



# A defense of modal appearances

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## Abstract

I argue that beliefs about what appears possible are justified in much the same way as beliefs about what appears actual. I do so by chisholming, and then modalizing, the epistemic principle associated with phenomenal conservatism. The principle is tested against a number of examples, and it gives the intuitively correct results. I conclude by considering how it can be used to defend two controversial modal arguments, a Cartesian argument for dualism and an ontological argument for the existence of God.

**Keywords** Phenomenal Conservatism · Conceivability · Modal epistemology · Dualism · Ontological argument

## Introduction

Many philosophers have suggested there is a strong similarity between the faculties of perception and conception. The similarity is strong enough that some go so far as to say that just as perceiving that *p prima facie* justifies one's belief that *p*, conceiving that *p* likewise *prima facie* justifies one's belief that possibly *p*.<sup>1</sup> The suggestion has proven to be a popular way to defend modal arguments. But it is, as are most things in philosophy, controversial: important differences concerning the conditions

<sup>1</sup> Where '*p*' is the content of a truth-apt proposition. Two big picture issues to note from the start. First, it should be clear that I, as do most philosophers, favor an approach to modal epistemology where we should presume in favor of metaphysical possibility unless we have reason not to do so, as opposed to a more stingy approach of presuming against metaphysical possibility unless we have reason not to do so. The former approach ties possibilities to conceivability, the latter to something like chance in the actual world. The present reflection will therefore be off to a rough start to those sympathetic to the stingy approach. Thanks to a referee for pointing this out. Second, we might say, following Senor (1996), that a belief is *prima facie* justified when it bears the appropriate relation to a state or process that will make the belief *ultima facie* justified if there is no other state or process relevant to the justificatory evaluation of the belief.

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in which perceptual and modal beliefs are thought to be reliable has cast doubt on how strong the similarity really is. Whatever other differences there may be, I argue that the faculties of perception and conception are similar at least in this important respect: the same characteristic phenomenology, that of being ‘appeared to’ a certain way, *prima facie* justifies beliefs formed on the basis thereof, be they perceptual or modal.

But a difficulty emerges. A plausible analysis of when *S* is *prima facie* justified (hereafter *pf*-justified) in believing *p* on the basis of its appearing to *S* that *p* includes the following condition: if it were not the case that *p*, then it would not likely appear to *S* that *p*. For perceptual appearances, such a subjunctive condition seems to be a counterfactual that presupposes a causal connection between the subject and the putative object of the appearance in the actual world. But a straightforward translation of the subjunctive condition to modal appearances, or where it appears to *S* that possibly *p*, gives us a counterpossible: if it were not the case that possibly *p*, (i.e., if *p* were impossible), then it would not likely appear to *S* that possibly *p*. Not only is it unclear how to assess counterpossibles, it is clear that there is no causal connection between the subject and the object of those appearances (which presumably are possible worlds or constituents thereof).

In this paper, I explore a way to construe the subjunctive condition for modal appearances that avoids counterpossibles while remaining faithful to the analysis *pf*-justification of appearance-based beliefs generally. I test the resultant analysis against several cases, and it seems to yield the intuitively correct results. I conclude by considering how, drawing on the lessons learned, one might defend two important modal arguments—a Cartesian argument for dualism, and an ontological argument for the existence of God.

## Appearances, perceptual and modal

Tamar Gendler and John Hawthorne note that many philosophers believe that “our ability to conceive of a scenario where *p* obtains is reckoned as constituting at least *prima facie* reason for supposing that *p* is metaphysically possible” (2002, 5–6)—enough philosophers, at least, for them to identify this as “the standard view” on these matters.<sup>2</sup> Why think conceiving that *p* constitutes a *prima facie* reason for supposing that *p* is possible? Perhaps the most significant reason is the widely acknowledged semblance between the faculties of perception and conception. Again, Gendler and Hawthorne:

Our faculty of perception reveals to us what is actual. And there is a widely accepted explanation of why this is so: our perceptual mechanisms are sensitive to features of the actual world, which impinge on them causally to produce

<sup>2</sup> Gendler and Hawthorne err in saying it is *our ability to conceive* of a scenario where *p* obtains that constitutes a reason to suppose *p* is possible; it is, rather, *our conceiving* of a scenario where *p* obtains constitutes a reason to suppose *p* is possible.

systematic patterns of stimulus and response. Likewise, it seems, our faculty of conception reveals to us what is what is possible (2002, 3).

Because perceiving that *p* is widely acknowledged as constituting a *prima facie* reason for thinking *p* is true, so too should one think conceiving that *p* constitutes a *prima facie* reason for supposing that *p* is possible. Stephen Yablo echoes the thought:

Maybe the analogy with perception can be carried a little further. Perceiving that *p* has in general the effect of *prima facie* justifying, to the subject, the belief that *p*, and thereby *prima facie* motivating that belief... The position to be defended, then, is...that *p*'s conceivability justifies one in believing that possibly *p* (1993, 6, 13).

However, it is not clear whether conception is thought to be reliable *because of* its strong likeness to perception (which we know to be generally reliable), or for some other reason. For example, Peter van Inwagen writes:

Many of our modal judgments are analogous to judgments of distance made by eye. That is, they are analogous to judgments of the sort that we make when—just on the basis of how things look to us—we say things like, “That mountain is about thirty miles away”...Such judgments are not, of course, infallible, but in a wide range of circumstances they can be pretty accurate...Analogously, I should say, we are able to discern the modal status of some propositions in a way that, like our intuitive judgment of distance, is non-inferential. (2001, 246).<sup>3</sup>

Here Van Inwagen does not just note that perceptual and modal judgments are formed by analogous faculties, but are *formed analogously*; i.e., “non-inferentially,” and “on the basis of how things look to us.” Yablo, too, makes a similar observation:

The idea is that conceiving is in a certain way analogous to perceiving. Just as someone who perceives that *p* enjoys the appearance that *p* is true, whoever finds *p* conceivable enjoys something worth describing as the appearance that it is possible. In slogan form: conceiving involves the appearance of possibility (1993, 5).

