

LINGUISTIC CONVENTIONALISM AND THE TRUTH-CONTRAST THESIS

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According to linguistic conventionalism, necessities are to be explained in terms of the conventionally adopted rules that govern the use of linguistic expressions. A number of influential arguments against this view concerns the ‘Truth-Contrast Thesis’. This is the claim that necessary truths are fundamentally different from contingent ones since they are not made true by ‘the (worldly) facts’. Instead, they are supposed to be something like ‘true in virtue of meaning’. This thesis is widely held to be a core commitment of the conventionalist position, and the view is frequently rejected on the grounds that this thesis is untenable. I argue that this line of reasoning is mistaken. While the thesis should be rejected (although not for the reasons often given), it is not, I argue, entailed by linguistic conventionalism – nor was it invariably accepted by the paradigmatic conventionalists.

Keywords: conventionalism, truth in virtue of meaning, truth by convention, analyticity, logical positivism, necessity.

I. INTRODUCTION

‘The philosophical problem of necessity’, Dummett writes, ‘is twofold: what is its source and how do we recognize it?’ (1959: 327). According to linguistic conventionalism, the solution to this problem goes roughly as follows: The source of necessity lies in the conventions which govern our linguistic expressions, and we can recognize necessities insofar as we can reflect upon these conventions.¹

One prevalent reason for rejecting this view concerns what I will refer to as the ‘Truth-Contrast Thesis’ (TCT). This is the claim that, as far as truth is concerned, necessary truths are fundamentally different from contingent ones since they are not ‘made true by the (worldly) facts’. Instead, they are

¹ Paradigmatic conventionalists include logical positivists such as Carnap (1937, 1947) and Ayer (1936a). More recent advocates include Hans-Johann Glock (2003) Alan Sidelle (1989; 2009), Amie Thomasson (2007, 2013), Brett Topey (2019) and Jared Warren (2015).

supposed to be something like ‘true in virtue of meaning’, or perhaps not really statements and therefore not, strictly speaking, *true* at all.

Linguistic conventionalism is widely held to be committed to some version of TCT. This thesis, however, is said to fall victim to a number of decisive objections, and so, according to a standard line of argument, linguistic conventionalism must be rejected. My overarching aim in this article is to argue that this line of argument is unsuccessful. In the course of doing so, I shall argue for the following four more specific claims:

- (1) A number of standard arguments against TCT are unsuccessful.
- (2) TCT should nevertheless be rejected, and so, therefore, should certain attempts to revive linguistic conventionalism that are explicitly based on some version of this thesis.
- (3) Rejecting TCT does not, however, undermine linguistic conventionalism in general.
- (4) TCT was not, as a matter of historical fact, universally endorsed by paradigmatic conventionalists such as the logical positivists.

I will argue for these claims in the order stated. First, however, I shall say a bit more about TCT.

II. THE TRUTH-CONTRAST THESIS

Fundamentally, TCT is just the negative claim that necessary truths are not true in the same way as contingent truths, since they are not made true by ‘the (worldly) facts’ or ‘the way the world is’.² More specific versions of the thesis emerge, however, when it is combined with some positive account of what the truth (or assertibility) of necessary truths consists in. Here we can distinguish at least four different (but, to some extent, potentially overlapping) proposals that play a role in the literature on linguistic conventionalism.

First, there is the idea that necessary truths are *true in virtue of meaning*, or, in Paul Boghossian’s terminology, *metaphysically analytic*. Unlike contingent sentences which, if true, owe their truth partly to what they mean and partly to the facts, meaning *by itself* is somehow supposed to make necessary sentences true (Boghossian 1996: 364–5). If, moreover, we take linguistic meaning to be a product of our linguistic conventions, this amounts to saying that necessary truths are somehow made true by such conventions.³

² Advocates of TCT *might* also endorse the claim that ‘truth’ is straightforwardly ambiguous (cf. e.g. Kaufmann 1944: 66), but, as Timothy Williamson points out (2007: 58), TCT does not entail such ambiguity.

³ While this is certainly not the only possible reading of the phrase ‘true in virtue of meaning’, it figures prominently in the literature on conventionalism (see e.g. Sider (2011: 98) and Williamson (2007: 58) in addition to Boghossian’s article).

Second, necessary truths are sometimes said to be *true by convention*. Insofar as this slogan is kept distinct from that of ‘truth in virtue of meaning’ (which is not always the case), it tends to refer to the suggestion that necessary truths are true because we have conventionally stipulated that they are to be treated as true come what may (thereby conferring a meaning on certain expressions by implicit definition). According to this view, then, necessary truths owe their truth to conventions in a particularly direct way.

A third version of TCT is the ‘normativist’ position that Ayer advocated for a while (Ayer 1936b: 20). According to this view, necessary ‘truths’ are not properly speaking statements and therefore not really *true* at all. Instead, they are *norms* which prescribe how linguistic expressions are to be used.

Since this position holds that we are mistaken when we ascribe truth to necessary claims, it plainly sits awkwardly with our ordinary ways of speaking. To mitigate this, a fourth position, which might be labelled ‘deflationary normativism’, maintains that necessary sentences can consistently be regarded as true even if they are fundamentally norms rather than descriptive statements.⁴ We just need to make it clear that ‘truth’, in such cases, must be understood along strictly deflationary lines. Crucially, however, the deflationary normativist still insists that necessary statements function fundamentally as prescriptions rather than descriptions. In contrast with contingent claims, therefore, their assertibility, and hence their truth (construed in a deflationary way), does not involve a truthmaker of any kind. This is important, defenders of this proposal maintain, since it allows them to avoid some of the traditional objections to linguistic conventionalism (cf. e.g. Glock 2003: 161).

These various suggestions are, however, united in their acceptance of TCT since they all endorse the negative claim that necessary claims, unlike contingent ones, are not made true by the facts or what the world is like. This, moreover, is meant to demystify the notion of necessity. After all, if the reason why necessary claims are true (or assertible) has nothing to do with the worldly facts, then it is no wonder that they remain true (or assertible) irrespective of what the world is like.

