

# Overcoming Inconstancy

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*Inconstancy in representation de re is exactly what we should expect under the hypothesis that it works by comparative overall similarity of complex things. What would be hard to understand, had it been found, is constancy.*

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David Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds*

## Abstract

According to skeptics about *de re* modality, the answers to *de re* modal questions depend on how we think of the individual in question. No individual bears *simpliciter* the sorts of modal properties apparently attributed by *de re* modal constructions. Realists about *de re* modality defend the view that individuals bear modal properties *simpliciter*, independently of how they are described. One major argument for skepticism highlights the phenomenon of *inconstancy*: sometimes *de re* modal attributions differ in truth value despite involving the same individual and modal predicate. Skepticism offers a plausible diagnosis: we get differences in truth value without differences in referent or predicate because there is a hidden third factor on which the truth of the utterance depends: the manner in which the individual in question is represented or described. This third factor is supplied somehow by context. In this paper, I argue that inconstancy does not motivate skepticism about *de re* modality. I claim that (i) skepticism has a difficult time explaining related linguistic data; and (ii) the best explanation of all of the linguistic data, including inconstancy, supports realism.

My mother's dog Maggie has fleas. Does she have more than 200 fleas on her body? Tough question. A 'yes' answer indicates that Maggie has a certain

property, *having more than 200 fleas*; a ‘no’ that she lacks that property. And the answer depends only on Maggie’s relations to her fleas. Things seem no different when we are considering modal questions. You are human. Might you have been non-human?<sup>1</sup> Tough question. A ‘yes’ answer indicates that you have a certain property, *contingent humanity*; a ‘no’ that you lack that property. And the answer depends only on your relation to your humanity. At least, this is how things appear.

*Skeptics* about *de re* modality hold that appearances are misleading. Skeptics claim that there is a big difference between modal questions and non-modal questions about particular individuals like Maggie or me. According to skeptics, the answers to the modal questions, unlike the answers to non-modal questions, depend on how we think of the individual in question. No individual bears *simpliciter* the sorts of modal properties apparently attributed by *de re* modal constructions. Skeptics, for instance, hold that there is no such thing as an individual’s bearing either *necessarily human* or *contingently human* independently of how it is described. *Realists* about *de re* modality defend the view that individuals bear the sort of modal properties apparently attributed by *de re* modal locutions independently of how they are described. By the realist’s lights, if the answer to the question of whether you are necessarily human is ‘no’, then you bear *contingently human*, no matter how we are thinking of you.

Skepticism about *de re* modality plays a central role in many philosophical controversies; see, *e.g.*, (Lewis, 1986, p. 248, *passim*), (Noonan, 1991), (Schaffer, forthcoming). Why believe it? One major argument highlights the phenomenon of *inconstancy*: sometimes *de re* modal attributions differ in truth value despite involving the same individual and modal predicate. Skepticism offers a plausible diagnosis: we get differences in truth value without differences in referent or predicate because there is a hidden third factor on which the truth of the utterance depends: the manner in which the individual in question is represented or described. This third factor is supplied somehow by context.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>My use of modal vocabulary in this paper indicates alethic modality – sometimes called “metaphysical modality” – rather than, say, epistemic or deontic modality. In particular, unlike the seminal treatment in (Kratzer, 1977), I am not attempting to provide a uniform semantics for all the uses to which modal vocabulary may be put; see the discussion in (Swanson, 2008). That being said, the theory developed in this paper for *de re* alethic modality can be subsumed under a more general treatment along the lines Kratzer sketches.

<sup>2</sup>Philosophers who discuss “*de re* modality” often have two different phenomena in view. First, there is a certain class of *linguistic* items: sentences, constructions, attributions, utterances, *etc.*, which involve the application to a subject term of a modal predicate, like “possibly human,” or contain a directly referential term in the scope of a modal operator. When I speak

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## 1 Skepticism and Inconstancy

Here's a classic statement of skepticism from Quine:

Mathematicians may be conceivably said to be necessarily rational and not necessarily two-legged; and cyclists necessarily two-legged and not necessarily rational. But what of an individual who counts among his eccentricities both mathematics and cycling? Is this concrete individual necessarily rational and contingently two-legged or vice versa? Just insofar as we are talking referentially of the object, with no special bias toward a background grouping of mathematicians as against cyclists or vice versa, there is no semblance of sense in rating some of his attributes as necessary and others as contingent. (Quine, 1960, p. 199)

Quine gestures toward a case of inconstancy which he claims supports his skepticism. Suppose that, walking to work today, you saw a mathematician riding a bicycle. Since you're in the habit of asking philosophical questions, you consider the claim:

- (1) The bicyclist I saw is necessarily two-legged.

Because the description of the individual in question invokes a "background grouping" of bicyclists, rather than mathematicians, Quine suggests that we should accept (1) as true. Suppose instead you consider

- (2) The mathematician I saw is necessarily two-legged.

Now the description of the individual in question invokes a "background grouping" of mathematicians, rather than bicyclists. Quine suggests that we should

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of the linguistic items, I will call them *de re* modal constructions or attributions. Second, there is a certain class of *facts*: facts involving the instantiation of modal properties by an individual independently of any description or representation of that individual. This is what I have been and will be calling "*de re* modality". Thus, a skeptic about *de re* modality holds that the latter class is empty, but accepts that the former class is nonempty.

not accept (2) as true. The same individual and predicate are involved in both cases. Thus, inconstancy.

I follow many other commentators in thinking that Quine's description of the linguistic phenomenon here does not survive reflection on the case. Once we take into account in particular the liability of modal constructions to *de re/de dicto* ambiguities, the appearance of inconstancy dissolves.<sup>3</sup> The only sense in which (1) seems sensible is the sense in which it is necessary that anyone with the equipment to be the bicyclist I saw has two legs. This reading, the *de dicto* reading of (1), is plausibly true. This is not, however, the most natural reading of (1), which is that a certain person – the one I saw riding a bicycle – could not have had fewer than two legs. I don't think we should accept (1) on this reading as true in the context in question. A standard way of explaining the distinction is as a scope ambiguity.<sup>4</sup> Sentences like (1) are ambiguous between

(3) It is necessary that: the bicyclist I saw is two-legged.

and

(4) the bicyclist I saw is such that: it is necessary that he is two-legged.

The ambiguity matters because, holding context fixed, (3) and (4) differ in truth value. So the apparent inconstancy is explained as the result of scope ambiguity. But it would be a mistake to think that all of the data can be dismissed by such reflection. Skeptics seem to be onto a real phenomenon.

Consider a perfectly ordinary *de re* modal attribution:

(5) Hoover could not have won the 1932 presidential election.

