# Modal Scepticism, Unqualified Modality, and Modal Kinds

**Andrea Sauchelli**

**Abstract**  I formulate and defend two sceptical theses on specific parts of our modal knowledge (unqualified and absolute modalities). My main point is that unqualified modal sentences are defective in that they fail to belong unambiguously to specific modal kinds and thus cannot be evaluated; hence, we must be sceptical of beliefs involving them.

We seem to have plenty of justified beliefs regarding modal matters. Everyday judgements about what is possible or impossible seem perfectly well grounded, and when we talk about modalities related to science, for example, some of these beliefs seem to amount to knowledge. Global modal scepticism seems to be on par, in terms of implausibility (or plausibility), with other forms of global scepticism. However, not all our modal beliefs are on equal footing. In what follows, I specify different sceptical stances towards our modal beliefs. In particular, I develop an argument in favour of adopting a sceptical stance towards unqualified modalities (SUM) and a sceptical stance towards a certain understanding of absolute modalities (SAM). This last thesis in particular can be interpreted as reminding us once more that there exists no sound discussion of modal claims without specifying the modal kinds at issue.

In the first section, I discuss and distinguish various ways of being sceptical towards modal claims. In the second, I introduce SUM and argue in favour of it. In

A. Sauchelli (✉)
Department of Philosophy, Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, Yongin, Republic of Korea
e-mail: andrea.sauchelli@gmail.com

the subsection, I discuss and reject one objection to this view. In the third section, I discuss one way of being sceptical about absolute modalities, and I conclude by stating that in modality, remaining neutral about the specification of the modality at hand always has negative consequences.

## Modal Scepticisms

Scepticism about modality comes in many forms. For instance, we can distinguish between a global and a local form of scepticism about modal knowledge. According to the former, we should be sceptical about all our modal beliefs. Local scepticism appears more plausible in that it restricts its range to one or more specific subsets of our modal beliefs. For instance, we can argue that whilst we have plenty of everyday modal knowledge (i.e., it is possible that the computer is on the desktop when the computer is on the desktop), we should refrain from believing certain far-fetched modal propositions (i.e., it is possible for the mind to survive after death). A form of local scepticism about modality has been put forward by Peter Van Inwagen.[1] In particular, he maintains that we are warranted in holding modal beliefs about the following: non-inferential perceptual attributions of modality (for example, believing that it is physically possible that an apple is on the table when we see an apple on the table); logical possibilities; and various other nomological modalities. For example, if biology tells us that a jellyfish called *Turritopsis nutricola* is potentially immortal, then our belief that immortality is biologically possible for certain organisms is warranted. While granting that we may be justified in having such modal beliefs, Van Inwagen also holds that we should be sceptical about what makes them particular instances of modality *simpliciter*.[2] In an attempt to clarify the range of this form of scepticism, he claims that the sense of possibility at issue is '[p]ossibility *tout court*. Possible *simpliciter*. Possible *period*. Explanations come to an end somewhere. I can say only that by possibility I mean possibility without qualification.'[3] Van Inwagen later explains that this 'possibility without qualification' has been variously called 'absolute', 'intrinsic', 'ontological' or 'metaphysical'.[4] Elsewhere in his paper, Van Inwagen restricts the range of his scepticism to modalities that are 'far from everyday life'.[5] However, since 'far from everyday life' isn't defined, we are left with only an intuitive sense of which propositions are in the crucial set. Peter Hawke devised an interesting defence of Van Inwagen's scepticism in which, at first approximation, the distinction between modal propositions about which we should be sceptical and those that can be justified is spelled out in terms of basic and remote modal statements. The remoteness of modal statements is understood as distance from actuality. Remote modal statements are those modal

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[1] See Van Inwagen (1998). I believe that some of the arguments advanced in, for example, Geirsson (2005) and Hawke (2011) do not directly apply to my version of SUM. Contrary to what Van Inwagen claims in his paper, I do not identify philosophically relevant modal beliefs with unqualified modal propositions.
[2] Van Inwagen (1998: 72).
[3] Van Inwagen (1998: 72).
[4] Van Inwagen (1998: 82, note 9).
[5] Van Inwagen (1998: 76).