III. STANDARD OBJECTIONS TO TCT

TCT — and in particular the versions of TCT which appeal to truth in virtue of meaning or truth by convention — has played a prominent role in the dismissal of linguistic conventionalism. A widespread line of reasoning (cf. e.g. Boghossian 1996: 364–6, Sider 2011: 100–4; and Hale 2013: 120–7) takes it to be a core commitment of the conventionalist position that linguistic

⁴ Hans-Johann Glock (2003) and Amie Thomasson (2007, 2013) have both advocated this view.

conventions can somehow make sentences true (either by direct stipulation or via stipulations of meaning), and then proceeds to argue that this idea is misguided.

I shall refer to this more specific idea — i.e. the combination of TCT and the positive claim that necessary truths are made true by linguistic conventions — as ‘TCT⁺’. While I agree that TCT⁺ should be rejected — since, as I shall argue in the next section, TCT should be rejected generally — certain prominent arguments against it are not decisive. Establishing this is important since these arguments could be reformulated so as to target the conventionalist position even if, as I shall argue in section V, this position isn’t committed to TCT. In this section, therefore, I consider and reject three influential arguments against TCT⁺: First, there is the suggestion that this thesis is undermined by the distinction between sentences and propositions; second, there is the argument from other languages; and third, the argument from pre-linguistic times.

III.1. *Sentences and propositions*

One common allegation is that linguistic conventionalism, and TCT⁺ specifically, owes it all to a failure to appreciate the distinction between sentences and propositions. Here is Elliott Sober making the point: ‘Given standard English usage, the sentence “bachelors are unmarried” is true; if English had involved different conventions about what words mean, the sentence might have meant something different, and so it might have been false. However, the *proposition* expressed by the English sentence — that bachelors are unmarried — does not depend for its truth on how English works’ (2000: 247).⁵

The point, of course, is not that while conventions might suffice to make the *sentence* true, they are not responsible for the truth of the *proposition*. Rather, acknowledging that the truth of the proposition is independent of the linguistic conventions leads naturally to the conclusion that such conventions do not fully account for the truth of the sentence either. The truth of the sentence, after all, is surely partly due to the truth of the proposition.

It remains to be shown, however, that the truth of the proposition could not depend on linguistic conventions. This cannot simply be taken for granted in this context, and there is a danger of appealing to an essentially question-begging conception of propositions here. Notably, the opponent of conventionalism cannot just insist that propositions are abstract, language-independent entities which are already there and possess truth-values and modal statuses prior to being correlated with sentences. This picture would certainly undermine the conventionalist position, but it begs the question since, as Arthur Pap puts it, ‘the advocate of the linguistic theory is likely to scoff at the suggestion

⁵ Cf. also Ewing (1940: 219–20), Lewis (1946: 96–7), Pap (1958: 169–70), Lewy (1976: 58), Yablo (1992: 878), Boghossian (1996: 365) and Hale (2013: 120).

that necessity is an intrinsic property of extralinguistic propositions' (1958: 166; cf. also Warren 2015: 90).⁶

Unless some such picture of propositions is presupposed, however, it is not immediately obvious that their truth could not be due to linguistic conventions. Merely drawing the sentence-proposition distinction, therefore, does not undermine TCT⁺. A further argument is needed to show that linguistic conventions could not be responsible for the truth of necessary propositions.

III.2. *English chauvinism*

Sober provides such a further argument by drawing on interlinguistic considerations: 'There are bachelors in France who would very much resent the English chauvinism involved in saying that the way *English* works affects whether (French) bachelors are unmarried. "Quelle impertinence!" one can hear them exclaim. The fact that bachelors are unmarried is no more dependent on English than it is on French' (2000: 247).⁷

The argument can be paraphrased as follows (where *E* is some English sentence, and *F* a synonymous French one):

- (P1) The proposition expressed by *E* = the proposition expressed by *F*.
- (P2) The conventions of English are not responsible for the truth of the proposition expressed by *F*.
- (C) The conventions of English are not responsible for the truth of the proposition expressed by *E*.

I will not contest the validity of this argument. (P1), moreover, is conceded by assumption, so the question is whether we should accept (P2).

Sober's reasoning appears to be we must accept (P2) since denying it would amount to 'English chauvinism', and it certainly would be chauvinistic to say that French is governed by the conventions of English. However, rejecting (P2) does not require us to put matters in this way. It is enough to say that English and French might *share* some linguistic conventions, or rely on conventions which *share those features* that are (supposedly) responsible for the truth of the proposition in question. After all, if we are really dealing with synonymous sentences, we should expect a great deal of overlap between the relevant conventions of English and those of French (since that is the natural explanation for how the sentences got to be synonymous in the first place).

⁶ Sober (2000: 247) cites a passage from Boghossian (1996: 380) which he takes to establish that the argument he presents works regardless of what propositions are like. This, however, is misleading since that passage is concerned with a somewhat different point. See Giannoni (1971: 104) and García-Carpintero and Pérez Otero (2009) for defences of linguistic conventionalism that explicitly rely on rejecting a Platonist conception of propositions.

⁷ Cf. also Ewing (1940: 217–9), Lazerowitz (1972: 235), Moore (1954: 311–2) and Lewy (1976: 58).

We would, of course, expect the *expressions* treated by the conventions of English to differ from those treated by the conventions of French. But unless what is supposed to account for the truth of the proposition concerns these particular expressions, there are not really any grounds for the accusation of English chauvinism here.

