AGENTIVE MODALS AND AGENTIVE MODALITY
A Cautionary Tale

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we consider recent attempts to metaphysically explain agentive modality in terms of conditionals. We suggest that the best recent accounts face counterexamples, and more worryingly, they take some agentive modality for granted. In particular, the ability to perform basic actions features as a primitive in these theories. While it is perfectly acceptable for a semantics of agentive modal claims to take some modality for granted in getting the extension of action claims correct, a metaphysical explanation of agentive modality cannot, at least not in the way that conditional approaches to agentive modality do. We argue that this problem was present even in the classical conditional analysis. By a pessimistic induction, we suggest that, probably, no conditional approach to agentive modality will succeed.

1. Introduction

Conditional analyses of agentive modality account for what agents can do, cannot do, and cannot but do in terms of the truth or falsity of certain counterfactual conditionals. AJ Ayer (1954, p. 282) put forward what is perhaps *the* classic view in this area, according to which "to say that I could have acted otherwise is to say, first, that I should have acted otherwise if I had so chosen". This analysis of *what we mean when we say* that someone could have acted otherwise was then marshaled to show why a certain sort of compatibilism about free will and moral responsibility is correct. The thought is that *if* having free will is just a matter of having the ability to do otherwise, and *if* having the ability to do otherwise is just a matter of certain conditionals being true, then free will is compatible with determinism because the truth of those conditionals is compatible with determinism. The appeal of the "classic conditional analysis of abilities" is obvious: it offers us the chance to reduce agentive modality—the kind of

modality characterized by what an agent can do—to the seemingly more familiar and less contentious modality of subjunctive conditionals (see also Moore 1915; Schlick 1934).

The classical conditional analysis didn't work. This is something we'll explore in more detail below, but for now, the problem can be shown schematically: it is sometimes true that if an agent had wanted (or tried, or chosen, or…) to do otherwise, she would have. This seems to be enough for the classical conditional analysis to predict that she could have acted otherwise. But in at least some cases, it is also true that the agent couldn't have wanted (or tried, or chosen, or…) to do otherwise in the first place, perhaps because she is psychologically constituted as so to be unable to want to do otherwise (Lehrer 1968). This latter fact about the agent's psychological make-up, for instance, speaks against the prediction that she could have done otherwise. So much the worse for the classical conditional analysis, but its reductive spirit has lasting appeal, so it's no surprise to see contemporary refinements of the classical thought.

The aim of this paper is to examine and critique two contemporary descendants of conditional analyses of agentive modality due to Mandelkern, Schulteis, and Boylan (2017) and Lewis (2020). For all their improvements over the classical conditional analysis, many of which are celebrated below, both accounts suffer from the same defect: in attempting to explain agentive modality writ large, they help themselves to just a bit of what they are trying to explain. More specifically, both accounts take for granted the notion of an agent's being able to perform what are sometimes called "basic actions," actions the agent can perform without having to do anything else (e.g., raising one's arm above one's head, deciding where to go to lunch). But an explanation of the nature of basic actions is among the chief *desiderata* for a theory of agentive modality, much like an explanation of the nature of basic epistemic justification is among the chief *desiderata* for a theory of rationality.

A note about the scope of our project: following John Maier (2020), we think that there are at least two problems—very different ones—that a conditional-style analysis might be wheeled in to

solve. The first is purely semantic: how can we best regiment and systematize the truth-values of natural language claims about what agents can, cannot, and cannot but do? The second is more obviously metaphysical: what is the nature of agentive modality, and (perhaps) what other, more familiar notions can reductively explain it? To the extent that these two problems are separable, we have in mind only the second one, which is within the metaphysics of agency. As such, we are extending Mandelkern, Schulteis, and Boylan's (2017) semantic project but meeting Lewis's (2020) theory where it lives. Since Mandelkern et. al suggest that their view might be helpful for the metaphysics of agency, specifically questions about free will, we do not find this extension objectionable but rather to the point (2017, p. 338).

