Articles

Epistemology and Possibility

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ABSTRACT: Recently the discussion surrounding the conceivability thesis has been less about the link between conceivability and possibility per se and more about the requirements of a successful physicalist program. But before entering this debate it is necessary to consider whether conceivability provides us with even prima facie *justification for our modal beliefs. I argue that two methods of conceiving—imagining that p and telling a story about p—can provide us with such justification, but only if certain requirements are met. To make these arguments, I consider those of Paul Tidman, whose position I use as a foil.*

RÉSUMÉ : Dernièrement, le débat sur la thèse de la concevabilité a peu porté sur le lien entre la concevabilité et la possibilité per se et s'est plutôt intéressé aux conditions requises pour la réalisation du programme physicaliste. Toutefois, avant d'entrer dans ce débat, il est nécessaire de se demander si la concevabilité offre une justification même élémentaire des croyances modales. Je soutiens que deux méthodes de concevoir — imaginer que p et raconter une histoire à propos de p — sont susceptibles de nous fournir cette justification, mais seulement dans la limite de certaines conditions. À l'appui de mon propos, j'envisage la position de Paul Tidman, qui me sert de repoussoir.

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Philosophers are not so much interested in what is the case as in what could be the case.[1] If scientists discovered that everything about the nature of pain is explained by the firing of C-fibers, philosophers of mind would not be out of a job, for they want to know if it is possible for pain to be something other than the firing of C-fibers. Ethicists want to know what a person should do. But a person can be morally required to engage in a particular activity only if it is possible for that person to perform that activity. From these examples alone it is easy to see that the concept of possibility is central to philosophy. It is also easy to see that philosophers have a great need for an epistemology of possibility.

One thesis traditionally advanced to meet this need is the conceivability thesis. This thesis holds that if we can conceive of something, it is possible. So, for example, if I can conceive of myself dressed up in jeans, chaps, cowboy boots, and a Stetson, while sporting a Smith and Wesson, then it is possible for me to be decked out in the regalia of the Old West.

Questions about this thesis have been the focus of much recent work in the philosophy of mind: zombies and the systematically colour-deprived have been used to argue that physicalism is an irremediably incomplete story about the nature of conscious states. For the most part, the controversy in this literature concerns not so much the link between conceivability and possibility *per se* but rather what is required of a successful physicalist program. Thus we find David Chalmers and Frank Jackson arguing for the conceptual entailment thesis: roughly, if physicalism were true, any true statement, and, *a fortiori*, any true statement about phenomenal states, would have to be conceptually entailed by all of the physical facts.[2] Ned Block and Robert Stalnaker challenge the related claim that "conceptual analysis is required to close the explanatory gap" between consciousness and brain processes (Block and Stalnaker 1999, p. 2). Conceivability comes into play only when we try to decide whether facts about consciousness are entailed *a priori* by physical facts.[3] Arguably, the real point in dispute here is whether physicalism requires the *a priori* deducibility of phenomenal facts from physical facts, plus the relevant concepts.[4] Indeed, Block and Stalnaker are happy to grant that phenomenal facts are not so entailed; their point is that a genuine, gapless explanation does not require that they be.

When the link between conceivability and possibility is considered in its own right, the response offered depends on the method of conceiving at issue. When the focus is on conceiving of a proposition (p) via calling forth a mental image of p, the standard response is to argue that this method cannot provide us with a guide to possibility for it is too limited.[5] When instead the method at issue is telling a story or describing a situation in which p is true, the standard response is either to ignore or to make too much of one of the stock objections brought against the conceivability thesis: the incompleteness objection.

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Interestingly enough, Chalmers is a prime example of both of these trends. In line with the first trend, he considers perceptual imagining only to set it aside for what he will later call "modal imagining" (Chalmers 2002, p. 151). Chalmers claims that modal imagining cannot be fully defined. But he does say it involves both our having a positive "intuition" about a situation in which p is true and then making sure that this situation is described "correctly" (Chalmers 1996, pp. 67, 96).[6] It is with respect to this description that Chalmers embraces the second trend. Chalmers claims "if there is a conceivable situation in which a statement is true, there will obviously be a conceivable world in which the statement is true" (ibid., p. 67). But this is not so obvious. Chalmers is ignoring here the real possibility that a contradiction might arise when one embeds a description of a particular situation within that of an entire world. It is this possibility that underlies the incompleteness objection and hence must be addressed by any modal epistemology that relies in any way on storytelling.[7]

In what follows, I will develop a modal epistemology that will counter these trends. I will both address common objections to the conceivability thesis, including the incompleteness objection, and make space for perceptual imagining in modal epistemology. In order to achieve these tasks I will consider Paul Tidman's article "Conceivability as a Test for Possibility" (1994). Tidman claims that our ability to conceive of some state of affairs gives us "no reason whatsoever to think that state of affairs is possible," for there are no connections between our ability to conceive and what is possible (ibid., p. 298). Tidman supports his rejection of the conceivability thesis by offering (instead of ignoring) many of the stock objections brought against this thesis. In fact, he makes too much of these objections, arguing that because what we conceive is inherently incomplete or indeterminate, it cannot provide us with any kind of guide to possibility. But these objections can be answered and through these answers a modal epistemology can be developed. Thus, using Tidman as a foil, I shall argue for a defeasible way in which conceivability can grant positive epistemic status to our beliefs about what is possible.

But before presenting Tidman's position and my response to it, some preliminaries must be dealt with. First, as Tidman rightly argues, we cannot conclude that p is possible from our ability to conceive of p. But this is not to say that conceivability cannot provide *prima facie* justification for our belief that p is possible. This qualification is important, since, as George Bealer has noted, "[i]nfallibilism and unrevisability have often been red herrings in modal epistemology" (2002, p. 74). Thus, setting my sights a bit lower, I shall argue that *prima facie* modal justification can be achieved in two ways, imagining p and telling a story about p.

Second, what is involved in conceiving depends in part on why we are conceiving. Let us assume that our ability to either conjure up mental images or tell stories does provide us with a guide to possibility. Even with

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this assumption, we should expect that we will have to do more than merely employ one of these two methods when seeking to justify our modal beliefs. Say in order to calm my nerves I imagine myself drinking cocoa in my grandmother's breakfast nook. As long as I am soothed by the images I have called forth, it does not much matter that these images do not resemble my grandmother's kitchen. But say an engineer calls forth images of the insides of a machine in order to solve a complex engineering question. In this situation, it is important that the pictures she calls forth are accurate. Accuracy also matters if we want to establish the modal status of some proposition. Like the engineer, we had better do what we can to ensure that we have conceived what we intended to conceive.

