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Abstract

In addition to conceiving of such imaginary scenarios as those involving philosophical zombies, we may conceive of such things being conceived. Call these higher order conceptions 'meta-conceptions'. Sorensen (2006) holds that one can entertain a meta-conception without thereby conceiving of the embedded lower-order conception. So it seems that I can meta-conceive possibilities which I cannot conceive. If this is correct, then meta-conceptions provide a counter-example to the claim that possibility entails conceivability. Moreover, some of Sorensen's discussion suggests the following argument: if the conceivability of some proposition entails its possibility, then the meta-conceivability of some proposition entails its possibility; but we can meta-conceive impossibilities; so conceivability doesn't entail possibility. In this paper, I'll argue that one cannot entertain a meta-conception without thereby conceiving of the embedded lower-order conception. And so we can neither meta-conceive impossibilities nor meta-conceive possibilities of which we cannot thereby conceive.

Introduction

Philosophy abounds with fanciful scenarios. Students encountering the subject for the first time are asked to consider waking to discover that they are unwittingly playing a crucial part in a critically ill violinist's life support, counties where empty barn facades are not entirely uncommon, babies lying unattended on forked train tracks, and many more.

In addition to conceiving of such things, we may conceive of such things being conceived. Indeed, we just did when we envisaged students considering the above examples of philosophical thought experiments. Let's, following Roy Sorensen (2006), call these higher order conceptions 'meta-conceptions'. Meta-conceptions play an important and understudied role in philosophical methodology. We appeal to such conceptions; and, in considering the responses, agreements and disagreements of our interlocuters, we conceive of these interlocuters entertaining our conceptions. But moreover, in reflecting on this very method of philosophy, we also employ meta-

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conceptions. For we unavoidably conceive of conceptions being entertained in our discussion of the role of conception in philosophy. Meta-conceptions thus play a role in our *discussion* of philosophical methodology. For this reason, progress in our understanding of our own philosophical methods would be facilitated by a better appreciation of higher-order conceptions.

In this paper, I will be primarily concerned with the role of meta-conceptions in what is arguably the central issue for modal epistemology, the question whether conceivability entails possibility. Many hold that being able to conceive of something does not generally entail that that thing is genuinely metaphysically possible. Sorensen offers a novel and important argument for this claim from consideration of higher-order conceptions. Sorensen's arguably relies in part on the claim that we can meta-conceive impossibilities. In brief, the argument suggested by Sorensen's discussion is as follows: if the conceivability of some proposition entails its possibility, then the meta-conceivability of some proposition entails its possibility. But we can metaconceive impossibilities. So conceivability doesn't entail possibility.

In this paper, I'll claim that this argument is unsound. We cannot meta-conceive impossibilities. Or rather, I will argue that, for any sense of conception under which conceivability would guide possibility, we cannot conceive of impossibilities being conceived. If this is right, then there is a significant result for meta-philosophy or our understanding of philosophical methodology. The paper comes in three parts. I'll begin by reconstructing Sorensen's argument (§1). I'll next discuss the relation holding between conceptions and meta-conceptions. In particular, I'll argue that meta-conceptions *collapse* into conceptions. That is to say, if I legitimately meta-conceive of something being conceived, then I thereby also conceive of that thing myself. Sorensen's counterexamples, to the claim that meta-conceivability entails possibility, are all cases where alleged meta-conceptions fail to collapse. That is to say, they are cases where I can meta-conceive an impossibility but I cannot thereby conceive of that impossibility. Sorensen proposes a defense of his claim that meta-conceptions do not collapse into conceptions and, in this part of the paper, I'll assess this defense (§2). Finally, I'll argue that the relevant meta-conceptions for our issue indeed collapse into conceptions. Here I'll note that not every imaginative act is a guide to possibility. Rather, there have been various proposed conditions that have been placed on an imaginative act so to be a legitimate possibility guiding conception. I'll survey these proposals and conjecture that any legitimate condition placed on a lower order conception, in order that it be possibility guiding, ought to be place on higher order conceptions as well. So although meta-conceptions do not *generally* collapse into first order conceptions, possibility guiding meta-conceptions do collapse into possibility guiding first order conceptions. Indeed, collapsability is a *mark* of possibility guidance (§3). There's also a brief conclusion, where I draw a few consequences for our discussion of philosophical methodology.

