counts as perceiving a state of affairs x if and only if S has an idea of what perceiving x is like. If S can successfully answer questions such as 'What would x look like were you in a position to see it?', then S knows what counts as perceiving x (although the ability to answer such questions may not be necessary to know what counts as perceiving an actual situation).

I will assume that we do in fact perceive some actual arrangements of sensible objects and qualities. As an obvious consequence, we *can* perceive some states of affairs. But the second horn of the perceiving dilemma together with the proposition that we can perceive an actual state of affairs entails that we cannot know what counts as perceiving that state of affairs. To falsify the perceiving dilemma (in at least one instance), then, I must show that in at least one instance we can both perceive a situation and know what counts as perceiving it.

Fortunately, this burden is not difficult to meet. It is not very controversial to hold that we can meet the conceivability and recognition requirements. For example, suppose you pick up a pebble and examine it. You have an idea of what it is like to perceive a pebble of the sort you are holding because you *are* perceiving such a pebble. You can view the pebble from various angles, feel its texture and weight, and so on. The question of whether you are having perceptual experiences of that pebble as opposed to other pebbles seems to make little sense. What other pebble could it be? You are perceiving a pebble, and you know what its sensible qualities are by perceiving it. Nevertheless, Tidman raises doubts about how reliable our belief is that we know what counts as perceiving an object. Would you be able to identify the pebble if you dropped it? You may not be as closely acquainted with its appearance as you thought.

Tidman rejects a potential response to this question. Perhaps we know what counts as perceiving an object if we have a "complete and fully detailed" representation of the object. Tidman claims this will not help, however, because "mental images are, by their very nature, ill-defined and imprecise," not "complete and fully detailed" (p. 300). No human can satisfy the 'complete and fully detailed' condition. One response to this requirement is that it leads to an absurd result. The requirement can be taken to add to the second horn of the perceiving dilemma a universal quantifier over perceptions: S cannot know what counts as perceiving an actual state

of affairs for *any* perceiving and for *any* actual state of affairs. On this interpretation, the second horn entails that we do not know if we are perceiving one situation as opposed to another, so we cannot know whether by perceiving an actual scenario we get any evidence about it. But while there are many facts about the actual world we cannot get direct perceptual evidence of, there are many we can. Consequently, the second horn is plausible only if at least one of the quantifiers is existential. Making at least one quantifier existential acknowledges that human perception has limitations but also that we know many of our perceptions to be of particular actual objects and qualities. Contrary to what Tidman seems to demand, we do not need to be perfectly acquainted with a scenario to know what counts as perceiving it.

One could also doubt my contention that we can know what counts as perceiving any actual state of affairs on the ground that our perceptual judgments (judgments based on perceptual experience) are fallible. It is important here to make a distinction between perceptual recognition and perceptual reliability. By 'perceptual recognition' I mean our ability to recognize sensible objects and qualities in our perceptual experiences. The question here is how strong is the connection between having a perceptual experience and recognizing sensible objects and qualities in that experience. P. F. Strawson (1988) argues the connection is a necessary one in that we cannot perceive sensible things except by recognizing them in terms of our concepts of sensible objects and qualities. Strawson writes, "Our sensible experience itself is thoroughly permeated with those concepts of objects which figure in [our perceptual] judgments." (p. 94) There are no perceptual experiences without recognition, on this view, and we do have perceptual experiences, so Strawson's view guarantees that we have perceptual recognition. Even if one does not countenance this strong a view, it is plausible that recognition and perceptual experience correlate strongly.

Perceptual reliability, on the other hand, is the tendency of our perceptual judgments to be true. If we make false judgments based on our perceptual experiences—the content of what we actually see, feel, etc.—we may have made a bad inference, or our perceptual experience may be misleading. We might have witnessed an illusion, for instance. If we are subject to an illusion, and are not just hasty in perceptual judgment, then we have misperceived the scene, so to speak. If our perceptual experience depicts a falsehood, then we are not really perceiving since perception is veridical. The fact we sometimes misperceive the world, however, does not break the link between our perceptual experiences and knowing about the external world. In other words, perceptual fallibility does not destroy perceptual recognition. If I see what I judge to be a barn in front of me, for example, then my sensible experience necessarily includes a barn. My experience is of a barn even if the apparent barn is a cleverly disguised fake used in a film. If it is a fake barn, then my judgment is false and I am misperceiving a barn, so to speak.