I might use (5) to express some conventional wisdom concerning American history. My colleague might then tease me by noting that it was in principle possible for Hoover to have been running against an unpopular incumbent in 1932. So it was possible for him to win. The attribution is inconstant if, as the skeptic maintains, the truth value of (5) differs in the pre-teasing and post-teasing contexts. But it's very plausible to think that the truth value of (5) does differ in the two contexts. Suppose, when teased by my colleague, I respond, "Well, you're right to say that Hoover could have won *in principle*; but I didn't

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<sup>3</sup>(Plantinga, 2003).

<sup>4</sup>(Smullyan, 1947).

mean to deny *that*.” My response is graceless but seems otherwise justified; my colleague was right, but so was I. Importantly, the phenomenon in question is pervasive. If you spend any significant time at all around a philosophy department, you will witness someone teased in this way.

One might still, however, demur from interpreting this phenomenon in the way the skeptic suggests. One might concede that both my original utterance and my colleague’s denial were *correct* and *appropriate*, without accepting that they are both *true*. Speaking truly is not always required for speaking correctly and appropriately; according to the legend, it was correct and appropriate for a subject of the kingdom of Siam to report gratitude upon receiving the gift of a white elephant, even if the report was false. So perhaps the phenomenon can be explained away as a case in which either my colleague or I speaks falsely, but correctly. Inconstancy requires not just the correctness but the truth of the relevant *de re* modal attributions. No argument for skepticism from inconstancy will get off the ground if the phenomenon involves the variability across contexts of correctness instead of truth. Let us therefore assume for the purposes of this paper that the phenomenon in question involves the variability across contexts of the truth of *de re* modal attributions.

We are accepting for the sake of argument that the truth-values of utterances of (5) vary. Notice that this variability is not plausibly explained as the result of a *de re/de dicto* ambiguity. Assuming that (5) is ambiguous between a *de re* reading and a *de dicto* reading, those readings don’t seem to differ in truth value in either the original context in which I truly asserted (5) or the post-teasing context in which my colleague truly denied it. Consider the original context. We are assuming that my utterance of (5) is true. And it would be true in this context, whether what was at issue was the impossibility of the proposition *that Hoover win the 1932 presidential election*, or instead the impossibility, for Hoover, of being the winner. Similarly, even if (5) suffers from a scope ambiguity, the two readings induced

(6) It is impossible that: Hoover won the 1932 presidential election

(7) Hoover is such that: it is impossible that he won the 1932 presidential election

seem to agree on truth value in the context in question.<sup>5</sup> So the variability in the truth value of (5) across contexts is not easily dismissed as the result of

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<sup>5</sup>Perhaps you disagree, *e.g.*, on the grounds that “Hoover” abbreviates some definite description whose scope affects the truth-value of utterances of (5). If so, then it is easy to

ambiguity. Notice also that the inconstancy of (5) is not to be explained by the fact that we use different means of referring to one and the same man. The linguistic means of reference are obviously the same in both contexts. Thus, the claim (see (Noonan, 1991)) that modal predicates like “could not have won” are *Abelardian* – that their extensions are sensitive to the meanings of the subject terms of sentences in which they occur – will not explain the inconstancy of (5). Some more flexible form of context-dependence is required.<sup>6</sup>

How, then, is the variability across contexts of the truth of (5) to be explained? Skeptics claim that the variation is to be explained as a result of variation in an unspoken, but contextually-supplied variable. Despite appearances, an utterance of (5) does not report the possession by Hoover of a modal property; instead it reports a *relation* between Hoover and a description of him.<sup>7</sup> Hoover does not bear such modal features as *being the possible winner in 1932* independently of how he is described. A skeptic might hold, for instance, that

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produce a case in which Hoover has been introduced as a contextually salient subject of conversation, and I use a deictic pronoun to refer to him:

(8) He could not have won the 1932 presidential election.

If that still won’t do the trick, then we can rely, with some loss of vividness, on cases in which what is asserted clearly involves quantification into the scope of the modal operator, explicitly resolving the relevant scope ambiguity:

(9) Someone is such that: it is impossible that he have won the 1932 presidential election.

Ultimately, if we can’t come up with a case of genuine inconstancy – rather than just a case of ambiguity – then there will be no argument for skepticism from inconstancy.

<sup>6</sup>I began this paper with the naive thought that the answer to the question of whether you are necessarily human, like typical non-modal questions, does not depend on how we are thinking of you. The plausibility of the claim that inconstancy is a genuine linguistic phenomenon should make us reconsider. If *de re* modal attributions are inconstant, then there is more to the semantics of such attributions than meets the eye.

<sup>7</sup>There are alternative forms of skepticism, depending on the role accorded to description-relativity in the semantics of modal predicates. For instance, it might be held that (5) does report the possession of a property by Hoover, but the description supplied by context determines in part which property that is. (Noonan, 1991, p. 188). The inconstancy of (5) is thereby explained in terms of the contextual variability of the semantic value of the modal predicate. (A difference between the proposal in the text and the alternative at hand is whether the description in question is part of the content of an utterance of (5), or whether its role is confined to determining the semantic value of (5).) The sort of skepticism this motivates is one which accepts that individuals bear modal properties, but denies that they bear the sorts of modal properties apparently attributed by *de re* modal constructions. According to this kind of skeptic: (i) there is no such property as *being necessarily human* simpliciter; (ii) in context the predicate “... is necessarily human” may pick out a property; and (iii) which property the predicate picks out is determined by which description of the subject of the proposition is salient. The arguments of this paper may be adapted to apply to the alternative.

it was impossible for Hoover to win under the description

(10) the least popular major party candidate for president in 1932.

He contingently lost, however, under the description

(11) the Republican candidate in 1932.

The truth of an utterance of (5) turns on which description of him is in question. Somehow the context of my original utterance supplied (10), so my utterance was true; and somehow my colleague's teasing altered the context so that (11) was salient instead, so his denial was true.

Here's how David Lewis explains some other examples of the phenomenon:

I think there is a great range of cases in which there is no ... right answer to questions about modality or counterfactuals *de re*. Could Hubert Humphrey have been an angel? A human born to different parents? A human born to different parents in Egypt? A robot? A clever donkey that talks? An ordinary donkey? A poached egg? Given some contextual guidance, these questions should have sensible answers. There are ways of representing whereby some worlds represent him as an angel, there are ways of representing whereby none do. Your problem is that the right way of representing is determined, or perhaps underdetermined, by context – and I supplied no context. (Lewis, 1986, p. 251)

This sounds like a plausible explanation of a real linguistic phenomenon. How, though, does this help make the case for skepticism about *de re* modality? Grant that sentences like (5) are inconstant. How do we get from the *semantics* of a certain kind of modal sentence to the *metaphysics* of a certain kind of modal fact? Presumably, the reason we believe that individuals like Hoover bear modal properties is that we think, quite sensibly, that true utterances of sentences like (5) attribute such properties to them. But, the skeptic argues, this turns out to be wrong. It turns out that (5) doesn't really attribute the modal property *could not have won in 1932* to Hoover; instead it attributes a relation between Hoover and description of him. The same goes for other sentences which appear to attribute modal properties to individuals. So, whenever we go looking for a situation which seems correctly described as a case of the possession of a modal

property by an individual, then inconstancy indicates that we have instead a case involving not just the individual but a way of describing that individual.

