Abstract
In this paper, a new argument for an expressivist account of epistemic modals is developed. The argument starts from a puzzle about epistemic modals that Seth Yalcin recently presented. Yalcin’s own solution to the puzzle is rejected and a better explanation is given which is based on expressivism concerning epistemic modals. Furthermore, two alleged problems for expressivism are addressed: firstly, it is discussed whether embeddings of epistemic modals pose a serious threat to expressivism, and secondly it is shown how expressivism can account for disagreements about statements containing epistemic modals.

I. A Puzzle About Epistemic Modals
Seth Yalcin recently argued that instances of the pattern

(1) \( p \& \diamond \neg p, \)

where the operator \( \diamond \) introduces epistemic possibility, are strictly contradictory.\(^1\)

His argument starts from the uncontroversial observation that instances of (1), as e.g.

(2) It is raining and it is perhaps not raining,

are not assertable. (I will henceforth use ‘perhaps’ to express epistemic possibility.)

As Yalcin notes, one may be tempted to assimilate the deficiency of (2) to that of Moore-sentences such as:

(3) It is raining and I don’t believe it is raining.

Moore-sentences clearly do not have a contradictory content. We can evaluate a sentence with respect to a context (including a speaker) independently of whether the sentence is asserted by the speaker in the context, or not. And we can even evaluate a sentence independently of whether it is assertable for the speaker in the context. Now, for many contexts the evaluation of (3) will come out as true because the speaker of the context does

---

not believe that it is raining, even though it is raining. And although any speaker uttering such a sentence will involve herself in a pragmatic contradiction and violate some norm of assertion, she would nevertheless utter a truth if she were in a context of the relevant kind.

Since Moore-sentences do not express contradictions, their non-assertability calls for an alternative explanation. Once one has settled on such an explanation, one might try to explain the non-assertability of (2) in the same manner.

Yet, Yalcin points out that the defect of (2) carries over to certain more complex contexts in which (2) is embedded. Thus, the following two sentences are as deficient as (2) itself:

(4) Suppose it is raining and it is perhaps not raining.

(5) If it is raining and it is perhaps not raining, then …

However, the same does not hold for Moore-sentences. The following expressions are easily comprehensible and have a clear use in appropriate circumstances:

(6) Suppose it is raining and I don’t believe it is raining.

(7) If it is raining and I don’t believe it is raining, then …

Hence, the deficiency of (2) cannot be explained in an analogous fashion to that of Moore-sentences. The best explanation, Yalcin concludes, is that (2) is really contradictory. He then develops an account of the semantics of epistemic modals on which (2) is so.

I will not discuss his account here but rather argue that its initial motivation is flawed. The important point to notice is that it is a quite general phenomenon that epistemic modals embed awkwardly under ‘suppose’ or in the antecedents of conditionals. Take the simple

---


3 Yalcin’s positive proposal is based on a notion of informational consequence. For a criticism see Moritz Schulz, ‘Epistemic Modals and Informational Consequence’, forthcoming in *Synthese*. Schulz argues that Yalcin cannot deal with reasoning from uncertain premises.

4 In linguistics, it is a well-known phenomenon that such expressions exhibit several restrictions on placement, including those which are relevant here; see, for instance, I. Bellert, ‘On Semantic and Distributional Properties of Sentential Adverbs’, *Linguistic Inquiry*, 8 (1977), pp. 337–51, or Øystein Nilsen, ‘Domains for Adverbs’, *Lingua*, 114 (2004), pp. 809–43.
(8) Suppose it is perhaps (or: maybe / certainly / surely) raining.

If the modal in (8) is taken to be epistemic, then it is barely intelligible what we are asked to do; the sentence, thus understood, has no proper usage in ordinary contexts. But its deficiency is obviously not due to any contradiction involved. So, while Yalcin’s assumption that (2) is contradictory could explain its awkwardness, it cannot explain the corresponding awkwardness of (8). But the awkwardness of (8) explains that of (2). Yalcin’s explanation therefore fails to get to the ground of the phenomenon. Before I come to a better solution, I will introduce an expressivist view about epistemic modals.