1

I'll begin with the basic background issues in modal epistemology. In at least many cases, the philosophical methodology described in the first paragraph relies on the tacit assumption that the imagination can provide warrant for our modal beliefs. Call the principle, that the conceivability of some given proposition entails that the proposition is possible, the Entailment Thesis.

The principle that conceivability entails possibility has received much attention in recent discussion of philosophical zombies, creatures physically and functionally identical to us but lacking phenomenologically rich experiences. Zombies act as though they experience pleasure and pain, but there's nothing that pleasure or pain is like to them. If such creatures are conceivable, some philosophers of mind argue, then they are metaphysically possible and so our mental states are not identical with any physical state which realizes a mental state. For a discussion of philosophical zombies, see for example Chalmers (1996).

However, the principle that conceivability entails possibility operates throughout much philosophy and is not relevant only to the issue of consciousness. My purpose here is neither a detailed study of the use of the Entailment Thesis in philosophy nor a complete history of the Thesis. But I'll mention just a few examples, so to give a taste of its historic role in philosophy. The *locus classicus* of the Entailment Thesis arguably is Descartes' argument in *Meditations* VI for mind-body dualism. I can clearly and distinctly conceive of the mind as separable from the body. And so the mind is a distinct substance from the body—that is to say, something which can exist apart from the body, for separate existence is a mark of substantiality. And Hume (1978 [1739-40]: 32) also endorses the Entailment Thesis below.

> 'Tis an establish'd maxim in metaphysics, That whatever the mind clearly conceives includes the idea of possible existence, or in other words, that nothing we imagine is absolutely impossible. We can form the idea of a golden mountain, and from thence conclude that such a mountain may actually exist, We can form no idea of a mountain without a valley, and therefore regard it as impossible.

Hume here treats a version of the Entailment Thesis as a metaphysical truth. For discussion, see especially Yablo 1993. Notice that Descartes and Hume place constraints on what counts as the relevant notion of conception. I will return to this theme.
Just as we can conceive of some things ourselves, we can imagine other conceivers themselves engaged in acts of conception. Indeed, such higher-order or meta-conceptions are not entirely uncommon. For example, they play an important role in so-called

mindreading or folk psychological simulations, which we use to anticipate other people's mental states, to interpret their actions and to coordinate our shared activities. For discussion, see Morton (1980). However, since meta-conceptions are clearly conceptions of a certain kind, they raise interesting issues for understanding the imagination. In this paper, I'll focus on Sorensen's (1996) argument that they pose problems for the Entailment Thesis. Sorensen's argument is not as clear as it might be, and we'll need to reconstruct it charitably.

We've called the principle that conceivability entails possibility the Entailment Thesis, so let's call the principle that meta-conceivability entails possibility the Meta-Entailment Thesis. I'll assume that conceiving is a propositional attitude and use 'p' and 'q' as dummy letters for propositions. Then we have:

> (Entailment Thesis) If p is conceivable, then p is possible.
> (Meta-Entailment Thesis) If the conceivability of p is itself conceivable, then p is possible.

Sorensen argues that the Entailment Thesis implies the Meta-Entailment Thesis. That is,
If p is possible, provided p is conceivable, then p is possible, provided the conceivability of p is itself conceivable.

The proof is straightforward in the presence of a sufficiently rich modal logic. We need S4 or a stronger modal logic. That is to say, we require the axiom characteristic of S4, traditionally called (4), that what is necessary is necessarily necessary:

> (4) If $\Box p$, then $\Box\Box p$.

or, equivalently, what is possibly possible is possible:

> If $\Diamond\Diamond p$, then $\Diamond p$.

Here's the proof. Assume the Entailment Thesis. So, if p is conceivable, then p is possible. And let the conceivability of p be itself conceivable. That is, allow 'C' to stand for 'it is conceivable that', and suppose that the following are true.

> 1) If Cp then $\Diamond p$.
> 2) CCp.

We'll show that p is possible. From (1) and (2), the conceivability of p is possible. In other words,

> 3) $\Diamond$Cp.