It is useful to emphasize the distinction between the metaphysics of modal property possession and the semantics of *de re* modal attributions, because it helps us distinguish the skepticism I am targeting from other views. Our skeptic denies that individuals possess modal properties independently of how they are described. But the skeptic does not deny the truth or cogency of claims made by utterances of (5). Quine (1943) famously took there to be a logical problem with sentences like (5) that merited abandoning their use. This would be one route to denying that individuals bear modal properties, a route that denied that, *e.g.*, my utterance of (5) was true. Skeptics like Lewis argue instead for accommodation: careful attention to the semantics of (5) reveals that its truth depends not just on how Hoover was, but on how he is represented.

Consider the following parallel. Suppose I am watching the wedding of Charles Windsor and Diana Spencer on television. I point to the monitor and observe

(12) Charles is on the left.

My colleague, teasing me, indicates another monitor, showing a video of the same event from the opposite angle, and says that Charles is not on the left. Clearly, we both speak truly. The difference of truth value is to be explained by the fact that (12) does not attribute a property, *being on the left*, to Charles; rather it attributes a relation between Charles and a certain point of view.<sup>8</sup> My colleague has somehow manipulated the context so that a different point of view is salient. Given this explanation, an evident metaphysical upshot is that there is no such thing as someone's having the property *being on the left simpliciter*, independently of any point of view; something is on the left or not only relative to a given point of view. Skepticism is the analogous view with respect the metaphysics of *de re* modality.

The parallel between the skeptic's metaphysics of *de re* modality and the sensible metaphysics of being on the left indicates what's at stake in the debate about skepticism. If the skeptic is right, then a lot of modal metaphysics turns out to be bunk. Suppose my colleague and I got in a big dispute over whether

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<sup>8</sup>Alternatively, "is on the left" picks out different properties in different contexts, and which property it picks out is determined by which point of view is salient. This alternative explanation is the analogue of the alternative briefly sketched in n. 7.

Charles was *really* on the left or not. I claim my colleague was wrong, and he claims I am wrong. This is obviously a silly dispute. There's nothing to argue over. Each of us is correct with respect to one point of view and incorrect with respect to the other. Similarly, disputes over what is *really* impossible for Hoover will seem silly if the skeptic is correct. Here's how Lewis puts the point:

...I suggest that those philosophers who preach that origins are essential are absolutely right – in the context of their own preaching. [...] But if I ask how things would be if Saul Kripke had come from no sperm and egg but had been brought by a stork, that makes equally good sense. I create a context that makes my question make sense, and to do so it has to be a context that makes origins not essential.

Attend to the variety of what we say about modality and counterfactuals *de re*, and I think you will find abundant evidence that we do not have settled answers, fixed once and for all, about what is true concerning a certain individual according to a certain (genuine or ersatz) world. The way of representing is not at all constant. Different answers are often right in different contexts, as witness the comfort with which we adhere to, or presuppose, different answers. [...] Can you really take this as a dispute? It can very well happen that no answer is determinately right, for lack of the contextual guidance that normally does the determining. (Lewis, 1986, p. 252)

I am targeting the argument from inconstancy to skepticism about *de re* modality. This is an argument from a linguistic phenomenon to a metaphysical conclusion, analogous to the sort of argument we ought to give in response to someone who insists that there is some viewpoint-independent property of *being on the left*, which some individuals have and others lack. But skeptics often also give a very different kind of argument, which I am not, for now, targeting. They argue that certain metaphysical certitudes require skepticism. This is an argument from metaphysical premises. Consider, for instance, an argument for skepticism often encountered in the debates concerning material coincidence. In the old philosophical chestnut, we imagine that Lump and Goliath are a statue and a lump, respectively, made of exactly the same clay for the entirety of their careers (Gibbard, 1975). According to some skeptics, it beggars belief to deny

that Lump1 and Goliath are numerically identical. To distinguish them “reeks of double-counting,” and “is absurd on its face” (Lewis, 1986, p. 252).<sup>9</sup> But these same skeptics admit that Lump1 and Goliath appear to differ in their *de re* modal features. For

(13) Goliath could not survive being squashed

is true, but

(14) Lump1 could not survive being squashed

is false. These skeptics suggest that we apply skepticism here. Lump1 (*i.e.* Goliath) can survive being squashed under the description “the lump of clay,” but not under the description “the statue.” Utterances of (13) and (14) differ in truth value because the use of different names makes different descriptions of Lump1 salient. Our discussion will eventually return to this sort of argument for skepticism. But, for now, I set it aside.<sup>10</sup>

## 2 *De Re* Constancy

My target, then, is the argument from inconstancy to skepticism about *de re* modality. This argument is an inference to the best explanation: the best explanation of inconstancy is that *de re* modal attributions report a relation involving a contextually supplied description, rather than just the possession of

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<sup>9</sup>A note of caution: it does not seem appropriate to rely on the identity of Lump1 and Goliath as an undefended premise in this argument for inconstancy. The claim that Lump1 and Goliath are distinct has now received such powerful defenses that Wasserman (2002) has termed it “the standard account” of material constitution. In light of these defenses, the metaphysical premise in this argument for skepticism requires support.

<sup>10</sup>I’m setting aside arguments from the metaphysics of material coincidence to skepticism. I also won’t discuss arguments from the requirements of the Lewis-Stalnaker semantics for counterfactuals (Lewis, 1973; Stalnaker, 1968) to skepticism. These arguments are invoked on the fly by Lewis in the passages quoted in the main text. It should be noted that, by Lewis’s own lights, the truth of a counterfactual with an impossible antecedent is consistent with the truth of the correlative necessity claim. Consider, for instance, the case Lewis alludes to in the passage quoted above. We’re to imagine someone asserting a necessity of origin thesis to the effect that Kripke had to come from a certain sperm and egg, while someone else speculates about what would have been the case had Kripke come from no sperm and egg. On Lewis’s semantics, the counterfactuals constituting the speculation would be trivially true given the truth of the necessity of origin thesis. This is because, according to Lewis’s view, counterfactuals with impossible antecedents are trivially true. So the context in which the counterfactuals are uttered need not also be ones in which an utterance of the necessity of origin thesis would be false. Thus, on Lewis’s semantics for counterfactuals, no inconstancy is indicated by cases of this sort.

a modal property by an individual. I will argue that, when we take into account a wider range of linguistic data, we will find a better explanation. In this section and the next, I will bring to light the linguistic data in question, and discuss how that data is to be explained.