statements about which our intuitions cease to be of much help in evaluating their truth.[6] In what follows, I will leave aside Van Inwagen's and Hawke's investigations into how we obtain non-remote modal knowledge as well as their arguments in favour of the view that certain modal premises of philosophical arguments are not warranted; instead, I will spell out different forms of scepticism.[7]

To clarify, I will draw a distinction between ambiguous and indeterminate statements with respect to their modality. A claim of possibility is indeterminate relative to its modality if the kind of modality at issue is not specified in the sentence itself. A claim of possibility is ambiguous when neither the sentence itself nor the context allows determination of which modal kind is at issue. In other words, an unqualified modal sentence is ambiguous because it is not clear with which proposition it can be related. For instance, the sentence 'it is possible that P' can simultaneously be taken as related to various propositions, each defined by a different set of worlds.

Based on the above, it does not follow that absolute modality is also unqualified. Following John Divers, we can elucidate the distinction between absolute and relative modalities along the following lines: Assuming a set S of all genuine possible worlds, a modality of kind M is absolute if all the members of S are of kind M.[8] Therefore, if understood in this way, absolute modality does not seem to be unspecified or ambiguous: it is supposed to range over the set of all possible worlds, if such a set exists. It seems, then, that in principle we can be sceptical about unqualified modality without being sceptical about absolute modalities. Arguments sustaining the former may not be strong enough to also support scepticism towards absolute modality.

In the following sections, I will discuss two different forms of scepticism based on the above distinction: 'Scepticism about Unqualified Modalities' (SUM) and 'Scepticism about Absolute Modality' (SAB).

## The Varieties of Modality and Unqualified Modal Claims

It is uncontroversial that, in our natural language, we use many different kinds of modalities (deontic, epistemic, logical, metaphysical, and so on). In possible-worlds talk, any restriction over a domain of worlds can be taken as representing a different modality: in general, a modal sentence such as 'It is possible that P' can be taken as being related to different propositions, that is, to different sets of worlds.[9] Obviously, not all delimitations over the domain of possible worlds determine a relevant or interesting modal proposition. In what follows, however, I will not provide a criterion to classify these delimitations.

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[6] Hawke (2011: 2).

[7] Even if modal premises in philosophical arguments are not qualified each time they are used, this does not mean that they *cannot* be qualified. A certain amount of investigation may well yield the requisite qualification. I am thus sympathetic towards recent proposals that suggest that modalities that are involved in philosophical discussions can be justified or warranted. See, for instance, Geirsson (2005), Williamson (2007), Biggs (2011), Hawke (2011).

[8] Divers (2002: 8).

[9] See Divers (2002: 4).

Any unqualified modal sentence is ambiguous. Specifically, any unqualified modal sentence fails to specify the set of possible worlds that composes the proposition it expresses. So, it is unclear what proposition an unqualified modal sentence expresses. So, in order to evaluate a modal sentence, we need not only a specification of the case (necessity, possibility, contingency, impossibility) of the modality in question but also a specification of the kind of modality in question.[10]

One consequence of my above suggestion is that a modal claim is evaluable iff someone (possibly through the context) is able to specify which kind of modality is to be taken into account. If an unqualified modal sentence cannot be evaluated, then it is reasonable to assume a sceptical stance towards it (SUM).[11]

## Objection and Reply

One might object to the claim that if a sentence cannot be evaluated, then we should be sceptical of claims about it. The objector may argue that the case of vague predicates shows that there are cases in which a sentence is not evaluable as true or false but that we are still somehow justified in using or believing it. Take, for instance, an attribution of the vague predicate 'red', such as 'this rose is red', where the colour of the rose in question is a borderline case. Even though we may not be able to say whether the related proposition is true or false, so the objection goes, we can nevertheless be justified in using (or believing) it.