Now, from (1) and (3), Sorensen infers that the possibility of p is possible:

5) $\Diamond\Diamond p$.

It'll be clear shortly why I'm skipping over a sentence labelled (4). Sorensen (2006, 261) glosses these steps from (1) to (5) by writing that "[i]f it is conceivable that it is conceivable [that] *p*, then two applications of the Entailment Thesis entitle us to infer that it is possibly possible that *p*." Notice, however, that Sorensen's proof requires that we apply the Entailment Thesis within an opaque modal context. So (1) and (3) are insufficient to derive (5). However, it's easy to derive in modal logic the theorem that what follows from a possibility is a possibility. That is,

from $p \rightarrow q$ infer $\Diamond p \rightarrow \Diamond q$.

And this allows us to make the step from (1) and (3) to (5). Finally, recall, we're assuming that we're working with a logical system at least as strong as S4, so

4) If $\Diamond\Diamond p$, then $\Diamond p$.

From (4) and (5), it follows that p is possible. So

6) $\Diamond p$.

So the Entailment Thesis implies the Meta-Entailment Thesis, in the presence of some plausible modal theses, such as the axiom equivalent that what is possibly possible is possible and the theorem that what follows from a possibility is a possibility.
I turn to the second premise in Sorensen's argument. Sorensen holds that we can meta-conceive of things of which we cannot conceive. For example, I cannot conceive of the following:

(First Child) of the first child born in 2100, that he or she will be a doctor.
(Chiliagon) a chiliagon, a thousand-sided figure.

I cannot imagine that the first child born in 2100 will be a doctor, by entertaining a de re proposition, for I am unable presently to pick out the person who satisfies the relevant description. And, as Descartes points out in *Meditations on First Philosophy* VI, 72, I cannot imagine a chiliagon with sufficient detail to distinguish it from, say, a myriagon, a ten thousand-sided figure.

However, Sorensen holds that we can meta-conceive of such things. I can conceive of people in 2100 who, conceiving of the first child born in 2100, entertain the de re

proposition that he or she will be a doctor. And I can conceive of a mind with more powerful imaginative capacities than myself conceiving of a chiliagon and able to distinguish it from a myriagon. So Sorensen alleges that I can conceive of both of the following cases:

> (2100 People) In 2100 there are people who, conceiving of the first child born in 2100, entertain the de re proposition that he or she will be a doctor.
>
> (Supermind) a mind with more powerful imaginative capacities than myself conceiving of a chiliagon and able to distinguish it from a myriagon.

What is the significance of these meta-conceptions of propositions that I cannot conceive? If I can meta-conceive of some possibility which I cannot myself conceive, then there are possibilities that are, for me, inconceivable (by a first-order conception). Of course, this is a counterexample to the *inverse* of the entailment thesis:

> (inverse entailment thesis) If p is possible, then p is conceivable.

It may well be the case that the possible outstrips our powers of imagination. I will return to this aspect of Sorensen's discussion in §3.

Sorensen's observation that the Entailment Thesis implies the Meta-Entailment Thesis, however, suggests that he is thinking of the following argument. Not only can I meta-conceive of propositions I cannot conceive, I can also meta-conceive of propositions that are impossible. Such cases would be counterexamples to the Meta-Entailment Thesis. And, since the Meta-Entailment Thesis is itself entailed by the Entailment Thesis, the Entailment Thesis is also false.

I'll come back soon to the question whether we can meta-conceive impossibilities. First, however, I'll note that Sorensen doesn't *explicitly* claim that we can metaconceive impossibilities. So I'll need to defend my interpretation of Sorensen. Instead of explicitly claiming that we can metaconceive impossibilities, Sorensen rather makes two different claims. And although Sorensen doesn't make the significance of these claims explicit, I believe his comments amount to the claims that we can have a third-order conception of an impossibility and that we can conceive impossibilities.

Sorensen's (2006: 265) first claim is that there is an easy refutation to the Meta-Entailment Thesis: he writes that, "I can conceive of someone conceiving of a counterexample. That should be sufficient refutation for someone who subscribes to 'The conceivability of conceivability implies possibility'." If I understand this passage, Sorensen is claiming that I can have a third-order conception of an impossibility: I can

conceive of someone conceiving of someone conceiving impossibilities. Since this begs the question at hand, it would be best to pass over Sorensen's first claim.