The first datum: some *de re* modal constructions are *constant*. That is, the truth of some sentences involving the attribution of a modal predicate to a certain individual is immune to the kinds of contextual variability characteristic of (5). I will argue that there is a kind of *de re* constancy that proves difficult for the skeptic to handle. But I will start with two kinds of *de re* constancy that are fairly easy for the skeptic. This will help give us a fuller picture of the skeptic’s explanatory strategy.

## 2.1 Impossible Predicates

First, consider *de re* modal constructions involving *impossible predicates* – predicates that couldn’t be true of anything.

(15) Hoover could be both red and not red.

The truth of (15) would require the possibility of a contradiction.<sup>11</sup> It will be false on any occasion on which it is uttered. (15) is constant. Sceptics should not say otherwise.

A skeptic presumably would argue that there is no description under which Hoover or anything else has the property *possibly both red and not red*. Being both red and not is not a possibility for any particular individual, no matter how it’s described. How can this view be supported? Answering this question requires getting a little clearer on what it is for an individual to bear a modal property under a description. Sceptics seem to have in mind some such idea as this:

(POSS)  $x$  bears *possibly*  $\phi$  under a description  $D$  iff it is possible that there be an individual that both satisfies  $D$  and bears  $\phi$ .

(NEC)  $x$  bears *necessarily*  $\phi$  under a description  $D$  iff it is necessary that any satisfier of  $D$  bear  $\phi$ .

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<sup>11</sup>Perhaps there are ways of reading “both red and not red” so that it turns out to be possible for something to be that way. Those aren’t the readings I am interested in.

On this proposal, the semantics of *de re* modal constructions are given in terms of *de dicto* modal facts – facts which do not in the first instance involve the possession of a modal property by any particular individual. The falsity of (15), for instance, results from the impossibility of there being *something or other* which is both red and not red, whatever other description it may satisfy. With (POSS) in hand, skeptics can likewise affirm the constancy of any claim of the form ‘ $\alpha$  is possibly  $\phi$ ,’ where  $\phi$  picks out a property that nothing could bear. For instance, skeptics can easily explain the constancy of:

(16) Hoover could have contained water but no hydrogen.

The constancy of negations of such claims are also easily handled. For instance,

(17) Hoover could not have been a married bachelor

will be true in any context because it negates a claim that is false in any context. (POSS) enables skeptics to explain why impossible predicates generate *de re* constancies. An explanation along similar lines using (NEC) will accommodate the constancy of *de re* constructions that involve properties necessarily instantiated by everything, like

(18) Hoover had to be self-identical.

## 2.2 The Tyranny of the Actual

There is another kind of constancy which skeptics can easily explain. Suppose I claimed

(19) Hoover could not have been president in 1930.

My colleague might correct me by noting that, since Hoover was president, he could have been. I should acknowledge that my colleague is right. This is not a case of inconstancy, it’s a case of falsity. *De re* modal constructions are governed by what we might call *the tyranny of the actual*: if Hoover in fact bears a property  $\phi$ , then a *de re* modal construction of the form ‘Hoover could have been  $\phi$ ’ is true, no matter what description of him is contextually salient. Thus, any utterance of (19) is simply false, no matter which description of Hoover is salient.

The skeptic can use (POSS) to explain why. But she needs a further claim to carry the explanation through. She needs to claim that the salience of a description  $D$  in context is governed by

(**ACCURACY**)  $D$  is a salient description of  $x$  only if  $x$  satisfies  $D$ .

Suppose that context makes some description  $D$  of Hoover salient. (ACCURACY) guarantees that Hoover satisfies  $D$ . Now apply (POSS): (19) is true iff it is impossible for something to be both a satisfier of  $D$  and the president in 1930. But, given our assumptions, it is obviously possible for something to be both, because Hoover actually is both. Thus, no matter which description of Hoover is salient, (19) will turn out to be true. The tyranny of the actual is explained.

### 2.3 Substantial *De Re* Constancies

We have examined two kinds of *de re* modal constructions whose constancy poses no great challenge to skepticism. I used the discussion of these cases to flesh out in a little more detail the explanatory picture available to the skeptic. I now turn to *de re* modal constancies that pose a bigger problem.

Suppose, for instance, I correctly guess that Sin yee is thinking of her father, and I coyly assert, of the individual she has in mind,

(20) He, she, or it could not have been a twin prime number.

What I say is true. Further, there is no way for Sin yee to manipulate the context to raise to salience a description of her father under which it is possible for him to have been a twin prime. Of course, Sin yee could raise to salience *some other individual* – the number 3, say – and pass it off as the individual she had in mind. But this is not inconstancy; it's deception.

If skepticism were true, it would be puzzling why it should not be possible for Sin yee to raise to salience a description of her father under which it is possible for him to have been a twin prime. The description of her father most salient in context, *the individual Sin yee has in mind*, certainly does not rule out being a twin prime. That is, the application of (POSS) to the claim that he could have been a twin prime number under the description *the individual Sin yee has in mind* predicts that it will be true: it is possible that there be a twin prime that satisfies *the individual Sin yee has in mind*. The invocation of (ACCURACY)

does not help, of course, because Sin yee's father does satisfy the description in question. There are limits to the inconstancy of *de re* modal attributions that go far beyond impossible predicates and the tyranny of the actual; not just anything goes.

I have claimed that *the individual Sin yee has in mind* is the description of her father most salient in context. Perhaps a skeptic might object that I have given only a very incomplete description of the context in which I utter (20). When we fill in the details, the skeptic argues, it simply isn't plausible to think that this is the description of the man that will be most salient. Instead, the skeptic will urge, some description which rules out being a twin prime will be salient. This objection is irrelevant to the phenomenon in question. The problem is not that some description of the man which fails to rule out his being a twin prime is salient; it is that, barring outright deception, Sin yee cannot manipulate context in such a way as to secure the falsity of an utterance of (20) in the new context. There are, however, accurate descriptions of her father that she could bring to salience that do not rule out being a twin prime. So the skeptic's view predicts that (20) should be inconstant, when it isn't.