So, if conceivability is a guide to possibility, when conceiving of p for this purpose we will have to satisfy certain requirements. The precise nature of these requirements will be determined in part by whether or not a specific notion of possibility (nomological, logical, etc.) is at issue. In this article, though, we will be ignoring this complicating factor. As Gendler and Hawthorne point out, conceivability is most often taken to be a guide to what they call "metaphysical possibility," which concerns the "ways things might have been" (2002, p. 5). That is, to say that p is possible is to say that there is a possible world in which p is true. Each possible world is described or constituted by a complete and consistent set of propositions. And, given a binary logic, for every proposition (q) and every possible world (W), q is either true or false in W. In what follows, it is this wide sense of possibility that is intended.

Mental Images

Let us begin, then, by considering Tidman's discussion of mental imagery. One way to conceive of p, according to Tidman, is to imagine p, where imagining p involves our bringing forth a mental image of a state of affairs in which p is true. As Tidman notes, proponents of the conceivability thesis have often assumed that it is our ability to call forth these images that provides us with a guide to possibility. Thus, for Hume it is our ability to conjure up an image of a golden mountain that informs us that there could be such a mountain. But, as has already been discussed, these proponents also acknowledge that the imagination can at best provide us with a limited guide to possibility, for there seem to be many possible states of affairs we cannot imagine. Consider the following proposition.

(G) *Gold has the atomic number 79.*

We cannot, they will claim, imagine the state of affairs which would make this proposition true.

Despite this, Tidman argues that for any proposition we are asked to imagine, we can usually call forth some sort of image.[8] We can, for exam-

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ple, imagine a scientist labelling a yellow rock with the number 79. Why, Tidman asks, should we not consider these images instances of our imagining G? Of course, if we do concede that we have imagined G here, Tidman argues, we surely should not conclude that G is possible. For clearly not every image we conjure up counts as an image from which we should draw conclusions about possibility. But, if this is so, how then do we determine that the image we have called forth is the kind of image on which we can ground claims about possibility?

One answer to this question is to say that we can draw conclusions about what is possible from a particular image if and only if that image is both "complete and fully detailed." But, Tidman argues, mental images are "inherently ill-defined" (1994, p. 300). Moreover, even if they were well defined, each image is taken from one perspective, and from one perspective a state of affairs may be clearly imaginable while from another it may not be imaginable at all. For example, if we try to imagine a round square viewed from the side, it seems perfectly imaginable ("as a line segment") and hence on the conceivability thesis possible (ibid.).[9] But if we try instead to imagine it from a top-down perspective, no image will come before our mind's eye. On one hand, if we accept not just the conceivability principle but its converse as well,[10] we would have reason to conclude that the round square is both possible and impossible, since it is imaginable from one perspective but not from another. If, on the other hand, we accept only the conceivability thesis, at worst (when we imagine the figure from the side) we will be led astray, and at best (when we try to imagine it from both perspectives), the evidence our imagination provides us will be ambiguous. In either case, the imagination has revealed itself to be a poor guide to possibility.

Tidman calls this the "What Counts?" Objection. It can be defined by two questions (Tidman 1994, p. 298):

Question 1: What makes a particular image an image of p?
Question 2: What makes an image of p the kind of image from which we can draw conclusions about possibility?

Tidman further argues that the only adequate answer to 1 will render the imagination an unfit guide to the possible and hence will leave 2 unanswerable. To illustrate this, Tidman considers Esche's image, entitled "Ascending and Descending," which depicts monks descending a set of stairs which leads them to their starting point at the top of the stairs. It is "natural," Tidman claims, to see this picture as depicting the impossible (ibid., p. 300). But, if this picture is of the impossible, then it is proof that we can imagine the impossible. And if we can imagine the impossible, then our imagination cannot be used as a guide to possibility.

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As Tidman notes, one might reply to this counterexample by arguing that this image is not really an image of the impossible. Rather, it is a mere illusion of impossibility. "Some of the steps that appear to go up actually go down" (ibid.). But this reply, Tidman claims, is inadequate.

The content of an image is determined in Tidman's opinion by the interpretation we impose upon that image.[11] Any image, Tidman holds, can be an image of any one of an infinite number of states of affairs. Thus, Tidman argues, Escher's image is an image of an impossible staircase as well as an image of a perfectly possible staircase. But, if this is so, then clearly this image, or any image for that matter, cannot provide us with a guide to possibility, for there is no one state of affairs this image is an image of, in and of itself, and hence there is no way of determining which state of affairs we are to infer is possible from the infinite number of state of affairs of which we could take that image to be.

So, as far as Tidman is concerned, in every direction we face a roadblock. Only those images that are complete and fully detailed can provide us with a sure guide to possibility. But we cannot call forth such images. Moreover, because our interpretations determine the content of the images we produce, we must conclude either that we can imagine the impossible or that of the many states of affairs a particular image can be taken to be of, we cannot determine which of these is the one that is possible. Either way, it seems clear that our imagination cannot provide us with a guide to possibility.

A Defence of Mental Images

While in principle these objections seem to hold great force, in practice we cannot help but consult the imagination when seeking to justify our modal claims. Even Tidman acknowledges this point. "Typically, it must be granted, when we consider whether a state of affairs is possible, we do attempt to imagine what it would be like for the state of affairs to obtain" (1994, p. 307). He even concedes that if we could call forth complete and fully detailed images, these images might provide us with some kind of guide to possibility. But he does not tell us why this might be so. I contend that this is where we need to look both to find an explanation as to how the imagination can provide us with a guide to possibility and to find an answer to the "What Counts?" Objection.

Suppose that one day while working in my garden I imagine, for the purpose of establishing its modal status, S.[12]

(S) *There is a spare spoon lying in the dirt of my garden.*

What can I say about the content of the images I have called forth? Moreover, can such images provide me with a guide to possibility?

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To the first question, Tidman will say that I can conclude that these images are of anything I want, for my interpretation of these images is the sole determinate of their content. There is good reason to challenge this position. If our interpretations are the sole determinates of an image's content, then we will have imagined p just so long as we interpret the images before our mind's eye as p, regardless of whether or not these images are related in any way to p. So, say the images I have called forth above resemble those images that would have come to me if I perceived myself swimming with dolphins. If I interpret these images as being of me finding a spoon, then in Tidman's opinion I will have imagined S. But this seems wrong. I have not imagined a spoon here; I have imagined dolphins.

But even if the content of an image is in general determined by how that image is interpreted, I am employing my imagination here for a specific purpose. I am using it to provide myself with a guide to possibility. As I have already explained, what is involved in conceiving will depend in part on why we are conceiving. Might there be limits, then, on which interpretations I can apply to an image given my purpose here?