While what appears to one on the basis of perception may differ from what appears to one on the basis of conception, I take it that both are fundamentally *appearance-based* faculties; one forms a belief on the basis of a certain phenomenological experience, that of being ‘appeared to’ a certain way. Now, it is not surprising that the function and importance of *appearances* or *seemings* in perception has received so much attention (Chisholm 1957, 1965; Tucker 2013). What is surprising is that the

<sup>3</sup> I should be clear that van Inwagen does not believe that the epistemic status of our modal judgments are on par with perceptual judgments; but I think he would agree that the similarities noted make it “easy to think they enjoy similar epistemic status.” Otherwise, it would be hard to see why he sets out to refute the idea that they are on par.

same ‘appears’ and ‘seems’ idioms are ubiquitous in discussions of conceivability, yet their function in those discussions is sorely underexplored.<sup>4</sup>

The situation, then, looks something like this. It is a widely accepted epistemic principle, generally associated with phenomenal conservatism (PC), that.

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PC                      If, on the basis of perception, it appears to *S* that *p*, then *S* is *pf*-justified in believing *p*.

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So, for instance, if, on the basis of perception, if it appears to me that ‘there is a tree before me’, then I am *pf*-justified in believing there is, as a matter of fact, a tree before me.<sup>5</sup> In light of the similarities between perception and perceptual beliefs and conception and modal beliefs, a similar epistemic principle is postulated:

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MPC    If, on the basis of conception, it appears to *S* that possibly *p*, then *S* is *pf*-justified in believing possibly *p*.

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If, on the basis of conception, it appears to me that ‘It’s possible that Trump never became president’, then I am *pf*-justified in believing that it is indeed possible that Trump never became president. Or, in possible worlds lingo, I’m justified in believing there’s a possible world in which Trump never becomes president. You might think the situation is fairly innocuous, but if MPC is as plausible as PC, then it would prove to be very powerful in the hands of philosophers wishing to defend more controversial modal arguments.

But things are not so easy for these prospective modal warriors. PC is plausible in part because we have a good handle on when perceptual appearances are and are not reliable. Not so for conception, cautions Yablo:

What makes us hesitate is not that conceiving can sometimes lead astray, but that we have so little idea how this happens...Misperception is something that we know how to guard against, detect when it occurs, and explain away as arising out of determinate cognitive lapses. That there is nothing remotely comparable for conceivability is a measure of our relative backwardness on the subject of modal error (1993, 32–33).

We know, for example, perceptual appearances can be misleading under conditions of poor lighting, drug influence, mirages, refraction, and so on. But “nothing remotely comparable,” Yablo says, can be said with respect to modal appearances. Absent having a similarly good handle on when modal appearances are and are not

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<sup>4</sup> In fact, nearly all prominent discussions of the conceivability-to-possibility principle make explicit use of these ‘appears’ and ‘seems’ idioms. Berglund and Chalmers rely on them to hedge what *seems* or *appears* conceivable; Bealer and Yablo rely on them to hedge what *seems* or *appears* possible. McLeod (2005, p. 240) notes Bealer and Yablo’s use of “seems” locutions. In fact, Bealer replaces ‘conceivability’ with a special case of intuition where by intuition he says “we mean *seemings*: for you to have an intuition that A is just for it to *seem* to you that A.” Gregory (2010) is one of the few who have explored this in some detail, and does well to show the MPC’s reliance on something like PC.

<sup>5</sup> For a defense of this principle, see Huemer (2001), ch. 5.

reliable, why should we think they are *pf*-justified? The difficulty, I will argue, is not insuperable. We can begin to make progress by first taking a closer look at PC.

## Chisholming PC

Having noted that the characteristic ‘appeared to’ phenomenology is central to both PC and MPC, I now turn to Roderick Chisholm’s influential analysis of perceptual locutions, such as “appears”. This will allow us to state a more careful version of PC that will help us gain a better handle on when modal appearances are and are not reliable.

According to Chisholm, locutions such as “I take it that...”, “it appears that...”, and “it is evident to me that...” all signify that one is *perceiving* something. “Takings,” as he refers to them generally, are acts of perceiving where

there is something  $x$  such that  $x$  appears in some way to  $S$ ;  $S$  believes that  $x$  is  $f$ ;  $S$  also believes, with respect to one of the ways he is appeared to, that he would not be appeared to in that way, under the conditions which now obtain, if  $x$  were not  $f$ ; and  $S$  did not arrive at these beliefs as a result of deliberation, reflection, or inference (1965, 483).<sup>6</sup>

When such criteria are satisfied, Chisholm thinks,  $S$  has a “mark of evidence” justifying his belief that belief that ‘ $x$  is  $f$ .’ He gives the example of a man (Sam, let’s call him) who takes there to be a large cat before him. He is appeared to large catly, we might say. This situation, or what Chisholm calls “the conditions which now obtain,”<sup>7</sup> provides Sam with evidence for the belief that there is a large cat before him just in case three conditions are met. First, Sam believes the thing appearing to him is a large cat. Second, Sam believes that he would not now be appeared to in just that way if the thing were not a large cat. Finally, these beliefs “were not arrived at as the result of reflection, deliberation, or inference.” Sam didn’t pause and consider alternatives and then infer that the thing before him is a large cat.

Although Chisholm thinks appearances, so understood, give  $S$  more than mere *pf*-justification for beliefs formed on the basis thereof, we will assume no more. It is possible, though unlikely, that Sam is mistaking something else for a large cat, or that Sam is hallucinating a large cat before him. But, as Chisholm implies, this is not the way things normally or usually go: it is not normally the case that Sam would be appeared to large catly if there were no large cat before him.<sup>8</sup> This *subjunctive condition*, as we shall see, is of crucial importance. Such subjunctive conditions figure prominently in other analyses of justified beliefs, such as Alvin Goldman’s causal

<sup>6</sup> Further background and details behind the relevant concepts and terms, as Chisholm uses them here, is Chisholm (1957), especially chs. 4–6. Most accessible and clearly-presented is Chisholm (1966), chs. 1–3.