This suggests another response on behalf of the skeptic. The skeptic is already committed to the strong constraint on descriptions we can bring to salience articulated by (ACCURACY). According to (ACCURACY), we cannot bring certain descriptions to salience. The skeptic may urge that the lesson of (20) is that we need more such constraints: the extra constraints prevent us from manipulating the context so as to bring *the individual Sin yee has in mind* to salience. Perhaps a skeptic could claim that this description is difficult or impossible to bring to salience because it is too complicated. The problem with this suggestion is that the sorts of descriptions whose salience is needed to underwrite the inconstancy of (5) are likewise complicated. In order to secure the truth of my original utterance of (5), we had to appeal to the salience of some such description as *the least popular major party candidate for president in 1932*. The appeal to the complexity of the relevant description won't help the skeptic explain away the constancy of (20). There doesn't seem to be any other difference between the descriptions that can be brought to salience in the case of (5) and the ones that pose a problem for the skeptic in the case of (20). So the skeptic seems not to have any plausible means of explaining the constancy

of (20).<sup>12</sup>

## 2.4 Methodological remarks

An alternative response to the argument from substantial *de re* constancies is simply to deny the data by claiming that (20) is not really constant. According to this response, our intuitive judgments concerning the truth of (20) across contexts are somehow leading us astray in this case. Why, then, shouldn't the skeptic simply deny that there are any substantial *de re* constancies like (20)?

There are two reasons why a skeptic should not simply deny the data. First, in my estimation, denying the constancy of (20) would be unreasonable. One way of bringing out this point is to consider the analogous response on behalf of realism to the argument from inconstancy. It would be unreasonable for a realist to insist without further explanation that

(5) Hoover could not have won the 1932 presidential election.

is constant. Why so? Because it so evidently isn't. It seems exactly as unreasonable for a skeptic to insist without further explanation that (20) is inconstant.

In both cases, the unreasonability of the response in question can be mitigated or eliminated by arguing that our intuitions concerning constancy aren't to be trusted. There is ample reason for caution concerning the trustworthiness of these intuitive judgments. Perhaps we are confusing truth and mere correctness when making intuitive judgments about constancy. Perhaps these judgments are too theory-laden to adjudicate the dispute between realism and skepticism. Their reliability depends, after all, on our facility with the distinction between epistemic and metaphysical modality. For all I have argued, our intuitive (but theory-laden) judgments that (5) is inconstant and (20) constant may not be

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<sup>12</sup>Perhaps it is plausible to think that some descriptions are too complicated, subtle, or sophisticated to bring to salience. For instance, Lewis (Lewis, 1986, p. 251) points us to a phenomenon that is a kissing cousin of *de re* constancy, the existence of what we might call *repugnant combinations*. Lewis asks us to consider a context in which I claim that Humphrey could have been a poached egg, but could not have been born of different parents. My utterance is false, and there is no way, it seems, for me to manipulate context so as to make it true. But there is a description true of Humphrey that should do the trick: *being an individual x such that, if x has any parents at all, then x's parents were Hubert Humphrey, Sr., and Ragnild Sannes* is true of Humphrey, does not rule out being a poached egg, and does rule out being born to parents other than Hubert, Sr., and Ragnild. But I find it difficult to imagine how one might manipulate context to bring such a monster to salience. Even if one could, it's hard to see how to do so without also bringing to salience *being an individual who has parents*.

trustworthy.<sup>13</sup>

But the argument from inconstancy to skepticism depends on these very judgments. This is the second reason why the skeptic should not simply deny the data: in the absence of some special reason for doubting their trustworthiness in the case of (20), the skeptic can't insist that our intuitive judgments concerning inconstancy are untrustworthy without undermining her own position. Those, then, who hold that our intuitive judgments concerning *de re* inconstancy are suspect should draw a comparative conclusion: the linguistic data provide at least as much support for realism as they do for skepticism. This is consistent with the data providing little or no support for realism.

So, we have a number of forms of *de re* constancy. One of them poses problems for the skeptic because her view does not seem equipped to explain it. This gives us reason to object to skepticism. It also undercuts the skeptic's argument from inconstancy: skepticism may better explain *de re* inconstancy, but realism evidently better explains *de re* constancy. But, at this stage of the argument, it looks like the views are equally bad: realism falters on inconstancy and skepticism on constancy. Our argument looks like a wash so far. But there are more linguistic data to consider.

### 3 *De Dicto* Inconstancy

Some *de dicto* modal constructions display a phenomenon quite similar to inconstancy. Recall that a pair of *de re* modal attributions is inconstant if they differ in truth value despite involving the same individual and modal predicate. Defined in this way, this phenomenon only arises in the case of *de re* modal attributions; by definition it cannot arise for *de dicto* modal constructions, *e.g.*, of the form, "it is impossible that some *F* be *G*." But this is just a matter of how we chose to define the notion. We can define a parallel notion to capture essentially the same phenomenon in the case of *de dicto* modal constructions: *de dicto* modal attributions are inconstant if they differ in truth value, despite involving the very same sentence.

Some *de dicto* modal attributions are inconstant. Suppose I express some conventional wisdom concerning American history by asserting

(21) It was impossible for a Republican to win the 1932 presidential election.

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<sup>13</sup>Thanks to JI for discussion.

My colleague might then tease me by noting that it was in principle possible for there to have been a Democratic president in office at the onset of the Great Depression, and so it is possible for a Republican to have won. (21) is inconstant if its truth value differs in the pre-teasing and post-teasing contexts. But it's very plausible to think that the truth value of (21) does differ in the two contexts. Suppose, when teased by my colleague, I respond, "Well, you're right to say that it was possible *in principle* for a Republican to win; but I didn't mean to deny *that*." My response is graceless but seems otherwise justified; my colleague was right, but so was I. This seems, in fact, to be the very same phenomenon that led us to conclude that *de re* modal constructions are inconstant. The only salient difference between (21) and the skeptic's example (5) is that (21) concerns the impossibility of victory by a certain class of individuals (Republicans), while (5) concerns the impossibility of victory by a member of that class (Hoover). This difference, it seems, makes no difference to their inconstancy.

How is *de dicto* inconstancy to be explained? Nothing similar to the skeptic's explanation of *de re* inconstancy will do. In a sentence like (21), no appeal to a contextually-supplied description seems at all relevant. What would it be a description of? Some other explanation seems called for.

A plausible and familiar explanation of *de dicto* inconstancy appeals to contextually supplied facts that constrain what one may say is possible on a given occasion. For any context  $c$ , call these contextually supplied facts the *constraints in  $c$*  (alternatively, *the constraints in force in  $c$* ). Then the underlying idea is something like this:

- ( $\diamond$ ) "It is possible that  $\phi$ " is true in a context  $c$  iff it is possible both that  $\phi$  is true and that all of the constraints in  $c$  are true.
- ( $\square$ ) "It is necessary that  $\phi$ " is true in a context  $c$  iff it is necessary that, if all of the constraints in  $c$  are true, then  $\phi$  is true.

