

ABSTRACT

Perspectives on possibilities: Contextualism, Relativism, or what?

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Epistemic possibilities are relative to bodies of information or, as I will call them, *perspectives*. To claim that something is epistemically possible is typically to claim that it is epistemically possible relative to one's own perspective (the body of information currently available to one). To assert epistemic possibilities we commonly use bare, unqualified epistemic possibility (EP) sentences, sentences that do not indicate the perspective from which the possibility is being considered. I mean sentences like 'Maybe Floyd Landis used a banned drug' and 'Perhaps your keys are still in the front door', as opposed to ones like 'As far as I know, maybe Floyd Landis used a banned drug' and 'As far as you know, perhaps your keys are still in the front door'. In most conversational situations we don't need to make the perspective explicit because it is evident what the relevant perspective is. That's why we can effectively use bare EP sentences. Even so, such sentences fall short of fully expressing propositions, since they fail to mention (refer to, describe, or quantify over) perspectives. That's because, as I said, epistemic possibilities are relative to perspectives.

Proponents of currently popular views on epistemic modals take for granted that bare EP sentences do express propositions. They implicitly take the fact that we have strong intuitions about the truth or falsity of utterances of such sentences, given particular scenarios, as strong evidence that the sentences themselves are capable of being true or false. Their focus is on how truth values can shift with a change in a person's perspective or with a shift from one person's perspective to another's. According to *Contextualism*, epistemic modals are like indexicals, so that bare EP sentences are context-sensitive. That is, the specific proposition such a sentence expresses depends on its context of use, which somehow determines the perspective included in the proposition. In contrast, *Relativism* does not treat epistemic modals as anything like indexicals. It maintains that a bare EP sentence expresses a fixed proposition (assuming the sentence is not context-sensitive in some other respect, by virtue of containing any genuine indexicals). But this is a proposition whose truth or falsity depends on the perspective with respect to which it is considered.

Radical Invariantism, as I call my view, denies that the contents of bare EP sentences vary with the context. However, it also denies that their contents add up to propositions. These sentences express only *propositional radicals*, not full-fledged propositions, hence are not

capable of being true or false. Nevertheless, they are perfectly capable of being used to assert propositions and of being taken as so used, because utterances of them implicitly mention the perspective with respect to which the relevant possibilities are to be considered.

To demonstrate the advantages of Radical Invariantism over Contextualism and Relativism, I will look at a variety of examples and take up various natural objections. These examples will also illustrate what we do when we use or encounter bare EP sentences. Typically we use them when seeking or considering answers to questions and when advising others about questions they're looking into. We assert or at least raise certain possibilities and reject or just dismiss others. We also use these sentences to challenge knowledge claims by raising counterpossibilities, potential defeaters. These sentences also occur in embedded clauses to attribute attitudes toward epistemic possibilities and to explain people's actions in light of them. In all these cases, we don't need to make explicit the relevant perspective as long as it is evident which perspective that is. This can be so even when more than one perspective is involved, but in most cases the relevant perspective is the speaker's, if only by default.

In order to make my case for Radical Invariantism, I will invoke several distinctions. The distinction between a sentence expressing a proposition and being capable of being used to convey a proposition will be used to show that bare EP sentences, like sentences of many other sorts, can be semantically incomplete and still be pragmatically effective. The distinction between epistemic possibilities and propositions involving them will be used to explain conflicting intuitions about the various examples that have fueled recent debates about epistemic modals. And the distinction between representing such a proposition and the structure of the proposition itself will help explain how it is that one can consider an epistemic possibility proposition from a perspective without having to represent that perspective – one can simply *be* in that perspective. Together, these three distinctions will be used to explain, or in some cases explain away, the intuitions that have motivated Contextualism and Relativism.

The problem of epistemic modals is not as hard as contextualists and relativists have made it out to be. The trouble with their approaches is that they misdescribe the data and, as a result, misconstrue the problem. The solution doesn't require semantic bells and whistles. The strategy behind the solution I'm proposing is to recognize the semantic slack left by bare EP sentences and to focus on how speakers who use and encounter them pick up the slack.