II. Expressivism

There are expressions whose linguistic function does not consist in making any contribution to the truth-conditions of a sentence in which they occur; instead, their function is to present the speaker as having a certain attitude or being in a certain mental state. Call such locutions expressivist terms (there are other possible uses of the term ‘expressivist’, but they will not be relevant here). ‘Gee’, as it occurs in the following sentence, provides a clear example:

(9) Gee, I told you to be careful.

The truth-conditions of (9) are identical to those of Nilsen,. 

(10) I told you to be careful.

Nevertheless, the expression ‘gee’ is not devoid of linguistic meaning; it signals a certain kind of negative attitude on behalf of the speaker. In using (9) instead of (10), the speaker not only asserts that she told the addressee to be careful, she moreover presents herself as being in a certain mental condition (which may range from impatience to irritation).

Expressivism concerning epistemic modals takes them to form a further kind of expressivist terms. Here, a particular variety of such an expressivism will be defended:5

Speech-act Expressivism

(i) If a modal $M$ is used in an epistemic sense and combined with a sentence $S$, the resulting $M \cap S$ does not differ from $S$ in content.

(ii) In uttering $M \cap S$, a speaker performs a speech-act that consists in presenting herself as having a certain epistemic stance of a certain strength (determined by the meaning of $M$) towards the content of $S$.

(iii) In uttering $M \cap S$, a speaker does not generally make any assertion.

Some comments: the proposal has it that epistemic modals affect what sort of speech-act is performed by uttering a sentence including them. Different sorts of speech-act are distinguished from one another in a variety of dimensions; one concerns their sincerity conditions. For most (if not all) sorts of speech-act, a speaker committing an act of that sort thereby signals that she is in a certain state of mind (i.e. that she believes something, knows something, regrets something, etc.). For the utterance to be sincere, the speaker must be in that state. Moreover, since many states of mind come in degree, a given sort of speech-act may also signal that the speaker is a particularly strong or weak state of the relevant sort. Two different sorts of speech-act may therefore agree in the type of mental state that a speaker must be in to be sincere, and yet differ in their sincerity conditions because one of them requires the speaker to be in a state of a certain strength while the other does not (imploring and requesting, for instance, both express a desire, but the former expresses a stronger one). The import of clause (ii) is that epistemic modals trigger a certain kind of speech-act other than that of assertion.

According to clause (iii), epistemic modals can moreover function as speech-act modifiers. This distinguishes them from expressivist terms such as ‘gee’, whose use in an assertoric sentence $S$ does not prevent the speaker from making the assertion standardly made with $S$. In using ‘gee’ she rather performs a secondary expressive speech-act. But epistemic modals can cancel the assertoric speech-act which is normally performed in uttering $S$. If someone says ‘Perhaps, Fred will come’, she obviously does not assert that Fred will come. Truth-conditional accounts of epistemic modals say that she nevertheless asserts something and specify how the truth-conditions of the assertion result from the interplay between the epistemic modal and the embedded sentence. The above account assumes that no assertion has been made at all.

The cautious formulation of (iii)—‘a speaker does not generally assert something’—is due to those epistemic modals which signal a speaker’s certainty concerning a given

---

proposition. With respect to such expressions, it is an option to hold that apart from
signalling a state of certainty that $p$, a speaker also makes the ordinary assertion that $p$. If
one chooses this option, certain epistemic modals would function as speech-act modifiers
while others may function as triggers of additional speech-acts.

A further dimension in which sorts of speech-act may differ from one another concerns
the commitments that a speaker undergoes in performing an act of the respective sort. This
dimension may also be affected by epistemic modals. Assume, for illustration, the norm of
assertion is knowledge. Someone who makes an assertion will then undergo strong
commitments to appropriately defend the content of her assertion on being challenged by
someone else. But an utterance of ‘certainly $p$’ will commit her to present even stronger
justification when challenged, while an utterance of ‘perhaps $p$’ will commit a speaker only
to defences of a considerably weaker form. Often, the aspects of the commitments
undergone by performing a certain speech-act seem to be tightly connected to the sort
epistemic state signalled by the act. At least in many of the currently debated cases, the
commitments to a certain kind of defence can be explained with recourse to what type of
state is signalled. Whether this is true for all cases need not be decided here; it suffices to
indicate that such cases could easily be taken into account by a slight modification of the
proposed form of expressivism.