Within the metaphysics of agency, the project of reducing agentive modality to the modality found in ordinary counterfactual conditionals is broadly Humean. Perhaps this Humean spirit wins the day in addressing the purely semantic questions. But if it does, this leaves open a strange and potentially disturbing consequence of our argument. Namely, the semantics and metaphysics of agentive modality may come apart at the seams. We briefly consider the merits of Barbara Vetter's (2015, 2013) view and John Maier's (2018, 2015) view, each of which avoids this consequence at the cost of robust anti-reductionism about agentive modality. Vetter's semantics says that agentive abilities–abilities to perform basic actions among them–are a species of potentiality, and that potentialities, suitably understood, explain the truth of agentive modal claims. Maier's semantics starts from the idea that optionality is a primitive kind of agentive modality. We also suggest a non-reductive way of thinking about Lewis's (2020) view. The cost of this way of thinking about the relationship between the semantics of agentive modals and the metaphysics of agentive modality is that it is antithetical to the longstanding enterprise of gleaning, more or less reductively, a metaphysics of agentive modality from our best semantics of agentive modals. We are inclined to accept this cost.

We will proceed as follows. In section 2, we will discuss the nature of conditional analyses and explicate our target accounts. We then present a dilemma for these accounts in sections 3 and 4, arguing that they fail extensionally. There is a way out of this dilemma, but this way out reveals the fact that these accounts take some agentive modality for granted. In section 5, we argue that this taking for granted is problematic since the accounts are meant to be metaphysically reductive. We argue in section 6 that this has been a problem even in prior versions of the conditional analysis, and we are thus pessimistic about reductive conditional analyses. We conclude that, perhaps, the metaphysics of abilities should guide our semantics for agentive modals rather than the other way around.

2. Varieties of Conditional Analysis

Let's begin by considering the varieties of conditional analyses of abilities, starting with the classic account. We will treat the following indented claim as a paradigm case of the classical conditional analysis of abilities (henceforth "CA"):

> S was able to do otherwise in circumstances C iff if she had tried (wanted) to φ
>
> (instead of ψ) in C, she S would have φ'd.

While advertised as a compatibilist view about free and responsible action, the CA nevertheless implicates a position about both the *semantics* and the *metaphysics* of abilities. Having an ability to φ is just *to be such that* the following counterfactual is true of you: if you had tried (or wanted, or…) to φ, you would have φ'd. It is of course a consequence of this account that questions of whether an agent is free in φ-ing can be settled by attending to whether certain counterfactuals are true of them. Since the truth of these counterfactuals are not threatened by physical determinism, neither then, the CA says, are the pertinent abilities.

It is generally agreed that the CA doesn't work. It faces several powerful counterexamples. Consider one that we mentioned earlier (Lehrer 1968):

The Phobic: Mary has a pathological phobia of red candy (they remind her of drops of blood). She is offered a bowl of red candy. In the closest world where Mary tries to take the candy, she would, since that would be a world where Mary is--for whatever reason--relieved of her phobia.

Mary is plainly unable to take the candy, even though the CA predicts that she can. Chisholm (1964/1989) suggested that the problem with the CA is that it leaves totally unsettled whether an agent is able to *try* or to *want* to do otherwise. And the counterexamples above follow straightforwardly from this explanatory gap: in actuality, Mary *cannot even try* to take the candy, let alone take it, but the CA incorrectly predicts that Mary can both try to take the candy and take the candy. That's because the CA determines which abilities Mary has (with respect to taking the candy) by considering worlds in which she tries to take the candy.

These problems are well-known; a good deal of attention has been paid to cases like The Phobic, and a number of extant accounts descendant from the CA claim to avoid objectionable implications in that and similar cases. Fara (2008) and Vihvelin (2013) have offered various takes on a *dispositional* analysis of abilities ("DA"), a close cousin of straightforward conditional analyses, insofar as dispositions are widely understood to have a close connection to counterfactual conditionals. We will treat the following indented claim as a paradigm case of DA:

S is able to φ in circumstances C iff she has the disposition to φ when, in

circumstances C, she tries to φ.[1]

DA accounts face new sorts of objections, articulated by Whittle (2009) and Clarke (2009; 2015), to the effect that *mere dispositions*, even dispositions to φ when one tries, only concern the way that an agent is generally "put together", not what is within their control on a particular occasion. These "general abilities" (as they are sometimes called, contrasting with "specific abilities") are decidedly not what is at issue in many important debates surrounding agentive modality, like the free will debate. As

Clarke points out, the appeal to general abilities seems to miss a crucial datum that appeals to specific abilities capture: it is *up to the agent on a particular occasion* to exercise them. Beyond this, even versions of the DA face extensional counterexamples (Clarke 2015, Vetter 2019)—more on this later.