It is not my aim here to take issue with the problem of vagueness in our natural language but rather point out peculiarities of our modal reasoning. The sentence containing an attribution of a vague property, such as 'this rose is red', can be warranted only to the extent that the property at issue is a member of a family of features with which we have an empirical and practical familiarity. For instance, even though the predicate 'being red' is not always evaluable as true or false, it can be argued that we have a sort of practical understanding that informs us when it is appropriate to attribute the related property to an object. My point is that, even conceding the previous view on the appropriateness of attribution of vague predicates, this is not the case for all modalities. Take, for example, the time-honoured philosophical practice of advancing arguments with modal premises, such as the ontological argument for the existence of God. As Van Inwagen has suggested, some of these premises are unqualified and can thus be interpreted as supporting different sets of intuitions about their truth value. In fact, it is quite common for philosophers to disagree about the precise nature of the modal premises of their arguments. The situation is different for cases in which we have a practical understanding for the attribution of predicates such as colour attributions. Therefore,

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[10] If, in a Stalnakerian fashion, we take the 'common ground' of a conversation to be what determines the presuppositions of the linguistic exchange, then we can say that the relevant modal kind K for a speaker S is determined by what S believes is accepted and that it is common belief among the members of the conversation that K is accepted (as the relevant modal kind). See Stalnaker (2002) for more details on the notion of presupposition.

[11] SUM does not entail that *qualified* modal claims within a specific context that are derived from such unqualified modal claims are not evaluable: precisifications of unqualified modal claims, like vague predicates, can be evaluated (and beliefs about them eventually warranted). See Williamson (1994) and Keefe (2000) for the notion of precisification in the context of theories of vagueness.

we can concede that in certain cases, the inferential step of my argument may not be justified, but that for modality, our argument is sound.

## Scepticism and Absolute Modalities

Given SUM, one way of arguing in favour of SAM is to show that all sentences about absolute modality are unqualified. An argument for this conclusion proceeds as follows. According to the standard specification of absolute modality, a modal kind M is absolute just in case all possible worlds are M. There is no plausible, univocal sense of 'all possible worlds'. So, sentences about absolute modality are unqualified. What follows supports the controversial premise of this argument, i.e. that there is no plausible, univocal sense of 'all possible worlds'.

Some argue that the very existence of a set of all possible worlds has logical problems and may generate paradoxes.[12] Some of these paradoxes are interpreted as showing that there are no possible worlds conceived in a particular way (i.e., maximal sets of propositions, states of affairs, and so on), while others are interpreted as showing that there is no set of all possible worlds. These arguments rely on simple assumptions generally accepted in set theory, such as Cantor's theorem (for any set S, the power set of S has a strictly greater cardinality than S itself). Divers summarises one of the arguments that takes possible worlds as sets of maximal consistent propositions as follows: 'The power set of the possible worlds is the set of all thinkable propositions, given that every subset of the set of all possible worlds is a thinkable proposition. But for each proposition, there must be a possible world corresponding to the possibility that only that proposition is thought (by $a$ at t). So, *contra* Cantor's theorem, the set of possible worlds is at least as big as its own power set.'[13] The conclusion here seems to be that there is no set of *all* possible worlds.

Patrick Grim advanced a refined version that takes into account an observation made by David Lewis to the effect that the argument, as it stands, is not conclusive. Lewis's point is that it is impossible that a thinker could think a thought whose content is such an 'ineligible set'.[14] Consider the propositional function T: On August 3rd, 2015, at 13:11 EST, Divers writes a phrase true of ordinal o and no other. According to Grim, if we substitute a particular ordinal with the variable o, we will have distinct propositions.[15] In addition, if each of these propositions is contingent, we will have at least as many possible worlds as the ordinals. Grim concludes, however, that there are too many ordinals for any set, and thus there cannot be a set of all worlds. Now, following Lewis, suppose that the propositional function T does not give us a contingently true proposition for each ordinal. Suppose that T gives us instead a truth of the form 'it is absolutely impossible that Divers should write a phrase true of precisely one of these ineligible ordinals'. At this point, Grim suggests that if there are instantiations of T that turn out to be necessarily false,

