

# YABLO ON MIND AND MODALITY

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*Thoughts* comprises eleven of Stephen Yablo's papers concerning meaning, mind, and modality (a second volume, *Things*, collects together his work on the metaphysics of essence, identity, and causation). All but one of the essays ("Beyond Rigidification") have been previously published. The first six papers ("The Real Distinction Between Mind and Body," "Is Conceivability a Guide to Possibility?," "Textbook Kripkeanism and the Open Texture of Concepts," "Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda," "No Fool's Cold: Notes on Illusions of Possibility," and "Beyond Rigidification") concern meaning and the epistemology of modality. The seventh ("How in the World?") concerns the metaphysics of modality, and the final four ("Mental Causation," "Singling Out Properties," "Wide Causation," and "Causal Relevance: Mental, Moral, and Epistemic") concern causation and the mental. Yablo's writings on these topics have been deservedly influential, and it is helpful to have these papers collected together in a single volume.

The first six papers all wrestle with the question "Is conceivability a guide to possibility?" Yablo discusses this question by engaging with Descartes, Hume, Kripke, and Chalmers, among others. Yablo's own position is that unless we are willing to accept skepticism about modal claims, we really have no choice but to accept conceivability as evidence of possibility since no one has any idea how else we might gain modal knowledge. But this is not an excuse for epistemic laziness, for in order to "modalize with conviction" (69), we must be serious about developing "a technology of modal error detection" (169), strategies for spotting "illusions of possibility" and understanding how they arise. Real progress in modal metaphysics depends on our ability to develop such strategies.

The point about skepticism is important and not sufficiently appreciated. A common refrain: "As Kripke and Putnam showed, conceivability is one thing, genuine metaphysical possibility another. It is conceivable that there should be water without H<sub>2</sub>O (since we can imagine having discovered that this was so), but such a state of affairs is not genuinely possible. So conceivability is no guide to possibility." Some might add that while water's not being H<sub>2</sub>O might

be *conceptually* possible, it is not metaphysically possible, and it's the latter that's at issue. The problem with this, Yablo points out, is that it's hard to see how anyone who takes this line can avoid general skepticism about metaphysical possibility claims:

No one would doubt of herself that (e.g.) she could have born on a different day than actually, or lived in different places... But how do we know [these things], if not by attempting to conceive ourselves with the relevant characteristics and finding that this presents no difficulties? (53)

Denying that conceivability is a guide to possibility threatens a good chunk of the modal knowledge with which we ordinarily credit ourselves. One might also wonder about the *internal* consistency of the objector's position: for how is the necessity of *water is H<sub>2</sub>O* established other than by finding its negation *inconceivable*? Is inconceivability supposed to be a better guide to impossibility than conceivability is to possibility?

Having secured a foothold for conceivability evidence, Yablo goes on to examine various strategies for detecting and avoiding modal error. The focus here is on Kripke's influential approach to these matters, along with its subsequent development by two-dimensionalists like Jackson and Chalmers. Here's the issue: As Kripke and Putnam argued, any world in which some compound or element other than H<sub>2</sub>O lies behind the 'watery' appearances there isn't a world that contains real water. Nevertheless, it also seems possible that water could have turned out to be other than H<sub>2</sub>O—we can imagine having undergone a series of experiences that would have lead us to conclude that water's chemical makeup was something other than H<sub>2</sub>O. But the appearance that we could have discovered that water was other than H<sub>2</sub>O must be an illusion: since "discovers" is factive, any world in which we *discover* that water is other than H<sub>2</sub>O is a world in which water *is* other than H<sub>2</sub>O, and we've agreed that there are no such worlds. So how does the illusion that we could have discovered this arise?

The broad strategy Yablo investigates goes something like this: the *seeming* possibility of water's being H<sub>2</sub>O has been confused with a closely related *genuine* possibility of something else: the possibility that the predominant clear, local, drinkable stuff—the 'watery' stuff—might not have been H<sub>2</sub>O. There would seem to be no objecting to this possibility, and it's not implausible that we mistook this for the possibility of water's not being H<sub>2</sub>O.

Note that if that possibility actually does obtain—if, *contra* the dominant theory of water, the predominant clear, local, drinkable stuff is not H<sub>2</sub>O—then water is not H<sub>2</sub>O. For this reason, Yablo calls this the *if-actually* account of illusions of possibility; we can state it thus (156):

There is the illusion that  $E$  is possible only if things could have been such that, if they actually *are* that way, then  $E$ .

Yablo thinks the *if-actually* model is useful for explaining some modal illusions, but he denies that it can explain them all. One class of problem cases concerns ‘actuality-based’ claims. It seems like Phosphorus might have turned out to be distinct from Hesperus. One way this might have happened is that Phosphorus turned out to be Mars and Hesperus turned out to be Venus. Another way this might have happened is (as before) Hesperus turns out to be Venus and (new) Phosphorus turns out to be distinct from any of the actual heavenly bodies. The possibility of *Phosphorus is distinct from every actual heavenly body* is illusory since Phosphorus is identical to actual Venus; according to the *if-actually* model this means that things could have been such that, if things actually are that way, then Phosphorus is distinct from every actual heavenly body. But obviously there is no way things could be such that if they actually are that way, then Phosphorus is distinct from every actual heavenly body (if, as we can suppose, it is part of our Phosphorus-concept that Phosphorus is a heavenly body, then no course of experience would lead us to affirm *Phosphorus is distinct from every actual heavenly body*).