It is noteworthy, therefore, that advocates of linguistic conventionalism typically insist that it is rather unimportant which expressions are used. Here, for instance, is Carnap: ‘From the syntactical point of view it is irrelevant whether one of two symbolical languages makes use, let us say, of the sign “&” where the other uses “•” (in word-languages: whether the one uses “and” and the other “und”) so long as the rules of formation and transformation are analogous.’ (Carnap 1937: 6)

Indeed, Carnap stresses that whether a sentence is analytic, or an inference valid, is fundamentally a matter of the *formal structure* of the language, which is what notational variants *have in common* (1937: 5–6). Carnap, then, would not be troubled by the objection that, say, the rules of English cannot explain the validity of conjunction elimination since this rule is valid in French as well.⁸

The upshot is that the conventionalist can reject (P2) in the reconstruction of Sober’s argument. Consequently, such interlinguistic considerations do not suffice to establish that linguistic conventions cannot be responsible for the truth of necessary propositions.

III.3. *Pre-linguistic times*

Before moving on to what I take to be the *right* reasons for abandoning TCT, I will consider a third influential reason for rejecting TCT⁺. In ‘Analyticity Reconsidered’, Boghossian objects to the notion of metaphysical analyticity as follows:

What is far more mysterious is the claim that the *truth of what the sentence expresses* depends on the fact that it is expressed by that sentence, so that we can say that what is expressed wouldn’t have been true at all had it not been for the fact that it is expressed by that sentence. Are we really to suppose that, prior to our stipulating a meaning for the sentence

Either snow is white or it isn’t.

it wasn’t the case that either snow was white or it wasn’t? Isn’t it overwhelmingly obvious that this claim was true *before* such an act of meaning, and that it would have been true even if no one had thought about it, or chosen it to be expressed by one of our sentences? (Boghossian 1996: 365)⁹

⁸ Cf. also Strawson (1952: 10–11), who makes a similar reply to this objection.

⁹ Cf. also Williamson (2007: 71–2) and Sider (2011: 102).

There are a number of things going on in this passage, and though I do think it provides the starting point for a cogent objection against metaphysical analyticity, it also suggests some less decisive ones.

First of all, the insistence that ‘the claim’ was true before there were any languages around could be read as suggesting, again, that the truth of the proposition is independent of our linguistic conventions. As we have seen, however, this is not something which can be taken for granted in this context. More generally, it is not exactly ‘overwhelmingly obvious’ that *the claim* was true before any linguistic stipulations took place since it is at least contestable whether there were any claims prior to the existence of languages.

On a more charitable reading, though, the point is rather that snow was white or not white before there were any languages around. Still, it is not entirely straightforward to draw any conclusions about TCT⁺ from this. Here is Putnam voicing his misgivings about this line of reasoning, albeit in a different context:

This short way with the issue reminds one of Lenin’s (disastrously incompetent) polemical book against Machian positivism. Lenin simply claimed that positivists, since they took human sensations as the class of truth-makers for all propositions (I am using the present-day terminology, not Lenin’s, of course), could not accept the statement that the solar system existed before there were human beings.¹⁰ This argument simply assumes — what the positivists of course deny — that the positivists cannot *interpret* ‘the solar system existed before there were human beings’ in their rationally reconstructed “language of science”. (Putnam 2007: 158)

While I think a more charitable reading is available, the passage from Boghossian might be read as dismissing metaphysical analyticity in a similarly ‘short way’. Read along those lines, the complaint would be that adherents of TCT⁺ cannot accept the (obviously true) statement that snow was white or not white before there were any linguistic conventions. Nothing has been said, however, to rule out the suggestion that the sentence ‘snow was white or not white before there were any linguistic conventions’ is made true by our *current* linguistic conventions, which is presumably what adherents of metaphysical analyticity would want to say anyway.¹¹

While there are potential difficulties with this rejoinder, it does show that merely making the point that snow was white or not white before there were any linguistic conventions around, does not, without further argument, suffice to undermine TCT⁺.

¹⁰ I suspect that this is somewhat apocryphal. Lenin does not, to my knowledge, make this exact claim, although he does make some similar ones (cf. 1948: 78–9).

¹¹ Notably, this line of response has been invoked when responding to the objection that conventionalism ends up making necessary truths contingent (cf. Wright 1985 and Sidelle 2009).

IV. IN FAVOUR OF ORDINARY TRUTH

Neither a bare appeal to propositions, nor interlinguistic considerations, nor platitudes about pre-linguistic times, then, suffice to undermine TCT⁺. However, in this section I argue that this thesis should nevertheless be rejected since TCT more generally is untenable.

It is often objected against TCT⁺ that the special kind of truth — i.e. ‘truth in virtue of meaning’ or ‘truth by convention’ — that necessary truths are said to possess is hopelessly obscure (cf. e.g. Waismann 1949: 27 and Boghossian 1996: 365). While perfectly reasonable, this objection is inevitably somewhat inconclusive. An advocate of TCT⁺ will be quick to respond that even if they haven’t succeeded in spelling out this peculiar kind of truth so far, this is no reason to stop trying (although eventually a pessimistic induction presumably becomes warranted).

I will suggest that a more conclusive objection comes from the other direction: Instead of arguing that we lack an adequate account of the *special* kind of truth which necessary truths are said to possess, I shall argue that we lack an account of *ordinary* truth which justifies restricting this notion to contingent truths. I shall argue, that is, that insofar as we want to say that contingent truths are made true by ‘the facts’ or ‘the world’, we have no reason to refrain from doing so in the case of — at least some — necessary truths. This argument, if successful, would undermine not just TCT⁺ (with its claim that linguistic conventions somehow act as truthmakers for necessary truths), but TCT more generally — including the normativist lines — since it targets the core *negative* claim that necessary truths are not made true by the facts in the ordinary way.

This is where a more charitable reading of the passage from Boghossian provides the starting point for a cogent objection. For rather than making the point that the linguistic conventionalist cannot endorse certain platitudes about pre-linguistic times, this passage can be read as a reminder of the trivial point that the colour of snow is not influenced by linguistic matters. This can then form the basis of the following argument:

- (P1) The colour of snow is a language-independent feature of the world.
- (P2) ‘Snow is white or snow is not white’ is made true (at least in part) by the colour of snow.
- (C) So, ‘Snow is white or snow is not white’ is made true (at least in part) by a language-independent feature of the world.