Let's now turn to Mandelkern, Shulties, and Boylan's Act Conditional Analysis ("ACA"). We will set aside the problems for the CA that Mandelkern, Shulties, and Boylan articulate.[2] Instead, we note the crucial innovation in ACA semantics. The ACA avoids the counterexamples to CA discussed in this section by appeal to *sets of practically available options*:

S can φ in some context c at some world w iff there is some practically available option A, such that the closest world where S tries to A is a world where S does φ.

One nice payoff of endorsing Mandelkern, Schulteis, and Boylan's view, and one sense in which it represents real progress over the conditional analyses that came before it, is that it affords a unified explanation of ability and compulsion modals. Compulsion modals concern what an agent *cannot but* do; on this account, a sentence of the form "S cannot but φ" is true just in case, for every practically available option A open to S in the context, if S tries to A, S does φ.

The precise nature of practically available options and how they are determined is not the focus of Mandelkern, Schulteis, and Boylan's account, but the notion is intuitive enough to be workable. They tentatively suggest that an action φ will count as a practically available option for agent S in context C just in case S could reasonably conclude in favor of φ-ing (2017: 319). Consider how easily this notion can be exploited to get around The Phobic. Mary lacks a practically available option to take the candy because, given her phobia, she cannot reasonably conclude in favor of doing anything that would count as a way to take the candy.

Notice also that the view correctly accounts for a *specific* sense in which Mary cannot take the candy, thus avoiding the problems of only explaining "general abilities", as the DA is accused of doing.

The notion of practically available options seems to latch onto a more specific sense of ability than a disposition to perform an action, because this notion is about the situation one is in when one acts.

Finally, consider David Lewis's account sketched in posthumously published notes for a paper to be called "*Nihil Obstat*: A Compatibilist Analysis of Abilities". In his novel theory of abilities, Lewis explicitly aims to reject a conditional analysis, and he presents counterexamples to the traditional analysis in the form of finked abilities—abilities that would in some sense disappear when the agent tries to exercise them (2020, p. 242). He seeks to offer a "fresh start" (2020, p. 242). Call this fresh start the obstacle-free analysis ("OFA") of abilities:

> S is able to φ iff for some basic action A, (1) A-ing would be φ-ing, and (2) there is no obstacle to doing A.

What makes Lewis's view distinctive is his appeal to obstacles (along with the sketch of a theory of obstacles he goes on to provide):

> O is an obstacle to S φ-ing iff O would prevent S from φ-ing even if things were just a little different.[3]

Obstacles are, on this account, modally robust preventers. What makes the OFA particularly novel in the theoretical landscape of theories of abilities is the inclusion of a *no obstacles* clause into the conditions of an agent possessing an ability. This clause makes an agent's possessed abilities "safe" in the sense of traditional safety conditions in epistemology, sometimes offered as necessary conditions on knowledge.[4] Although the motivations for traditional safety conditions on knowledge are too varied and nuanced to work through here, it is enough to note that, for safety-friendly epistemologists, S knows that P only if, were S to believe that P, P would not be false.[5] In other words, S knows that P only if S couldn't have easily been wrong about P (in a similar case).[6] With that in mind, we can see how Lewis's OFA does something analogous. Roughly, for S to be able to φ (by A-ing), S couldn't have easily been prevented from A-ing.

Why think that Lewis's self-proclaimed "fresh start" is in fact a descendant of conditional analyses? The short answer is that this is a classic Lewisian analysis, a semantic-cum-metaphysical explanation of something apparently metaphysically spooky, namely agentive modality, in terms something metaphysically harmless and familiar, mere counterfactuals, and so ultimately for him, "just one little thing after another" in the space of possible worlds (1986, p. ix).