Specifically, let us say that for the purpose of providing ourselves with a guide to possibility we can take ourselves as having successfully imagined p if and only if the images we call forth satisfy two requirements. First, these images must not include any blanks, i.e., moments when our visual screen is empty as occurs when we try to imagine a ball that is in the same way and at the same time coloured completely red and completely green. This is the consistency requirement; why it is so-called will emerge below. Second, these images must be such that if they came to us via our senses we would be justified in concluding that we had veridically perceived p. This is the perception requirement and it is constituted by at least two conditions: the quality condition and the content condition.[13] To fulfill the quality condition, the images in question must possess the requisite degrees of those qualities usually associated with veridical perceptions, i.e., qualities such as force, vivacity, determination, and completeness. To fulfill the content condition, there must not be any reason—over and above those that confront us in actual perceptual cases—to doubt that these images are images of p. I will discuss these requirements in more detail below. For now, note that there is nothing that prevents us from imposing these two requirements on our imagination. Moreover, I contend that those images that meet these requirements will provide us with a guide to possibility.

To see this, assume that the images I call forth in order to imagine S meet these requirements. At no time in the course of this imagining is my visual field empty. Thus, there are no blanks within and between the images I call forth. Also, these images are as complete and as fully detailed as Tidman could want. In other words, they possess all the qualities associated with veridical perceptions and they possess them to a sufficient

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degree to be considered veridical. And, finally, nothing in these images causes me to hesitate in my conclusion that these images are of S. That is, if these images had come to me via my senses, I would take them to be images of myself examining from multiple perspectives an implement composed of a handle attached to a small bowl, an implement commonly referred to as a spoon.[14] Hence, these images fulfill both the consistency and the perception requirements, and thus I have successfully imagined S.

Now, whatever we can imagine, we can also perceive. To explain, in order to imagine any proposition, we need to call forth the relevant image.[15] But, no matter what image we summon, the same image could have come to us through our senses. For example, if I can call forth an image of a snake with the head of a cat via my imagination, then this same image can come to me through some external force operating on my senses. Be careful here. I do not mean to imply that such a snake can exist separately from me and hence can cause me to veridically perceive it. I mean only to say that this image of a snake can come to me in some way through my senses. In other words, when I speak of perceiving here, I am not necessarily speaking of veridical perception.

It is no surprise that we can perceive what we can imagine. What we imagine is constructed in some way out of what we have perceived. Moreover, the contrapositive of this claim is true: whatever cannot be perceived also cannot be imagined. Consider again the sphere that is in the same way and at the same time coloured completely red and completely green. Not only is it impossible for a sphere to be coloured in this way, it is also impossible for a sphere to look as if it were coloured in this way. The impossibility of such a sphere operates at the phenomenological level and, because it does, we obviously cannot call forth images of such a sphere. When we try, we draw a blank.

Of course, it is not the case that blanks occur only when someone is attempting to imagine the phenomenologically impossible. When my mechanic assures me that my car can be fixed, I cannot imagine what he will do beyond popping the hood. This blank that I draw is not due to the fact that my mechanic will be performing a phenomenological impossibility, but rather to my profound ignorance about cars. But, even so, blanks are at times associated with phenomenological impossibilities and phenomenological impossibilities are at times associated with other kinds of impossibilities. Something that cannot appear to be the case is often something that is either metaphysically, logically, or conceptually impossible. It is because of these associations that we must meet the consistency requirement when imagining p for the purpose of providing ourselves with a guide to possibility. The presence of a blank gives us at least *prima facie* reason to think that what we have imagined does not provide us evidence of possibility.[16]

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With this in mind, let me return to my argument. I am supposing that I have called forth images that meet not just the consistency requirement but the perception requirement as well. They are, in other words, images that under the right conditions I would justifiably take to be veridical perceptions of S. Given that we can perceive that which we can imagine, I know that such images can come to me in some way through my senses. Now, to say that X can be the case is just to say that there is a possible world in which X is the case. So, there is a possible world in which these very same images of S have come to my epistemic twin, Rebecca, through the operation of her senses. Our epistemic twins are those individuals that exist in some possible world who have had exactly the same experiences, beliefs, justificatory practices, and knowledge as we have had in the actual world.[17]

Insofar as these images have come to Rebecca through her senses, the experiences she has with respect to these images are different from my experiences. These images of this spoon came to me, not because something was impinging on my senses, but because I intentionally imagined S. Hence, I experience these images as being accompanied by this intention to imagine S. But Rebecca's images did come to her through her senses. Thus, unlike me, she did not consciously will herself to have these images. Hence, her experiences of these images were not accompanied by any associated intention to imagine.

Thus, at this point, Rebecca and I technically cease to be epistemic twins. But, initially, the only way in which we differ is with respect to the fact that I consciously willed these images and Rebecca did not. When these images came to us, Rebecca and I still employed the same justificatory practices and we still shared the totality of our beliefs. Now, our justificatory practices recommend that in most cases we take those images that are not consciously willed and yet satisfy the perception requirement, *like Rebecca's images of this spare spoon*, to be (not surprisingly) veridical perceptions. Thus, within the confines of my, and hence Rebecca's, epistemic standards, Rebecca is justified in taking these images of this spoon to be veridical. Hence, there is a possible world in which Rebecca is justified in believing that S is true.[18]

It might seem as if I am begging the question here. But, again, keep in mind that the fact that these images came to Rebecca through her senses does not necessarily mean that these images are veridical perceptions. They may be veridical or they may be optical illusions of some sort. Now, this response might not adequately answer this objection. Some will locate the problem here not in the claim that Rebecca perceived this spoon, but in the assumption that Rebecca's images of this spoon satisfy the quality condition. That is, some might argue that only those images that are in fact veridical are sufficiently complete and determinate to fulfill the requirements of this condition. Thus, to assume that Rebecca's images satisfy this condition is to implicitly assume that these images are veridical.

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And, of course, to assume this is just to assume that there is a possible world in which there is a spare spoon lying in the dirt of my garden.

But, again, I am not begging the question here. While images that satisfy the quality condition are usually veridical perceptions, sometimes such images are the consequence of an optical illusion or a hallucination or the product of the imagination. Thus, the mere fact that Rebecca's images satisfy this requirement does not necessarily mean that they are veridical. They may be or they may not be. So, I have begged no question here.

Even so, I have not yet proven what I want to prove. My ultimate goal is to establish that my belief in ◊S is justified.

(◊S) *There is a possible world in which there is a spare spoon lying in the dirt of my garden.*

The mere fact that in some possible world my erstwhile twin is justified in believing that S is true does not by itself justify my belief that ◊S is true. For me to be so justified, I must deem Rebecca a reliable witness with respect to the goings on in her world. Specifically, I must have reason to believe that in general what she deems to be a veridical perception accurately reflects what is in this possible world.