I turn to Sorensen's second claim. Sorensen holds that I can meta-conceive of a proposition, which I cannot myself conceive, being conceived *because* I can meta-conceive of a proposition being conceived without thereby conceiving of that proposition myself. When I meta-conceive, I need only entertain the higher order conception; I do not need to entertain the lower order conception. So Sorensen doesn't explicitly claim that I can meta-conceive impossibilities. Rather, he holds that my meta-conceptions do not need to satisfy the requirements for successful conceptions with respect to the lower-order conception; they only need to satisfy the requirements for successful conceptions with respect to the higher-order conception. Meta-conceptions show, according to Sorensen, that conceptions need not be held to the strict requirements those who endorse the Entailment Thesis might have expected.

However, Sorensen (2006: 270) writes that "[s]ince the meta-entailment ($CCp \rightarrow \Diamond p$) is less plausible than the entailment ($Cp \rightarrow \Diamond p$), we must either raise our opinion of the meta-entailment or lower our opinion of the Entailment Thesis. The downward revision seems more natural." I fail to understand Sorensen's discussion, unless he holds that we can meta-conceive impossibilities. That meta-conceptions might offer a counter-example to the inverse entailment thesis is irrelevant to his conclusion. So I ascribe to Sorensen the following argument:

> (7) the Entailment Thesis (what is conceivable is possible) entails the Meta-entailment Thesis (what is conceivably conceivable is possible);
>
> (8) we can meta-conceive impossibilities, so the Meta-entailment Thesis is false;
>
> so (9) the Entailment Thesis is false.

Nichols (2007: 14) appears also to take Sorensen to be offering this argument. At any rate, the argument is of independent interest, regardless of Sorensen's intentions, and I will consider all of the following claims: we can meta-conceive impossibilities; we can meta-conceive possibilities which we cannot conceive; and I can meta-conceive of a proposition being conceived without thereby conceiving of that proposition myself.

2

Sorensen, we have seen, holds that I can meta-conceive of a proposition, which I cannot myself conceive, being conceived because I can meta-conceive of a proposition being

conceived without thereby conceiving of that proposition myself. I have noted that this claim is of little relevance to the Entailment Thesis unless Sorensen holds that I can even meta-conceive of impossibilities. However, in this section, I first will assess Sorensen's reasons for holding that I can meta-conceive of a proposition being conceived without thereby conceiving of that proposition myself.

Sorensen's argument concerns whether iterated conceptions *collapse* into conceptions. The issue is this. Let us say that the conception of a conception collapses into a conception, when my conceiving of a proposition being conceived entails that I conceive of that proposition. And more generally, were the conception of a conception to collapse into a conception, then the conceivability of a proposition being conceived would entail that that proposition is itself conceivable. Since this line of reasoning is repeatable, collapsability might well be taken as a claim about n-ary iterated conceptions, where in principle any number can be substituted for 'n'. So let us label the principle at hand as follows:

(collapsing conception thesis) $C^n p \rightarrow Cp$

where '$C^n p$' stands for the n-ary iterated conception, p is conceivably conceivably … conceivable. Sorensen argues for the falsity of the collapsing conception thesis. And it is for this reason, the falsity of the collapsing conception thesis, that I can meta-conceive of a proposition being conceived without thereby conceiving of that proposition myself. Indeed, the conceivability of a proposition being conceived does not entail that that proposition is itself even conceivable.

In this section of the paper, I will note that Sorensen's argument for the falsity of the collapsing conception thesis fails to persuade. Then, in the next section, I will offer reasons instead to support the collapsing conception thesis.

Sorensen's argument draws on an alleged analogy between conception and perception. Sorensen holds that an iterated perception does not entail the embedded perception. That is to say, to use the terminology introduced above, the perceivability of a perception does not collapse into a first-order perception. As in the case of collapsing conceptions, the situation generalizes to n-ary iterated perceptions. Let us label the principle, analogous to the collapsing conception thesis, as follows:

(collapsing perception thesis) $P^n p \rightarrow Pp$

where '$P^n p$' stands for the n-ary iterated perception, p is perceivably perceivably … perceivable. Sorensen defends the denial of the collapsing perception thesis by appeal to several kinds of cases.