Thus, the constraints in  $c$  are treated in context *as if* they are necessities.<sup>14</sup> The constraints in the context of my original utterance of (21) presumably in-

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<sup>14</sup>The constraints in a given context  $c$  are not to be identified with what is, in Stalnaker's Stalnaker (1973) terms, presupposed in  $c$ . If we identified constraints and presuppositions, then the updating of a context to include new presuppositions would preclude the true assertion that things might have been otherwise. For instance, on Stalnaker's view, if an assertion of

(22) No Republican won in 1948

is accepted, it is added to what is presupposed in the context. But then the application of

clude the realities of the political situation at the time of the 1932 election. What I say is true, because it was necessary, given those political realities, that no Republican have won. All the possibilities that include a Republican victory also include divergences from these political facts. Some of those divergences are fairly pedestrian – a Democrat won in 1928; others are just bizarre – American voters suffer from a mass hallucination in the ballot box. My colleague’s reminder that a Democrat could have been the incumbent relaxes some of these constraints. That’s why the truth of his denial of (21) does not count against the truth of my utterance.

One feature of the explanation of *de dicto* inconstancy in terms of ( $\diamond$ ) and ( $\square$ ) bears special mention. These two principles make use of the very possibility and necessity operators whose semantics in the object language are being characterized. Homophony of this sort is not generally an obstacle to doing semantics. No problematic circularity is indicated if our semantic theory takes as fundamental such claims as “‘Aristotle’ refers to Aristotle.” Furthermore, no skeptic who accepts (POSS) and (NEC), which also use the possibility and necessity operators, will eschew their use in ( $\diamond$ ) and ( $\square$ ). Finally, those who hanker after an analysis of these modal idioms may apply their favorite such analysis; many presumably will appeal to possible worlds analyses of the idioms. There is nothing in the present approach to stop them.

I have just argued that the interpretation of *de dicto* modal attributions is context-sensitive, so I should say how the attributions in ( $\diamond$ ) and ( $\square$ ) are to be interpreted. The use of “possible” in the metalanguage indicates what (Kripke, 1980, pp. 99, 164) calls possibility *tout court* – utterly unrestricted possibility (and likewise for “necessary”). That is, the constraints in the context in which ( $\diamond$ ) and ( $\square$ ) are propounded are stipulated to be null. If those operators are analyzed as quantifiers over possible worlds, that quantification is stipulated to be utterly unrestricted. So, for instance, instances of the right-hand side of ( $\diamond$ ) should be taken to express claims about what’s possible, given, well, *nothing*. In what follows, I will indicate utterly unrestricted possibility by using the vernacular “possible *period*” (and similarly for necessity).

This explanation of the inconstancy we find in *de dicto* modal attributions

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( $\diamond$ ) would predict that a subsequent utterance of

(23) But it is possible that a Republican have won in 1948

would be false if the presupposition of (22) were also a constraint.

is both plausible and common (see, for instance, (Lewis, 1986, pp. 7-8)). It has the advantage of also being able to accommodate the constancy of certain *de dicto* modal attributions. For instance, the following are all constant:

(24) It is possible for something to be both red and not red

(25) It is necessary that there are no married bachelors.

Their constancy is explained by ( $\diamond$ ) and ( $\square$ ). For instance, since it is impossible *period* for something to be both red and not red, no manipulation of context can relax constraints enough to make an utterance of (24) true. Likewise, since it is necessary *period* that there are no married bachelors, the truth of (25) is impervious to changes in which constraints are in force.

In order to accommodate the analogue of the tyranny of the actual for *de dicto* modal attributions, the constraints in *c* should be governed by an analogue of (ACCURACY):

**(CORRECTNESS)**  $\phi$  is a constraint in *c* only if  $\phi$  is true.

This will secure the constancy of

(26) It was impossible for a Republican to have been president in 1930.

Whatever constraints are in force in the context of an utterance of (26), (CORRECTNESS) requires that they be true (in the actual world). Since it is also true (in the actual world) that a Republican was president in 1930 the application of ( $\diamond$ ) yields the constant falsity of (26). If it were possible to manipulate context so that one of the constraints was that no Republican was president in 1930, then an utterance of (26) in that context would turn out to be true on ( $\diamond$ ).

Notice also that, if this standard explanation of *de dicto* inconstancy is accepted, then inconstancy gives us no case for skepticism about *de dicto* modality on a par with the case for skepticism about *being on the left* from the linguistic data. On the contrary, the explanation of the inconstancy of *de dicto* modal attributions presupposes the notion of possibility *period*, the very phenomenon targeted by skepticism about *de dicto* modality. The standard explanation does not support a case against the reality of possibility *period*; it instead bolsters the case in its favor by giving it a role in explaining certain linguistic phenomena.

## 4 Inconstancy Explained

The *de dicto* inconstancies we find are explicable by appeal to the constraints in force in a given context. But we also encounter *de dicto* constancies. We have seen that the explanation we give of the inconstancies also explains the constancies. This explanatory strategy can be adapted to the case of *de re* modal attributions. When it is, I will argue, we get an explanation that does as well as the skeptic's at explaining *de re* inconstancies, but does better than the skeptic's at accommodating *de re* constancies.

Our strategy for explaining *de dicto* inconstancy relied on the idea that there were certain constraints imposed by context. For instance, I have imagined that the constraints in the context of my original utterance of (21) included the realities of the political situation in 1932. Importantly, there is no reason to think that these realities cannot include claims concerning particular individuals. For instance, these political realities presumably include the fact that *Hoover* was an unpopular incumbent president in 1932, that *Roosevelt* was more popular than Hoover, *etc.* Further, the skeptic's own explanation of inconstancy requires it to be possible to raise descriptions true of Hoover to salience in a context. But any context in which, by the skeptic's lights, a description *D* of Hoover is salient can be characterized instead as a context in which one of the constraints is 'Hoover is *D*'. Facts concerning particular individuals, then, are as well-poised to constrain possibilities concerning Hoover as they are possibilities concerning Republicans in general. That is, there is no reason to think that the constraints in a given context don't affect *de re* modal attributions in the same way they affect *de dicto* modal attributions.

In fact, there is plenty of reason to think they do. The similarity of the inconstancy phenomena with respect to utterances of

(5) Hoover could not have won the 1932 presidential election.

and

(21) It was impossible for a Republican to win the 1932 presidential election.

is suggestive. The idea might be carried out in this way:

( $\diamond^{DR}$ ) "*t* is possibly  $\phi$ " is true in a context *c* iff the referent of *t* is possibly such that both it is  $\phi$  and all of the constraints in *c* are true.