To flesh things out a little, it is worth noting here that DAs have the same hopes as Lewis's obstacle-free analysis, at least insofar as they aim to replace something spooky with something that is not. Indeed, DAs are sometimes motivated by Lewisian thinking about the close connection between dispositions and counterfactuals (e.g., Vihvelin 2013, pp. 181-187), for Lewis himself defended a complex conditional analysis of dispositions (Lewis 1997). To be sure, the OFA is distinctive within the space of conditional analyses and their descendants, in that the conditionals to which it appeals have a "negative" form: they are about what the agent *is (not) prevented from doing* when things are slightly different. Nevertheless, all the analyses under discussion appeal to counterfactuals with instances of exercising an ability contained within them (and this will become very important later). So, although it is plainly true that Lewis's posthumous view appeals to a novel bit of theory—the notion of obstacles, perhaps best understood as a safety condition on possessed abilities—he explicates this novel bit of theory in terms of counterfactual conditionals that contain instances of exercising an ability to perform a basic action. Thus, we see Lewis's "fresh start" as nevertheless being a salient descendant of conditional analyses and will treat it accordingly. We note important differences between the OFA and other views where relevant.

Notice that the OFA, like the ACA, neatly avoids the Lehrer-style counterexamples. Mary's phobia is plausibly an obstacle in the relevant sense. It prevents Mary from taking the red candy and it would not go away—and so continue to prevent— even if the world were a little bit different. And

like the ACA, the view seems to capture a more specific sense of being able to perform an action by considering the situation in which one could act.

The ACA and OFA are, by our lights, the most promising versions of contemporary conditional analyses. In what follows, we will more or less focus on just these two accounts, assuming that our criticisms carry over to the rest.

Our criticisms in the next two sections take the following shape. We start by focusing on a problem for the ACA—or rather, a subjective reading of it, to be spelled out below—that faces versions of the familiar extensional problems for the CA and DA (Section 3). We note that the most plausible way to avoid these problems is by, so to speak, "going objective." We then critically examine the objective reading of the ACA alongside the OFA, which is objective in a similarly virtuous way.[7] While these more objective conditional analyses have the virtue of avoiding the familiar extensional problems, they face extensional problems of a different sort (Section 4). This extensional dilemma is surmountable along the second horn, but we argue that this comes at a deep cost (Section 5). The best contemporary conditional semantics of agentive modals are largely idle in the metaphysician's task of understanding the nature of agentive modality.

3. Subjective Conditionals and Old Problems

One lesson from the failure of the CA and DA is that agents are sometimes unable to do things because salient aspects of their psychology somehow impede the springs of their agency. A successful theory of agentive modality should be able to explain such cases. As a semantics, the ACA handles these cases by distinguishing between two senses of practical available options. Practically available options as they feature in the ACA are understood to be "relative to a given description" of an agent's actual situation. On a subjective construal, this description is in terms of what the agent herself knows (2017, p. 321). On another construal, it is "just a complete description of all the facts relevant" to the

agent's actual situation (2017, p. 321). In this section, we will argue that a subjective reading of agentive modals is subject to the kinds of counterexamples that came up in the free will debate over the CA.[8]

Imagine that the agent in a classic Lehrer-style counterexample is (perhaps reasonably) unaware of their own phobia:

> The Misled Phobic: Mari has a pathological phobia of red candy (they remind her of drops of blood), but her well-meaning therapist has systematically misled her about her own condition, such that, for all she knows, she has no more aversion to bloodlike red candy than the rest of us. She is offered a bowl of red candy.

In such a case, there is pressure to think that on the subjective reading of options, the reading in which an agent's set of options is fixed by what she knows, *Mari is able to take the red candy*. For one thing, her being able to take the red candy is *consistent* with what she knows. For another, in virtue of being rationally misled about her own condition, she would be eminently reasonable to conclude in favor of taking the red candy (perhaps by resolving to simply reach out and grab it). These facts suggest that, by her own lights, she has some practically available option O such that the closest world in which she tries to O is a world where she takes the candy. But this strikes us as incorrect. If it's plausible in the original Lehrer case that Mary is unable to even try to take the candy, it's plausible in this variation that Mari is likewise unable to even try to take the candy. The only salient difference is that, in the latter case, Mari *thinks* she can try to take it. As such, being able to reasonably conclude in favor of taking the candy (by A-ing) seems to play a relatively minor role in explaining what this sort of agent is able to do.

We have only, of course, extended the discussion by introducing another psychologically pathological agent into the mix of test cases. But let us stress that the form of this example is general. Any case in which what an agent can do comes apart from what she can reasonably deliberate in favor

of doing will be a problem for the subjective reading of the ACA. Rather than work through a slew of similar examples, we'll offer some general considerations for how to construct problem cases.