According to one kind of case, chains of perception may be broken by interposed agents. Sorensen considers a case mentioned by Sanford (2004).

(mimic) You are attending lecture in a large lecture hall, and you cannot yourself hear the lecturer. However, sitting next to you is a talented mimic with better hearing. The mimic repeats the lecture with great fidelity, including the vocal mannerisms of the lecturer.

Sanford and Sorensen claim that in mimic you do not hear the lecture. If Sanson and Sorensen are correct, then this case would provide a counter-example to the collapsing perception thesis.

At the risk of pedantry, let's lay out Sorensen's argument. For Sorensen's discussion is not as clear as it might be and an explicit statement of the argument will facilitate assessment. Sorensen's argument appears to be the following:

> (10) the collapsing perception thesis entails the collapsing conception thesis;
>
> (11) the collapsing perception thesis is false;
>
> So (12) the collapsing conception thesis is false.

I'll discuss each premise in turn.

Sorensen's sole explicit support for (10) is his (2006: 262) undefended claim that conception is analogous with perception. It is difficult to assess this claim. Like a perception, a conception is a conscious state of an agent. And arguably, both perceptions and conceptions have propositional content. However, these are features that conceptions share with any propositional attitude. Conceiving and perceiving are both sources of knowledge. But certain other sources of knowledge can form chains that are not broken by interposed agents. Reliable testimony, for example, is transitive. So are perceptions and conceptions analogous in any stronger sense? In particular, are conceptions and perceptions analogous phenomenologically? Conscious episodes such as perceptions are arguably *individuated* phenomenologically. A pain, for example, just is a certain feeling. It is for this reason that physical, behavioural or functional characterizations of pain fail to identify the phenomenon. So were conceptions and perceptions analogous phenomenologically, they would be very strongly analogous. And we might well expect such parallel features as that implied by (10).

Conceptions *may* involve imagined quasi-perceptive experiences. When you considered mimic, you may have entertained attendent visualisations of sitting in a lecture hall,

listening to the mimic, and so on. Such conceptions are arguably phenomenologically similar to perception.

However, not all examples of conceptions are like this. This is, I believe, well accepted within the field. George Bealer, for example, is a strong supporter of the role of intuitions and conceptions in philosophy. However, even Bealer denies that intuitions are always accompanied by imagery or perceptive content. Some of the cases that Bealer considers treat intuitions as dispositions to assent to claims without attendent perceptions or quasi-perceptive experiences. For example, he (1996: 123) discusses one of de Morgan's Laws seeming true as a conscious episode but one lacking perceptual content. We have hitherto been discussing somewhat different kinds of cases. But Sorensen holds that cases such as 2100 People and Supermind are conceivable. And in these cases, it seems we might entertain such scenarios without any attendent perception. Indeed, I believe that I can entertain mimic without any attendent perception.

Of course, even if we *concede* that conceptions are analogous to perception phenomenologically, this would not show that the two cognitive states are analogous in a way *relevant* to supporting (10). At any rate, it is uncontroversial that there are certain analogies and certain disanalogies between conception and perception. The question at hand is whether the two are analogous with respect to collapsability. Sorensen is perhaps thinking along the following lines. One does not first need to *establish* that there are certain analogies between conception and perception. The mere fact that there are analogies would show little. But if the reader agrees that the collapsing perception thesis is false, she will on reflection and for similar considerations, agree that the collapsing conception thesis is false as well. After all, only this would show that conception and perception are relevantly analogous. Although this line of argumentation is not entirely persuasive, let us concede the point. Sorensen's argument hinges then on the premise (11) and I will next consider its truth.