<sup>7</sup> I replace “condition” with “situation” to avoid confusion when I discuss necessary and sufficient conditions.

<sup>8</sup> Hence below we opt for a more modest construal of the subjunctive condition where if it there were no cat before Sam, he would *not likely* be appeared to catly.

theory of knowledge and Robert Nozick's truth-tracking theory of knowledge.<sup>9</sup> The idea is fairly simple: our beliefs reliably (but not infallibly) track the truth in the situations we are in, similar to how a thermometer tracks the temperature of the environment; if the temperature were to change, so, too, would the reading on the thermometer.

The subjunctive condition is present also in Stephen Wykstra's proposed principle for when someone is entitled to claim "It appears that  $p$ ", which is much closer to our topic. As Wykstra points out, a principle like PC cannot handle cases where if it appears to  $S$  that  $p$ ,  $S$  is not *pf*-justified in believing  $p$  because, if  $p$  were not the case, things would not appear any differently. For example, if I find a syringe in a public bathroom, and it appears to me to be clean, am not *pf*-justified in believing it is clean because, even if it weren't, it would not appear any differently. Germs are too small for the naked eye to see. PC needs a subjective condition to handle such cases.

Furthermore, Wykstra's principle makes room for cases where we are justified in believing appears claims that are not perceptual in an unduly narrow sense. As he points out, "we also often find ourselves with belief-inclinations produced when a broad (and perhaps largely tacit) range of considerations are brought to bear upon 'cognized situations'" (1984, 86). Illustrating the point, Wykstra writes:

[A] chess master finds himself strongly inclined to believe that White has a winning game after a novel pawn thrust on the 17<sup>th</sup> move of a complex Dragon line in the Sicilian Defense—and what 'triggers' this belief-inclination is his 'visualization' (in his imagination) of the situation after this move. (Many masters can play fine games of 'blindfold chess', having no need for sensory experience of the board.) If the master says 'It appears that this pawn thrust gives White a won game', he is using 'appears' in what we might call its 'cognitive-epistemic' sense. (1984, 86).

Thus cognized situations include, but are not limited to, more narrowly-understood instances of perception.

I'd like to extend Wykstra's point even further and suggest that what Wykstra calls the cognitive-epistemic sense of 'appears' is perhaps the *primary* sense of 'appears' relevant to the *pf*-justification of appearance-based beliefs. When I see a circular tabletop at an angle, I literally see it with my eyeballs as ovalar. In that sense, the tabletop appears ovalar to me, yet I am *not pf*-justified in believing the tabletop is ovalar. Why? Because that "broad (and perhaps largely tacit) range of considerations" are brought to the cognized situation, conditioning how the tabletop appears to me in a way relevant to reliable belief formation. The tabletop does not, in fact, appear ovalar to me in the cognitive-epistemic sense, so I don't believe it is. Similarly, my eyeballs literally see a stick as bent when half-submerged in water. In that sense, the stick appears bent to me, yet I am *not pf*-justified in believing the stick is bent. Why? Because a "broad (and perhaps largely tacit) range of considerations" are brought to

<sup>9</sup> See Goldman (1973) and Nozick (1981, 167–288). See also Richard Swinburne's Principle of Credulity in his (2001, 140–142) and (2004, 303–315) and Wykstra's CORNEA principle (discussed below).

the cognized situation, conditioning how the stick appears to me in a way relevant to reliable belief formation. The stick does not, in fact, appear bent to me in the cognitive-epistemic sense, so I don't believe it is.<sup>10</sup> What these examples show is just how peripheral literal seeing is to perception, and to what we believe based on how things appear. The "mind's eye" plays a much larger role in our appearance-based belief formation than is often assumed.

Having clarified the notion of a 'cognized situation' and the relevant sense of 'appears', Wykstra recommends the following principle:

On the basis of cognized situation  $s$ , human  $H$  is entitled to claim "It appears that  $p$ " only if it is reasonable for  $H$  to believe that, given her cognitive faculties and the use she has made of them, if  $p$  were not the case,  $s$  would likely be different than it is in some way discernible by her.<sup>11</sup>

This principle, it should be noted, is in many ways more modest than the one we are attempting to articulate. Combining its virtues—which we will discuss further below—with Chisholm's analysis above, however, yields a more detailed but suitably 'chisholmed'<sup>12</sup> version of PC that gets us in the ballpark of what we're after:

<sup>10</sup> Here's a mirror example. I look out the window and imagine a flying pig crossing the sky. Now, I don't literally see, with my eyeball, a flying pig. But it does appear to me, with my mind's eye, that there is a flying pig. That being said, I am *not prima facie* justified in believing there is actually a flying pig, since a "broad (and perhaps largely tacit) range of considerations" are brought to the cognized situation, including that I'm merely imagining it. I'll discuss this example more below.

<sup>11</sup> Wykstra's principle, as formulated, may be subject to counterexamples like the following. Suppose it appears to me that I exist. If Wykstra's principle is true, then it must be reasonable for me to believe that if it were not that case that I exist, then my cognitive situation would likely be different than it is in some way discernible by me. But that's false, since if I didn't exist, nothing would be discernible by me. In personal communication, Wykstra concedes that that his principle, as originally formulated, needs to be revised to account for such cases. He suggests something along the following lines: "On the basis of cognized situation  $s$  in which  $H$  is appeared to in certain aspects or ways discernable by  $H$ , human  $H$  is entitled to claim 'It appears that  $p$ ' only if it is reasonable for  $H$  to believe that, given her cognitive faculties and the use she has made of them, if  $p$  were not the case, it is not likely that the discernible-by- $H$  'ways' or 'aspects' of  $s$  would be same as they presently are." The counterexample is now avoided, since if it were not the case that I exist, none of the discernible-by-me ways or aspects of my cognitive situation would obtain at all. But it seems to me that Wykstra may be conceding too much here. Does not the "given her cognitive faculties and the use she has made of them" clause of the original principle already take care of these types of counterexamples? For if  $H$  doesn't exist,  $H$ 's cognitive faculties and the use she has made of them *are no longer given*. Wykstra thinks this reply would not be true to the original intent of that clause, however. Regardless, as is clear below, I opt for a similar, but different, principle that also avoids such counterexamples. Thanks to a referee for raising these counterexamples, and to Stephen Wykstra for extensive discussion of them.

