

CONCEIVABILITY & MODALITY - CONFERENCE SCHEDULE

Venue: Sapienza University, Villa Mirafiori, Room XI
via Carlo Fea 2, 00161 Rome

June 19th, Monday

Chair: Tito Magri

9:30-10am *welcome & coffee*

10am **ANAND VAIDYA**, San José State University
Re-Conceiving Conceivability in light of the History of 20th Century Theories of Conceivability

11:15am **DANIEL NOLAN**, Notre Dame
Imaginative Resistance as Parochialism

12:30pm *lunch*

2pm **ANTONELLA MALLOZZI**, The Graduate Center - CUNY
Putting Modal Metaphysics First

3:15pm **BARBARA VETTER**, Freie Universität Berlin
Potential Knowledge

4:30pm *coffee break*

4:45pm **FRANCESCO BERTO**, University of Amsterdam
Logic Will Get You from A to B. Imagination Will Take You Everywhere

6pm *drinks & dinner*

June 20th, Tuesday

Chair: Antonella Mallozzi

9:30-10am *welcome & coffee*

10am **TITO MAGRI**, Sapienza University
True Humean Modalities

11:15am **TOM SCHOONEN**, University of Amsterdam
Modal Scepticism and Kung's Epistemology

12:30pm *lunch*

- 2pm **AL CASULLO**, Nebraska
Modal Empiricism: What Is the Problem?
- 3:15pm **BORIS KMENT**, Princeton
The Conceivability Test for Possibility
- 4:30pm *coffee-break*
- 4:45pm **JONATHAN SCHAFFER**, Rutgers
To See the Worlds in a Grain of Sand
- 6pm *drinks & dinner*

Registration is free but required, by June 4th: amallozzi@gradcenter.cuny.edu

ABSTRACTS

Francesco Berto *Logic Will Get You from A to B. Imagination Will Take You Everywhere*

One would think that imagination is a logically anarchic activity — a kind of runabout inference ticket: given that one imagines that A, one may also imagine whatever B pops to one's mind by free association of ideas. Still, imagination might have to obey some normative logical constraints if it is to have some cognitive value, e.g., as a tool to reliably form new (conditional) beliefs. In this talk I attempt a formal treatment that combines a modal semantics with a mereology of contents. Imagination is understood as a variably strict quantifier over possible worlds with a kind of content-preservation constraint. The variability of strictness is to account for the way we contextually select background beliefs and information to be imported into the imagined scenario. Content-preservation is to model the fact that cognitively valuable exercises of imagination respect some constraints of relevance, limiting the importation of beliefs that are irrelevant with respect to what the act of imagination is explicitly about.

Al Casullo *Modal Empiricism: What is the Problem?*

In his introduction to the Critique, Kant contends that necessity is a criterion of the a priori—that is, that all knowledge of necessary propositions is a priori. This contention, together with two others that Kant took to be evident—we know some mathematical propositions and such propositions are necessary—leads directly to the conclusion that some knowledge is a priori. Although many contemporary philosophers endorse Kant's criterion, supporting arguments are hard to come by. Gordon Barnes provides one of the few examples. My purpose in this paper is to articulate and examine his argument. I have two goals in doing so. The first is to uncover several significant gaps in the argument. The second is to show that it suffers from a common defect in rationalist arguments. If the argument were successful against empiricist accounts of modal knowledge, it would apply with equal force to extant rationalist accounts of such knowledge. Hence, the cost of refuting modal empiricism is modal skepticism.

Boris Kment *The Conceivability Test for Possibility*

It is a common thought that we can establish the possibility of a proposition by demonstrating its conceivability, and its necessity by demonstrating the inconceivability of its negation. I consider various ways in which philosophers and non-philosophers support modal claims by this method and then offer an account of conceivability that can explain how the procedure works in these cases. To say that P is conceivable for us is to say that there is some proposition Q that we can recognize to be possible, such that we can recognize that $Q \Box \rightarrow P$. We can demonstrate P's conceivability by finding a proposition Q that meets these two conditions. And we can show that $\sim P$ is inconceivable by showing that $Q \Box \rightarrow P$ holds for every possible proposition Q. (This can be done in a number of ways, some of which are beautifully exemplified by arguments that Kripke gives for various essentialist claims in *Naming and Necessity*.) On the theory of necessity that I have developed in previous work, P is necessary just in case P holds at all worlds that have at least a certain degree of closeness to actuality. Possibility can be defined accordingly. I use this account to explain the justificatory force of the conceivability test. On my view, any application of the conceivability test to establish a modal claim must rest on pre-existing modal beliefs. The method cannot create modal knowledge from scratch.

Tito Magri *True Humean Modalities*

Humeanism about modalities stands in need of careful defense but, more and before that, of adequate characterization. While it is recognized, all hands, as a member of the family of the conceivability accounts of modal epistemology and, perhaps less unanimously, as an anti-realist conception of the metaphysics of modality, some interesting features of this philosophical position (including how it was put forward by its initiator, Hume himself) are often neglected. Attention to such features could partially but substantively redirect the debate on modal Humeanism, pointing to reasons why it could still be philosophically important and even to lines along some of its distinctive views could be, if only qualifiedly, vindicated. In my talk I want to make some progress in this direction, by addressing, firstly, the essential commitments of modal Humeanism and, secondly, how these commitments shape the Humean conception of conceivability as a guide to possibility.