$(\Box^{DR})$  “ $t$  is necessarily  $\phi$ ” is true in a context  $c$  iff the referent of  $t$  is necessarily such that if all of the constraints in  $c$  are true, then it is  $\phi$ .

Two comments I made about  $(\Diamond)$  and  $(\Box)$  apply also to  $(\Diamond^{DR})$  and  $(\Box^{DR})$ . First,  $(\Diamond^{DR})$  and  $(\Box^{DR})$  use the very *de re* modal locutions whose semantics is being given. This sort of homophony is harmless for semantic purposes. Those who hanker after an analysis of such locutions may apply their favorite analysis; many presumably will appeal to possible worlds analyses of the idioms. There is nothing in the present approach to stop them. Second, given that I have argued that the interpretation of *de re* modal constructions is context-sensitive, I owe an explanation of how to interpret the *de re* modal locutions on the right-hand sides of  $(\Diamond^{DR})$  and  $(\Box^{DR})$ . As before, the use of “ $x$  is possibly  $F$ ” in the metalanguage indicates the possibilities *period* for  $x$  – the utterly unrestricted possibilities for  $x$  (and likewise for “necessary”). That is, the constraints in the context in which  $(\Diamond^{DR})$  and  $(\Box^{DR})$  are propounded are stipulated to be null. If the modal notions in question are to be analyzed in terms of quantification over possible worlds (plus representation by worlds of  $x$ ’s having or lacking certain properties) then that quantification is stipulated to be utterly unrestricted.

Reliance on the idea of what’s possible *period* for a given individual makes the present approach inimical to skepticism about *de re* modality. The present approach presumes realism about *de re* modality: there must be such a thing as what’s possible *period* for Hoover – descriptions simply don’t enter into the question. The disanalogy with attributions of “on the left” could not be starker. The semantics for attributions of “is on the left” do not rely on any such notion as what’s on the left *period*, independently of any point of view. One could avail oneself of a theory that had the explanatory advantages I claim for the present proposal while preserving the letter of skepticism. One would have to claim that, though nothing is possible *period* for Hoover, there is a canonical description  $D_H$  of Hoover such that the possibilities for Hoover under  $D_H$  play the role of what’s possible *period* for him. (For vividness, we might think of  $D_H$  as the description of Hoover in the mind of God.) One might then replace  $(\Diamond^{DR})$  and  $(\Box^{DR})$  with the principles you get by swapping out the claims about what’s possible for  $x$  for claims about what’s possible for  $x$  under its canonical description. Given this view, there’s an obvious way to specify what’s possible *period* for Hoover: what’s possible *period* for Hoover is what’s possible for Hoover under his canonical description. For present purposes, I set this view aside, because it won’t have

the sorts of upshots for metaphysical debates involving *de re* modal attributions usually claimed by skeptics. For instance, it won't have the upshot noted above that a lot of the controversies concerning what's possible for Humphrey turn out to be bunk.

The inconstancy of *de re* modal attributions like (5) can now be explained by the fact that the constraints in force in a given context can be manipulated in all the ways skeptics have emphasized. My original utterance of (5) is true because the constraints in that context include such claims as

(27) Hoover was the least popular major party candidate for president in 1932

together with some generalities concerning how relative popularity affects the outcomes of presidential elections. If (POSS) successfully predicts the truth of my utterance, then so does ( $\diamond^{DR}$ ): Hoover could not have been both the least popular candidate and the winner, given that least popular candidates never win. My colleague's teasing effects a change in what constraints are in force. In particular, it removes (27) from the constraints in force, perhaps replacing it with

(28) Hoover was the Republican candidate for president in 1932.

As a result, the application of ( $\diamond^{DR}$ ) predicts that an utterance of (5) would be false in the new context. Thus, inconstancy.

( $\diamond^{DR}$ ) and ( $\square^{DR}$ ) are well-placed to explain the *de re* constancies. Consider first *de re* modal attributions which involve impossible predicates, like

(15) Hoover could be both red and not red.

This sentence is constant because, no matter what constraints are in force in a given context, it is not possible *period* for Hoover to have a property that nothing could have. So the application of ( $\diamond^{DR}$ ) correctly predicts that (15) is false in every context. Similar comments apply to the explanation of the constancies we find for (16), (17), and (18).

Given that the constraints in a given context are governed by (CORRECTNESS), the tyranny of the actual is also easily handled.

(19) Hoover could not have been president in 1930

is false in any context *c* because all of the constraints in *c* have to be true. Since they are true, Hoover is (in the actual world) such that they are actually

true. And, likewise, Hoover was president in 1930. So Hoover is actually both president in 1930 and such that the constraints in  $c$  are true, and thus possibly so. Applying  $(\diamond^{DH})$  yields the falsity of (19).

So  $(\diamond^{DR})$  and  $(\square^{DR})$  can explain the same *de re* constancies that the skeptic's principles (POSS) and (NEC) can, and for essentially the same reasons. They do better than the skeptic's view, however, on the last kind of constancy we discussed. Consider again my utterance of

(20) He, she, or it could not have been a twin prime number.

Recall that the pronouns refer to the individual Sin yee is thinking about, and I have correctly guessed that the individual in question is her father. (20) is constant: raise any description of him to salience that you like; (20) will still be true. I have argued that the skeptic has a difficult time accommodating this constancy.  $(\diamond^{DR})$  accommodates it easily. This constancy is to be explained by the fact that the possibilities *period* for Sin yee's father do not extend to his being a twin prime number. Since it is not possible *period* for him to be a twin prime number, it is not possible *period* for him to be a twin prime number and such that some constraints are true. The story couldn't be simpler.<sup>15</sup>

Two clarifications are in order. First, on the realist-friendly proposal on offer, our *de re* modal attributions suffer from two sources of indeterminacy. It is sometimes indeterminate whether something is possible *period* for a given individual. There are borderline cases of baldness. It is plausible to hold that these cases involve indeterminacy. Now consider someone who is completely bald. A certain amount of hair growth would render him a borderline case of baldness. It will then be indeterminate whether, for that person, it is possible *period* to experience that amount of hair growth and yet remain bald. A second source of indeterminacy: it may be indeterminate whether a certain claim is a constraint in a given context. It may be indeterminate, for instance, whether Hoover's having been the U.S. Secretary of Commerce is a constraint in a given

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<sup>15</sup>Skeptics hold that there are deep problems with the idea that some things are possible *period* for Hoover. A skeptic might therefore complain that the reliance on what's possible *period* for Hoover means that the realist-friendly explanation of constancy faces these deep problems. Perhaps so. But at least one reason to suspect the notion of the possibilities *period* for Hoover – the reason given by Quine in the passage I quoted in §1 – has been defanged: the fact that there are inconstant *de re* modal attributions provides no reason for suspicion. The charge that the realist-friendly explanation of constancy faces deep problems requires alternative support.

context. If so, it may be indeterminate whether an utterance of

(29) Hoover could not have failed to be the Commerce Secretary

is true.<sup>16</sup> Commitment to realism thus implies neither that every question concerning Hoover's modal properties has a determinate answer, nor that it is always determinate which modal property a given utterance attributes to Hoover.