<sup>12</sup> **Chisholm**, v. To make repeated small alterations in a definition or example. "He started with definition (d.8) and kept chisholming away at it until he ended up with (d.8''''''').)" See the esteemed *Philosophical Lexicon* ([philosophicallexicon.com](http://philosophicallexicon.com)).

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PC' If, on the basis of cognized situation  $c$ , it appears to  $S$  that  $p$ , then  $S$  is *pf*-justified in believing  $p$  if and only if it is reasonable for  $S$  to believe that if it were not the case that  $p$ ,  $c$  would likely not suggest that  $p$ .<sup>13</sup>

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Return now to Sam. Sam is *pf*-justified in believing “There is a cat before me” just in case, on the basis of his cognized situation in which he is appeared to catly, it is reasonable for Sam to believe that if there weren’t a cat before him, his cognized situation would likely not suggest there is.

Before moving on, it is important to note that its being reasonable for Sam to believe the subjunctive condition is not the same as Sam’s reasonably believing the subjunctive condition. The former doesn’t require Sam to believe the subjunctive condition at all; it requires only that *there be* reasons that make it reasonable for Sam to believe it, including, but not limited to, the appearance itself. Sam might not be aware that the appearance *qua* appearance is such a reason, or be aware of what other reasons there are besides. The importance of this will become evident when we consider modal applications of PC’.

## Modalizing PC’

With a chisholmed version of PC—PC’—in hand, I will now explain how to modalize it. Let us consider first what makes for a proper modal appearance, and what, exactly, a ‘cognized situation’ in modal appearances is. Answering these questions will help us see how to state the subjunctive condition for a modalized PC’. This, in turn, will shed light on the question of when modal appearances are and are not reliable.

### Proper modal appearances

Not just any proposition can be the object of a modal appearance. Some propositions may be so complex that few or no humans could justifiably say, just on the basis of how things appear, whether it is possibly true or not. We must limit candidate propositions to those which are, in some sense, epistemically accessible to us (more on this in due course).

Further, a proper modal appearance will be of putative *possibilities*. Thus the beginning of a modalized PC’ will read “If, on the basis of cognized situation  $c$ , it appears *possible* that  $p$ ”, not “it does not appear possible that  $p$ ,” or “it appears *impossible* that  $p$ .”<sup>14</sup> The reason for this is not that we are here concerned with only appearances of possibility to keep the present inquiry at a manageable length. Rather, there just doesn’t seem to be any other alternative. To say “it does not appear

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<sup>13</sup> If  $S$  is to be propositionally justified in believing  $p$ , we will have to add as a further necessary condition that  $S$  believes  $p$  (cf. Chisholm’s analysis above), so that PC’ reads: If, on the basis of cognized situation  $c$ , it appears to  $S$  that  $p$ , then  $S$  is *pf*-justified in believing  $p$  if and only if  $S$  believes  $p$  and it is reasonable for  $S$  to believe that if it were not the case that  $p$ ,  $c$  would likely not suggest that  $p$ . I omit this for simplicity.

<sup>14</sup> It also applies to necessity claims of the sort “It appears necessary that  $p$ ,” given that what is necessary is possible.



possible that  $p$ ,” if it is not to be understood as the negation of an appearance, is just a sloppy way of saying “it appears impossible that  $p$ .” But claiming something appears impossible has a degree of boldness that invites further inquiry; presumably there is some *obvious reason*, such as a contradiction, category mistake, paralyzing myopia suggesting  $p$  is not possible.<sup>15</sup> Intuitively, then, appearances of impossibility demand explanation or justification in a way appearances of possibility do not. Moreover, I take it that “it appears possible that  $p$ ” is equivalent to “there appears to be a possible world in which  $p$  is true.” Thus, the object of a proper modal appearance is technically not an individual proposition, but what *appears* to be a possible world in which the proposition is true. But “it appears impossible that  $p$ ” does not take a possible world as its object. For example, compare the following two propositions:

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|-----|--|
| (1) | There is a possible world in which there are no chipmunks. |
| (2) | There is a possible world in which there are no numbers.   |
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Whereas (1) is a perfectly proper modal appearance, (2) is not. This is because numbers, unlike chipmunks, are necessary entities; that is, if numbers do not exist in one possible world, they do not exist in any possible world. In other words, what (2) really says is.

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|------|--|
| (2*) | There is no possible world in which there are numbers. |
|------|--|
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which is does not take a possible world as an object of a cognized situation. (2\*) is the negation of worlds as objects of cognized situations.

So a proper modal appearance is one where an epistemically accessible proposition is true in a putatively possible world. Where  $p$  is an epistemically accessible proposition and  $W$  a putatively possible world in which  $p$  is true, I will abbreviate “there is a putatively possible world  $W$  in which  $p$  is true” to “ $W_p$ ” (For example, (1) above would be abbreviated ‘ $W_I$ ’,  $W_I$  being the object of a proper modal appearance.).