Antonella Mallozzi *Putting Modal Metaphysics First*

Given the distinction between (a) the belief-formation methods involved with modal reasoning vs. (b) the principles that constrain and guide such methods, identifying (a) only gives a partial answer to the issue of modal epistemology. For conceivability, intuition, imagination, and the like do not automatically generate correct modal beliefs, but must be adequately constrained in some way captured by (b). Thus, elucidating the underlying theory or set of principles governing modal metaphysics is the primary task of modal epistemology. In order to do modal epistemology, we need to put modal metaphysics first. In this talk, I argue that such a modal metaphysics is specifically a metaphysics of essence. I draw from Kripke's cases of a posteriori necessities and hold that metaphysical necessity is grounded in the natural makeup of the actual world, via the essential properties of things. The underlying metaphysical principles are therefore essentialist principles. In my account, essential properties of individuals and kinds are characterized by their causal roles for determining many other properties and behaviors of those individuals and kinds. Consequently, essential properties have a distinctive explanatory power, which is tied non-modally and non-conceptually to the very nature or *de re* profiles of things. I present this account as applied to natural kinds, and show how it fits nicely Kripke's examples of a posteriori necessities as well as other cases.

Daniel Nolan *Imaginative Resistance as Parochialism*

When invited to imagine various scenarios, whether through explicit instruction or being presented with fictions, people frequently resist. This "imaginative resistance" is often taken to tell us a lot about the limits of conceivability. I will argue that imaginative resistance is often much better explained by unfamiliarity with imagined scenarios than any representational or structurally cognitive limits. With training and experience, much more is imaginable than you might think, including many scenarios widely agreed to be conceptual impossibilities. If it is true that this wide range of imaginable scenarios are conceivable, it becomes correspondingly less plausible that conceivability lines up with possibility. I will argue that using our ability to conceive may play some role in modal epistemology, but a limited one, and the keys to modal knowledge need to be sought elsewhere.

Jonathan Schaffer *To See the Worlds in a Grain of Sand*

I develop an account of metaphysical modality that combines ground-theoretic ideology with the idea that possibilities are properties of a sort (intrinsic profiles). The basic idea runs: Possibly p =df if there is an intrinsic profile F such that the world's being F ground-entails p 's being true.

Tom Schoonen *Modal Scepticism and Kung's Epistemology*

In various important works, Peter Kung has convincingly defended the view that we can imagine absolute impossibilities. However, Kung does not think that this leads to modal scepticism: he aims to provide a theory making of a regimented form of imagination a good, if defeasible, guide to possibility.

In this paper, I argue that Kung's theory is not yet up to the task. I will critically evaluate Kung's theory and suggest that, as it is, it provides a very weak modal epistemology, unable to account for our knowledge of certain common, everyday modal claims. I will explore if the theory may be strengthened by adding 'similarity principles' akin to those one finds in recent forms of modal empiricism.

Anand Vaidya *Re-conceiving conceivability in light of the history of 20th century theories of conceivability*

In the later half of the 20th century, especially post-Kripke's Naming and Necessity, conceivability, as an epistemic relation aimed at offering an account of how we can come to know modal truths, received a lot of attention. Philosophers, such as Stephen Yablo, David Chalmers, James Van Cleeve, and Peter Menzies all tried to theorize conceivability in some way, such that it provided either evidence of possibility or under certain conditions entailed possibility. In recent times, 2010-2015, there has been a turn away from conceivability theory toward alternative accounts of modal knowledge, such as Timothy Williamson's counterfactual approach, E. J. Lowe's and Bob Hale's essence-based approach, Sonia Roca-Royes's similarity-theory, Bob Fischer's theory-based model, and Otavio Bueno and Scott Shalkowski's modalism. In this presentation I lay out a sketch of these distinct views and the criticism that they launched against classical conceivability theory. However, my project is not negative. Although I wonder where conceivability theory can go in light of the vast amount of criticism it has received, I aim to see what lessons we can learn from these criticisms in order to locate a role for conceivability theory as we move forward in thinking about the nature of modal knowledge. In particular, I pay attention to the work of Edmund Husserl, and Saul Kripke, two

figures that I believe we need to return to in thinking about modal knowledge when seeking to locate the proper role for conceivability theory in modal epistemology.

Barbara Vetter *Potential Knowledge*

In recent years, there has been a surge of interest in anti-exceptionalist modal epistemology - approaches on which our knowledge of metaphysical modality are continuous with our very ordinary ways of knowing about the world around us. The standard anti-exceptionalist approach remains Williamson's counterfactual-based modal epistemology, but it is far from the only option available to the anti-exceptionalist. In this talk, I explore a different form of anti-exceptionalist modal epistemology that starts with our knowledge of the modal properties that ordinary objects have, in other words: with our knowledge of potentials. I argue that the central cases of objectively modal knowledge are knowledge of our own abilities and powers, as well as knowledge of the dispositions and tendencies of the objects around us. Such knowledge is clearly empirical. I consider the different ways in which it can be acquired, from perception to imagination and inference; and I defend the approach against a challenge levelled from a more aprioristic, conceivability-based approach.