A final note: even though I usually talk as if epistemic modals signal the strength of a
speaker’s beliefs (i.e. the speaker’s credence in some proposition), my proposal does not
essentially presuppose a specific view on what sort of epistemic stances is correlated to
epistemic modals. It is a controversially debated question whether modals of necessity (e.g.
‘certainly’, ‘surely’) present the speaker as knowing the content in question, or as being
certain that the content is true, or as being in still some other epistemic state (analogously
for modals of possibility). This question need not be settled here because it equally arises
for expressivist and for truth-conditional accounts of epistemic modals. The accounts only
differ in what role the signalled state plays for the utterance. On the current view, a simple
utterance containing epistemic modals is generally not used to make an assertion and in
such a case lacks truth-conditions. The signalled state will therefore not feature in
specifications of truth conditions but rather in specifications of sincerity conditions.

---

7 This was stressed by Toulmin, ‘Probability’, pp. 28–35.
8 As argued for in T. Williamson, Knowledge and its Limits (Oxford UP, 2000).
9 For a survey and discussion of some common proposals see M. Huemer, ‘Epistemic
III. In Favour of Expressivism

a. Motivations for Expressivism

Before presenting a new argument for expressivism, I will briefly mention two initial motivations for it. The first consists in the observation that speakers do not seem to evaluate utterances containing epistemic modals in the dimension of truth and falsity (which is not to say that such utterances are not up for criticism; see section VI below). A second motivation stems from the fact that we often want to communicate that we have some other epistemic stance towards a proposition p apart from a full belief.\(^\text{10}\) Of course, we can do that by explicitly reporting on our epistemic state and by asserting, e.g., that we have a very low or a particularly high credence in a given proposition. However, by making such an assertion we will lay a focus on ourselves and our epistemic makeup, whereas often we want to focus on the content of our epistemic states. The situation is just the same with full beliefs: in straightforwardly asserting that p, a speaker focuses on the content of one of her beliefs. She could also explicitly report on the fact that she holds the belief that p, and she would thereby still present the content for evaluation. But it would be cumbersome if a speaker would always have to explicitly ascribe the belief that p to herself in order to put forth its content (that p) as a contribution to the conversation. Moreover, it would often be misleading and invite reactions about the mental state which is reported, instead of reactions towards the content of the state. So, language provides the means of putting forward the content of a belief without the detour of explicitly ascribing the belief to oneself. And it would equally be useful to have expressions at our disposal with which we directly signal that we have some other epistemic stances towards a proposition p apart from full belief. If epistemic modals work as speech-act modifiers, they play exactly this role.

b. An Argument for Expressivism: Solving Yalcin’s Puzzle

While the above paragraph is only meant to provide some motivation for expressivism, I will now present a new argument in favour of that position: expressivism provides a neat solution to Yalcin’s puzzle about epistemic modals.

The proposed expressivism straightforwardly explains why (8) is awkward and thereby explain why (2) is so too. ‘Perhaps’, as it occurs in

(11) Perhaps it is raining.

determines the speech-act performed by uttering (11). In uttering (11), you neither assert that it is raining, nor that you are uncertain whether it is raining or not. You do not assert anything, but you present yourself as being uncertain about the proposition (more precisely: as not being certain that its negation is true). Hence, the sentence is not apt for embedding under ‘suppose’, for the act of supposing is tightly connected to the act of asserting: we can only suppose what we could also assert to be the case.

So, expressivism offers a good explanation of the resistance of epistemic modals to be embedded in contexts such as ‘suppose’ or ‘if … then’. This reveals an important difference between expressivism about moral discourse (which takes moral vocabulary to be expressivist) and about epistemic modals. A standard case (the Frege-Geach-point) against moral expressivism just relies on embeddings of moral statements. ¹¹ Moral terms can straightforwardly be used in contexts which operate on the truth-conditional content of the embedded sentences, as is exemplified by sentences such as:

(12) Suppose lying is always wrong. Then it is also wrong to lie in order to help others.

(13) If lying is always wrong, it is also wrong to lie in order to help others.

Utterances of (12) or (13) can be evaluated just as any other ordinary hypothetical discourse (we even find them immediately acceptable). So, the very contexts that apparently provide a strong case against the latter kind of expressivism provide a case in favour of the former kind, because contrary to moral terms, epistemic modals do resist embedding in the relevant contexts.