Sorensen defends (11) with cases such as mimic. His assessment of these cases, however, rests on an equivocation. Recall, in this case, I attend a lecture where the lecturer is inaudible to me but I listen to a talented mimic's simultaneous recitation. Sanford and Sorensen allege that I do not hear the lecture, since I hear only the mimic's version. However, the claim that I hear the lecture is ambiguous. Although I do not hear the token event of the original lecturer's lecture, there is another sense in which I do indeed hear the lecture. For I hear a *performance* of the lecture, not the original lecturer's lecture but the distinct token event of the mimic's recitation. Likewise, the collapsing perception thesis is ambiguous. Ought we to take the conception in the consequent as the token occurance of the embedded perception in the higher-order conception or instead as the latter's perceived content?

Perhaps however I have offered in (10)-(12) an uncharitable reading of Sorensen's argument. We might weaken (11) so to give a better argument which is nonetheless a not implausible interpretation of Sorensen's intentions. Let us consider next Sorensen's other cases offered in support of the claim that higher-order perceptions do not collapse. Although in mimic, the agent of the higher-order perception is not the agent of the lower-order perception, in other of Sorensen's cases the higher- and lower-order perceptions have the same agent. Some of these are cross-modal, where the higher- and lower-order perceptions are of different kinds. For example, I cannot see by hearing. I cannot hear the lecture by reading the transcript of the lecture, projected simultaneously with the lecture as surtitles. Likewise, I may well hear that I see the lecture. For example, as I watch some activity on the stage of a lecture hall, a person next to me may whisper in my ear, and tell me that I indeed am watching a lecture. However, I do not *thereby* see the lecture. For it is not in virtue of being told that the activity I am watching is a lecture, that I am seeing the lecture.

In a third and final kind of case the higher- and lower-order perceptions have the same agents and are of the same perceptual modality. Suppose that with my right hand I am feeling around in my pants pocket for coins. I also with my left hand feel my right hand. Yet, Sorensen (2006: 263) claims, that higher-order feeling is not itself a feeling around for coins. That is, by feeling myself feeling around for coins, I do not *thereby* feel around for coins. To give a last example, I may remember remembering some event without thereby remembering that event.

Notice that these cases make it clear that Sorensen appears to want to deny something weaker than the collapsing perception thesis. For in these cases, the entailment in collapsing perception thesis does indeed obtain. I do in fact feel around for coins in my pocket; otherwise, I could not feel myself feeling around for coins. I did in fact remember the event; otherwise, I could not now remember remembering it. Rather, Sorensen wants to deny that, in entertaining a higher-order perception, I *thereby* entertain the embedded lower-order perception. And moreover Sorensen denies that, in entertaining a higher-order conception, I *thereby* entertain the embedded lower-order conception. In the next section of the paper, I will defend just this claim.

3

Few would claim that any imaginative act whatsoever has modal consequences. Rather, modal epistemologists have typically imposed constraints on the imagination to distinguish legitimate conceptions which, they go on to allege, have modal consequences, from other imaginative acts which do not. I'll continue to use 'conception' for the constrained imaginative acts, and occasionally modify these as 'possibility-guiding' to

emphasize their difference from other imaginative acts which some (Sorensen included) have called conceptions.

The modal consequences are then not intended to flow from the imaginative act alone. Certainly, this would be an inexplicable human power, if I were able to get onto necessary truths by the sheer fact that I am imagining it—as if I were able, solely by the force of my mind, determine what is possible. An immodest claim and one which, to my knowledge, no one makes. Of course, one might hold that our imaginative abilities *track* modal truths—claiming for example an evolutionary explanation—without holding that my imagination is the *cause* of modal truths in the world. But few ascribe even this power of tracking possibilities to the human imagination. Rather, the modal consequences flow in part from the constraints imposed on my imaginative acts. In this section of the paper, I will rehearse a few representatives of the constraints which philosophers have proposed. My goal is not to provide a comprehensive survey. Rather, I hope to bring out that, regardless of what condition we place on conceptions, similar conditions are applicable to meta-conceptions.