Now, as it stands, (P2) blatantly begs the question against an advocate of TCT. The problem, though, is that it is difficult to find a principled reason for denying this (assuming that we are happy to talk about truthmaking at all).

Consider the disjunction ‘snow is white or snow is purple’. Presumably, we may say that this sentence is true because one of its disjuncts is true, and that this disjunct is true because snow is indeed white. In the absence of a more

specific account of what truthmaking is supposed to be, I take it that this is what is meant by saying that this sentence is made true by the colour of snow (or the fact that snow is white).

On the face of it, however, we can say exactly the same thing about ‘snow is white or snow is not white’. This suggests the following argument for (P₂) (where ‘*S*’ is the sentence ‘snow is white or snow is not white’, and ‘*D*’ the sentence ‘snow is white’):

- (P₃) *S* is true because it has a true disjunct *D*.
- (P₄) *D* is made true (at least in part) by the colour of snow.
- (C) So, *S* is made true (at least in part) by the colour of snow.

I don’t expect advocates of TCT to be convinced by this argument either, but it adds further pressure since it pinpoints what they must deny. (P₄), after all, is uncontroversial; so, provided that the argument is valid, (P₃) must be the culprit.

Now, the validity of the argument might be questioned insofar as it seems to assume that truthmaking is a transitive relation, which is contestable (cf. Rodriguez-Pereyra 2015: 523). However, the argument does not require that truthmaking is transitive in general. Rather, it requires only the much more limited — and much less controversial — principle that when a sentence is true because it has a true disjunct, then what makes the disjunct true also makes the whole sentence true. It seems safe to assume that anyone who accepts (P₃) — and so accepts that *S* is indeed true because it has a true disjunct — will also accept the required inference here. It remains the case, therefore, that an adherent of TCT must reject this premise.

Initially, though, denying (P₃) might seem like a reasonable option. While the truth of *D* certainly *suffices* for the truth of *S* (given its truth-conditions), that, plainly, is not yet to say that this is what explains why *S* is true. Analogously, the fact that I’m vaccinated against a particular disease might suffice to ensure that I won’t get ill, but it need not be the reason why I don’t (I might never get in contact with the pathogen). A natural suggestion, in this case, is that the vaccine is not the reason here because we don’t get the appropriate counterfactual sensitivity: I would have been healthy even if I hadn’t been vaccinated. This, then, would seem to give the adherent of TCT a reason to deny (P₃). For it is clear that *S* would have been true even if *D* had been false, thus suggesting that *D* being true is not the reason why *S* is true after all.

Something like this appears to be Amie Thomasson’s line of thought. Thomasson advocates (2007, 2013) a version of what I am calling ‘deflationary normativism’, according to which both modal claims and analytic claims are prescriptive rather than descriptive. Although she is prepared to accept that analytic claims are true ‘in a straightforwardly truth-conditional sense’ (2007: 147), she insists that this does not show that they require — or indeed

have — truthmakers, which is, she maintains, the crucial issue in this context (2007: 136–7).

Assessing this claim is somewhat difficult since Thomasson does not provide an account of just what it takes for something to be a truthmaker for a sentence. It is, therefore, not entirely clear what the difference between ‘having a truthmaker’ and ‘being true in a straightforwardly truth-conditional sense’ is supposed to be.

My best attempt to make sense of this, however, is to utilize the above distinction between being *sufficient* for truth and *explaining* truth. Since, as we have seen, the colour of snow suffices to make *S* true, *S* could be said to be true in a straightforwardly truth-conditional sense, but this is not yet to say that the colour of snow acts as a truthmaker here since this might be redundant in the proper explanation for why *S* is true. This is, I think, what Thomasson has in mind when she, after conceding that ‘all bachelors are male’ is straightforwardly true, goes on to write: ‘But actual bachelors and their features are not truthmakers for the claim, for the analytic claim is guaranteed to be true regardless of any features of the world: it is vacuously true even if there are no bachelors whatsoever’ (Thomasson 2007: 148).

I am not, however, convinced that there is anything here which gives us reason to say that ‘all bachelors are male’ lacks a truthmaker whereas, say, ‘all humans are mortal’ has one. Certainly, universal claims are somewhat awkward for truthmaker terminology *in general*, but Thomasson needs to identify a contrast.

The point about the analytic claim being true even if there are no bachelors does not identify such a contrast since that holds equally for ‘all humans are mortal’. But the only suggestion, apart from this, is that there is no truthmaker since the sentence is ‘true regardless of any features of the world’. If, however, this is just to say that the sentence is *necessary*, then this isn’t satisfactory either. Being contingently true cannot be the *criterion* for having a truthmaker, since that would make the question that Thomasson is interested in trivial.

A more promising route is to invoke the notion of counterfactual insensitivity to justify the inference from ‘this sentence would have been true regardless of the features of the world’ to ‘the features of the world do not explain why it is true’.

Let us now probe this idea a bit further. Because of the awkwardness of universal claims, I will switch back to the sentence *S*.¹² The claim, then, is that the colour of snow is not what makes *S* true since it would have been true even if the colour of snow had been different — just like the vaccine is not what makes me disease-free if I would have been disease-free regardless.

¹² It should be noted, though, that Thomasson sets logical and mathematical truths aside (2007: 135), so it’s not clear what she would say about instances of excluded middle. Still, the main lessons below carry over to the cases of analyticity which she does discuss.

However, two cases should be distinguished: Do we get counterfactual insensitivity because there is an independently available explanation *even in the actual scenario* (as in the vaccination case), or because a *new* explanation becomes available in the counterfactual scenario? The sentence ‘Germany or Argentina won the 2014 World Cup’ is true, and what makes it true is presumably that Germany won it. This is so *even though* the sentence would have been true had they not won it (since they played Argentina in the final). Here counterfactual insensitivity gives us no reason to reject our original explanation, and it is clear why: In the counterfactual scenario a *different* explanation is available.