IV. In Defence of Expressivism: Problematic Embeddings

Surely, there is more to be said on embedding of epistemic modals. Even though such modals embed awkwardly under ‘suppose’ or in the antecedents of conditionals, they can embed easily in many complex contexts. For instance, there are situations in which the following sentences are assertable:

(14) Perhaps he will come and perhaps he won’t.

(15) If Fred comes, I might leave.

To explain why such embeddings are admissible is a task for any expressivist account. The task can be met.

a. Strategy 1: Exploiting Ambiguities

First note that it is often debatable whether a modal expression as occurring in a particular sentence should be understood epistemically, or rather as expressing some kind of objective modality. If the latter is the case, all kinds of embeddings are admissible without any problem (unless one holds an expressivist position about every kind of modal talk, which is not what I would want to do). So, many embeddings of expressions that can be used to express epistemic modality may be acceptable because we rely on a non-epistemic reading of the modal expression. (Thus, we may, e.g., sometimes accept embeddings of ‘might’ in the antecedent of a conditional, because it allows for a non-epistemic reading.)

Let me very briefly address two issues concerning the ambiguity of modal expressions relevant to the present proposal:

(i) That many modals locutions can be understood either in an epistemic or in an objective sense seems to be the commonly accepted view in philosophy. However, the variety of objective modalities that can be relevant is often underestimated. On the one hand, many modals can be used to express either absolute or restricted metaphysical modality. Moreover, many philosophers acknowledge that some modals can be used to express objective chance. Thirdly, modals can be used to ascribe abilities. And even if

---

12 But see A. Thomasson, ‘Modal Expressivism and the Method of Metaphysics’, *Philosophical Topics*, forthcoming, for a defence of universal expressivism concerning modal talk.

abilities might reduce to some kind of restricted metaphysical possibility it is not obvious that they do. Fourthly, it is plausible that modals can be used to express statistical chance.

(ii) A modal expression which is often regarded as ambiguous between an epistemic and a non-epistemic reading is the word ‘might’. But Keith deRose argued that ‘might’ is, at least in contexts where it is followed by a verb phrase in the present tense, unequivocally epistemic. His argument is basically as follows.

(P.1) Sentences of the following form are never assertable:

(16) \( p \), but it might be that \( \neg p \).

(P.2) The best explanation of (P.1) is that ‘might’ unequivocally expresses epistemic possibility.

(C) Therefore, ‘might’ unequivocally expresses epistemic possibility.

If deRose’s conclusion is accepted, the possibility of embedding ‘might’-statements could never be explained in the way outlined above, which would rely on assuming ‘might’ to be ambiguous between epistemic and non-epistemic readings.

But the first premise of deRose’s argument (which he defends merely by an appeal to the ‘golden ears’ of ordinary speakers) is a dubious assumption about English. To see this, take the following line by Modest Mouse: ‘I might, and you might, but neither of us do, though, and neither of us will’. The line is a perfectly acceptable sentence and is naturally taken to express the ability on behalf the speaker to do the deed in question, while at the same time expressing his belief that he will not make use of that ability. Since it is easy to find many similar examples, it is possible to hold unto the ambiguity of ‘might’ in spite of deRose’s argument. The idea behind deRose’s argument even shows that it is advisable to hold unto the said ambiguity: for if ‘might’ were unequivocally epistemic, we indeed could not make sense of utterances of the form ‘I might, but I won’t’. Since we can make sense of it, ‘might’ is ambiguous. The same kind of ambiguity is exhibited by many, if not most, modal locutions.

b. Strategy 2: Combinations of Speech-acts

I have argued that expressions which can be used to express epistemic modalities can often also be used to express other kinds of modality, and that the resulting ambiguity can be


exploited to explain why such expressions can be embedded in many contexts. But even if
an epistemic reading of a modal expression is definitely employed, the expressivist can
account for the admissibility of certain embeddings. Let me briefly go through some
examples and sketch the available explanations.

**Conjunctions:** An utterance of (14) can be understood as a conjunctive speech-act
(consisting in two different acts of expressing uncertainty). In general, there is strong
linguistic evidence that speakers often use certain connectives in order to perform
conjunctive speech-acts;\(^\text{16}\) the conjunction ‘and’ can, e.g., be used to couple assertoric and
imperative sentences, as in:

(17) I consider this conversation over, and now close the door, please.