In Descartes' view, it seems, it is the *clarity* and *distinctness* of my imagination which ensures that what I imagine is possible, and not the mere fact that I am imagining what I imagine. So possibility guidance then requires that the content of the conception be neither obscure nor confused. Recall that Descartes takes Chiliagon to be confused. For I cannot conceive of a thousand-sided closed figure with sufficient detail to distinguish the conception from the conception of a myriagon, a ten-thousand sided figure. I doubt that Chiliagon is confused in this way. Descartes, I believe, ties conception too closely to quasi-perceptual phenomenology. If I mentally visualize a chiliagon, I picture a closed figure with a great many sides, one which from a distance is indistinguishable from a circle. When I mentally visualize a myriagon, I entertain the same mental picture. As I have noted above, conceptions need not involve any such attendent perceptual or quasi-perceptual experiences. So I disagree with Descartes that the criterion of clarity and distinctness preclude Chiliagon from being possibility guiding. However, certain imaginative acts may well have obscure or confused content. For example, the mental visualization of a chiliagon is indeed confused. And for this reason, the visualization is not possibility guiding. So clarity and distinctness may be a mark of possibility guidance in certain cases.

If clarity and distinctness is a mark of possibility guidance for certain first-order conceptions, then surely clarity and distinctness is a mark of possibility guidance for higher order conceptions of these conceptions. To bring out this point, let us concede that Chiliagon is confused. Then surely my meta-conception Supermind suffers from the very same confusion. For suppose that I cannot conceive of Chiliagon because, when I attempt to visualize a chiliagon, the mental picture I entertain is indistinguishable from the mental picture I entertain when I attempt to visualize a myriagon. What then do I imagine when I

entertain Supermind? My conception of a superior mind conceiving of a chiliagon is phenomenologically indistinguishable from my conception of a superior mind conceiving of a myriagon. To be clear, I do not endorse clarity and distinctness as good criteria for possibility guidance, and I do not endorse the view that conceptions are phenomenologically like perceptions. But I do believe that, if we *were* to hold these views, then we *ought* to apply these views equally to lower- and higher-order conceptions.

A more popular proposal for a mark of possibility guidance is freedom from a charge of mis-description. Consider the following alleged conception:

> (queen) Queen Elizabeth II is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Truman.

For queen, see Kripke (1980: 112), who takes queen to be necessarily false. Given that Queen Elizabeth II is not the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Truman, the thesis of the necessity of origins ensures that it is necessary the case that Queen Elizabeth II is the daughter of the Trumans. Yet it seems that we can entertain the impossibility. A common response to is the following. queen is mis-described. I am not entertaining the thought that Queen Elizabeth II is herself the daughter of the Trumans. Rather, I am entertaining the thought that someone who closely resembles Queen Elizabeth II is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Truman. This thought is merely contingently false.

Now consider the meta-conception corresponding to queen:

> (queen conceived) A conceiver conceives of Queen Elizabeth II being the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Truman.

One might hold that queen conceived is conceivable. If it were, then queen conceived would provide a legitimate counterexample to the meta-entailment thesis. However, it seems to me that one ought to respond to the allegation that queen conceived is a legitimate or possibility-guiding conception in just the same way as the response to the allegation that queen is a possibility-guiding conception. What specifically am I conceiving when I allegedly imagine queen conceived, the meta-conception that the Queen was born to parents different from her actual parents? In allegedly conceiving queen, I am really entertaining the possibility that someone, not the Queen but who satisfies many of the descriptions which she herself satifies in virtue of her contingent properties, is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Truman. It seems to me that, if queen conceived has much real content at all, it is that I am imagining someone entertaining the possibility that someone, not the Queen but who satisfies many of the descriptions which she herself satifies in virtue of her contingent properties, is the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Truman. Surely I can't be imagining someone entertaining the possibility that the Queen herself was born to parents different from her actual parents.

My conjecture is that a meta-conception is possibility-guiding only if the embedded conception is possibility-guiding as well. So, for example, suppose that clarity and distinctness are necessary conditions for possibility guidance. Then, when I conceive that something is conceived, that higher-order conception is possibility-guiding only if both my conception of the conception and that conception itself are clear and distinct. Suppose instead that immunity to charges of misdescription are necessary conditions for possibility guidance. Then, likewise, when I conceive that something is conceived, that higher-order conception is possibility-guiding only if both my conception of the conception and that conception itself are free of misdescription.