### Modally cognized situations

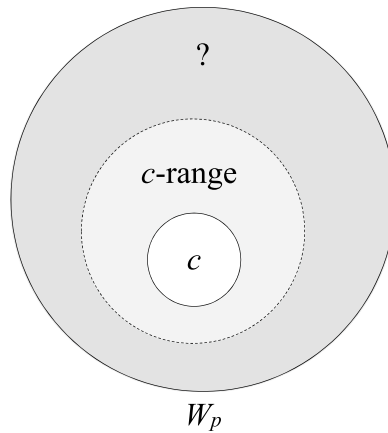
The ‘cognized situation’ in a modal appearance is  $S$ ’s visualization (in his imagination) of a situation in which  $p$  obtains, triggering  $S$ ’s belief-inclination that  $W_p$ . By “obtain”, I mean that certain configurations of ‘nearby’ propositions or properties or objects imply  $p$  (for simplicity’s sake, I will continue to speak only in terms of

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<sup>15</sup> Swinburne (2004, 304) makes a similar observation with respect to perceptual appearances. He writes, “how things seem positively to be is evidence of how they are, but how things seem not to be is not such evidence....[I]f it seems to me that there is no table in the room, then there is only reason for supposing that there is not, if there are good grounds for supposing that I have looked everywhere in the room, and...would have seen one if there was one there.” Swinburne thinks, then, that *additional, good grounds* are needed to justify negative appearances; grounds for thinking one’s present sensory experience *would have been* different were it not the case that not- $p$ .

propositions).  $S$ 's cognized situation,  $c$ , may vary in size and detail, depending on the person (some may have greater imaginative powers than others) and the proposition (some propositions are more epistemically accessible than others).

Just as our perceptual purview is limited in the actual world, only a small set of the total number of propositions of an apparently possible world will make up  $c$ .<sup>16</sup> But as  $S$  attends to  $p$  more carefully and reflectively,  $c$  broadens to include more propositions relevant to  $p$ 's obtaining. Some may be visualized, but many, I suspect, will constitute that "broad (and perhaps largely tacit) range of considerations" brought to the cognized situation relevant to  $p$ 's obtaining. Call the *total* number of propositions conceived by  $S$  that are relevant to  $p$ 's obtaining  $S$ 's ' $c$ -range.' The  $c$ -range is like the total logical terrain of an apparently possible world that has been mapped (i.e., imagined, conceived) by  $S$  at some time or another. We might illustrate this as follows:



For all  $S$  knows, there could be propositions beyond  $S$ 's  $c$ -range (represented by the question mark) that are inconsistent with  $p$ , in which case  $W$  would not, in fact, be a possible world. The  $c$ -range therefore brings more clarity to the notion of epistemically accessible propositions: propositions beyond  $S$ 's  $c$ -range are not epistemically accessible to  $S$ .

<sup>16</sup> Putting the matter in set language is only meant to be a useful way to capture the idea. Strictly identifying possible worlds as (maximal) sets of propositions runs into Cantorian-like paradoxes. See Chihara (1998, 120–141). We could instead think of possible worlds in terms of certain configurations of objects and properties.

## The subjunctive condition

Our final step in considering how to modalize PC' is to see how the subjunctive condition works in modal contexts. It is tempting to simply replace "if it were not the case that  $p, \dots$ " with "if it were not possible that  $p, \dots$ ". But if modal PC' requires an impossible antecedent in the subjunctive conditional, every application of the principle would require assessing a counterpossible. And if all counterpossibles are trivially true, as many think, all modal applications of PC' would be trivial.<sup>17</sup> While I am inclined to think that not all counterpossibles are trivially true,<sup>18</sup> the modest epistemological aim of modal PC' would be utterly lost if it depended on a controversial theory of non-trivially true counterpossibles.

Thankfully, there is good reason to not state the subjunctive condition this way: the objects of perceptual and modal appearances themselves require a different analysis. Recall that the object of a perceptual appearance is the (apparently) actual world to which the subject is causally related. As such, it is plausible to think that if it were not the case that the world is as it appears, the subject would not be receiving the same perceptual stimuli from the world. If it were not the case that a cat is before me, I would probably not be appeared to catly. It is the real-world presence of a cat that is causally responsible for the appearance. But the object of a modal appearance is a (putatively) possible world to which I am in no way causally related; whether one thinks of possible worlds as useful fictions, abstract objects, or concrete objects, in no case is there a causal connection between the cognizer and the cognized situation in modal appearances.<sup>19</sup>

Perceptual appearances thus have the advantage of being empirically tested against our knowledge of the actual world. The way modal appearances are tested, by contrast, is something more like counterfactual reasoning with *a priori* and conceptual constraints, where one supplies or fills in relevant details and propositions logically consistent with  $p$  anywhere within  $S$ 's  $c$ -range.<sup>20</sup> If this cannot be done, then  $S$ 's *pf*-justification for believing that  $W_p$  is either undercut or significantly weakened it.

Descartes, Hume, Leibniz, and others all spoke of possibilities as "clear and distinct". Clarity is something that comes in degrees. It is natural to think, then, that

<sup>17</sup> At least according to the Stalnaker/Lewis analysis of counterfactuals. Thus, it is widely recognized that the Lewis/Stalnaker analysis of counterfactuals cannot make sense of counterpossibles. See Goodman (2004).

<sup>18</sup> See Zagzebski (1990) and Nolan (1997).

<sup>19</sup> Unless, of course, the apparent possibility is also actual.

<sup>20</sup> Chalmers (2002, 153): "A situation is coherently imagined when it is possible to fill in arbitrary details in the imagined situation such that no contradiction reveals itself...it must be possible in principle to flesh out any missing details of an imagined situation that verifies  $S$ , such that the details are imagined clearly and distinctly, such that no contradiction is revealed." Cf. also Williamson (2008, 145). Williamson correctly likens modal knowledge to perceptual knowledge in important respects, but oddly thinks modal knowledge is gained in cerebral acts of mental deductions. I agree with Jenkins (2008) that this is an implausible description of how we come to know modal truths, though I do think it is how we come to be *uf*-justified in believing modal propositions.

there are degrees of associated justification for beliefs formed via modal appearances. Thus as the breadth and clarity of  $S$ 's  $c$ -range increases, so, too, does the justification  $S$  has for believing that  $W_p$ . The larger and more detailed, coherent, and clear  $S$ 's  $c$ -range becomes, the more reasonable it is for  $S$  to believe in the subjunctive condition, and with it, the truth of  $W_p$ . If  $S$ 's epistemic powers were great enough,  $S$ 's  $c$ -range could grow to be coincident with  $W$  itself. In that case,  $S$  would be conceiving the maximal state of affairs that is  $W_p$  and, accordingly, maximally justified in believing that  $W_p$ .