Unfortunately, possible worlds are causally inaccessible to us. I cannot go to this possible world and determine for myself that there is a spoon in this garden. And I certainly cannot assume that in this possible world there is such a spoon. How then can I establish that Rebecca is a reliable witness? Think here about how we judge the reliability of someone who is reporting about an event that took place in the past. In this case, we also cannot see for ourselves if this past world is as s/he says it is. Instead, we deem such a person to be reliable if we consider that person to be both rational and to have been in the right epistemic position when he or she made the judgement in question.

From my perspective, I cannot help but think that Rebecca fulfills both of these conditions. When these images of this spoon came to Rebecca and myself, as I have explained, the only way in which we differ is with respect to the fact that I consciously willed these images and Rebecca did not. Thus, for all intents and purposes we should still be considered epistemic twins at least initially. For we still share the same justificatory practices, beliefs, and for the most part experiences. Now, insofar as she is my epistemic twin, I cannot help but think that her belief that these images are veridical is reasonable. For, again, she believes just as I do that unwilled images (like her images of this spoon) that are highly complete and determinate are usually veridical. Moreover, I know that Rebecca (being my epistemic twin) does not drink during the day, is not prone to hallucinations, and has no reason to believe that there is a holograph in her backyard. So, as far as I can tell, she was in the right epistemic position to draw

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the conclusion she drew. Given all this, I have reason to think that Rebecca is reliable. This means that I have reason to think that there is a possible world in which there is a spare spoon lying in the dirt of my garden.

So, we seem to have an instance of my imagination providing me with a guide to possibility. Note, however, the kind of guide the imagination has provided me with here. My imagination has not provided me with proof that there is a possible world in which S is true; it has only helped me to justify my belief that there is such a possible world.

Tidman will object to this argument. He too will have problems with the quality condition. Specifically, he will object to my assumption that I could ever call forth images that satisfy this condition. Again, I assumed that the images I called forth when I imagined this spoon possessed the requisite degrees of those qualities associated with veridical perceptions. And it is my ability to call forth images with such qualities that in part justifies my belief that ◊S is true. Tidman will argue that I cannot imagine anything in such detail, for mental images produced via the imagination are "ill-defined and imprecise" (Tidman 1994, p. 300).

But Tidman is setting the bar unnecessarily high here. Let us concede the point. Let us assume for now that such mental images are imprecise and ill-defined. Even if this were true, not all of the judgements we make about what is actual are based on "complete and fully detailed" visual images (ibid.). We often get by on a lot less. Many such judgements are based on images that are to some extent incomplete or indeterminate. Some judgements are even based on fleeting glimpses, or on experiences had in the fog or in the night, and yet few would want to challenge the claim that such judgements are justified to some degree. Thus, to satisfy the quality condition, the images we call forth need not be perfectly "complete and fully detailed," as Tidman demands (ibid.). Rather they must be as complete and as detailed as many of the images on which we base our everyday judgements. Given this, it seems quite clear that we can at least at times call forth images that satisfy this condition.

It is also worth noting that not all of the mental images we produce are as woefully incomplete and indeterminate as Tidman makes them out to be. Consider Temple Grandin, an engineer who specializes in designing animal restraint systems and yet suffers from autism: "Every design problem I've ever solved started with my ability to visualize and see the world in pictures" (Grandin 1995, p. 20). If Grandin is solving design problems in part through her ability to conjure up mental pictures, these pictures have to be quite complete and fully detailed. We might want to dismiss Grandin's self-reports because she is autistic, but we should not, for most of us, especially when day-dreaming, have called forth images which were so real that coming out of them was a jolt.

Thus, I think there is reason to challenge Tidman's claim that the images we produce when imagining are inherently ill-defined. They are

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often ill-defined, but even so this would not preclude those images that are well defined from providing us with a guide to possibility. Moreover, even when an image is ill-defined, it can still provide us with a guide to possibility for, while an image might be flawed in various ways, it still might be such that if it had come to us through our senses, we would be justified in taking it to be a veridical perception. It still might, in other words, satisfy the quality condition. So, where does this leave Tidman's "What Counts?" Objection?

Again, Tidman's objection is reducible to two questions. First, what makes an image an image of p? Second, when is an image one from which we can draw conclusions about possibility? We now have answers to both of these questions. We have imagined p for the purpose of providing ourselves with a guide to possibility if the image we call forth satisfies two requirements: the consistency requirement and the perception requirement. That is, the image we call forth must not contain any blanks and it must be such that we would conclude that we had veridically perceived p if this same image came to us through our senses. This kind of image provides us with a guide to p's modal status because our ability to generate such an image justifies our belief that there is a possible world in which p is true.

There is one last objection that needs to be addressed, however. Tidman will argue that we can fulfill both of these requirements and yet still be able to imagine the impossible. Consider again Escher's etching. Many people when looking at "Ascending and Descending" take themselves to have seen the impossible. My response to this objection is the familiar one. Close scrutiny of the back edge reveals that the stairs seem to be neither climbing nor falling: the illusion falls apart. It is thus not an etching of the impossible.

Unfortunately, this response is problematic. Above I claimed that the images we call forth can be incomplete or indeterminate and yet it can still provide us with a guide to possibility. But, if this is so, my response to Escher's etching would seem to indicate that I am employing a double standard. When it looks as if we have called forth an image of the impossible, I maintain that the image lacks sufficient detail and hence conclude that we have not imagined what we intended to image. When we call forth an image which I maintain justifies our belief that p is possible, I conveniently ignore the fuzziness of the image in question.

But there is no double standard here. What is at issue is the relationship between the quality condition and the content condition of the perception requirement. The line between these two conditions is at times blurred, especially with respect to the completeness and the determination of the images we call forth. At times, an image will be overwhelmingly indeterminate and that very indeterminacy will be reason not to take the image in question to be an image of p. Consider again the image of the line seg-

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ment we might call forth so to imagine the round square. This image fails both conditions. It is not sufficiently determinate insofar as it could just as easily be an image of a triangle viewed from the side as a round square viewed from the side. Thus, due to this indeterminacy, this image fails the quality condition. But, obviously, it also fails the content condition. The indeterminacy of this image gives us reason not to conclude that this image is an image of a round square. Hence, the indeterminacy here constitutes what I call a defeater. (Note: to have a reason not to take an image to be an image of p is to have a defeater. If a defeater is discovered with respect to an image then that image fails to fulfill the content condition.[19])

At other times, an image might be indeterminate in various ways but yet meet the quality condition. Take, for example, my many experiences with bears. I have seen bears in situations when it has been unclear to me whether or not the bear in question has been a cub, a juvenile, or an adult. This indeterminacy obviously did not cause me to doubt what I had seen, viz., a bear. Consequently, if I try to imagine a bear and the same sort of indeterminacy appears in the images I call forth, this indeterminacy similarly should not preclude me from concluding that I have imagined a bear. This indeterminacy does not give me reason to conclude that these images have not satisfied the content condition. But, of course, at other times the indeterminacy of an image will constitute a defeater, even though this indeterminacy does not violate the quality condition. This is what is happening with the Escher etching.