The question, then, is which category our instance of excluded middle falls into, and it is quite clear, I think, that there is no reason, on the face of it at least, not to put it in the second category. The reason why we have counterfactual insensitivity here is that a different explanation is available in the counterfactual scenario: If the colour of snow had been different, then this alternative colour would have made the second disjunct of *S* true.¹³

What this shows is that merely pointing to counterfactual insensitivity does not give us reason to abandon (P₃). If, therefore, the adherent of TCT wants to reject it (as they have to), they must hold, more specifically, that there is an independent reason why *S* is true which has nothing to do with the colour of snow — indeed, nothing to do with either disjunct being true — e.g. that it has been stipulated to be true, or that there is a norm which says that it shouldn’t be denied.

This, however, is the point at which TCT unravels. First, the proposal now sits awkwardly with Occam’s Razor: Not only have we introduced two distinct routes to truth for disjunctions — by having (at least) one true disjunct or by some special reason posited by TCT (which, it may be noted, certainly does *not* suffice to make either disjunct true)¹⁴ — the first route *alone* seems perfectly adequate to account for the truths that need accounting for.

Second, and more importantly, no such *additional* route can, at this point, solve the problem which TCT was meant to solve. The strategy, recall, was to explain necessity in terms of the special kind of truth (or normative status) which is conferred on the sentence independently of what the facts are. In light of the above, however, it must be conceded that there is, nevertheless, a fact which suffices to make a sentence like *S* true. But once we make this concession, we realize that not only *is* there some such fact, there is *necessarily* some such fact, and this is something the additional kind of truth is quite unable to explain.

¹³ I am setting aside complications having to do with vagueness. Also, I am assuming that in possible worlds in which snow does not exist, this would suffice to make the second disjunct true.

¹⁴ Sider also presents an objection along these lines (2011: 104). Azzouni claims that the objection begs the question (2014: 47) but provides little detail.

To see this, consider the following: We ordinarily think that when a disjunction is true, this is either:

- (i) . . . because the first disjunct is true.
- (ii) . . . because the second disjunct is true.
- (iii) . . . because both disjuncts are true.

An adherent of TCT cannot think that this list is exhaustive since whichever of these scenarios obtains, it is going to be because the world is the way it is. They must therefore add something like:

- (iv) . . . because it is stipulated to be true (or accepted as a rule or the like).

The problem, though, is that *S* appears to be necessarily true even if we explicitly restrict ourselves to (i)–(iii), thus undermining our reason for introducing (iv) in the first place. In other words, it is *necessarily* true that one of (i)–(iii) will hold in the case of *S* (given its meaning), and (iv) is powerless to explain this fact. Consequently, *adding* (iv) as an additional route to truth/assertibility has not provided us with the sought-after explanation of necessity.

The upshot is that the motivation behind TCT was misguided from the beginning. The idea was that some sentences are necessary because they are true/assertible for reasons that have nothing to do with what the facts are. I have argued, first, that we are forced to concede that (at least some) such sentences are, in any case, *also* true/assertible for ordinary, factual reasons, and, second, that they remain true — and necessarily so — even if we restrict ourselves to such reasons, thereby making the hypothesis that there is some additional, special reason why they are true/assertible redundant. TCT, therefore, should be rejected.

Before moving on to why this conclusion does not undermine linguistic conventionalism, it is worth elaborating on a few points. First, note that unlike the arguments against TCT⁺ in section III, the argument in this section does not assume that advocates of TCT endorse a particular positive account of what the truth/assertibility of a necessary claim consists in. It does not assume, for instance, that they take linguistic conventions to be truthmakers for such claims. Advocates of TCT need not endorse this specific suggestion,¹⁵ but they must endorse the key negative claim that necessary truths, unlike contingent ones, are not made true by the facts. If the argument presented here is sound, however, this claim should be rejected.

Second, since this argument focuses on *S* as a counterexample to TCT, it might be suggested that someone sympathetic to TCT could admit that TCT does not hold for *all* necessary truths and retreat, instead, to some restricted reformulation of TCT. Notably, they might hold that although at

¹⁵ Thomasson, for instance, explicitly rejects it (2007: 148).

least some *particular* necessary truths (like S) are made true by the facts, we should still invoke something like truth by convention to explain the truth of *general* statements of logical laws or truths in pure mathematics.

Certainly, the line of argument presented here does not show that there is no room for a special account of truth within any restricted domain. My concern is squarely with linguistic conventionalism as a general account of necessity (cf. Dummett's question from the introduction), and the main point, for my purposes, is that since TCT does not hold generally for necessary truths, it does not provide a sound basis for such an account. The route to demystifying necessity, that is, does not go via denying that necessary truths are 'made true by the facts'.

This discussion, then, leaves open that some restricted reformulation of TCT could be useful for other purposes. That said, I do think we have some reason, at this point, to be somewhat sceptical of the suggestion that truth by convention or some other version of TCT should be invoked to explain the validity of general laws of logic. After all, if the instances of a putative law are assessable as true or false by ordinary factual criteria, then it is not altogether clear that there is a further question about the validity of the general law that we are free to settle by convention. We might worry, for instance, that in laying down such a further convention we could end up stipulating that a certain general law is to hold true even though there are instances which are not true — perhaps even false — when judged by factual criteria.

Now, a conventionalist might not be overly troubled by the fact that we could end up with a strange or inconsistent logic (cf. Carnap's principle of tolerance; 1937: §17), but an opponent might point out that if the instances of a putative law can, in any case, *also* be assessed by ordinary factual criteria, then we can, it seems, sensibly ask whether all these instances are guaranteed to come out true according to those criteria alone. The opponent might then insist that this is what *they* mean by a 'logical law' and complain that positing some additional route to truth will not help explain the validity of logical laws in this sense.¹⁶

Finally, it is worth noting that the considerations in this section also spell trouble for Brett Topey's recent defence of conventionalism. Topey argues that the conventionalist should accept the seemingly unpalatable conclusion that 'certain facts about the world outside us (such as the fact that all vixens are foxes) obtain by convention alone' (2019: 1744). Essentially, his argument is that since the truth of 'all vixens are foxes' is true at least partly in virtue of the fact that all vixens are foxes, and conventionalists must hold that this sentence

¹⁶ Mathematical truths might arguably be more amenable to a restricted version of TCT since, at least in the case of pure mathematics, it is not obvious that the notion of 'truth by ordinary factual criteria' applies. However, difficulties in the vicinity of those discussed in this section emerge once we try to accommodate the possibility of applying mathematics (cf. Craig 1975).

is true *purely* in virtue of our conventions, they must accept that the fact in question obtains purely in virtue of our conventions.