Thus, if the modals in (14) are understood in an epistemic sense, an expressivist can hold
that the embedding is admissible because the utterance of (14) involves a speech-act
conjunction. Similarly, we also use other connectives to combine sentences which are used
to perform speech-acts other than assertions.

**Conditionals:** As in (15), epistemic modals often embed smoothly in the consequent of
a conditional. An expressivist can account for such cases in at least two ways. Firstly, an
expressivist could try to exploit a possible scope distinction: the embedded ‘perhaps’ in
(15) can be understood as governing the whole conditional. The speaker then signals
uncertainty about whether he will leave if Fred comes, which seems to be an appropriate
understanding of (15).

Secondly, an expressivist might adopt the view that conditionals are used to make
conditional assertions.\(^\text{17}\) If that view is correct, they can equally be used to make
conditional speech-acts of some other kind, as e.g. a conditional expression of uncertainty.
In uttering the conditional, the speaker commits himself to the expressed uncertainty on the
condition formulated in the antecedent.

This view smoothly explains the fact that we embed, for instance, sentences used for
orders and questions in the consequent of conditionals (though not in the antecedent), as
illustrated by the following example:

(18) If every angel’s terrible, then why do you welcome them?

---


But notice that even if the suppositional view on conditionals is rejected, the phenomenon that imperatives, questions, etc. can be embedded in the consequent of a conditional has to be acknowledged and explained. Whatever the explanation might look like, it will be applicable to the statements containing epistemic modals (understood along the expressivist lines) as they occur in the consequents of conditionals.

**Logical Reasoning:** The original Frege-Geach-point addresses in particular the occurrence of allegedly expressivist terms in arguments. We can reason as follows:

(P.1) If Fred is coming, Freddy might also come.
(P.2) Fred is coming.
(C) So, Freddy might come.

On the expressivist account, an utterance of (C) is not an assertion, which may seem problematic if we think that the point of an argument is to license an assertion. But once more, this is an oversimplified view of language. Ordinary discourse involves arguments licensing the performance of a number of different speech-acts; just recall Winston Wolfe’s utterance ‘I think fast, I talk fast, and I need you guys to act fast if you want to get out of this. So, pretty please, with sugar on top, clean the [damned] car’. An adequate account of ordinary language will involve an account of the logic of speech-acts;¹⁸ such an account can then be used to explain how expressivist terms may occur in the conclusions of arguments.¹⁹ What particular account is correct for the above example depends on several factors. If, e.g., the conditional in (P.1) is regarded as a device of a conditional speech-act then the story will roughly be this:²⁰ with an utterance of (P.1), a speaker makes a conditional expression of her non-negligible credence in the proposition that Freddy is coming. The expression is made conditionally on accepting that Fred is coming, and since the latter is indeed accepted by the speaker in endorsing (P.2), the speaker is committed to the non-negligible degree of belief expressed with (C).

There may doubtless be further challenges for expressivism due to certain types of embeddings. But the main aim of this paper was to make a case in favour of expressivism and to show why the possibility of embedding such modals does not seriously endanger

---


¹⁹ For a partial account of the logic of epistemic modals along expressivist lines, see Forrest, ‘Probabilistic Modal Inferences’.

²⁰ On the following cp. Green’s account of illocutionary validity (‘Illocutionary Force and Semantic Content’, pp. 444–46).
expressivism. A thorough investigation of all possible embeddings has to be deferred to another occasion.

Let me conclude with an observation on just two other kinds of embeddings; epistemic modals do not only resist embedding in the context of ‘suppose’ or antecedents of conditionals, but also (i) in negations and (ii) in the scope of other epistemic modals. Expressivism provides an explanation for both observations:

Re (i): We normally do not use epistemic modals in the scope of negation. Sentences such as the following are defective:

(19) They did not perhaps / certainly win.

On the expressivist account, this is explainable by the fact that we do not use negation as a device of cancelling speech-acts (or triggering “opposite” speech-acts). Negation strongly tends to attach to the content of a sentence. (Compare the function of negation in imperatives: to utter ‘don’t do that’ is to perform a directive speech-act ordering the addressee to omit something; it is not to perform something like the opposite of a directive speech-act.) This explains the contrast between (?19) and

(20) Perhaps / certainly they did not win.