The Escher etching is as determinate as any image I have ever called forth of a bear. As a consequence, I cannot deny that this image satisfies the quality condition. But the back edge of this image is such that we have reason not to take it to be an image of a staircase that leads its climbers back to where they began. Thus, this image fails to fulfill the content condition and hence should not be considered an image of the impossible. Nor is this image relevant when it comes to evaluating how it is that the imagination can provide us with a guide to possibility.

That said, it should be noted that at times these two conditions pick out the same problem with an image, while at other times they do not. Thus, the question arises, should these two conditions be treated separately or should they be treated as one condition? We should not be distracted by this problem. The larger issue is whether the image in question satisfies the perception requirement, i.e., is this image such that I would be justified in taking it to be a veridical perception of p if it came to me via my senses? If I would not be so justified, it does not much matter whether it is due to the fact that the image in question failed to satisfy the content condition or the quality condition. Either way, this image does not provide me with a guide to possibility.[20]

Thus, the imagination can provide us with a guide to possibility. Of course, this guide to possibility is quite limited in its usefulness. As has

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already been noted, there are propositions which refer to or describe situations that cannot be experienced, and hence imagined, in any way whatsoever. If the modal status of these propositions is in doubt, clearly our imagination will in no way help us resolve this doubt. In addition, there are images we will call forth in order to imagine p which will fail to satisfy the requirements above. But the failure to satisfy these requirements might in some cases be due to our ignorance or our inadequacies. Consequently, we should be hesitant to take our failure to imagine p adequately or at all as justifying our belief that p is impossible. Thus, the imagination cannot tell us about the modal status of every proposition and at best it provides us with a questionable guide to the impossible.

But, again, as even Tidman admits, the fact is that we employ the imagination as a guide to possibility despite these limitations. Consequently, we need an account of how our imagination can serve this function. This is what I have provided above. We also need another method for justifying our modal beliefs that is not so limited. This is what I consider next.

Storytelling

While our ability to imagine p provides us with one method of justifying our belief that p is possible, it is not our only means of doing so. The second method that provides us with *prima facie* justification is storytelling. Tidman holds that to conceive of p via this method, we must construct a set of propositions that contain every proposition entailed by p's truth. On one analysis of possibility, to say that p is possible is just to say that there is a possible world in which p is true where that possible world is understood to be a maximally consistent set of propositions which contains p. Given this, if we could tell a story which included all the propositions entailed by p and yet contained no contradictions, then clearly we could conclude that p was possible, for in telling such a story, we would have in effect constructed a possible world in which p was true.[21]

But, as Tidman argues, it is here that we face the incompleteness objection. We cannot construct a set of propositions which includes all the propositions entailed by p's truth, for such a set is infinitely large. What we can do is construct a set that includes *some* of the propositions entailed by p's truth. But if this is all that we can do, then we cannot conclude that p is possible, for if this set was completed so that it contained all the requisite propositions, an incoherence might be revealed which would force us to conclude that p was false or even necessarily false.

Tidman is right. I cannot construct such infinitely large sets. Consequently, I cannot *conclude* that p is possible based on my ability to tell a story about p.[22] But that is not all. As far as Tidman is concerned I also cannot conclude that I have conceived of p, since a completed set might reveal that the world in question is one in which p is false.

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But is there not something odd here? Tidman agrees that one of the ways we can conceive of p is via telling a story. But, for Tidman, conceiving of p via this method involves us constructing an infinitely large set of propositions and this is something we cannot do. So, in fact, we cannot conceive of p via telling a story. But if storytelling is a way in which *we* can conceive of p, then what must be involved in constructing these stories must be something that *we* can do. Given this, it seems reasonable to conclude, *contra* Tidman, that to conceive of p, the stories we tell need not be infinitely long. They need instead to contain just some of the propositions entailed by p.

Moreover, I contend that these shorter stories can justify our belief that p is possible. Say we tell a story about p that contains some of the consequences and conditions associated with p's truth. In reviewing this story, we discover a contradiction and we determine that this contradiction follows from p's truth and is seemingly intractable (i.e., it cannot, as far as we can tell, be explained away by adding more information or by redescribing the conditions and consequences that make up the story in question). Upon discovering such a contradiction, are we not justified in believing that that p describes an impossibility, even though we have not described all the consequences and conditions that follow from p's truth?[23]

If finding such a contradiction justifies our belief that p is impossible, what are we justified in saying about p if we fail to find a contradiction? Clearly, in this situation we cannot *conclude* that p is possible, for, as Tidman and I agree, a contradiction may appear if we continue to detail all that is entailed by p's truth. But should not our failure here provide *prima facie* justification for believing that p is possible?

Consider an analogy. Say a policeman, Officer Leo, is searching for a missing person, and in his search he stumbles onto a warehouse full of boxes that are large enough to contain a human body. In his search, he looks into some, but not all, of these boxes. He also looks up and down all the aisles, and in the offices, and yet he finds no one. He then forms the belief that this missing person is not in this warehouse and he continues on his way. Is Officer Leo not to some degree justified in his belief? He did a search of the warehouse and no evidence of the victim was found.

Let us go further and say that Leo is aware that a complete search of the warehouse might reveal the victim. Let us also say that he is aware that his current belief about the victim's whereabouts would be better justified if he continued his search. But, even so, we would not want to say that, as a consequence of these two facts, this belief is unjustified. His belief is to some degree justified but, as he will admit, defeasible. If this is the case, cannot the same thing be said about our basing our belief that p is possible on an incomplete, non-contradictory story?

When telling a story about p for the purpose of justifying our belief that p is possible, our goal is to uncover a logical or conceptual contradiction.

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We tell a story that contains some of the propositions entailed by p. We then search for a contradiction. No contradiction is found. We are aware that if more of the entailments were included in this story, we might discover the contradiction we are looking for. Hence, we cannot conclude that p is possible based on our story. But we are justified to some extent in believing that p is possible, for we have done some sort of search for this contradiction. Moreover, just as in the case of the police officer, the degree to which we are justified depends on the extent of our search.

Here is where Tidman's next objection comes in. Assume a different police officer, Officer Jim, merely opened the door and peeked into this warehouse. Assume he did not even bother walking up and down the aisles. Most would say that Officer Jim is not justified in believing that the victim is not in this warehouse. But if he is not justified, what kind of search must this police officer do to be justified? Analogously, how many entailments must we include in our story in order to be justified in believing that p is possible? "Whatever it is to conceive of something, whether it be to imagine, understand, entertain, or some other allied notion, this question is problematic: How do we know whether we have conceived of enough?" (Tidman 1994, p. 305).

