Fallibilism and the flexibility of epistemic modals

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Abstract It is widely acknowledged that epistemic modals admit of inter-subjective flexibility. This paper introduces intra-subjective flexibility for epistemic modals and draws on this flexibility to argue that fallibilism is consistent with the standard account of epistemic modals.

1 Introduction

Epistemic modals such as 'might' and 'must' have a complex semantics. The standard story is that epistemic modals quantify over a domain of possibilities compatible with *what is known*. As the relevant domain of knowledge shifts from context to context, so does the truth-value of the epistemic modal sentence. Recent attempts to capture this shiftiness focus on which epistemic base is relevant: that of the speaker or some relevant group, which may or may not include the speaker. In this paper, I argue that epistemic modals are flexible in a way that has gone largely unnoticed. The relevant base for an epistemic modal can be S's total knowledge or some subset of S's knowledge. 'Might *p*' can be true relative to a restricted body of S's knowledge, even if false relative to S's total knowledge. This flexibility of epistemic modals resolves a recent problem in the literature concerning fallibilism and the standard view of epistemic modals. Section 2 introduces the problem, namely, that the two positions seem to be in tension. Section 3 argues for the intra-subjective flexibility of epistemic modals. Section 4 explains how intra-subjective flexibility of epistemic modals dissolves the apparent tension. Fallibilism is not inconsistent with the standard account of epistemic modals.

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2 The tension

It is an assumption of the standard account of epistemic modals that if S knows p, then 'it might be $\sim p$' is false for S. Let's call this the Know-Might principle.

> *Know-Might Principle:* If S knows p, then 'it might be that $\sim p$' is false for S (where S is an individual or a group).[1]

This principle has considerable intuitive support. It would be extremely odd for me to assert the following:

(1)   I know the keys are in my pocket, but they might be in Ana's pocket.

The oddness of such claims lends support to the know-might principle.[2]

John Hawthorne (2004, 2012) has suggested that a version of the know-might principle is correct and that consistency with the principle should be a constraint on any adequate account of knowledge (2004, pp. 24–28). A version of the principle is endorsed explicitly and implicitly throughout the literature.

While this picture of epistemic possibility is very natural, there is a very intuitive position that it seems at odds with—fallibilism. There is all but unanimous agreement in contemporary epistemology that knowledge is compatible with a chance of error.[3] Worries about Cartesian demon deception and awareness of the fallibility of our faculties drive anti-skeptical epistemology to agreement that un-eliminable error possibilities abound.[4] Insofar as 'might p' is an utterance that we use to express an epistemic chance of p, acceptance of the compatibility of knowledge and an epistemic chance of error seems to commit fallibilists to the truth of some concessive knowledge attributions (CKAs)—that is, attributions of the following forms: 'I know p, but it might be that $\sim p$,' and 'I know p, but it might be that q (where q obviously entails $\sim p$).[5,6]

The tension between fallibilism and the standard account of epistemic modals arises because CKAs appear to be outright contradictions of the know-might principle. In fact, several recent attempts to explain why CKAs sound odd appeal to the know-might

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[1] The 'for S' makes S's epistemic perspective the perspective relevant for determining the truth or falsity of the might claim. The most common use of the epistemic modal is such that the relevant perspective is speaker-inclusive. But as Hawthorne (2004, p. 27) notes, there are deviant uses that are not speaker-inclusive. For example, when I know that the way out of the maze is on the left, but you are in the maze and do not know the way out, I can say to you, 'the way out might be on the right.' In such circumstances, my utterance is consistent with the know-might principle because I speak with your epistemic perspective in mind, not mine.

[2] This point is developed at length in DeRose (1991, 1998).

[3] There are various ways to formulate fallibilism. I will not adjudicate between accounts here, but instead rely on a general statement of the view. See Dougherty (2011) and Reed (2002) for helpful discussions of fallibilism.