Unlike (?19), the latter is perfectly acceptable because the negation modifies the content towards the speaker positions herself in uttering (20).

Re (ii): We do not iterate epistemic modals. Utterances such as

(21) Fred will certainly perhaps come.

appear to be defective. Of course, we sometimes repeat epistemic modals. Such repetitions are, however, not iterations but merely used for emphasis. When someone says ‘perhaps, perhaps’, she emphasizes the uncertainty she expresses but she does not use one ‘perhaps’ as operating on the other. On standard truth-conditional accounts of epistemic modals, however, such repetitions could be read as iterations generating truth-conditions that differ from the non-repeated use of ‘perhaps’. If, e.g., an utterance of ‘perhaps p’ would be true

---

iff the speaker is uncertain whether $p$, then ‘perhaps, perhaps $p$’ should have a reading on which it is true iff the speaker is uncertain whether he is uncertain whether $p$. Under that reading, the truth-conditions of the utterance would differ from those of ‘perhaps $p$’. So, if such a truth-conditional account was correct, we should recognise an utterance of ‘perhaps, perhaps $p$’ as structurally ambiguous between the iteration and the emphasize reading. But we do not recognise any such ambiguity; this is natural if expressivism is true, for on that view, iterated epistemic modals do not make any literal sense, which is why the iteration reading is not an option.

V. In Defence of Expressivism: The Problem of Disagreement

Sometimes an utterance involving an epistemic modal becomes a matter of dispute and is either corrected or negated. But an expressivist holds that someone who makes such an utterance does not assert anything. That the utterance nevertheless can give rise to a disagreement seems a problematic datum for expressivism.

Let us try to pinpoint the problem. Assume, Jean says:

(22) Perhaps, Paul will come.

The utterance can be criticised in a variety of ways, e.g. by the following responses:

(23) No, he won’t come. He told me he’ll stay home.

(24) No, he cannot come. He had an accident and is at the hospital.

(25) You know he won’t come. You just want to calm me down.

Or, to use another well-known sort of example, suppose Jean has sufficient information to conclude that a certain door has been sealed shut for years, but fails to draw the conclusion and says

(26) Perhaps, he left through the back door.

Since Jean had the relevant information, her utterance seems criticisable.

The problem for expressivism is this: in the examples, Jean has the epistemic attitudes that the expressivist takes her to express with (22) or (26). Nevertheless, disputes can arise,
which shows that additional information or the attitudes of people other than the speaker play a role in evaluating the utterances. How could an expressivist account for this?

Firstly, notice that it seems nearly always possible to resist corrections and denials of modal statements by emphasizing that the utterance was in accord with one’s own epistemic makeup. However stubborn or nitpicking it may seem, Jean may in response to (23) or (24)—more on (25) and (26) below—just stick to her guns: ‘Well, I merely said perhaps he might come. And I just didn’t know he won’t.’

Nevertheless, corrections are often accepted and an expressivist should explain why. For a start, notice that denial is generally a much more complex issue than it may first seem. Consider the following straightforward account of negation:

\[ \text{NEG} \text{ In uttering the negation of a sentence } S, \text{ a speaker asserts the negation of what was said by uttering } S \text{ (i.e., she asserts the negation of the proposition expressed by } S \text{ in the given context).} \]

While NEG may describe the standard function of negation, there are perfectly ordinary cases which require a different treatment. Take the following bits of conversation:

(27) A: Your cur bit my child. B: She’s not a cur, she’s a dog.

(28) A: I trapped two mongooses. B: No, you didn’t; you trapped two mongoose.

(29) A: I think it will rain. B: No, it won’t.

In none of these cases should the object of denial be understood as what was said by the initial utterance. Instead, the respective denial aims at (27) a (conventional) implicature of the utterance, or (28) at the formulation itself which conflicts with some linguistic rules, or finally (29) at a proposition expressed by a component of the sentence uttered.

The latter case is directly relevant here: disputes often start from utterances in which a speaker explicitly attributes to herself a certain belief. However, criticisms of such utterances are rarely meant to deny that the speaker has the relevant belief. Instead, they usually turn on the content of the belief in question. This even happens when beliefs are attributed to other people, as the following exchange illustrates:

---

22 Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing this point.
(30) A: Fred thinks it will rain. B: No, it won’t rain.