In response to this query, consider a third officer, Officer Paula, who runs right by the warehouse and merely assumes that no one is in it. Clearly, Jim's belief is better justified than Paula's belief. What, then, does this tell us about Jim's belief? Well, it tells us that his belief enjoys some degree of justification. It is justified, though poorly justified. If this conclusion is acceptable, then we will have to say that telling a story that contains a few of p's entailments and yet no contradictions will justify our belief that p is possible, but justify it poorly.

For some this answer will be unsatisfactory, for it does not seem to solve the problem as much as move the problem. Now the question is, how many entailments must be included before our belief in p's possibility is well justified? There is no single answer to this question. The number of propositions to be included will be determined largely by pragmatic considerations. Why is the modal status of the proposition in question being sought? Are we inquiring after some narrower notion of possibility, such as nomological possibility? Questions like these will affect how complete our story must be for it to be well justified. For example, if nomological possibility is at issue, the content of the story we tell will be bound by the laws of nature. This will circumscribe the range of possible worlds we could be describing through this story. Hence, we will be required to include more entailments in our story to increase the likelihood that the world being described is included in this curtailed set of worlds. But, even though no one answer can be given to this question, we are not completely at sea. When telling these stories, there are requirements we have to meet in order to provide ourselves with a guide to possibility, just as there are

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requirements we have to meet when we employ our imagination for this purpose. And if we fail to meet these requirements, we will have reason to reject the story just told as not providing us with a guide to possibility.

The requirements that are at issue here are similar to those that are at issue with respect to the imagination. For one, we must satisfy the content condition, since, to conceive of p, the story told must be about p. To fulfill this condition, there must not be any reason to take the story in question to be about ~p. If there is such a reason, or if the story is ambiguous in some way such that it could be about either p or ~p, then there are defeaters present here. Hence, this story will have failed to fulfill the content condition and we should not take it as an instance of our having conceived of p. If we then want to try again to conceive of p, we will have to tell a story that contains more of p's entailments in order to preclude competing interpretations.

Second, this story must satisfy the consistency requirement: the story told must not contain any contradictions. The need for this requirement should be obvious, for the presence of a contradiction within a story would clearly preclude our using this story to justify our belief in p's possibility. Moreover, when a story fails to fulfill this requirement, not only should this story be rejected insofar as it fails to provide us with a guide to possibility but, as Tidman rightly notes, there is also no reason to take this story to be about p as opposed to ~p.[24]

Again, there is always the danger of an unseen contradiction lurking in some complicated set of propositions. Thus, when we conceive of p via a story, and hence try in effect to describe a possible world in which p is true, we cannot preclude the possibility of there being a contradiction in those aspects of this world we fail to describe. Worse yet, we might tell a complex story in order to rule out certain ambiguities, but this very complexity might obscure the fact that two propositions within this story contradict each other. However, this is precisely where we must recall that our goal is the *prima facie* justification of our modal beliefs. Moreover, it is worth noting that in ordinary perceptual cases, we sometimes encounter the same sort of difficulty: my judgement that p is put in doubt if it contradicts other claims I take myself to know. But I may be unaware of this contradiction due to my inability to be conscious at any one time of all that I take myself to know. But no one takes my *prima facie* justification to be undermined by the fact that I do not have an idealized grasp of my entire set of beliefs. In that case, as in the above case of storytelling, the bar would be set unreasonably high.

Let us turn now to Tidman's final objection to our using storytelling as a guide to possibility: the classic circularity objection. As we have seen, when conceiving of p for the purpose of justifying our belief that p is possible, the story we tell must not include any logical or conceptual contradictions. But, Tidman will object, logical and conceptual contradictions

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are interdefinable with logical and conceptual impossibilities. Thus, we must know what is possible before we can use conceivability as a guide to possibility.

However, there is no vicious circle here. To conceive of p for the purpose of justifying our belief that p is possible, we do need to be able to identify logical and conceptual contradictions in the story we tell. And Tidman is right: our ability to make such identifications does depend on our having knowledge of the modal status of some propositions. But a vicious circle will arise only if our ability to identify such contradictions depends on our prior knowledge that *p* is possible. But this ability does not depend on such knowledge. Rather, our judgement as to the consistency of a story depends only on whether the propositions that make up that story are internally consistent. Thus, no vicious circle arises here.

To see this, consider a story I might tell to establish the modal status of the proposition

(T) Yesterday I traveled back in time.

Perhaps I include within this story the claim that, prior to my getting into my time machine, I accidentally knocked over and broke my mother's Tiffany lamp. I then continue this story by explaining how I decide to travel ten minutes back in time in order to move the lamp so I will not break it in the future. Some will conclude that this story is inconsistent by noting that there are conceptual contradictions associated with the notion of backwards causation. But notice that they did not need to know the modal status of T to come to this conclusion. Hence, no vicious circle arises in their judging this story to be inconsistent.[25] Thus, this objection of Tidman's has been met.[26]

Conclusion

Let us quickly consider Tidman's positive account. Tidman concedes that when we are wondering whether or not p is possible, we often try to conceive of p. But he does not think that our having conceived of p is what justifies us in concluding that p is possible. In line with Bealer, Tidman claims that what provides us with the necessary justification is modal intuition, that is, upon conceiving of p, "we find triggered within ourselves a strong disposition toward accepting, or denying, the possibility of what is being considered" (1994, p. 308). And it is this inclination that justifies any claim we make about whether p is possible. As Tidman further explains, this disposition is not always triggered and at times we are inclined with a weaker disposition that informs us not that p is possible but that there is no reason to think that p is impossible. But, even so, for Tidman, "the key to modal epistemology is modal intuition, not conceivability" (ibid.).

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I am deeply sceptical of this position. It is just unclear how these intuitions are to work for Tidman. In some places it seems as if conceiving is somehow integral to the triggering of these dispositions. But in other places it seems as if this triggering can occur without our having conceived of anything. If the former option is the case, then the work of justifying our modal claims might still be accomplished by our having conceived of p, for it could be that our disposition to accept p as possible is triggered because we have conceived of p. But, if the latter option is the case, why do we bother conceiving of p in response to the query "Is p possible?" As Tidman admits, this is our common response to such a query. Now, this response is a mystery.

Chalmers's modal imagination faces similar worries. As we have seen, modally imagining p involves not just our having a positive intuition of a situation that verifies p, but also our describing or being able to describe this situation coherently. How do these two aspects of modal imagining work together? Might it be that this description triggers our intuition that p is possible? If it does, then this intuition is seemingly irrelevant within the context of a modal epistemology.

Finally, how do we adjudicate between people whose dispositions are triggered in opposition to each other? Chalmers has claimed that he can conceive of zombies. As he admits, he is strongly disposed to accept their existence as a possibility. How can all those who object to Chalmers on this point respond to him? What if they are strongly disposed to say that such creatures are not possible? How do we decide which disposition to trust here? Do we decide between these two parties by considering the associated descriptions? If we do, then again the intuitions involved here seem irrelevant to the process of establishing the possibility of zombies.