The problem, however, is that we could then also argue that since *S* is true at least partly in virtue of the fact that snow is white, this fact too must obtain purely in virtue of our conventions. And this conclusion is surely one we ought to reject since there simply are no conventions that could plausibly account for this fact. Indeed, since we could replace ‘snow is white’ in *S* by any sentence whatsoever, we would be able to argue that this goes for *all* facts (or at least those we can express in our language).¹⁷

V. FROM TRUTH TO NECESSITY

TCT, then, should be rejected. This might seem like bad news indeed for the conventionalist since this position is widely held — especially by its critics — to be committed to some version of this thesis. In this section, however, I argue that this view of the matter is mistaken.

To begin with, it should be stressed that a number of conventionalist proposals that have been put forth recently are, on the face of it, quite compatible with what I have argued so far.¹⁸ It should not be assumed, moreover, that conventionalists are committed to some version of TCT *by definition*. The aim of linguistic conventionalism, recall, is to explain *necessity* in terms of the conventionally adopted rules that govern linguistic expressions. That is different from claiming that these rules (rather than ‘the facts’) must also account for why necessary claims are *true*.¹⁹

The claim that linguistic conventionalism entails some version of TCT is thus in need of argument. One such argument is suggested by the following passage from Boghossian:

Guided by the fear that objective, language-independent necessary connections would be both metaphysically and epistemologically odd, [the logical positivists] attempted to show that all necessities could be understood to consist in linguistic necessities, in the shadows cast by conventional decisions concerning the meanings of words.

¹⁷ Alternatively, Töpel could deny that the fact that snow is white plays any role in explaining why *S* is true, and focus instead on the fact *that snow is white or not white*. This move, however, strikes me as misguided. Even if we grant such disjunctive facts, it would be strange if the fact that snow is white played no role in the proper explanation for why this disjunctive fact obtains.

¹⁸ Consider e.g. ‘the conventionalist picture of reality’ presented by Einheuser (2006: 460–2), or ‘the story’ which Sidelle outlines (2009: 229).

¹⁹ This point is invoked by Alan Sidelle in his account of how the conventionalist should deal with necessary *a posteriori* truths (1989: 37). In fact, the term ‘neo-conventionalism’ is sometimes used to denote positions that reject ‘truth by convention’ in favour of ‘necessity by convention’ (cf. Livingstone-Banks 2017). However, some such ‘neo-conventionalist’ positions (e.g. Cameron 2010) are not versions of *linguistic* conventionalism since they do not attempt to explain necessity in terms of linguistic conventions.

Conventional linguistic meaning, by itself, was supposed to generate necessary truth; *a fortiori*, conventional linguistic meaning, by itself, was supposed to generate truth. Hence the play with the metaphysical concept of analyticity. (Boghossian 1996: 365)

The suggestion is that since the logical positivists maintained that necessary truth is ‘generated’ by linguistic meaning (as I think is roughly accurate), they also had to accept, *a fortiori*, that linguistic meaning could generate truth. Consequently, they had to accept TCT and the notion of metaphysical analyticity.

This argument, however, is problematic. First, the *a fortiori* inference is dubious in general: A soda-maker could be said to generate carbonated water, but it doesn’t *a fortiori* generate water. Second, the argument seems to equivocate on ‘generate’. There are two senses in which the conventionalist could be expected to accept that the linguistic conventions ‘generate’ the necessary truth of some claim *S*. It could mean: a) that the conventions make it the case that that *S* is necessarily true, or b) that the conventions suffice to *ensure* that *S* is necessarily true.

If ‘generate’ is read along the lines of (b), then the argument is sound, but the conclusion poses no problem. The conventionalist can happily say that the linguistic conventions suffice to *ensure* (i.e. guarantee) that *S* is true without saying that *S* is made true by those conventions and embracing the notion of metaphysical analyticity.

If, on the other hand, ‘generate’ is understood along the lines of (a), then the inference is invalid since it need not be the case that what makes it the case that *S* is necessarily true must also make it the case that *S* is true. To see this, consider how the matter looks from the perspective of a different account of necessity — namely Lewisian realism: What makes it the case that ‘snow is white or not white’ is *necessary* would be that it is true in all possible worlds, but what makes this *true* is, presumably, the (contingent) fact that snow is *white*. Either way, therefore, the argument fails to deliver the intended conclusion.

Bob Hale also suggests that we can move from a thesis that the linguistic conventionalist would accept to something like TCT. He initially characterizes conventionalism — quite accurately to my mind — as ‘the thesis that necessary truths are simply truths guaranteed by conventions governing the use of words’ (2013: 117). He then goes on to object, variously, that conventions cannot *create* truth (122), that necessities cannot be explained as truths *grounded* in meaning (117), and that conventions cannot *make* statements (118) or propositions (120; 122–3) true.

However, the initial thesis does not entail the claims that are later rejected. After all, the special theory of relativity guarantees, I suppose, that I am not moving at a speed exceeding *c*, but if I say that this is what *makes it true* (or grounds the fact) that I’m not moving at such a speed, then I’m giving my legs too much credit. Likewise, our linguistic conventions might be capable of ensuring that certain sentences will be true no matter what without acting

as anything like truthmakers for those sentences. As I argued above, *that* job should be left to the facts.