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[12] See Davies (1981, 262), Grim (1984; 1986, 1997), Chihara (1998), and Divers (2002, 245).
[13] Divers (2002: 245).
[14] Grim (1997). Lewis's remark is found in Lewis (1986, 105).
[15] Grim (1997: 150). Unless explicitly stated, I follow Grim's version of the argument.

there must be one ordinal such that that ordinal is the first for which T turns out to be false. Assuming that it is a contingent fact that on August 3rd, 2015, at 13:11, Divers writes the following phrase: 'The first ordinal for which the instantiation of T is necessarily false,' Grim continues his argument by claiming that from this, it follows that there is a first ordinal for which the instantiation of T turns out to be necessarily false. What Divers is going to write will be something true of that unique ordinal; therefore, the instantiation of T for the case at issue will be contingently true. Grim concludes by saying that this leads to a contradiction, for there can be no first ordinal that, if it instantiates T, would give us a necessarily false proposition. If this is true, then there is no ordinal at all for which the instantiation of T is necessarily false. If we suppose that Divers is a contingent being, each instance of T must be contingent. If this is the case, then there are at least as many propositions (and thus possible worlds) as there are ordinals. In conclusion, there can be no set containing all of them.

   Is Grim's argument sound? The most promising way of rebutting it is by adopting a theory of propositions in which it would not follow from the fact that a thinker is contingent that an instance of T indexed to a particular time, world, and speaker is also contingent. If we assume that much, then we can also argue that it is not the case that the instance of T is contingent, thus blocking one passage in the previous argument. I find this view of propositions implausible. Roughly, I think that this view can't provide a convincing account of how abstract entities outside space and time possess representational features correlated to what is in space and time.[16] So, I think that Grim's point stands. To reiterate, Grim's point implies that there is no plausible, univocal sense of 'all possible worlds'. So, all sentences about absolute modality are unqualified. At the very least, this discussion suggests a surprising result: the claim that sentences about modality are qualified implies that propositions are abstract, timeless entities. This is a very controversial view of propositions that many who are happy to talk of absolute modality surely reject.

   Now, it can be argued that the concept of absolute modality need not be understood in terms of possible worlds. For instance, according to Bob Hale, an absolute necessity $\Box P$ is a necessity such that there is no modal kind in which $\Diamond \sim P$. In other words, a necessity is absolute in case there cannot be modal kinds (i.e., nomological, biological, and so on), such that a sense of necessity or possibility can be specified according to which the negation of P may turn out to be true.[17]

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[16] See Jubien (2001) for a related concern directed at George Bealer's account of propositions. According to Bealer, propositions are primitive abstract entities, not reducible to sets of possible worlds or functions from possible worlds to truth-values. The crucial part of Bealer's theory of interest here is his anti-existentialism about propositions, that is, the claim that it is not necessary for a proposition to exist that its constituents (whatever these are) exist as well. Now, Jubien argues that this does not square well with the requirement that propositions should represent. More specifically, one proposition is true (and thus, it should correctly represent) in case what this proposition is actually about is the case or does occur. It does not seem to be an accident that a proposition has certain representational features, even if only because it would have a different truth value. Jubien argues that a proposition cannot possess representational properties as a result of something external, for then these same features would not be essential to the proposition itself. According to Jubien, the general point is that it makes little sense to attribute representational properties to propositions intended as abstract primitives. Obviously, there's more to say about this issue. See Bealer (1998) and Hanks (2009) for relevant discussion.

[17] See Hale (1996).

However, such a definition would not allow us to distinguish anything about the properties of such types of modalities. In addition, the second part of the definition ('such that a sense of necessity or possibility *can* be specified according to which the negation of P *can* turn out to be true' [emphasis mine]) leaves unspecified which modal kind relative to which the negation of P should not turn out false. If this is the case, then this definition also requires the specification of a kind of modality. Unless such a specification is provided, then we may argue that the concept of absolute modality is ambiguous, and we should thus be sceptical about it (SAM).

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