Clearly, there is good reason to hesitate before conceding both that there are such intuitions and that these intuitions provide us with a guide to possibility. Prior to doing so, we should do all that we can to define a method of justifying our modal beliefs that does not rest on something so spooky. In this article, I have done just that. I have argued that both telling stories and conjuring up images will provide us with a guide to possibility insofar as both will in some instances enable us to justify our beliefs about what is possible. I have also argued that when employing these two methods for this purpose, we must do more than merely call forth an image or tell a story; we must also fulfill certain requirements. We must make sure that our mental images contain no blanks and that our stories contain no contradictions. We must also make sure that there is no reason to take either these stories or images as stories or images of ~p as opposed to p. And, finally, when imagining p, we must make sure that these images possess those properties which are usually associated with veridical perceptions. Here, then, are the beginnings of a modal epistemology.

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Notes

1 I would like to thank Walter Ott for all his help with this article.

2 See Chalmers and Jackson 2001. Katalin Balog argues that on the Chalmers/Jackson view the conceptual entailment thesis provides the link between conceivability and possibility (Balog 1999, p. 505).

3 Correspondingly, the operative notion of conceivability is both negative and quite narrow: P∧~Q is conceivable iff Q cannot be deduced from P using logic and conceptual truths. This is the second of Block and Stalnaker's two notions of conceivability and it is also the notion of conceivability at play in Balog's article (Balog 1999, p. 498; Block and Stalnaker 1999, p. 7). The first notion of conceivability Block and Stalnaker offer is less explicit but even more narrow, explained entirely in terms of natural-kind terms like "water" and their reference on Twin Earth (Block and Stalnaker 1999, pp. 6-7).

4 At least one author attacked by Block and Stalnaker, Joseph Levine, discusses conceivability without in any way suggesting a link with possibility. See Levine 2001.

5 One exception to this first trend is Stephen Yablo, who argues that to conceive of p is to imagine a world that is taken to verify p, and to imagine such a world is for it to appear as if p is possible (1993, p. 30). This, Yablo suggests, means that the imagination is to the possible as perception is to the actual. Yablo, however, does not think that this method of conceiving necessarily involves our calling forth mental images. As a consequence, it becomes obscure how the appearance of p's possibility arises. I shall develop an account of conceivability that centrally involves perceptual imagining and thus builds on Yablo's analogy between imagining and perceiving.

6 In his article, "Does Conceivability Entail Possibility?" Chalmers presents a more sophisticated analysis of modal imagining. It too suffers from problems associated with the incompleteness objection which I will discuss in note 22.

7 In a similar vein, George Bealer rejects conceivability in all its forms as a guide to possibility and appeals instead to an unanalyzed notion of "modal intuition" to ground ascriptions of possibility. Bealer argues that talk of conceivability is "an idle complication," since it ultimately reduces to, or presupposes, modal intuition. He claims that he "can see no reason" why our conceiving that p should provide evidence for (possibly) p (Bealer 2002, p. 76). Beyond this rhetorical point, he offers only an argument to the effect that conceivability cannot *entail* possibility, an argument he himself derides as a red herring. Thus, he writes, "the mere fact that I tried, but happened to fail to conceive that p, is not a good guide to what is in principle possible . . . maybe I am just not sharp enough" (ibid.). First, the inference under discussion is not the inference from our failing to conceive that p to the claim that p is impossible; Bealer is, or should be, concerned with the converse. Second, the more general possibility that one might be suffering from some cognitive defect is one that would also apply to Bealer's "intuitions." Thus, I cannot see that Bealer has given any good reason to give up talking of conceivability.

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8 Tidman's article contains two related confusions. First, he discusses our conceiving of states of affairs as opposed to statements or propositions. As a consequence of this decision, Tidman has to commit all sorts of philosophical *faux pas*. So, for example, he questions whether we can conceive of "everything entailed by a state of affairs," though states of affairs entail nothing (1994, p. 304). To avoid these kinds of problems, I have chosen instead to focus on our conceiving propositions. Second, he is very loose with the *de re*/*de dicto* distinction, speaking sometimes of the possibility of a thing and sometimes of a statement involving the thing. When discussing Tidman, I will primarily be concerned with *de dicto* modality. Although for the sake of convenience I do at times employ *de re* locutions, these should be understood as shorthand for the relevant *de dicto* proposition.

9 See Sorensen (2002, pp. 343ff.) for a related consideration of what he calls "Tidman's joke."

10 The converse of the conceivability thesis is the claim that possibility implies conceivability.

11 In some places, Tidman claims that it is our intentions upon imagining that determine the content of the images we call forth. But more often he speaks of our interpretations of these images as doing this job. For this reason, I have chosen to focus on our interpretations.

12 Some might claim that this is a silly example, for the modal status of S is not in doubt. This may be true but I know of no account that explains the justification behind our belief that S is possible. I am trying to provide just such an account here. Moreover, we need this account before we start worrying about how we are to justify our beliefs about the proper relationship between the mind and the body.

13 To meet the perception requirement, there are other conditions that will need to be met besides these two. For example, whether we take an image to be of p is probably constrained by inferences to the best explanation. I have chosen to focus on the conditions of content and quality partly for simplicity's sake and partly because these two conditions will be relevant when it comes to addressing Tidman's objections.

14 By contrast, Tidman's square circle is pictured from, as Sorenson puts it, a single "evasive" perspective instead of being like the spoon, a specimen "open to view" (Sorenson 2002, pp. 343-44).

15 It should be clear that we are still concerned with imagining propositions here, i.e., with *de dicto* modality. In order to imagine such propositions, we employ mental images. We have not shifted to *de re* modality, since the question of possibility *still* concerns the proposition, and not the *res* whose image is being inspected.

16 Hart (1988) also discusses the role blanks have in employing the imagination as a guide to possibility.

17 Epistemic twins should not be confused either with the Kripkean notion of an epistemic counterpart or with Putnam's twins. For Kripke, on the one

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hand, an epistemic counterpart is an individual that exists in a possible world. This individual possesses many of the traits that are used in the actual world to identify a particular person (R) as R. But yet this individual is not in fact R. R's epistemic twin, on the other hand, enjoys the same mental life as R, but she need not possess any of the other qualities that identify R in the actual world. Finally, a twin on Putnam's Twin Earth (like an epistemic twin) will share all the same psychological states as her doppelgänger in the actual world, but (unlike epistemic twins) Putnam's twins must also be "molecule for molecule identical" (Putnam 1981, p. 18).

18 In contrast, I am not justified in taking my S-images to be veridical perceptions. For these same justificatory practices demand that I take those images that are accompanied by an intention to imagine to be products of my imagination.