Call modal beliefs that pass or can pass these kinds of reflective tests *ultima facie* justified (*uf*-justified). It is, of course, possible that even *uf*-justified beliefs be mistaken. But as with perceptual appearances, the logical possibility of error should not be sufficient to defeat *pf*-justification for modal appearances. Relevant defeaters are only those which  $S$  can be reasonably expected to be privy to. It is not reasonable to expect  $S$  to be privy to the maximal set of propositions that make up an apparently possible world before  $S$  can be *pf*-justified in believing  $W_p$ . I therefore propose, for  $S$  to be *pf*-justified in believing  $W_p$ , that it be reasonable for  $S$  to believe the following subjunctive condition: if it were not the case that  $S$  is *uf*-justified in believing  $W_p$ , then  $S$ 's  $c$ -range would likely not suggest that  $W_p$ . Our next question, then, is: In cases where  $S$  is not *uf*-justified in believing  $W_p$ , how would  $S$ 's  $c$ -range likely not suggest  $W_p$ ?

## Overriders

I have argued that appearances, perceptual and modal, are *pf*-justified. *Pf*-justification is defeasible; or to use William Alston's term, *pf*-justification can be "overridden" (1993, 134–135).<sup>21</sup> "Sufficient negative considerations," according to Alston, serve as "overriders" for beliefs' *pf*-justification. Chief among such negative considerations, or overriders, is "internal inconsistency." Alston writes, "If two perceptual beliefs contradict each other, at least one is false. The existence of even one such pair is sufficient to show that sense perception is not perfectly reliable." In such cases, the *pf*-justification for one (or perhaps both) of the beliefs is overridden.

Overriders factor into our modal application of PC' in that they help spell out how  $S$ 's  $c$ -range would likely not suggest that  $W_p$  were it not the case that  $S$  is *uf*-justified in believing  $W_p$ :  $S$ 's  $c$ -range would likely contain certain "sufficient negative considerations" which override justification for believing  $W_p$ . But what counts as an overrider in modal appearances? The chief overriders, it seems to me, are inconsistency and unclarity. Since a necessary condition for metaphysical possibility is logical consistency—viz., lack of contradiction or inconsistency within a world—if something contradictory to or inconsistent with  $p$  turned up in  $S$ 's  $c$ -range,  $S$  would no longer be *uf*-justified in believing  $W_p$ . But I suspect it is more often a kind of

<sup>21</sup> It is customary to speak of defeaters in these contexts. The variety and nature of defeaters is interesting and important subject, but speaking instead of 'overriders' is a convenient way of avoiding unnecessary forays into that literature.

indelible opacity with respect to  $p$  that overrides  $uf$ -justification in  $p$ . If there were such opacity, it would no longer appear to  $S$  that  $W_p$ .

All of the requisite machinery now in place, a fully modalized application of PC' will therefore look something like:

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MPC' If, on the basis of cognized situation  $c$ , it appears to  $S$  that  $W_p$ , then  $S$  is  $pf$ -justified in believing  $W_p$  iff it is reasonable for  $S$  to believe that if it were not the case that  $S$  is  $uf$ -justified in believing  $W_p$ , then  $S$ 's  $c$ -range would likely not suggest that  $W_p$

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With the above prototype on the floor, we are almost ready for test trials. But before that, I should say one more thing. Suppose it is reasonable for  $S$  to believe the subjunctive condition *because*  $S$  consulted  $S$ 's  $c$ -range and found no overriders there (nothing suggesting not- $W_p$ ). Can we conclude from this that  $S$  is therefore  $uf$ -justified in believing  $W_p$ ? No. It remains possible that  $S$  overlooked an overrider in  $S$ 's  $c$ -range. But I take that the more carefully and exhaustively  $S$  explores  $S$ 's  $c$ -range, the less likely it is that an overrider will turn up, and, accordingly, the greater justification  $S$  has for believing  $W_p$ . When the degree of justification is sufficient to cross the threshold of  $pf$ -justification to  $uf$ -justification, I do not know. For now, it is safest to say simply that, in such cases,  $S$  is at least as justified in believing  $W_p$  as  $S$  was before consulting  $S$ 's  $c$ -range, and more likely a bit more justified. Now on to the test trials.

## MPC' tried

This being an election year, politics is on our minds. So imagine with me, if you will, a possible world in which

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(3) Democrats vote for Trump in the 2020 US general election

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Granted, this may be a world considerably distant from the actual world. But I say your very act of imagining it constitutes  $pf$ -justification for believing  $W_3$ . If MPC' is true, it must therefore be reasonable for you to believe that if you weren't  $uf$ -justified in believing  $W_3$ , your  $c$ -range would likely not suggest  $W_3$ . To test to see whether this is true, let's go ahead now and consult our  $c$ -range. As I think more about (3) and the different propositions that it likely entails (Democrats acquire a newfound respect for law and order, come to see the heinousness of abortion, appreciate the principles on which the US was founded, condemn Antifa and BLM as domestic terror groups, not be as easily offended by views they disagree with, etc.), I find nothing there not suggesting  $W_3$ —no contradictions or debilitating opacity.

Perhaps a more banal example is in order. Imagine with me, if you will, a possible world in which pigs can fly. That is, imagine a possible world in which the following proposition is true:

(4)

There are flying pigs.

If you're like me, you're cognized situation contains, most prominently among other things, rotund, stumpy-legged animals soaring across the sky, carried along by two suspiciously small white-feathered wings jutting from its shoulders. Your act of imagining this—you're being appeared to flying pigly—I say, constitutes *pf*-justification for believing  $W_4$ . If MPC' is true, it must therefore be reasonable for you to believe that if you weren't *uf*-justified in believing  $W_4$ , your *c*-range would likely not suggest  $W_4$ . To test to see whether this is true, let's go ahead now and consult our *c*-range. As I think more about (4) and the different propositions that it likely entails (all pigstys are enclosed, pigs are not as easily captured and turned into bacon, pigs perhaps roost in trees, the force of gravity is lower than it is on Earth, pigs carry themselves in a more respectable manner, etc.), I find nothing there not suggesting  $W_4$ —no contradictions or debilitating opacity. *Mutatis mutandis* for other, equally anodyne possibilities as (4).