Now, the proposed form of expressivism does not deny that utterances involving epistemic modals put forward propositions. It just denies that the epistemic modal affects what proposition is propounded and rather takes it to determine what attitude towards the proposition is expressed. But even if no assertion is made, a proposition is put on the table for evaluation and many moves in disputes about such utterances should be understood as being concerned with the truth of that proposition. In such a debate, different sorts of statements can be fruitfully exchanged: some which explicitly attribute propositional attitudes to the speakers (‘I am sure that \( p \))’, some which express such attitudes (‘Certainly \( p \))’, and some which are just plain assertions concerning the subject matter (‘\( p \))’. This explains why (23) is an adequate response to (22).

But there are more sources for dispute: as was pointed out earlier, most modals are ambiguous between epistemic and certain non-epistemic readings. But statements about objective possibility are often a matter of genuine dispute: what the statistical chances of a certain outcome are or whether someone has a certain ability are substantial questions concerning non-epistemic possibilities. An expressivist can hold that some disputes involving modal statements are best interpreted as pivoting about non-epistemic possibilities; this explains why (24) can be a proper response to (22).

In both cases addressed so far, the issue was whether some proposition involved in (one interpretation of) the utterance of (22) is true. But the criticism of an utterance can also concern its sincerity. This is why, according to expressivism, (25) is a sensible criticism of (22): what is denied is not the proposition put forward by (22) but rather that the sincerity conditions of the utterance are fulfilled.

Finally, consider (26). Here, a further dimension of rational interchange is relevant: apart from the content or the sincerity of an utterance, criticism can also concern its epistemic responsibility. If someone participates in a conversation, she can be expected to try to meet certain standards of rationality and epistemic caution. This is commonly acknowledged in the case of assertion: an assertion can not only be criticised for being false or insincere, but also for being unwarranted. But rules of rational discourse equally apply to speech-acts of other kinds. Speakers are also criticised for posing all too obvious questions, for commanding tasks that they could know to be unaccomplishable, etc.

Expressivism can therefore allow that in expressing any attitude towards a proposition, a speaker may reasonably be expected to have made some efforts in order to cultivate her epistemic system. In particular, for the expression of a (full or partial) belief to be responsible the speaker should have paid attention to all relevant parts of her evidence. Accordingly, a speaker can be blamed for expressing a (partial or full) belief in a proposition if she could have known from her evidence that the proposition is false. Thus,
even though Jean did not actually know the door was sealed, her utterance of (26) is criticisable because she had the relevant information. If she rejects the criticism by saying ‘I just didn’t know it,’ one may reasonably reply: ‘Well, you should have known.’ Moreover, in many situations we expect a speaker to take into account not only her present evidence, but also easily available evidence, etc., which gives rise to further possibilities of criticism.26

To sum up, expressivism can account for a rich variety of possible disagreement concerning statements containing epistemic modals along the dimensions of (i) the truth of a proposition propounded in an utterance, (ii) the sincerity of the utterance, and (iii) the epistemic responsibility of the utterance.

VI. Conclusion

It is time to take stock. I began with a puzzle about epistemic modals: instances of ‘p & perhaps ¬p’ are neither assertable nor embeddable in the contexts ‘suppose’ or ‘if’. The solution proposed by Yalcin—he regards such instances as contradictory—does not get to the ground of the puzzle because the failure of embeddability already occurs with statements of the simpler form ‘perhaps p’ which typically are not contradictory. I then developed an expressivist view about epistemic modals and showed how it can solve the puzzle. Finally, I discussed two objections: at first glance, it may seem that expressivism is at odds with (i) the fact that statements containing epistemic modals can be embedded in many contexts (even though they resist embeddings under ‘suppose’ and ‘if’), and (ii) the fact that such statements can be rejected for reasons that go beyond the epistemic system of the speaker. But I showed that an expressivist can account both for embeddability and dispute.27

26 This point relates to Hacking’s hulk example and the like; see I. Hacking, ‘Possibility’, *Philosophical Review*, 76 (1967), pp. 143–68, at p. 148.
27 I am indebted to Moritz Schulz for invaluable discussions of the topic, to two anonymous referees of this journal for their very helpful comments, and to the audience of a presentation of this paper that I gave in Hamburg. I’d like to thank the DFG for financial support.