

Yalcin on 'Might'

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On one view about the word 'might', to say *that it might be that S* is to say something about one's epistemic state (and perhaps also about the epistemic states of those around one). For convenience, I will call this *the natural view about 'might'*. On one version of the natural view, to say *that it might be that S* is to say *that what one knows is consistent with the proposition that S*. On another version, to say *that it might be that S* is to say *that one's evidential state is consistent with the proposition that S*. And on yet another version, to say *that it might be that S* is to say *that what one is certain of is consistent with the proposition that S*. Seth Yalcin (2007) has argued that all versions of the natural view are wrong. My aim in this paper is to show how at least one version of the natural view escapes Yalcin's argument.

Here is Yalcin's argument, as I understand it.¹ Consider (1a):

(1a) It is raining and it might not be raining.

There is something defective about (1a). Initially, one is inclined to say that (1a) is Moore-paradoxical, in the same way that (2a) is:

(2a) It is raining and I do not know that it is raining.

¹ Yalcin's actual argument is set in the framework of a possible-worlds semantics. Yalcin argues that no standard "relational" semantics for 'might' is correct. Basically, on any such semantics, 'It might be that *S*' is true at a world *w* iff, at *w*, a specified feature of the epistemic state of the speaker—say, what the speaker knows, what the speaker's evidence is, or what the speaker is certain of—is consistent with the claim that *S*. Yalcin's employment of the possible-worlds framework seems to me to be inessential to his argument. And so I formulate the argument without reference to possible-worlds semantics.

But the defect in (1a) goes deeper than that in (2a). For, unlike the content of (2a), we are not even able to entertain, or suppose, the content of (1a). Consider (3a):

(3a) Suppose that it is raining and it might not be raining.

The fact that (3a) is an impossible command to carry out spells trouble for the natural view. For the natural view predicts that (3a) should be unproblematic. (3a) is the command to suppose what is expressed by (1a). On the natural view, what is expressed by (1a) is a conjunction of two jointly unproblematic claims: the first claim is that it is raining; the second claim is something about the speaker's epistemic state, say, that what the speaker knows is consistent with the proposition that it is not raining. Because these two claims are jointly unproblematic, we ought to be able to suppose their conjunction. Thus, we ought to be able to suppose the content of (1a). But we cannot. So the natural view is false. This is Yalcin's argument against the natural view.

Here is a version of the natural view that escapes Yalcin's argument. To say *that it might be that S* is to say *that what one is certain of is consistent with the proposition that S*. On this view, (1a) is in fact Moore-paradoxical, for it is equivalent to the Moore-paradoxical (1b):

(1b) It is raining and, for all that I am certain of, it is not raining.

Now, the content of (1b) is easy to suppose:

(3b) Suppose that it is raining and that, for all that I am certain of, it is not raining.

So why is (3a) an impossible supposition? Part of the answer is that, given an ordinary interpretation of (3a), (3a) is not the command to suppose the content of (1a). Let me explain.

Within the context of a supposition, ‘might’, ‘must’, ‘possibly’, ‘necessarily’, and ‘certainly’ are typically used to describe, not our pre-suppositional epistemic states, but rather our *suppositional* epistemic states. For illustration, consider the following conversation:

- A: Suppose that it is raining.
B: Then there might be lightening.
A: Possibly it is thundering, too.
B: Yes. And it might not be raining.
A: What? That doesn’t make sense. On the supposition that it is raining, it *must* be raining.
B: I was only kidding. Certainly, on our supposition, it must be raining.

On the version of the natural view that I am defending, to say *that it might be that S* is to say *that what one is certain of is consistent with the proposition that S*. So, when B says above that it might be lightening, what B is saying is *that what B is certain of is consistent with the proposition that it is lightening*. But there are two ways to interpret ‘what B is certain of’: what B is *categorically* certain of—that is, what B is certain of independently of the relevant supposition; or what B is *suppositionally* certain of—that is, what B is certain of on the relevant supposition. As I said above, within the context of a supposition, ‘might’, ‘must’, ‘possibly’, ‘necessarily’, and ‘certainly’, are typically used to describe, not our pre-suppositional—or *categorical*—epistemic states, but rather our *suppositional* epistemic states. So the ordinary interpretation of B’s utterance of ‘there might be lightening’ is as an expression of a claim about B’s *suppositional* epistemic state, namely, that what B is certain of—*on the supposition*—is consistent with the proposition that there is lightening.

Though typically unnecessary, there is a device for clarifying whether one’s use of ‘might’, ‘must’, ‘possibly’, ‘necessarily’, or ‘certainly’ is to be interpreted suppositionally or categorically. To indicate that the use is to be interpreted suppositionally, one may add ‘on the supposition’ to one’s utterance. For instance, above B said, “Certainly, on our supposition, it must be raining.” To indicate that

the use is to be interpreted categorically, one may—with some care—add ‘from *x*’s perspective’ to one’s utterance. For illustration, consider the following exchange:

- A: From my perspective, it might not be raining.
B: Suppose, nevertheless, that it *is* raining.
A: On that supposition, it must be raining. Still, from *my* perspective, it might not be raining.

Of course, the perspective that A has in mind is A’s pre-suppositional, or categorical, perspective.

We are now in a position to see how the given version of the natural view escapes Yalcin’s argument. Yalcin claims that the proponent of the natural view is committed to saying that (3a) is a supposition of the content of (1a). But this is not so. On its ordinary interpretation, (3a) is equivalent to (4a):

- (4a) Suppose that it is raining and that, on this supposition, it might not be raining.

In other words, on the default interpretation of ‘might’ as it occurs within the scope of ‘suppose’ in (3a), a claim is being made about a *suppositional* epistemic state. (4a) is indeed an impossible command to carry out. But it is not a supposition of the content of (1a). For (1a) is a conjunction of the claim *that it is raining* with the claim *that it might not be raining*, where the word ‘might’ is here used to express a claim about one’s *categorical* epistemic state, not about one’s suppositional epistemic state. To emphasize this fact, we can add ‘from my perspective’ to (1a), as follows:

- (1c) It is raining and, from my perspective, it might not be raining.

Now, there is no problem supposing the content of (1c):

(3c) Suppose that it is raining and that, from my perspective, it might not be raining.

On the version of the natural view that I am defending, (3c) is equivalent to (3b):

(3b) Suppose that it is raining and that, for all that I am certain of, it is not raining.

So, on the version of the natural view that I am defending, (1a) is defective because it is Moore-paradoxical; (1a) expresses a conjunction, namely (1b), which is perfectly suitable for supposing, as witnessed by the unproblematic (3b); and (3a) is equivalent to (4a), which is a command to engage in an impossible supposition, but which is not a command to suppose the content of (1a).

It should be clear, then, how the given version of the natural view escapes Yalcin's argument: might-statements are relative to a perspective, and that perspective is not always indifferent to the linguistic context. It should also be clear that there are other versions of the natural view that can escape Yalcin's argument in a similar fashion. To escape Yalcin's argument, versions of the natural view simply need to accommodate the idea that, when uttered within the scope of a supposition, 'it might be that *S*' typically expresses a claim about the speaker's *suppositional* epistemic state; whereas, when uttered outside the scope of a supposition, 'it might be that *S*' typically expresses a claim about the speaker's *categorical* epistemic state. By accommodating this idea, such views avoid commitment to the problematic idea that (3a) is a supposition of the content of (1a).²

REFERENCES

Yalcin, Seth 2007: "Epistemic Modals". *Mind*, 116, pp. 983-1026.

² For helpful comments, I am grateful to Yuval Avnur and Kit Fine.