

Chapter 5

ART AND MODAL KNOWLEDGE

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It has been argued that art cannot give us propositional knowledge. Alternatively, it has been proposed that any knowledge acquired via art is cognitively trivial. Finally, assuming the first two challenges can be met, it has been argued that, while art may provide us with propositional knowledge, it does not do so in any special or effective way. In other words, any knowledge obtained via art can be obtained elsewhere, and more efficiently and reliably to boot (Stolnitz 1992; see also Wilson 1983; Lamarque and Olsen 1994). Thus we have:

(K) the knowledge challenge: art cannot provide propositional knowledge.

(T) the triviality challenge: even if art can provide propositional knowledge (i.e. even if (K) is false), any knowledge so provided is cognitively trivial.

(P) the proficiency challenge: even if art can provide non-trivial propositional knowledge (i.e. even if both (K) and (T) are false), it does so via means which are cognitively or epistemically inferior.

Conjoining (K) through (P) presents us with a strongly non-cognitivist position – a rejection of the view that art is the kind of thing that can have significant cognitive value. Call this position *the skeptical position*.

The skeptical position can and should be rejected. Art provides us with non-trivial propositional knowledge. Art enables modal knowledge, in particular, knowledge of or about possibility. The argument for this claim will involve three steps corresponding to the above three skeptical claims. First, we reliably form beliefs about modal truths based upon our experiences

with art; as a result, the knowledge challenge is rejected. This claim will require considerable discussion of the prospects for modal knowledge. Second, it is argued that such knowledge is non-trivial: knowledge of possibility has legitimate cognitive value. The triviality challenge is thus rejected. Finally, the proficiency challenge is also rejected. I argue that art is especially adept at providing us with knowledge of modal truths. Novels, films, theater productions, and paintings represent counterfactual possibilities, the experience of which leads to the acquisition of modal knowledge.

MODAL EPISTEMOLOGY

A number of important and difficult questions emerge from the debates surrounding modal epistemology. We will focus on just two. First, what can be said about modal truth? What, if anything, would make a proposition of the form, ‘it is (im)possible that p’ true? Second, how could a belief with content that is relevantly similar to the aforementioned proposition be justified? That is, are the mechanisms responsible for our modal beliefs reliable (or truth tracking)? Providing answers to either of these questions, let alone both, is no easy task. Nevertheless, if modal knowledge has any epistemic legitimacy, both questions must be given some positive answer. Proposals about modal knowledge from art will stand or fall with accomplishing this task. I am thus obligated to provide a modal epistemology, or at least an answer to the truth-question and to the justification-question with respect to modal belief. At best, I meet this obligation half way, offering a sketch of how modal beliefs might be reliably formed and of what would render such beliefs true. This may be a good start, but a sketch is, after all, just a sketch.

Types of Modality and Types of Modal Knowledge

The two questions are made more tractable by first distinguishing types of modalities and types of modal knowledge. Following Kripke (1980), we can distinguish *epistemic* from *non-epistemic modality*. Epistemic modalities are relativized to some epistemic position. For all I know, it could be ten degrees Celsius in Victoria right now, the governor of Kansas might be a Democrat, and the White Sox might have only one left-hander on their pitching staff; these are possibilities from *my* epistemic perspective. Non-epistemic possibilities are not so relativized. We may also distinguish *nomological modality* from *non-nomological modality*. Some proposition p is nomologically possible or necessary relative to natural laws as current science posits them. Philosophers appeal to a variety of