

Disagreeing About “Might”

Patrick Skeels

University of California, Davis

Contextualism about epistemic modals has it that sentences of the form ‘It might be that p ’ are true just in case the relevant body of knowledge has not ruled out p .¹ The view faces two common criticisms, the first of which can be called *the disagreement challenge*. According to the disagreement challenge, a semantics for epistemic modals should predict instances of disagreement between agents who are decided about the truth of some proposition and agents undecided about that proposition. For example, suppose Holmes believes that Moriarty is not the murderer, while Watson remains undecided, and believes both that Moriarty might be the murderer and that he might not be. Proponents of the challenge hold that Holmes disagrees with Watson and that contextualism fails to predict this disagreement since the two beliefs in question are consistent on the contextualist semantics.²

The second challenge concerns the subject matter of epistemic modal contents. The idea is that epistemic modal contents like ‘It might be that p ’ should have the same subject matter as their non-modalized counterparts like p and ‘It’s not the case that p .’ This is to say that each of the aforementioned contents should each be *about* the issue of whether or not p (henceforth, the issue of whether or not p will be denoted \mathfrak{p}). The associated objection, which we can call *the subject matter objection*, has it that the contextualist semantics for epistemic modals gets the subject matter wrong. It is argued that the contextualist semantics treats epistemic modal contents as about the limits of the contextually supplied body of knowledge. The objection demands that a semantics for epistemic modals should ensure that contents like ‘It might be that p ’ are about \mathfrak{p} , and only about \mathfrak{p} .³

In the associated paper, I intend to demonstrate how arguments in favor of the disagreement challenge are in direct tension with arguments that defend the subject matter objection. This tension comes to a head when we ask “what do Holmes and Watson disagree about?” Let m be the proposition that Moriarty is the murderer, and \mathfrak{m} be the issue of whether or not Moriarty is the murderer. The proponent of both challenges is committed to the claim that Holmes and Watson disagree about \mathfrak{m} . I conclude that, counterintuitively, this commitment undermines a motivating premise in support of the disagreement challenge. The result is that one of the two challenges that motivate various alternatives to contextualism should be discharged. After weighing the options, I argue, much more speculatively, that we should reject the subject matter objection, and develop an account of aboutness for epistemic modals where contents like ‘It might be that p ’ are about more than just \mathfrak{p} .

References

Khoo, J. (2015). “Modal Disagreements”. *Inquiry* vol.58: 511-534.

¹Paradigm examples of the view can be found in Kratzer (1977) and Kratzer (1981).

²See MacFarlane (2011), and MacFarlane (2014) for popular instances. See Khoo (2015) for a characterization of the challenge with respect to epistemic modals and Khoo (2017) for a more general version of the argument against contextualism at large.

³A prototypical version of this argument is made in Yalcin (2007). A later version that directly appeals to aboutness and subject matter can be found in Yablo (2011) and Yablo (2014).

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