[4] Even David Lewis, who argued that fallibilism sounds mad, admits that we cannot rule out all error possibilities—we must ignore some.

[5] As I understand fallibilism, it is merely committed to the view that *some* of our knowledge is fallible. The extent to which particular fallibilists are committed to CKAs will depend on how much of our knowledge they take to be fallible. If, for example, one holds that knowledge of tautologies is infallible, then one will not be committed to CKAs for tautologies. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for bringing to my attention the need to make this point clear.

[6] The 'might' in CKAs should be read as an epistemic might, which is the natural reading.

principle: according to the know-might principle, CKAs are false (Hawthorne 2004, 2012; Stanley 2005). If fallibilism is committed to the truth of CKAs, then fallibilism and the standard view of epistemic modals are inconsistent.[7] In the next section, I will present a mechanism that explains why these two positions *seem* inconsistent, even though they are actually consistent.

3 Intra-subjective flexibility for epistemic modals

One challenge in the literature on epistemic modals is to explain cases of modal disagreement. Consider the following dialogue:

> Ana: Do you know where the keys are?
> Bill: They might be in your pocket.
> Ana: No, you're wrong, I already checked there.

There is a sense in which what Bill asserts strikes us as true. Relative to what Bill knows at the time of his utterance, the keys might have been in Ana's pocket. It also seems that Ana speaks the truth when she claims Bill is wrong: relative to their combined knowledge, the keys couldn't be in her pocket—Ana knows that they aren't. On the one hand, they seem to be disagreeing. On the other hand, it seems they both speak truly. Recent work on epistemic modals attempts to reconcile this data.[8]

Because the problem of modal disagreement is prominent in the literature on epistemic modals, discussions have focused on the *inter-subjective* flexibility of epistemic modals.[9] That is, discussions have centered on *whose* knowledge restricts the relevant domain. Although there is little agreement regarding how to determine who comprises the salient group, there is widespread agreement that whoever's epistemic base matters, the domain consists of what is *known* by the relevant group.[10,11]

The prominence of modal disagreement cases reveals two things worthy of note. First, the orthodox view of epistemic modals already affords a great deal of flexibility. Second, the focus on problems that involve inter-subjective flexibility explains to some extent why little to no attention has been paid to the kind of flexibility I will discuss in this section. The problem of modal disagreement can arguably be handled by inter-subjective flexibility alone. That is, the standard cases can be explained by variation in the salient group S, while holding fixed the relation S stands into the body of propositions used to determine whether or not the modal utterance is true—the propositions *known by* S. The know-might principle functions as a background assumption of these discussions.

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[7] Dodd (2010) and Littlejohn (2008) both observe this tension. Dodd explicitly argues that fallibilists are committed to the denial of the standard view of epistemic modals.

[8] See DeRose (1991), Egan et al. (2005), (2007), von Fintel and Gillies (2008), MacFarlane (2011).

[9] Eavesdroppers cases are also prominent in the literature, and also focus on *inter-subjective* flexibility.

[10] For discussion of how the salient group is fixed see DeRose (1991, 1998), Egan et al. (2005), Hawthorne (2004, 2012), MacFarlane (2011), Stanley (2005), von Fintel and Gillies (2005, 2008, 2011).

[11] I will be construing the modal base as a set of propositions, though I am aware that it is a common—especially among semanticists—to think of the base as a set of possible worlds.

I will not question the intuitiveness of the know-might principle nor that epistemic modals are *often* used in accordance with it. Nevertheless, I do not think this commitment of the standard view can explain all uses of epistemic modals. Epistemic modals exhibit flexibility that cannot be accounted for by merely varying the relevant group.