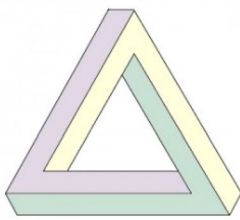
The foregoing example, and others like it, do not really put MPC' to the test, however. For that, we need examples where we already know that  $S$  is not *uf*-justified in believing  $W_p$ . So suppose there is a town with just one male barber, and that every man in the town keeps himself clean-shaven: some by shaving themselves, the others by the barber. Imagining such a town gives the appearance that there is a possible world in which it is true that

(5)

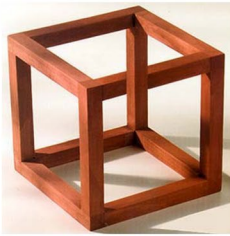
There is a barber who shaves all and only those men in town who do not shave themselves.

That is, 'It appears that  $W_5$ ' Am I *pf*-justified in believing (5), or  $W_5$ ? I say so. After all, isn't the apparent possibility of (5) precisely what makes Russell's paradox so alluring? But, as we know, we are not *uf*-justified in believing  $W_5$ . So according to MPC', it must be reasonable for me to believe that, if it were not the case that I am *uf*-justified in believing  $W_5$ , my *c*-range would likely not suggest that  $W_5$  because of some overrider lurking there. And there is. Upon closer inspection, I soon detect a contradiction upon thinking a little harder about (5) and its neighbors: if the barber, as a man in town, does not shave himself, he must shave himself. But if the barber does shave himself, he must not shave himself. Thus, the initial justification I had for belief that  $W_5$  is overridden.

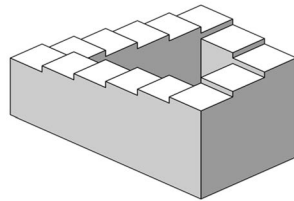
For another example, consider some famous so-called “impossible objects”:



Penrose Triangle



Escher Cube



Escher Stairs

I don't think that these and similar images are typically referred to as “impossible objects” because they *appear* impossible; on the contrary, they *appear* possible. Just look at them; they even come complete with shadows. So you initially enjoy the appearance that there is a world in which

(6)

There is a Penrose Triangle.

is true; and so are *pf*-justified, on the basis of this appearance, that  $W_6$ . As before, if *MPC'* is true, it must be reasonable for me to believe that, if it were not the case that I am *uf*-justified in believing  $W_6$ , my *c-range* would likely not suggest that  $W_6$  because of some overrider lurking there. And there is. What leads us to think Penrose Triangles and other such objects are impossible is a kind of debilitating opacity that attends them. We think hard about the angles and connections, but something prevents us from making them ‘click.’ Thus, the initial justification I had for belief that  $W_6$  is overridden.

Before moving on, it would be helpful to consider at least one example where we are not *pf*-justified in believing  $W_p$ . Imagine we are at the most recent meeting of the Mathematics Association of America, and the keynote address is on a proof of Goldbach's conjecture. There he is, Terry Tao, going through his paper “On an Unassailable Proof of Godlbach's Conjecture.” After a rigorous presentation, he concludes, “therefore, every even integer greater than two is the sum of two prime numbers. QED.” Presumably we are enjoying the appearance that

(7)

Goldbach's conjecture is true.

But it would be absurd to think that if we were not *uf*-justified in believing  $W_7$ , our cognitive situation—our *c-range*—would likely not suggest  $W_7$ . This is because nothing in the scenario we imagined really “verifies” (7). You are not imagining a scenario in which Goldbach's conjecture is true, but one in which it is *stated* that Goldbach's conjecture is true (Cf. Chalmers 2002, 153). Thus, we are not *pf*-justified in believing  $W_7$  based on the scenario imaged above. The reason, I think, is because (7) is not a proposition that's epistemically accessible based on mere appearances.

If MPC' is true, then all modal appearances of epistemically accessible propositions are innocent until proven guilty, just as are our appearance-based non-modal beliefs. In short, *pf*-justification for appearance-based beliefs generally is easy. Perhaps too easy, it might be objected. If *pf*-justification for our appearance-based modal beliefs is as easy as I've suggested, how interesting of a result can this be? Quite interesting, I think.

## MPC' applied

Consider first a Cartesian argument for dualism. If it is possible that I exist unembodied, then there is something true of me that is not true of my (or any) physical body—namely, possibly existing unembodied. Given the Indiscernability of Identicals, it follows that I am not, in fact, identical to any physical body, including my own. What *pf*-justifies my belief in the main premise is the appearance that

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(8) I exist unembodied.<sup>22</sup>

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Is it reasonable for me to believe that if it were not the case that I'm *uf*-justified in believing  $W_8$ , my *c*-range would likely not suggest  $W_8$ ? I'd say it's reasonable for me to believe that, even before consulting my *c*-range. I already know that many thousands of people throughout history have entertained  $W_8$  (adjusting for the indexical) with no apparent difficulty. Even hardcore materialists have imagined apparently coherent scenarios of disembodiment.<sup>23</sup> We also have the exquisitely detailed descriptions of people who have reported having out-of-body experiences, such as NDEs.<sup>24</sup> I therefore have ample testimonial evidence that makes it reasonable for me to believe the subjunctive condition. But supposing I don't take this testimonial evidence for granted, I can always test it out for myself by projecting my own first-person perspective into others' descriptions of unimbodiment, or imagine my own. Upon doing so, I do not find anything not suggesting  $W_8$ . I thus remain *pf*-justified in believing  $W_8$ —that there is a possible world in which I exist unembodied—and, along with it, the conclusion of the Cartesian argument: I am, in the actual world, not identical any physical body.

