

Modal Pessimism Defused

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Abstract

Although it is rarely explicitly defended (but see Van Inwagen 1998; Hawke 2010), Modal Pessimism is widely agreed to pose a serious threat to modal metaphysics. Modal Pessimists hold that the metaphysically modal knowledge we may attain is characteristically limited. We can (and do) know that \Diamond (The Earth revolves around the Sun), or that $\Box(1+1=2)$. But knowledge of substantial metaphysically modal claims standardly enlisted in contemporary philosophy such as e.g. \Box (Hesperus = Phosphorus), \Box (Gold is ^{79}AU), or \Diamond (There are philosophical zombies) is beyond our epistemic ken. Modal Pessimism thus challenges the epistemic legitimacy of much of our dealings in metaphysical modality. I take up this challenge. First, I present the best argument for Modal Pessimism I know – the Argument from Autonomy. Secondly, I discuss standard replies to the Modal Pessimists' argument relying on counterfactual thinking (Williamson), abduction (Biggs), and principles of logic-cum-(meta-)semantics (Hale, Yli-Vakkuri), respectively. Although the last approach forces the Pessimist to backtrack a little, none of these approaches invalidates Modal Pessimism. Thirdly, I put forth a new (meta-)semantic argument – the Argument from Paradigm Terms. Since this argument forces critical concessions from the Modal Pessimist, it not only undercuts the Pessimists' Argument from Autonomy. It also defuses Modal Pessimism outright.