As examples already present in the literature suggest, the relevant epistemic base can extend beyond what is known by the relevant group to include what *would be known* were proper attention given to the available evidence. Consider this case from Ian Hacking:

> Imagine a salvage crew searching for a ship that sank a long time ago. The mate of the salvage ship works from an old log, makes some mistakes in his calculations, and concludes that the wreck may be in a certain bay. It is possible, he says, that the hulk is in these waters. No one knows anything to the contrary. But in fact, as it turns out later, it simply was not possible for the vessel to be in that bay; more careful examination of the log shows that the boat must have gone down at least thirty miles further south. (1967, p. 148)[12]

Many find it intuitive that although no one in the relevant group knew $\sim p$, it was false for the mate to assert 'Might p' because $\sim p$ was available in some important sense to the relevant group.[13,14] This is evidence that there is a use of the epistemic modal such that the relevant base is a *more* expansive base than the total knowledge of the relevant group.

But epistemic modals exhibit even more flexibility than this. The relevant base for determining the truth of a modal claim can also be a *subset* of S's knowledge. The result is that even when S knows p, $\sim p$ may be epistemically possible for S relative to some restricted body of S's knowledge. I'll call this variability of epistemic modals *intra-subjective flexibility*.

> **Intra-subjective Flexibility**: the epistemic base that determines whether p is possible for S can be some proper subset of S's total knowledge.

Intra-subjective flexibility combined with superset flexibility and the standard use of the epistemic modal, suggests the following rough characterization of options for determining the relevant domain:

K-: less than S's total knowledge
K_T: S's total knowledge
K_+: more than S's total knowledge

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[12] The example would be more apt if rather than making a mistake in calculation, the mate simply did not look carefully at the log and thereby overlooked an entry. A mistake in calculation leaves open the possibility that the mate's total knowledge entails $\sim p$. Thanks to John Hawthorne here.

[13] Of course, this needs more precise spelling out. My purpose is merely to point out that there is some precedent to allow more than the speaker or relevant group's knowledge to determine the truth or falsity of the modal utterance.

[14] Although in the case the mate uses 'it is possible that p' rather than 'might p,' the substitution does not change anything germane to the example.

Epistemic modals are wildly flexible.[15,16] My purpose here is modest: to introduce the notion of intra-subjective flexibility and draw attention to an important role intra-subjective flexibility plays in contemporary epistemology.

K- restrictions admit of a wide range of variations. For example, we may restrict the base to only what S knew yesterday, only what S knew last week, only the knowledge S gained from a particular source of information, and so on. Given our interests and purposes in any particular setting, we may use intra-subjective flexibility to express any number of possibilities consistent with various subsets of S's total knowledge. I will here offer a couple examples of K- restrictions.

Notice that some K- restrictions are trivial. For instance:

(2) I know it's raining, but given only what I know about Cheerios, it might not be raining.

This is a possible restriction of 'might' but it is unlikely that anyone would restrict the relevant domain in this way. Contrast (2) with the following:

(3) I know Carl committed the crime, but given only what I know from the crime scene, he might not have.

Here the restriction of the relevant domain for the modal serves an important purpose. It allows me to communicate that although I know that Carl committed the crime, I would not know this if the only information I possessed was that which I obtained from the crime scene. My knowledge relies on additional information.

Both of these examples contain explicit restrictions for the epistemic modal. But not all sentences containing an epistemic modal include an explicit restricting modifier. When a modifier is absent (and the modal is not embedded), the modal is *bare* and context must provide the specification. Bare epistemic modals often refer to K_T. Indeed, this seems to be the default base. If Ana asks whether the keys might be in Bill's jacket pocket, and Bill replies:

(4) Yes, the keys might be in my jacket pocket

Ana will naturally conclude that Bill does not know the keys are not in his jacket pocket. She assumes a K_T use of the epistemic modal. Because K_T is the default use

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[15] This is not intended to be an exhaustive list of options for epistemic modal restrictions. The base could be such that it both includes some unknown propositions and excludes some known propositions. Those inclined to allow that unknown propositions can be evidence will likely use a restriction of this sort.