The simplest ways to construct problem cases, and to appreciate how general the problem is, is to focus on ways in which deliberation goes awry. Mari exemplifies one such way; because she is systematically misled about her own condition, her reasonable deliberation about what to do will not result in knowledge of what she can (try to) do. Another way in which deliberation can go awry is when an agent is less than fully reasonable; being upset, distracted, or absent-minded can interfere with how one's deliberation proceeds without interfering with what one is able to do in a context. In general, when an agent is not in a position to know what her options are, or when she is rendered less-than-fully reasonable, her deliberating about what to do will come apart from what she can do.

Deliberation can also fail to result in knowledge for an importantly different reason, not because an agent is misled but because deliberation itself can sometimes act as a kind of fink; some abilities are such that one has them only if one doesn't think too much about exercising them. (Baseball fans need only think about Chuck Knoblauch's yips!) One need not appeal to pathological nervousness to make the point; one can simply point to the relationship between expertise and reflection, noting that the latter tends to get in the way of manifesting the former. Sometimes, reasonably concluding in favor of something is precisely what gets in the way of being able to do it.

In light of these considerations, we think that the subjective reading of the ACA faces a general issue in securing an explanatory connection between what an agent is able to do (in a context) and either what an agent could reasonably conclude in favor of (in that context). Even though it is in some sense obvious that what an agent knows (or is in a position to know) is relevant to what she can do,[9] a subjective understanding of conditional semantics seems to draw too close of a connection between an agent's knowledge (or potential knowledge) of her options, on the one hand, and her abilities, on

the other.[10] This should prompt careful consideration of a conditional analysis of abilities that goes in for an objective reading of the relevant agentive modals.

4. Objective Conditionals and Extensional Adequacy

Let's now turn to the idea that the relevant terms of the counterfactuals in a counterfactual account of agentive modality refer to something more objective, the actual features of the world in question rather than features of the subjective point of view of an agent.

On the objective reading of the ACA, an agent's practically available options are determined by "a complete description of all the facts relevant to her *actual* situation" (2017, p. 321). To see the contrast between this and the subjective reading, consider the following case:

> Jones the golfer "did not know that aiming just to the right of the tree would result in
> a successful shot, because he did not know that a gust of wind would arise at just the
> moment he made the swing. Jones did know, however, that, given such a gust of wind,
> aiming just to the right of the tree would result in a successful shot. So, relative to an
> *objective* description of his practicing situation, *aiming just to the right of the tree* is practically
> available" (2017, p. 323).

That there was a gust of wind at the moment of the swing is a fact of which Jones was unaware. Nevertheless, there was a gust of wind at the moment of the swing, and this fact, combined with Jones's knowledge of how to act when it obtains, determines that O = *aiming just to the right of the tree* is an option for Jones, and makes true the objective reading of the sentence S = "Jones is able to make this shot right now". The objective reading is true, in short, because, unbeknownst to Jones, there is something he can do, namely bring about option O, that would count as making the shot. (By contrast, on a subjective reading, S would be false, since Jones is ignorant of the fact that a gust of wind will

affect his shot, and so, presumably, this fact could not feature in his reasonable deliberation.) To the extent that we are inclined to think that S is true, we are dealing with an objective reading of it.

On such a reading, a complete description of the facts relevant to Jones's actual situation determine whether S is true; after all, given the facts of his situation—the wind, his skill as a golfer, his present focus on the task at hand, and so on—Jones must only compensate for the wind to make the shot, something which, by stipulation, he knows how to do. The kind of problems we raised for various forms of appeals to subjective conditionals simply don't show up here. To wit, an objective version of the ACA avoids the problems raised in section 3. Mari cannot take the red candy because she is phobic, her (reasonable) ignorance of this fact notwithstanding. And in general, the complaint we lodged against the subjective ACA (and any view that ties one's options too closely to what one could reasonably deliberate in favor of) does not arise precisely because one's options are settled by a much broader set of facts, many of which are beyond an agent's ken. This supplies some *prima facie* reason to favor an objective version of ACA semantics over a subjective one as a template for a metaphysically reductive understanding of agentive modality.