I turn to an alternative interpretation of Sorensen's intentions. Recall that Sorensen holds that meta-conceptions do not collapse into conceptions. In meta-conceiving some proposition, I do not thereby conceive of that conception. Indeed, I can meta-conceive of some possibility which I cannot myself conceive, so there are possibilities that are inconceivable (by a first-order conception). That is to say, Sorensen might intend to offer a counter-example to inverse entailment thesis. It may well be the case that the possible outstrips our powers of imagination. I doubt however that considerations concerning meta-conceptions would establish this. The same considerations as with meta-conceiving impossibilities apply. For the same constraints applicable to first-order conceptions, whatever they may be—immunity from charges of obscurity, confusion, mis-description or some other condition a conception must meet so to be possibility-guiding—are prima facie applicable to higher-order conceptions.

Let me note that there is room for considerable agreement with Sorensen. First, I have conjectured that the collapsing conception thesis is true for suitably constrained conceptions, and Sorensen might well agree. Second, I have advocated the stronger claim that, in meta-conceiving some proposition, I thereby conceive of that proposition—again, for suitably constrained conceptions and, with that proviso, Sorensen might well agree. Finally, I have mooted the worry that conceptions are not good guides to possibility, since it may be difficult to ascertain when any proposed constraints are met. And again, Sorensen might well agree.

There are however significant points of disagreement. Of most significance, I have argued that, whatever the constraints placed on conceptions, so to ensure that they be possibility-guiding, they apply equally to first-order and higher-order conceptions. Although there may be difficulties in recognizing that meta-conceptions are suitably constrained, it is not obvious that the difficulties are different in kind or degree from the difficulties in recognizing that conceptions are suitably constrained.

Conclusion

I conjecture that possibility-guiding meta-conceptions collapse into conceptions. That is to say, if I meta-conceive a conceiver entertaining a first-order conception, and that higher-order conception carries consequences for what is possible, then I thereby conceive of that first order conception myself. This claim has the status of a conjecture because I haven't provided necessary and sufficient conditions for an imaginative act to be a possibility-guiding conception. However, the descriptive problems identified in the previous section make it plausible that a necessary condition for an imaginative act to be a possibility-guiding meta-conception is that the embedded first-order conception be neither obscure nor confused nor falsely described by the meta-conceiver. And more generally, suppose that there are necessary and sufficient conditions for an imaginative act to be a possibility-guiding conception. Then whatever these conditions are, the considerations from the previous section suggest that conceptions satisfying these conditions collapse.

I conjecture then that possibility guiding conceptions adhere to a principle analogous to the modal axiom characteristic of S4 which, recall, is:

4) If $\Diamond\Diamond p$, then $\Diamond p$.

That is to say, possibility-guiding conceptions adhere to the collapsing conception thesis. Indeed, I hold a stronger claim. Not only does a possibility-guiding meta-conception *entail* a certain possibility-guiding conception. In entertaining a possibility-guiding meta-conception, I *thereby* entertain a certain possibility-guiding conception. But the weaker claim, and the resulting analogy with (4), is instructive. For equivalent to (4) is the transitivity of the accessibility relation among possible worlds. And so the analogy suggests that the accessibility relation among worlds that are both conceivable and possibility-guiding is transitive. Such transitivity is a *mark* of possibility entailment.

I don't however claim that conceivability *guides* possibility, and this for several reasons. First, for all we have seen, it may not be possible to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for legitimate possibility-guiding conceptions which adequately distinguish such conceptions from other imaginative acts. Second, conceptions and obscure, confused or falsely described imaginary scenarios may be very difficult to distinguish phenomenologically, if such imaginative acts have any phenomenological character at all. If this is the case, then even if we can in principle distinguish conceptions from other imaginative acts it may prove difficult to know when the conditions for an imaginative act to be a conception obtain. Finally, successful acts of conception may rely on our possession and application of substantive modal beliefs. If this is the case, then even if we can effectively distinguish conceptions from other imaginative acts, conceptions will not be able to provide an independent or non-modal guide to possibility and necessity.

I'll close with a brief final remark. Philosophical or meta-philosophical reflection often itself employs meta-conceptions. We discuss the philosophical methodology of entertaining imaginative scenarios at one step removed. The employment of such conceptions within philosophical argumentation, we have seen, requires care. If I am right that the relevant notion of conception collapses, then such reflection on philosophical methodology itself requires equal care.

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