The fact that perceptual experience provides strong evidence that a perceived state of affairs is actual is partly explained by the fact that our perceptual judgments are highly reliable given appropriate conditions. Our visual experiences give us reliable visual evidence, for example, in good light when our visual systems are working properly and our eyes are directed at an appropriately sized nearby object. But it is also explained by the fact that our perceptions in good circumstances tell us how the world really is, how properties and objects are arranged in actual states of affairs. Perception latches onto aspects of reality. If it did not, humans would not long survive individually or collectively. Our senses by and large indicate important features of our material surroundings. We see and feel the extension and size of objects. While material objects participate in causing our perceptions, they do not make our perceptions reliable.

Whatever it is about our senses that latches onto reality is what makes our perceptions reliable. Our online perceptual abilities themselves give us reliable information about the actual world.

6.   Meeting the Two Requirements (Refuting Tidman)

If our online perceptual abilities latch onto features of reality and give us reliable evidence of actual states of affairs, it is plausible to think that our offline abilities, namely our powers of imagination, also have some evidential value. I support that thought in this section in parallel with my argument against the perceiving dilemma in the last section. As I have suggested, the conceiving dilemma is false for reasons similar to those due to which the perceiving dilemma is false. The reasons are similar because the arguments are similar. First of all, the conceiving and perceiving arguments have the same form. Second, the perceiving argument was constructed by replacing in the conceiving argument every instance of "conceive" with "perceive" and every instance of "possible" with "actual." The arguments' similarity thus turns on whether under this substitution perceiving is analogous to conceiving and actuality is analogous to possibility.

Their chief similarity for my purposes is that they both involve our experiencing images that resemble (or are) those we gain through our senses. Perceiving gives us sense-images of actual states of affairs while conceiving produces sense-like images of possible states of affairs (either actual or merely possible). It is also plausible that there are more potential conceivings than perceivings, which matches the fact that possibility outstrips actuality. (It is another question whether we actually conceive more than we perceive.) At least, we can conceive what we perceive but we cannot always perceive what we conceive.

Having described the analogy to this extent, I use it to refute Tidman's dilemma for conceiving. Just as there are some actual scenarios we can perceive and know we are perceiving,

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there are some possible scenarios we can conceive and know we are conceiving. For example, imagine a pebble like one you might actually observe. Now imagine that one of its properties is different from any actual pebble. Take color for instance. No actual pebble is neon-pink (unless painted). Thus, picture a pebble of the size, shape, texture, and so on of an actual pebble but that is inherently neon-pink. The resulting image portrays a merely possible scenario—namely, a pebble being inherently neon-pink. Thus, we have conceived a merely possible scenario.

Moreover, we know what counts as conceiving the scenario when we conceive this image, just as we know what counts as perceiving a situation when we perceive it: We can discriminate our imagined pebble from other imagined pebbles. For instance, you can tell the difference between a large imagined pebble and a small one, or between a neon-blue imagined pebble and a neon-pink one. One might worry that we cannot tell the difference between two imagined pebbles of the same color, shape, size, and so on, and that therefore we cannot really distinguish one imagined pebble from similar ones. Since we cannot distinguish our conceived pebble from other similar pebbles, we cannot distinguish it from every other possible pebble. And if we cannot distinguish it from every other possible object, then we cannot adequately distinguish it.