Before raising a problem for the objective reading of the ACA, it will help to see how the OFA exhibits similar virtues (and, ultimately, vices). Recall that OFA says that S is able to φ iff for some basic action A, (1) A-ing would be a φ-ing, and (2) there is no obstacle to doing it. Recall also that the conditional aspect of the OFA is contained in the notion of an obstacle: something O is an obstacle to φ-ing iff O would prevent you from φ-ing even if things were a little different. Interestingly, then, *some* obstacles will be subjective, in the sense that one's own subjective states can serve as robust preventers. They will be features of an agent's own psychology; Lewis seems to accept that even preferences can sometimes be obstacles to action (2020, p. 224). By the same token, beliefs, or an agent's deliberation itself, can sometimes be obstacles to action. But this is not to say that Lewis's view is objectionably subjective. To see why, let's focus on Lewis's remarks about preferences.

Again, Lewis suggests that preferences are only *sometimes* obstacles. They are not obstacles on metaphysical grounds; even in a deterministic world one's preferences are not always robust preventers. Instead, Lewis produces examples like these: "I can't, I've promised not to; I can't, he's holding a gun to my head; I can't, I'd go to jail." (2020, p. 244). But other times, preferences *are not* obstacles on similar grounds: "I can break my promise to obey if I'm ordered to shoot hostages; I can face death rather than shoot hostages" (2020, p. 244).

Whether a preference is an obstacle "depends on the balance of pros and cons" that accompany the options of over which one's preferences are defined in a given situation ("when it's overwhelmingly con, preferring not to is an obstacle… When it's delicate, not") (2020, p. 244). Even if there are special cases in which component parts of an agent's psychology (phobias and intense desires, for instance) serve as obstacles, it's not *generally* true that one's psychology is an obstacle; not all preventers are robust preventers, and, for instance, the balance of pros and cons in any given situation is often delicate. And beyond that, Lewis need not say that obstacles to reasonably deliberating in favor of A-ing are obstacles to A-ing; someone in a fit of bad temper is not rendered unable to apologize for a mean remark, and likewise, someone with a strong preference for butter pecan ice cream can still order chocolate instead.

In short, the objective reading of the ACA and the OFA alike avoid the problems raised in Section 3 regarding wedding one's abilities too closely to one's deliberation. Both accounts do this by taking in more and more facts beyond an agent's ken in determining what she is able to do. They thus strike us as a more appealing basis for a reductive account of agentive modality. Nevertheless, these objective conditional analyses face pressure from two fronts. We worry that (1) they are extensionally inadequate as semantics of agentive modals, and if they aren't inadequate, then we worry that (2) they help themselves to a bit of what they aim to explain as accounts of agentive modality.

First, we are sympathetic to the idea that not all abilities are tied to *tryings* or *attempts* in the rather straightforward way both the ACA and the OFA assume (at least when we consider tryings to be a large portion of our basic actions). Thus, the views are extensionally inadequate.

Barbara Vetter (2019) has suggested that there are plenty of abilities that are not predicated on an agent's trying to perform them: spontaneous, absent-minded, graceful, effortless, and creative abilities may be among those actions performed only in the absence of trying to perform them (2019, pp. 7-8). For example, the skilled and graceful running back might not need to try to do anything in order to recognize and exploit the gap in the offensive line; the improv performer does not have to decide to "yes and" the suggestion of her onstage collaborator. Vetter has used these kinds of cases against various DAs of abilities, since a typical DA takes the performance of a basic action as the stimulus condition for the manifestation of the ability (e.g., Vihvelin 2013).

Notice, however, that these cases would *also* be straightforward counterexamples to the objective ACA. If, for instance, there are actions an agent can perform that come apart from her options, understood as the things she could try to do in a context, these actions are simply left out of the story.

Lewis does not provide us with a theory of basic actions, but on a standard way of thinking about basic actions, Vetter's cases can also make trouble for the OFA. A standard set of basic actions might include tryings, intendings, and choosings. These are mental actions that one can perform without performing any other action. In the cases under discussion, it seems like the agent does not perform any of these actions; again, spontaneous, absent-minded, graceful, effortless, and creative abilities may involve no trying, intending, or choosing. The OFA says that to be able to φ is to be able to perform some basic action (a trying, intending, or choosing) that counts as a way of φ-ing without facing any obstacles. Thus, on a standard view of the set of basic actions, these cases are counterexamples to OFA too.

We think Vetter is onto something. If you disagree, you might reply that we are conflating an awareness of performing a basic action with performing a basic action. Surely the graceful dancer does not explicitly or consciously try or decide or choose to perform the move, but that does not mean that they do not actually try or decide to choose!