19 Yablo discusses a similar requirement (1993, pp. 32-36). But my requirement operates differently. Unlike Yablo, I think the discovery of a defeater forces us to conclude that we have not conceived of the proposition in question. Yablo, instead, argues that the discovery of a defeater directly undermines our conclusion that p is possible.

20 It should be noted, though, that there are good reasons for distinguishing these two conditions from each other. First, while the content condition and the quality condition do blur together at times, both conditions are relevant when it comes to providing ourselves with a guide to possibility. For an image to provide us with a guide to p's modal status, it must be sufficiently complete and determinate and I must be justified in taking this image to be of p. Separating the perception requirement into these two conditions forces us to attend to these two factors and not ignore the one for the other as happens in the Escher case. Second, I might try to imagine p so to provide myself with a guide to possibility, but fail. If I know why I failed then, if I try again to imagine p, I will know which facet of this imaginative project I need to attend to in order to succeed. Finally, when we turn to considering how storytelling provides us with a guide to possibility, we will see that there are similar requirements with respect to the content condition and the consistency requirement, but not with respect to the quality condition. Dividing the perception requirement into these two conditions allows me to make this connection.

21 We will not have completely specified a possible world by telling such a story, for we will not have described everything in that world. However, we will have constructed a partial description of a world that is complete *relative to p*. Thus, we need not fear the possibility of a contradiction arising as a consequence of this partial description getting embedded in a complete description of a world. Thus, this story—unlike Chalmers's descriptions of p-verifying-situations—seems sufficient given our goal here.

22 As I explained above, Chalmers (in his 2002 article) presents a fuller analysis of modal imagining. But this analysis also faces problems with the incompleteness objection similar to those presented above. For Chalmers, the modal

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imaginability of p entails p's possibility. Now, for p to be modally imagined p must be "ideally positively conceivable" (2002, p. 153). That is, one must have a "positive intuition" of a situation that verifies p and one must be able "in principle to flesh out any missing details" associated with this situation "such that the details are imagined clearly and distinctly, and such that no contradiction is revealed" (ibid).

If we did know that "on idealized reflection" we could fill in such details without finding any contradiction, then clearly we could conclude that p was possible (ibid.), for the details filled in on idealized reflections would presumably be those details that together constituted a complete description of a possible world. But how could we know for a given proposition that such details could be filled in without filling them in ourselves (which is something we cannot do, as we learned above)? And if we cannot know that such details could be filled in, how can we preclude the possibility that a contradiction would arise if these details were filled in? Given all this, how can this modal imagining entail possibility? An "in principle" guide to possibility which cannot be used in practice cannot constitute a modal epistemology.

In response, Chalmers will argue that idealized reflection does not necessarily involve the construction of a complete description of a possible world; rather it involves "a little reflection" on the intuited situation (ibid., p. 155). But "a moment's reflection" will not assuage the real worries brought on by the incompleteness objection (ibid., p. 154). Moreover, how is this little reflection "idealized"? There is a bait-and-switch quality to this position. If "idealized reflection" demands of us only a little reflection, there is no reason to assume that ideal positive conceivability entails possibility. But because the notion of "idealized reflection" implies the complete description of a possible world, we endorse this entailment.

23 Note that we should not *conclude* that p describes an impossibility upon finding such a contradiction, for, while this story does contain a contradiction, it is still incomplete. Consequently, it is possible that this contradiction might be resolved if every proposition entailed by p was included in this story. Think here about David Lewis's position on time travel. He would argue that many of the seeming contradictions found within stories about time travel would be resolved if we included in these stories those implications that are usually left out, specifically those having to do with the difference between time in-itself and personal time. See Lewis 1986.

24 When trying to determine whether a story justifies our belief that p is possible, we can also ask ourselves whether this same story would in the actual world justify our belief in p if it were offered to us not as a story but as an explanation of p's truth. If we would agree that under the right conditions this story would justify our belief that p is true, this gives us some reason to accept this story as justifying our belief that p is possible. This is clearly analogous to the perception requirement insofar as the epistemological standards of the actual world are being used to inform us as to when we should use what we have con-

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ceived as a guide to possibility. That said, I do not want to elevate this suggestion to the status of a requirement. I do not want to require that the stories I tell about possible worlds be tied so closely to the actual world.

P might be true in some possible world that is radically different from the actual world and I might be able to begin to consistently describe that aspect of this possible world which concerns p. But there might not ever be a situation in the actual world when this story would justify my belief that p is true. But, clearly, this fact about the actual world should not preclude me from using this story as a guide to p's modal status. Thus, while my willingness to employ a story in the actual world might provide me with reason to take this story as justifying my belief that p is possible, my unwillingness to use this story should not be reason to reject this story as providing the necessary modal justification.

25 We need to know the modal status of the following proposition (L), "There is something that can be described by a proposition that takes the form p and ~p," prior to our judging the logical consistency of *any* story we offer. As a consequence of this, it is clear that our ability to tell a story cannot be used to establish the modal status of every proposition, for, obviously, we cannot establish the modal status of L via this method of imagining. How then is the impossibility of L established? There are at least two answers to this question. Either we could argue that the impossibility of L is established by the fact that its possibility would undermine all reasoning. Or we could argue that the impossibility of L is established by way of our conjuring up mental images. Specifically, we could argue that we know that L is impossible because we tried and failed to conjure up mental images of objects that could be described by propositions that take the form p and ~p. Perhaps the first of these two options is the most plausible. But there are those who argue for the second option. See Hart 1988, pp. 14-15.

26 Tidman's final objection applies to any method we choose to employ when seeking to justify our modal beliefs. It is called the Stand-Off Objection. Tidman argues that for any state of affairs we can conceive of as possible, we can equally well imagine God making such a state of affairs impossible. But, if this is the case, Tidman argues, the imagination cannot provide us with any kind of guide to possibility, for the imagination gives us just as much reason to believe that that state is impossible as it gives us reason to believe that it is possible.

But God's presence within these imaginings either begs the question or renders what has been imagined inconsistent. To see this, we need to consider what notion of God Tidman might be employing here. Is this God not bound by any laws, including the laws of logic, math, physics, and nature? Well, surely then such a God could bring into existence any state of affairs, regardless of whether or not it is possible or impossible. But, as many people have argued, this very conception of God is inconsistent. So, when imagining this God, we have failed to satisfy the requirement of consistency.

Alternatively, the God Tidman might be employing here could be a God who is bound by some of these laws. But then we are begging the question, for

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we would assume that such a limited God could create a world in which some particular state of affairs obtained only if we assumed that this world and hence this state of affairs was possible given the laws in question. Of course, Tidman claims that with respect to this objection, "God need not enter the picture at all" (1994, p. 306). But he does not substantiate this claim. Thus, until Tidman can give us an example of a stand-off that does not employ God, this objection is toothless.

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