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<sup>22</sup> If there is in (8) an implicit reference to a negative existential in "unembodied," perhaps we can replace it with (8\*) Possibly, I am a spiritual substance; or (8\*\*) Possibly, I am fundamentally mental. Thanks to [Joshua Rasmussen] for discussion here.

<sup>23</sup> For example, see Dennett (1978). Taliaferro (1994, 175–176) notes others as well, including A. J. Ayer, C. J. Ducasse, and J. McTaggart. Taliaferro also quotes at length passages from W. D. Hart, who provides detailed imagined scenarios of disembodiment (idem., 176–177).

<sup>24</sup> A nice collection and discussion of NDE and OBE reports is Bailey and Yates (1996). For argument that these constitute evidence for the possibility of unembodied existence, see Habermas (2018).



For a second example, consider an ontological argument for the existence of God. God is the kind of being such if He exists at all, He necessarily exists. Given S5, it follows that if God possibly exists, God actually exists, since whatever is possibly necessary is necessary, and hence, actual.<sup>25</sup> What *pf*-justifies my belief in the main premise is the appearance that

(9)

God exists.

Is it reasonable for me to believe that if it were not the case that I'm *uf*-justified in believing  $W_g$ , my *c*-range would likely not suggest  $W_g$ ? I'd say it's reasonable for me to believe that, even before consulting my *c*-range. Of course, there is the initial appearance itself.<sup>26</sup> It is, or so it is to me, rather like the appearance of an unembodied person generally, except one with the maximal degree of great-making properties like knowledge, power and goodness. But there's also the fact that I know many thousands of people throughout history have entertained  $W_g$  with no apparent difficulty. We also have the exquisitely detailed descriptions of the concept of God, and how the divine attributes coherently fit together articulated by philosophers.<sup>27</sup> I therefore have ample testimonial evidence that makes it reasonable for me to believe the subjunctive condition. But supposing I don't take this testimonial evidence for granted, I can always test it out for myself by reflecting carefully on the concept of God.<sup>28</sup> Upon doing so, I do not find anything not suggesting  $W_g$ . I thus remain *pf*-justified in believing  $W_g$ —that there is a possible world in which God exists—and, along with it, the conclusion of the ontological argument: God exists.

A final point regarding a MPC' defense of the ontological argument. The argument, for present purposes, can be condensed to the following premise and conclusion:

(10)

It is possible that God exists.

(9)

God exists.

<sup>25</sup> The inference is valid in S5 and B. The characteristic modal axiom of S5,  $\Diamond p \supset \Box \Diamond p$ , is logically equivalent to the  $\Diamond \Box p \supset \Box p$ . In fact,  $\Diamond \Box p \supset p$  is also a provable in B, so technically theists don't need to appeal to S5 to license the relevant inference. That said, S5 is the favored system among modal logicians and metaphysicians as regards to the question of what best captures our intuitions about metaphysics of modality. For defenses of S5 as the correct system of absolute or metaphysical modality, see Pruss (2011), Hale (2013), Williamson (2016), and Pruss and Rasmussen (2018).

<sup>26</sup> For a detailed discussion of what it could mean for it to appear to one that God exists, see Alston (1991). For an application of this point to the ontological argument, see Pruss (2001).

<sup>27</sup> Two recent book-length treatments include Swinburne (2016) and Nagasawa (2017).

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Plantinga: "if we carefully ponder [the proposition '*Maximal greatness* is possible exemplified'] and the alleged objections, if we consider its connections with other propositions we accept or reject and still find it compelling, we are within our rights in accepting it" (1979, 221). What Plantinga describes is, in effect, discerning no overrides within his *c*-range.

Graham Oppy and others have argued that a parallel argument can run as follows:

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(11)	It is possible that God does not exist.
(12)	God does not exist.

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But then it is not clear, they say, which premise, (10) or (11), is more reasonable to believe. Oppy explains:

Given the assumption that there is no reason for an agnostic to prefer (10) over (11), it seems that an agnostic is perfectly justified in rejecting both...if he grants that either it is necessary that God exists or else it is necessary that God does not exist, the agnostic will allow that one of the arguments has a true premise—but, again, he will hold that the arguments give him no help in deciding which (1995, 70–71).<sup>29</sup>

But if what I have argued is correct, Oppy isn't—there *is* a reason for an agnostic to prefer (10) over (11). Because God's existence is either necessary or impossible, what (11) is actually asserting is

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(11*)	It is impossible that God exists.
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which is not a proper modal appearance, whereas (10) is. (10) and (11\*), therefore, are not epistemically on par with each other as far as appearances go. The parity argument fails.

Suppose Oppy or someone concedes that one is *pf*-justified in believing God exists, but is not *uf*-justified. God, it might be argued, is rather like the impossible objects discussed above. In that case, the burden is on him to point out what overrides there are with respect to  $W_9$ . It is of course true that philosophers have advanced many arguments to the effect that the concept of God is incoherent or ill-defined. But given the extent to which theists have articulated and refined the concept of God, it is unlikely indeed that anyone privy to those efforts will find any proposed override moving. The theist thus remains *pf*-justified, and likely quite a bit more, in believing (10), and with it, (9), based just on the appearance that it is so.<sup>30</sup>

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## Compliance with ethical standards

**Conflicts of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

<sup>29</sup> Van Inwagen (2001, 244–245) voices the same concern: “Whatever merit the crucial modal premise of your argument may have, you can’t expect the philosophical world to accept it unless you can show why it is somehow better or more reasonable than the crucial modal premise of the argument for the opposite conclusion...And I don’t see how you can do that.”

<sup>30</sup> This paper was first conceived at Calvin College back in 2010, and was kindly nurtured there with much help from Kevin Corcoran, Tim Perrine, Cameron Gibbs, Stephen Wykstra, and Alvin Plantinga. It fell stillborn shortly thereafter. Thanks to Benjamin Arbour for encouraging me to revive it from the swollen grave of abandoned papers. It is raised here to new life, though not, I suspect, to glory. Please direct all counterexamples to benarbour03@yahoo.com.

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