While this move strikes us as initially plausible, we worry that it requires that one make basic actions metaphysically cheap in a problematic way. On ACA semantics, for instance, all it takes for a sentence of the form 'S can try to X' to be true is that, in the relevant context, there is some practically available option O such that, were S to try to O, S would try to X. Mandelkern, Schulteis, and Boylan acknowledge that their account may make trying "too easy." Much of their discussion (2017, pp. 326-327) focuses on sentences which ascribe both an inability and a basic ability, such as "I can't fix the fridge, but I can try to", and, acknowledging that some might hear such a sentence as infelicitous, they argue that the infelicity is not due to an incompatibility between being unable to X and being able to try to X (their account predicts this compatibility), but rather to some feature of pragmatics. Mandelkern, Schulteis, and Boylan seem to think that the issue with tryings being cheap is whether they make the wrong sentences come out true. Working primarily as semanticists, this makes sense. Nevertheless, dealing with the apparent existence of abilities that one needn't try to perform by appealing to cheap tryings renders this semantics of agentive modals suspect when it comes to general questions about the metaphysics of basic actions; tryings cannot be both cheap *and* fundamental.

Lewis's OFA situates itself within the tradition of explaining all actions in terms of a privileged subset of basic actions (2020, p. 242). Because Lewis didn't offer a theory of basic actions, the OFA as it stands seems to help itself to objectionably cheap basic actions in a similar way. Plugging in a basic action into the OFA renders easy answers. To be able to try just amounts to your trying being counterfactually "safe," because trying (to A) is trivially a way to try (to A). Thus, the no obstacles clause of the analysis does all the work in explaining when and what an agent can try. But the no

obstacles clause says something is an obstacle if it robustly prevents you from doing something, that is, causes you not to do it even if the world were a little bit different. So, to be able to try, according to the OFA, is just to not be caused not to try in a modally robust way. Tryings and intendings are "safe" in the purported counterexamples. Thus, we are left to speculate that he too faces this problem.[11]

In other words: an objective conditional analysis—the objective reading of the ACA, on the one hand, and the OFA on the other—can avoid Vetter's counterexamples, but only at the cost of rendering basic actions as implausibly metaphysically cheap. We think this leads to an even deeper problem, which we explore in the next section.

5.   Conditional Analyses and Problematic Primitives

It seems like the conditional-style analyses under discussion need cheap basic actions. And this leads us to our second and deeper worry. The counterfactuals in question contain basic abilities on both the ACA and the OFA. So, both help themselves to *whatever basic agentive modality there is*, since it helps itself to all the facts relevant to one's practical situation, which certainly includes one's options and obstacles in performing basic actions (or the facts that determine what those options and obstacles are). Neither view constitutes a *fully reductive* metaphysical analysis.

In this respect, certain problems with both the subjective and objective readings of agentive modals stem from a common source. Namely, the ACA provides a semantics (and so too does the OFA when we consider it as a semantics rather than reductive metaphysical analysis) for claims about *non-basic agentive modals*, modals concerning the actions we can perform in virtue of performing other, more basic actions. This is obvious on Lewis's account, since we get to an account of generated action by appealing to counterfactuals including basic actions.

The deeper issue with the ACA and the OFA is reminiscent of one that plagued the CA, as discussed by Chisholm (1964/1989). The counterexamples to the CA are cases where the agent is unable to try (or want or choose) to do otherwise. This just points out that the whole semantics is predicated on a set of unexplained abilities—the primitive agentive modality that those like Ayer were trying to analyze away by semantically ascending to questions about the meaning of the phrase "is able to do otherwise". All the CA did was hide the metaphysical jiggery-pokery; it failed to reduce agentive modality to the modality tracked by the subjunctive conditional.[12]

The problem with the ACA is similar. For instance, Jones the golfer *can sink the shot*, according to the ACA, because he has the option to *aim in such and such a way*, where having such an option consists in the fact that the agent can, in that context, *try to perform it*. But *being able to try* to perform that action is not explained in terms of having some further option; rather, it is an ability to perform a *basic action*, an action we can take without taking any other actions. Where is the explanation for that? The ACA explicitly bakes in that the agent is always able to try (because of its bottoming out in options, which are themselves sets of actions an agent is able to try to perform in a context). Thus, we should not expect there to be counterexamples to the objective reading of the ACA, which takes in *all the facts relevant to an agent's situation* so long as tryings are metaphysically lightweight. But this is just to take the agentive modality at work in the ability to perform basic actions as an unexplained primitive.