[16] Given the numerous dimensions of flexibility present in other kinds of modals, we should not be surprised that epistemic modals admit of various kinds of flexibility. For example, the set of norms salient for determining the truth of a deontic modal utterance does not always include *all* the norms that govern in any context, but could include only a subset. An action could be impermissible with respect to all the norms governing a context, but permissible with respect to a subset of those norms—an action could be immoral, but legal, for example. In this way, something analogous to the intra-subjective flexibility of epistemic modals is arguably exhibited in deontic modals. Additionally, deontic modals are flexible with respect to how much of what occurs in the actual world we hold fixed. If we hold fixed that Alice went to the party, we may judge that she ought to have driven Sally home. But if we do not hold fixed that Alice went to the party, we may not be inclined to say she ought to have driven Sally home. For further discussion see Kratzer (2012). Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting I draw attention to this point.

of the epistemic modal, there is an obligation on the speaker to make it clear in context when she intends a K- use of a bare epistemic modal.

One particular family of K- restrictions will be relevant for our purposes. Often K- uses of the modal restrict S's epistemic base by removing p when S knows p but is considering the possibility of $\sim p$. In these cases, the possibility of $\sim p$ is often considered relative to a set on the basis of which one could know p. I will designate such uses of the modal as K-$_p$.[17] Because K-$_p$ restrictions of the bare modal are not the ordinary use, K-$_p$ restrictions tend to sound odd. Nevertheless, sentences that include a bare K-$_p$ modal are sometimes asserted. Consider the following case:

> Harry: Look, over there, it's a zebra!
> Sally: Might it be a cleverly disguised mule?
> Harry: It might, but come on; we know it's a zebra.

Here the most natural explication of Harry's assertion is that he intends the epistemic modal to be relative to his K-$_p$ base. That is, he intends the 'might' to be restricted to his total epistemic base with (at least) p removed.[18] Harry is *not* saying the animal might be a cleverly disguised mule *given that it is a zebra*. Such an interpretation is uncharitable since it assumes Harry does not realize that no zebra is a cleverly disguised mule.

Here is an additional example of a K-$_p$ use of the bare modal:

(5) I know that you have hands, but do you see that you might be a BIV?

We can avoid attributing contradiction to speakers of (5) by understanding the *might* in the utterance as relative to less than the speaker's total knowledge base. Although such utterances take more work to process, this is to be expected with K-$_p$ uses of the modal. Intra-subjective flexibility explains why we do not contradict ourselves on the occasions when we utter sentences of this form, however exceptional these occasions may be.

Consider another case:

> Matt: Not every golfer in the tournament will get a hole-in-one on the next hole.
> Ben: How do you know that? Isn't it *possible* they all will?
> Matt: Sure, it's possible, but I know they won't.

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[17] Removal of p is intended as a constraint on the relevant base, rather than an account of the base. Clearly the base will most often be restricted by removing more than just p. Exactly what the subset base will consist of will depend on one's account of fallibilism. Attractive candidates are likely to be S's evidence, basic knowledge, appearances, or what is obvious to S. My purpose in this section is merely to point out the availability of a base that does not include S's total knowledge; I refrain from committing to any particular view regarding what the base consists of. Intra-subjective flexibility can accommodate various fallibilist positions.

[18] A contextualist about knowledge may contest that there is no restriction of Harry's epistemic base in this case since, given contextualism, Harry does not know 'it's a zebra' once the mule possibility is raised. On this interpretation of Harry's assertion the base of the modal in the first clause does not include p, yet the base is Harry's *total* epistemic base. To explain why Harry could truly assert that he knows it's a zebra in the second part of his utterance, the contextualist posits a mid-sentence context shift. Those willing to posit such context shifts can explain these utterances without intra-subjective flexibility. Although contextualists may not need intra-subjective flexibility to explain CKAs, it is needed to explain other utterances, such (3).