One might wonder whether the proponent of *if-actually* could concede the point, and then refine the account by restricting its scope:

There is the illusion that  $E$  is possible only if things could have been such that, if they actually *are* that way, then  $E$  (where “ $E$ ” is a schematic letter whose admissible substitutions are non-actuality-based claims).

The crucial issue—at least for mind-body matters—is whether anti-physicalist arguments still go through with the revised *if-actually* account. As far as I can see, they do, since the relevant claims—e.g. *There is pain without c-fibre firing*—do not appear to be actuality-based. If Yablo thinks the claims in question are actuality-based, this requires further argument, since neither “actually” nor any of its synonyms occur in them explicitly.

Yablo’s discussion of mental causation begins with the ‘exclusion argument’ for epiphenomenalism about the mental. The argument runs as follows (223–224):

1. If an event  $x$  is causally sufficient for an event  $y$ , then no event  $x^*$  distinct from  $x$  is causally relevant to  $y$  (*exclusion*).
2. For every physical event  $y$ , some physical event  $x$  is causally sufficient for  $y$  (*physical determinism*).
3. For every physical event  $x$  and mental event  $x^*$ ,  $x$  is distinct from  $x^*$

(dualism)

4. So: for every physical event  $y$ , no mental event  $x^*$  is causally relevant to  $y$  (epiphenomenalism).

Epiphenomenalism is implausible: surely my desire to answer the door is causally relevant to my opening it. But where does the exclusion argument go wrong? One might suspect that (3) is the culprit: identify mental events with physical events and the problem evaporates. But Yablo thinks this only relocates the problem from events to *properties* of events, since one can re-formulate (2) as (2') with no loss of plausibility:

- 2'. For every physical event  $y$ , some physical event  $x$  is, in virtue of its physical properties alone, causally sufficient for  $y$ .

If we assume that mental and physical properties are distinct (as multiple realization arguments suggest), the argument can be re-formulated to establish the thesis that no mental event is, in virtue of its mental properties, causally relevant to any physical event.

Yablo's response to this argument is to reject the exclusion principle. His strategy is as follows: The asymmetric supervenience of the mental on the physical shows that mental properties are *determinables* of their underlying physical *determinates* (Yablo also formulates an interesting analogue of the determinable-determinate distinction for events). But determinables and determinates do not compete for causal influence. To illustrate this last point, Yablo imagines a pigeon, Sophie, conditioned to peck at red tiles to the exclusion of tiles of other colors (230). A red tile is presented; Sophie pecks. Presumably the tile's being red was causally relevant to Sophie's pecking. Not so if the exclusion principle holds. For in addition to being red, the tile has another property: being scarlet; and the tile's being scarlet was presumably causally sufficient for Sophie's pecking at it. So, by the exclusion principle, the tile's being red turns out to be causally irrelevant after all. The argument can be run a second time, assuming that scarlet is itself a determinable of an even more specific color property. The exclusion principle yields the result that the only properties of an event that have causal relevance are its *ultimate determinates*, its properties which are not amenable to further determination.

But all this just shows that the exclusion principle is false: "rather than competing for causal honors, determinables and determinates seem likelier to share in one another's success" (241). The tile's being red *does* cause Sophie to peck—that was what she was conditioned to do. Thus, if mental properties are

determinables of their physical determinates, the exclusion argument for the causal irrelevance of the mental fails.

Yablo then goes on to draw a distinction between causal relevance and causation, and he thinks that, while the mental and the physical do not compete for causal relevance, they do sometimes compete for being *the cause* of a given effect. But, Yablo argues, oftentimes mental events are better candidates for being the cause of an action than their more specific physical determinates. I open the door; was that event caused by my desire *m* to do so, or by *m*'s physical determinate *p*? Plausibly, the opening of the door would have still occurred even if *m* had been determined by a slightly different physical determinate *p*\*. That suggests that *m* is a better candidate than *p*; being a determinable of *p*, *m* is less specific than *p*, and, in this particular case, this means that *m*-involving explanations will be more general than *p*-involving explanations. (Although I'm compressing a good deal of Yablo's intricate discussion of what it is for a cause to be proportional to an effect, I hope I've accurately represented his underlying thought.)

The other papers in the volume dealing with causation go on to develop these ideas, applying them to other domains. For example, Yablo defends 'naive objectivism' about color properties, suggesting that the property of being red is a determinable of its physical underpinnings. This allows red to play its characteristic causal role (e.g. causing things to look red to us) without requiring us to find a physical property that plays that role. And saying that red is a determinable of various physical determinates is not at odds with its figuring as the cause of our experiences, since, as we've seen, determinables can be causally efficacious.

*Thoughts* contains a wealth of original and exciting philosophical ideas, and the writing is funny and engaging. Students of these topics will benefit from a careful study of this volume.

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