Neither Hale nor Boghossian, then, manage to establish that the conventionalist is committed to TCT. There is, however, one further reason which should be considered — this time stemming from the rationale for accepting TCT in the first place. The idea, recall, was that divorcing necessities from the notion of ‘factual truth’, provides us with a seemingly straightforward way of demystifying necessity — of explaining, that is, how certain things could be true (and knowably so) regardless of what the world happens to be like. If, on the other hand, we acknowledge that necessary truths are ‘made true by the (worldly) facts’, then it might seem quite mysterious how our linguistic conventions could ever suffice to guarantee that this will be the case. Roughly: given that these conventions do not influence the non-linguistic aspects of the world, how could they conceivably ensure that the world will cooperate in the right way?

While this certainly raises a pressing issue, the conventionalist does have a potential strategy for addressing it. The overarching thought is that it might be possible for our linguistic conventions to ensure that a sentence is made true by some fact or other without ensuring that some specific state of affairs obtains.²⁰ The conventions guarantee truth, that is, not by shaping the world in some particular way, but by yielding truth-conditions which cannot but be fulfilled (as will be clear from the next section, this was the strategy employed by at least one paradigmatic conventionalist).

To be clear, I am not saying that there are no potential obstacles to this strategy. Notably, the conventionalist cannot take the notion of a possible world for granted and then argue that our linguistic conventions guarantee that certain claims are true no matter which possible world is actual. Since the aim is to explain the source of necessity, this would be patently circular (cf. Williamson 2007: 65). Indeed, whether this strategy can, in the end, be successfully carried out in detail is, I think, an interesting question that could only be positively answered by developing a conventionalist proposal in detail. For present purposes, however, the point is merely that it represents a *possible* route which the conventionalist might explore, and that, therefore, the conventionalist is not forced to endorse TCT.

Still, in order to illustrate how this strategy might work and substantiate the claim that it is not an obvious non-starter, it would be useful to provide at least a brief sketch of how it might be applied to an (admittedly somewhat simplistic) example. Consider, therefore, the sentence ‘all adult female sheep

²⁰ For responses to Boghossian that draw on similar considerations, see Russell (2008) and Hofmann & Horvath (2008). However, since these authors are happy to take a notion of possibility for granted, their proposals would not be of help to the conventionalist who aims to provide an explanation of the source of necessity.

are ewes'. Can we at least sketch how a set of linguistic conventions might guarantee that this sentence comes out true, while allowing that it is 'made true by the world' in the same way as contingent truths of the same form?

Suppose that we have the following linguistic conventions:

- (A) Something can be correctly called an 'adult female sheep' just in case it is an adult female sheep.
- (B) If something is an adult female sheep, then it can be correctly called an 'ewe'.
- (C) A claim of the form 'all As are Bs' is true provided that the B-predicate correctly applies to anything to which the A-predicate correctly applies.

Conventions A and B jointly ensure that no matter what the world is like (even allowing that it might be inconsistent or contain gaps) 'ewe' can be correctly applied to whatever 'adult female sheep' can be correctly applied to (roughly: the criteria laid down interact so that establishing that 'adult female sheep' applies to some entity immediately establishes that 'ewe' also applies). This then guarantees that, in the case of 'all adult female sheep are ewes' the truth-condition laid down in (C) will be fulfilled no matter what the world is actually like.

This is, however, consistent with maintaining that this claim is 'made true by the world' in the same way as, say, 'all humans are mortal'. In both cases, the claim is true because all those entities in the universe to which the first predicate applies are also such that the second applies. And while it is a somewhat controversial issue how, exactly, the notion of truthmaking should be applied to universal claims, there is nothing here which precludes such an account from applying uniformly to contingent and necessary truths (we might, for instance, say that 'all adult female sheep are ewes' is made true by the fact that *this* adult female sheep is an ewe, and *that* adult female sheep is an ewe, and so on — together with the fact that these are all the adult female sheep there are).

Of course, there are potential complications even with regard to this simplistic example.²¹ Moreover, it is hardly obvious that an account along such lines could be used for other necessary truths, including, notably, general statements of logical laws.

My limited claim, therefore, is only that this is a strategy that remains open for exploration. In the case of a general logical law, for instance, the idea would be that validity arises because the conventions that govern the relevant logical constants suffice to ensure that all sentences of a certain form will come out true, and that this is consistent with maintaining both that instances of this

²¹ Notably, establishing that the conventions guarantee the truth of this claim requires the use of some logical inferences in the metalanguage, thus raising the vexed issue of whether such 'pragmatic' circularity can be harmless (cf. e.g. Dummett 1991: 202–4).

law are ‘made true by the facts’ in accordance with the same principles that apply to contingent claims, and that the truth of the universal claim ‘every sentence of such-and-such form is true’ can be accounted for in the same way as the truth of other (contingent) universal claims (cf. convention C above).²² Again, there are certainly potential obstacles here, and so my claim remains that since this strategy remains open for exploration, the conventionalist need not endorse TCT.

VI. IN DEFENCE OF THE LOGICAL POSITIVISTS

The question remains, though, whether Boghossian is right that TCT — in the form of a commitment to metaphysical analyticity — figured prominently in the work of paradigmatic conventionalists like the logical positivists. Little direct textual evidence is provided for this claim. Instead Boghossian’s discussion relies primarily on critical papers such as Quine’s ‘Carnap on Logical Truth’, which, it is worth noting, in one version opens with the following disclaimer: ‘My dissent from Carnap’s philosophy of logical truth is hard to state and argue in Carnap’s terms. This circumstance perhaps counts in favor of Carnap’s position’ (1963: 385).

Still, it is not difficult to find passages which at least suggest that Carnap did invoke something like the notion of metaphysical analyticity. In ‘Meaning Postulates’, for instance, we read: ‘Philosophers have often distinguished two kinds of truth: the truth of some statements is logical, necessary, based upon meaning, while that of other statements is empirical, contingent, dependent upon the facts of the world’ (1952: 65). I am not denying, therefore, that the logical positivists did, *on the face of it*, appeal to something like metaphysical analyticity, or at least employed slogans which suggested some such idea.