As in the cases above, the best interpretation of the epistemic modal in Matt's utterance is to evaluate it relative to less than Matt's total knowledge. Matt grants that, given the evidence on which his belief was based, it is *possible* that all the golfers in the tournament will get a hole-in-one.[19] He acknowledges this possibility without retracting his original knowledge claim. This is not uncommon. We often grant that given some subset of our knowledge there is a small chance that we might be wrong. We sometimes make a knowledge claim and, when pressed, admit a chance of error on our $K\text{-}_p$ base, without a willingness to retract the original claim.[20]

In the next section, I will suggest that failure to distinguish K- and K_T bases for epistemic modals has led to confusion about the commitments of fallibilism.

4 Fallibilism and the flexibility of epistemic modals

David Lewis argues that fallibilism *sounds* contradictory:

> If you are a contented fallibilist, I implore you to be honest, be naïve, hear it afresh. 'He knows, yet he has not eliminated all possibilities of error.' Even if you've numbed your ears, doesn't this overt, explicit fallibilism *still* sound wrong? (1996, p. 550)

I will argue that concessive knowledge attributions sound contradictory in part because we haven't made fallibilism *explicit enough*. The modal clause contains an ambiguity which, when made explicit, significantly attenuates the oddity.[21]

The infelicity of CKAs has generated much discussion. On one account the oddness is easy to explain—the statements are false because the two clauses are semantically incompatible (Hawthorne 2012; Stanley 2005). The know-might principle lurks in the background of such readings. An alternative and minority position is that CKAs involve only a pragmatic infelicity (Dougherty and Rysiew 2009). According to this view, CKAs are true but unassertable. The intra-subjective flexibility of epistemic modals allows for a middle position between these two explanations.

Intra-subjective flexibility of epistemic modals dissolves the apparent inconsistency between fallibilism and the know-might principle. As we noted in Sect. 2, fallibilism is a thesis about the compatibility of knowledge and a chance of error. Fallibilism is often understood as a relationship between S's evidence for *p* and S's knowledge that *p*, namely, that S can know *p* on some basis *r* even if *r* does not entail *p*. It should be obvious that whatever base fallibilists have in mind when they

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[19] My use of 'evidence' here is intended to be neutral with respect to any particular theory of evidence, including E = K. For those inclined to E = K, the relevant base will consist of a subset of the subject's evidence.

[20] While in some cases we may be inclined to deny that one knows *p* when an error possibility is made salient, I contend that not every mention of a possibility of error results in a disinclination to utter 'I know p.' Speakers will not always retract the knowledge claim in the sorts of cases I have articulated above.

[21] The clause 'eliminate possibilities of error' is a bit more nuanced than 'might p' or 'possibly p' clauses, but for my purposes here the difference is not relevant.

claim that S can know p on the basis of non-entailing evidence, the relevant base does not include p.[22]

In this way K-$_p$ restrictions help us articulate a key idea of fallibilism. Fallibilists are committed to the idea that for many propositions we know, there is some body of propositions, K-$_p$, such that we can know p on the basis of K-$_p$ even though 'might $\sim p$' is true relative to K-$_p$.

We are now in a position to see that the CKAs that fallibilists are committed to the truth of involve a modal with a particular kind of restriction:

CKA-1: I know p, but it might-K-$_p$ be that $\sim p$.

When a fallibilist is committed to a claim such as,

(5)   I know it's a zebra, but it might be a cleverly disguised mule

the 'might' should be understood as relative to a K-$_p$ base. Fallibilism exploits the intra-subjective flexibility of the epistemic modal.

Once it is clear that this usage is in play, the oddness of CKAs of type 1 is significantly attenuated. Consider this expansion of (5), where the modal is given an explicit modifier:

(6)   I know it's a zebra, but given only my appearances, which don't entail that it's a zebra, it might be a cleverly disguised mule.