Now for the second clarification. I have argued against the skeptic's explanation of *de re* inconstancy on the grounds that there is a realist-friendly alternative that provides as good an explanation of *de re* inconstancies, and a better explanation of *de re* constancies. The skeptic's explanation is often implemented using counterpart-theoretic analyses of *de re* modal attributions.<sup>17</sup> The idea is that the description of a given individual that's salient in context picks out a particular counterpart relation, and then the question of how the individual could be is analyzed in terms of how its counterparts are. Suppose once again that the description of Hoover salient in my original utterance of (5) is

(10) the least popular major party candidate for president in 1932.

This description restricts Hoover's counterparts to those who were the least popular major party candidates for president in 1932. Then, according to this implementation of skepticism, the question of whether Hoover could have won is answered by considering whether any of those counterparts won his or her 1932 election. Importantly, the argument against skepticism is not an argument against counterpart-theoretic analyses of *de re* modal claims. The objection is only to the use of counterpart theory to implement skepticism about *de re* modality. For all I have said here, there might be other reasons to be a counterpart theorist. For instance, we would need something along the lines of counterpart theory if it turns out that there are counterexamples to the necessity of identity or distinctness. Counterpart theory and skepticism are typically found together, but they are in principle separable.

Let's take stock. The skeptic's view does a good job explaining the *de re* inconstancies we find. It also does fine explaining some *de re* constancies. But

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<sup>16</sup>Thus, the realist-friendly explanation employing ( $\diamond^{DR}$ ) and ( $\Box^{DR}$ ) predicts the same kinds of indeterminacies as the skeptical view; see (Lewis, 1986, p. 254).

<sup>17</sup>(Lewis, 1986, esp. pp. 248-63), (Noonan, 1991).

there are other *de re* constancies it can't easily explain. The realist-friendly alternative relies on the same mechanisms as the skeptic's view for raising various facts concerning the individuals in question to salience. This enables it to do as well as the skeptic's view on *de re* inconstancies. But it also can explain all of the constancies we have found. The realist-friendly explanatory strategy does a better job explaining all of the linguistic data, including both constancy and inconstancy. Thus, the very linguistic phenomena that were thought to lend support to skepticism turn out to favor realism instead.

## 5 Metaphysical Arguments for Skepticism

At the end of §1, I distinguished *linguistic* from *metaphysical* arguments for skepticism. Linguistic arguments infer skepticism from the linguistic fact of *de re* modal inconstancy. Metaphysical arguments proceed instead from metaphysical premises. A major ambition of the intervening discussion has been to undercut linguistic arguments for skepticism. But it turns out that this discussion also provides a basis for rejecting the metaphysical arguments.

The metaphysical argument for skepticism that we have already encountered starts from a position in the debates concerning material coincidence. That position, *monism*, holds that objects that, like Lumpl and Goliath, are materially coincident throughout their careers are identical. Monism faces a problem. It seems inconsistent with two evident facts:

(13) Goliath could not survive being squashed

and

(30) Lumpl could survive being squashed.

Monists invoke skepticism in their defense: Lumpl (*i.e.* Goliath) bears *could survive squashing* under the description brought to salience by the use of 'Lumpl' in (30), but it also bears *couldn't survive squashing* under the description brought to salience by the use of 'Goliath' in (13). Embracing skepticism thereby allows the monist to accommodate the truth of both claims.<sup>18</sup> If the best way to ac-

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<sup>18</sup>Or, more accurately, embracing skepticism allows the monist to accommodate the truth (13) and (30) *in the contexts in which they are uttered in philosophical debates about material coincidence*. I will be suppressing this reference to context for the remainder of the discussion.

commodate the apparent truth of (13) and (30) is to embrace skepticism about *de re* modality, then monism motivates skepticism.<sup>19</sup>

Our discussion of the linguistic argument has shown that skepticism is not the best way for a monist to accommodate the truth of (13) and (30). Monists can accept that both are true by claiming inconstancy. And we have seen that inconstancy is no part of a case for skepticism; on the contrary, it's part of a case for realism. What the skeptic does with the description of Lump salient in context the realist can do instead with the constraints concerning Lump in force.<sup>20</sup> So, monism does not adequately motivate skepticism about *de re* modality.

Consider now the view (recently defended by (Schaffer, forthcoming) and (Skow, 2005)) that ordinary physical objects are identical to the regions of space-time that they occupy. I'll call this view *cartesianism*, in honor of Descartes's claim that extension is the essence of body.<sup>21</sup> Suppose, for instance, that *c* is a homogeneous cube, exactly occupying a spacetime region *r*. Cartesians claim that *c* and *r* are identical. Cartesianism faces a problem. It seems inconsistent with two evident facts:

(31) *r* does not necessarily coincide with any material object

and

(32) *c* necessarily coincides with some material object.

Cartesians invoke skepticism in their defense (Schaffer, forthcoming; Skow, 2005). They argue that the region *r* (which they claim to be *c*) bears *necessarily coincides with a material object* under the description "material object", but not under the description "spacetime region."

As in the case of monism, the cartesian's appeal to skepticism about *de re* modality is unnecessary; all the cartesian needs is inconstancy. Thus, neither monism nor cartesianism ultimately provide reason to embrace skepticism

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<sup>19</sup>See (Lewis, 1986, p. 252) for an argument of this sort.

<sup>20</sup>See (Fine, 2003) for another argument that appeal to skepticism does not really help the monist. Fine suggests that a substantially similar problem for monism can be put without recourse to *de re* modal attributions like (13) and (30). If Fine's contention is correct, then the appeal to inconstancy also won't help the monist. Even so, the present point, that monism does not adequately motivate skepticism, would still stand.

<sup>21</sup>In the literature (Skow, 2005; Schaffer, forthcoming; Saucedo, forthcoming) cartesianism is also called *supersubstantivalism*. (Skow, 2005, p. 65) suggests that this terminology was coined at (Sklar, 1974, p. 214).

about *de re* modality. If our discussion has succeeded in undercutting linguistic arguments for skepticism, it has also succeeded in casting doubt on these metaphysical arguments.

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