There is, however, reason to think that appearances are misleading here. While passages like this are common when Carnap engages in ‘big-picture’ talk, a different picture emerges from his more detailed treatments of necessary truth. When he wrote ‘Meaning Postulates’, Carnap’s preferred approach to semantics was via state-descriptions — i.e. sets of sentences which contain, for every atomic sentence of the relevant language, either the atomic sentence itself or its negation. This approach is most fully presented in *Meaning and*

²² An interesting question, related to this, is whether different linguistic conventions might give rise to genuinely different logics. This idea is closely associated with at least some conventionalist accounts (notably Carnap 1937), and so it might be suggested that it is integral to a truly conventionalist view. However, since changing the conventions presumably involves a change in meaning, it is not clear that different conventions could yield logics that are in genuine disagreement (cf. e.g. Creath 1992: 144). Whether conventionalism really allows for ‘logical pluralism’ in an interesting sense is therefore a somewhat complicated issue.

Necessity, and here the notion of truth is characterized as follows: ‘There is one and only one state-description which describes the actual state of the universe; it is that which contains all true atomic sentences and the negations of those which are false. Hence it contains only true sentences; therefore, we call it the true state-description. A sentence of any form is true if and only if it holds in the true state-description’ (Carnap 1947: 10). Note, in particular, that Carnap explicitly says that this characterization of truth applies to sentences *of any form* — he does not, that is, restrict it to contingent claims.

As to ‘the familiar but vague concept of logical or necessary or analytic truth’, Carnap first tells us that ‘this explicandum has sometimes been characterized as truth based on purely logical reasons, on meaning alone, independent of the contingency of facts’ (Carnap 1947: 10). When Carnap goes on to explicate this notion, however, it quickly becomes clear that truth ‘based on meaning’ should be understood as truth which *can be established* on the basis of ‘semantical rules’ (i.e. linguistic conventions) alone (Carnap 1947: 10). The relevant notion of analyticity here, therefore, is that of *epistemic* analyticity.

It might still be maintained, of course, that Carnap subscribed to the metaphysical notion as well. However, if we consider the more detailed explication of necessary truth (L-truth) that Carnap goes on to offer, we see that there really is no role for metaphysical analyticity to play. The explication offered is simply that a sentence is L-true if and only if it holds in every state-description, and, crucially, Carnap then goes on to link this with his general account of truth and his claim that L-truth can be established using only the semantical rules.²³ ‘If \mathfrak{S}_i holds in every state-description, then the semantical rules of ranges suffice for establishing this result. Therefore, the semantical rules establish also the truth of \mathfrak{S}_i because, if \mathfrak{S}_i holds in every state-description, then it holds also in the true state-description and hence is itself true.’ (Carnap 1947: 11)

This makes it quite clear that Carnap takes the appropriate understanding of ‘truth based on meanings’ to be truth (*ordinary* truth) that can be established via the semantic rules, and that L-truth, like *all* truth, is a matter of the sentence holding in the actual state-description. There is no basis here, then, for a distinction between L-truths and other truths when it comes to what ‘makes them true’ in a metaphysical sense.

Indeed, there is a straightforward way of introducing truthmakers into this framework should we want to, and this would provide necessary truths (L-truths) with exactly the same kind of truthmaker as contingent truths. We could simply say that the truthmaker for a sentence R is the minimal subset M of the

²³ Although it is worth noting that Carnap’s claim that L-truth can be established solely on the basis of semantical rules is problematic since so much of the explanatory work is done by the stipulation that state-descriptions are consistent and complete.

actual state-description such that R could be derived from M via the semantic rules of the relevant language.²⁴ Thus, returning to Boghossian's example, 'snow is white or not white' would receive exactly the same truthmaker as 'snow is white or purple'.

Upon scrutiny, then, I think there is little evidence that the logical positivists ever bought into the idea of metaphysical analyticity, and I think few of them ever accepted TCT more generally.²⁵

VII. CONCLUSION

I have argued that a number of widely accepted claims and assumptions concerning the relationship between truth and linguistic conventionalism are mistaken. The general upshot is that the conventionalist position should not be rejected on the grounds that this amounts to a misguided view of why necessary truths are true.

More specifically, I have argued that a number of frequently repeated arguments that target TCT⁺ (i.e. the idea that necessary truths are made true by linguistic conventions) are, in fact, unsuccessful. These arguments, therefore, should not provide the basis for rejecting linguistic conventionalism, nor should they be used to justify a shift towards normativist versions of this position. Still, TCT should, I maintain, be rejected *quite generally* since the notion of ordinary truth — i.e. truth based on 'the (worldly) facts' or 'the way the world is' — cannot be successfully restricted to contingent claims.

However, rejecting TCT does not require abandoning linguistic conventionalism since maintaining that the *necessity* of necessary truths is due to linguistic conventions is consistent with maintaining that such claims are made *true* by the facts in the same way as contingent truths. Finally, I have argued that the logical positivists did not — at least not in general — endorse TCT. In particular, Carnap's account of L-truth in *Meaning and Necessity* does not sustain any distinction between necessary and contingent truths when it comes to what 'makes them true'.²⁶

²⁴ There are a few complications here since there might be no unique such set. There is also the issue of how to deal with universally quantified sentences.

²⁵ Although some certainly did. The clearest case is perhaps Ayer who, as noted, subscribed to a normativist position for a while. Moreover, the axioms that partly constitute the languages in Carnap's *Logical Syntax of Language* can *arguably* be described as 'true by convention'. However, since Carnap here explicitly shuns the notion of truth (1937: §6ob), the suggestion that he subscribes to a version of TCT is problematic. For a thorough discussion of whether Carnap was committed to 'truth by convention', see Ebbs (2011).

²⁶ Many thanks to Arif Ahmed, Tim Button, Hans-Johann Glock, Michael Potter, Jared Warren and an anonymous reviewer for helpful discussion and comments.

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