An alternative interpretation of CKAs is in accordance with the subject's K$_T$, which includes p when S knows p. For these CKAs, we can disambiguate the modal as follows:

CKA-2: I know p, and it might-K$_T$ be $\sim p$.

When the base of the epistemic modal is made explicit, it is obvious that all CKAs of type 2 are false.[23] Consider (7):

(7)   I know it's a zebra, and given that it's a zebra, it might be a cleverly disguised mule.

(7) is obviously false. When the modal base of a CKA is disambiguated as K$_T$, the assertion will always be false and therefore will sound odd.

The know-might principle also includes an epistemic modal, which must be made explicit. We are now in a position to see that the know-might principle, as affirmed by the standard account, assumes a K$_T$ base for the epistemic modal. Hence, the principle can be disambiguated as follows:

Know-Might Principle*: If S knows p, then 'it might-K$_T$ be $\sim p$' is false for S (where S is an individual or a group).

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[22] Once again, the relevant base will involve more than merely the removal of p, but for the purposes of contrasting K-$_p$ uses of the modal with the ordinary use of the modal—that is, K$_T$ uses—p removal will suffice, as it constitutes the most salient difference between the two uses.

[23] Stanley (2005, pp. 126–128) makes it explicit that this is his reading of CKAs.

When the modal base is made explicit, it is evident that the know-might principle, as affirmed by the standard account, is not inconsistent with CKAs of type 1 and hence is not inconsistent with fallibilism.

If we were forced to choose between the two prevailing interpretations of CKAs, something important would inevitably be left unaccounted for. Suppose epistemic modals were always tied to a K_T base, expressions of fallibilism would be incoherent. But if epistemic modals were always tied to a K_{-p} base, we would be hard pressed to explain the most natural and dominant usage of the modal.[24] The intra-subjective flexibility of epistemic modals allows us to dodge the choice between the two competing explanations.

Given the intra-subjectivity of epistemic modals, there are a number of reasons why a CKA sounds odd in any particular setting. In a context where a speaker asserts a CKA of type 2, the utterance is always false and therefore sounds odd. Thus, sometimes a straightforward semantic explanation of the infelicity is available.

But most often the speaker will have a CKA of type 1 in mind (because it is generally obvious to the speaker that a CKA of type 2 is false). The account at hand provides an explanation of the oddness in these cases: given our interests and purposes, we usually have a K_T base in mind when we use an epistemic modal. We are ordinarily interested in whether or not 'might p' is true or false with respect to a subject's total knowledge because our purpose is usually to determine whether p is true. When I ask you whether the keys might be in the kitchen my primary interest is most often to find my keys, not to learn anything about your epistemic position with respect to where my keys are. I am interested in your epistemic position only insofar as it will help me find my keys. Because the default use of 'might' is in accordance with the know-might* principle, CKAs of type 1 contain a modal with a minority usage. When we hear a CKA, we generally assume the modal has a K_T base. Hence we are inclined to hear the utterance as a CKA of type 2, which naturally sounds odd.

This kind of oddness will in general accompany utterances spoken in contexts where it is not immediately clear what is being said and where on the most natural interpretation of the utterance the sentence would be false. For example, suppose someone says, "I have two palms but no hands." Although there is a use of 'palm' such that this utterance is true, namely, the kind of palm found on a palm tree, the utterance initially strikes us as odd.

Once it becomes clear that a) the know-might principle assumes an epistemic base that includes p when p is known; b) fallibilism is a thesis about a restricted epistemic base where p is removed, even when p is known; and c) epistemic modals are flexible enough to allow for both uses, the apparent tension is dissolved. Fallibilists can hold that CKAs that involve a K_T base for the modal are false while maintaining that CKAs with a K_{-p} base for the modal can be true. There is no inconsistency between fallibilism and the know-might principle, and thus no inconsistency between fallibilism and the standard account of epistemic modals.

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[24] Indeed, on this way of thinking, we are saddled with an error theory for many ordinary uses of epistemic modals.

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