One answer to this objection would rely on the principle that indiscernibles are identical, so that if two conceivings are indiscernible, their contents are (or represent something) identical. Then there would be no possibility of misjudging the possibilities conceived. However, I think this principle is stronger than needed to answer the objection. The objection seems to require that a conceiver be able to distinguish one particular conceived possibility from any other potentially conceived possibility, and this requirement is too strong. When we conceive a neon-pink pebble or any other merely possible object or state of affairs, the contents of our conception depict

something that meets certain criteria. When you imagine a neon-pink pebble, that is what you are

imagining: a neon-pink pebble. Your conceiving fits a description. To be sure, a conceiving will

contain other contents, some relevant and some irrelevant to identifying the situation of interest.

My point is simply that when conceiving a merely possible situation, one may not be conceiving

a particular unique situation. One conceives according to criteria. And if that is the case, then

conceiving any merely possible state of affairs violates Tidman's conceiving dilemma.

On the other hand, it is important to note, there are possible objects for which Tidman's

conceiving dilemma is true. If we try to imagine a neon-pink pebble at a distance of 100 yards,

for example, we will be conceiving a dot. If we conceive a dot, it is hard to maintain that we

know from the conceived image what exactly we are conceiving (beyond a dot). However, I

argued the dilemma is false for some possibilities, not for all possibilities. And we can get

evidence of possibility by conceiving when Tidman's dilemma is false, not when it is true.

Nevertheless, this fact imposes an important constraint on my account: not all possibilities are

conceivable in a way that is useful for modal reasoning.

7.   Modal Reality

I have argued that, for some possible propositions, we can meet both the conceivability

requirement and the recognition requirement. We can conceive a merely possible scenario and

know what scenario we are conceiving, and we can know what scenario we are conceiving

because we can discriminate that scenario from other conceivings of different states of affairs.

But one could grant everything I have argued for and still coherently deny that we get evidence

about possibility, or at least evidence that is *useful* in reasoning about metaphysical possibility. I

still have not established the usefulness of such evidence because I have not argued for its

reliability. Even if we can conceive a neon-pink pebble and know that we are conceiving a neon-pink pebble, how are we thereby closer to knowing that neon-pink pebbles are metaphysically possible? I will argue that

If conceiving is a reliable guide to metaphysical possibility, we cannot explain that fact by way of the causal theory of perception.[16] There are enough differences between conceiving and perceiving that the causal theory of perception does not apply to conceiving. However, it does not follow from these differences that there can be no theory of conceiving's reliability. Here is a light sketch of how such a theory might go.

Conceiving is a reliable guide to possibility because, on two prominent accounts, the way conceiving works is similar to the way metaphysical possibility is structured. On the first account, due to Saul Kripke (1980), we can conceive many possibilities, and the reliability is higher the closer to actuality our conceivings get.[17] On the second account, due to David Lewis (1986), there are so many possible states of affairs that we can conceive only a minuscule fraction of them. Given that there are so many possible scenarios, our conceivings have a high chance of reflecting one such scenario. On both accounts, however, modal metaphysical reality has a combinatorial character. Similarly, I suggested above in section two, conceiving an existential proposition expressed in the form 'There is an x such that x is F' involves combining ideas of object and properties in various ways.

On Saul Kripke's (1980) account of possibility, the closer a conceivable possibility is to a relevant actual state of affairs, the more reliable is the evidence from conceiving it. While on this picture evidence from conceiving will be less reliable for possible states of affairs that are quite

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[16] Gendler and Hawthorne (2002) note, p. 6.
[17] Plausibly the limit to the reliability of conceiving possible scenarios is given by the reliability of perceiving actual states of affairs, but I will not pursue this point here.

different from actual states of affairs, conceiving is highly reliable at least for a 'moderate' range of possibilities.

Kripkean possibilities are generated by how actual things could be. One example Kripke (1980) uses is the election of Richard Nixon (p. 40 ff.). To update the example, consider Hillary Clinton and the fact that she lost the general election of 2016. For Kripke, it is a merely possible state of affairs that Clinton *won* the general election of 2016. The proposition that Clinton won the general election of 2016 is a proposition we can understand and entertain, and which we know to be false. In this proposition there are two actual entities—Clinton and the property 'winning the general election of 2016' (or, as a tenseless propositional function, 'x wins the general election of 2016'). What makes the proposition merely possible is that the object Clinton and the property of winning the 2016 general election never combined in the actual world. The latter does not actually apply to the former. But since both entities are actual, and they belong to classes whose members do actually combine, the proposition <Hillary Clinton, wins the 2016 general election> is possible.[18] The case of conceiving a neon pink pebble also works in a combinatorial manner. Neon-pinkness is an actual property and there are actual pebbles. Although there are no actually pink pebbles, our conceiving forms a combination of pebble and neon-pinkness.

David Lewis' account is similarly combinatorial but more expansive. Lewis (1986) famously required a principle of unrestricted recombination to express his view of the plenitude of possible worlds. "[T]he principle is that anything can coexist with anything else, at least provided they occupy distinct spatiotemporal positions. Likewise, anything can fail to coexist with anything else" (Lewis (1986), §1.8). We get possible states of affairs, objects, or worlds by recombining without restriction parts of objects and properties with objects. One does not need

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[18] I am portraying propositions as bracketed sequences here to clearly distinguish the object and property involved.

to accept Lewis' modal realism to see possibility as combinatorial, however. Kripke seems to take a combinatorial view of the modal properties of actual objects while eschewing Lewis' modal realism.[19] The key statements are "anything can combine with anything else" and "anything can fail to coexist with anything else." Together these generate unrestricted recombination, and the point of unrestricted combination for my argument is that it permits a lot of possibilities. If we characterize reliability as the likelihood that the contents of our conceivings correctly indicate some possible state of affairs, then our conceivings are fairly reliable on Lewis' view. They are fairly (although not completely) reliable because given how many possibilities there are on Lewis' view, it is unlikely we will conceive a proposition that isn't possible.

Conceiving and possibility match up such that on both Kripke's and Lewis' views, our conceivings provide reliable evidence of possibility. Just as possibility has a recombinatorial character, our imaginative powers have combinatorial capabilities. In conceiving, we take sensory images gleaned from the actual world and recombine parts of objects with parts of other objects and properties with objects. The neon-pink pebble, for instance, is a recombination of object: pebble and property: being inherently neon-pink. The explanation of how conceiving might track possibility is thus that they are both recombinatorial and that our ability of mental recombination, which is available to our activity of conceiving, is reliable.

8.   Conclusion

I will now tie together the foregoing sections. I argued that a conceiver gets accessible evidence of the possibility that p by conceiving that p. I generated a counterexample to the dilemma

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[19] See Kripke's discussion of the two dice in the Preface of *Naming and Necessity*.

premise of Tidman's argument (the neon- pink pebble). From there I argued that such counterexamples meet both of Tidman's conditions: we can conceive of something and we know what counts as conceiving it. My argument relied on the similarities between perceiving and conceiving. Since we get evidence of actuality from perceiving, it is reasonable to believe that we get evidence of possibility from conceiving. We find this evidence in the contents of our conceptual experiences, and the evidence is accessible to us because the contents of our conceptual experiences are accessible to us. I also outlined an explanation of why such evidence might be a reliable guide to possibility. This included a sketch of modal reality. The sketch was necessary for my argument because if the evidence we get from conceiving is unreliable, it is of no use in reasoning about modal questions.

The sketch said that conceivings approximate metaphysical possibility. On both views of possibility considered, metaphysical possibility includes actuality and some subset of recombinations of actuality, and the causal powers that allow us to conceive have reliable recombinatorial capability. Given this parallel between how conceiving works and how metaphysical possibility works, therefore, our conceivings tend to reliably match metaphysical possibilities on both Kripke's and Lewis's views. In Kripke's case, the reliability seems to be restricted to a smaller set of conceivings, namely ones that involve only recombinations of actual objects and properties not too far from actuality. On Lewis's theory, our conceivings are likely to match genuine possibilities regardless of how far those possibilities are from the actual world. The set of possibilities is so expansive that most of what we can imagine will turn out to be possible. On either view, conceiving is a useful guide to possibility.

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