The problem is similar for the OFA. The OFA says that for basic actions, to be able to perform them is to face no obstacle in performing them—deciding to sink the shot is trivially a way of deciding to sink the shot (perhaps even more basic: deciding to move one's arms *thusly*). For instance, Jones the golfer can *decide to sink the shot* (*decide to move his arms* thusly) so long as there is no obstacle to him deciding to sink the shot, where an obstacle is something that prevents him from deciding to sink the shot and that, if the world were a little different, would still prevent him from deciding to sink the shot. But being able to so decide or choose is not explained in terms of some further obstacle-free

ability; rather it is an ability to perform a basic action. Likewise, if the OFA takes basic actions to be metaphysically lightweight, as it seems to, we should also expect there to be no counterexamples to it. Again, this is just to take the agentive modality at work in the ability to perform basic actions as an unexplained primitive.

To drive home the point, recall how we got here. In Section 3, we argued that the subjective reading of the ACA was extensionally inadequate. In Section 4, we argued that both the objective reading of the ACA and the OFA were extensionally inadequate *unless* one made basic agentive modality exceedingly cheap. In other words, an agent's ability to *try* (to A) was simply presupposed in all of the problematic cases, and so appears to be an unexplained primitive. Now, when we turn to the sorts of problems for which one might hope to employ an analysis of agentive modality to make some kind of progress, one such problem being that of free and morally responsible action, we see why cheapening basic agentive modality really is, at best, uninformative; worse, it simply gives one party to the debate the tools to beg the question. Compare: Chisholm (1964/1989, pp. 7-8) urged that the classical conditional analysis of abilities did not help compatibilists in the free will debate. It didn't help because the notion of 'trying' employed in the classical conditional analysis was either something unexplained, or, suitably explained, only served to give compatibilists a theory of free will on the cheap by assuming that agents could freely try to do otherwise. If we were to apply the ACA or OFA to the free will problem, we worry we will find similarly unhappy results.[13] We will have either failed to give a theory of the kind of agentive modality most centrally at issue in the free will debate, having taken it as unexplained primitive, or, worse, simply assumed that agents possess the very sort of agentive modality that incompatibilists take to be threatened by physical determinism.[14]

To be clear, we are not interpreting any of the views under discussion as taking *free* basic action as a primitive. And, of course, we have only discussed the free will debate as one example of how the theoretical machinery might go off the rails. There may be other questions for which one runs no risk

in relying on cheap tryings; indeed, this strikes us as a plausible strategy for the semanticist to take. Still, to steal another turn of phrase from Chisholm, we worry that in taking basic action as a primitive in a reductive theory, you are claiming the benefits of honest philosophical toil without even having a theory of agentive modality (1978, pp. 622-3).

Couldn't the proponent of a conditional analysis of abilities simply say that they no longer aim to offer a reductive analysis, and take the agentive modality in being able to perform basic actions as a primitive? In a sense, yes. It is, of course, sometimes acceptable to take something as an unexplained primitive, especially when reduction has failed. For instance, consider the project of knowledge-first epistemology, which takes knowledge as a primitive notion and uses it to explain other epistemic notions like justification and responsibility (Williamson 2000; forthcoming). But we have been looking at attempts to *reductively* analyze agentive modality in general in terms of conditional statements, and given that they take some agentive modality for granted, they fail by their own lights. In the next section, we consider the merits of non- and anti-reductive views about basic agentive modality, which we think offer more promising approaches to the relationship between the semantics of agentive modals and the metaphysics of agentive modality.

6. A Pessimistic Induction

Here is a pessimistic induction: every reductive conditional-style analysis of agentive modality thus far has faced extensional and explanatory problems. So, probably, any future descendent of a conditional-style analysis will face extensional and explanatory problems. The pessimistic induction is not offered as a knock-down argument, but it supports a healthy and measured skepticism. Theorists of action might wish to plumb other metaphysical depths in their explanations.

The source of the problem for conditional analyses of agentive modality is that they take for granted the special agentive modality at work is basic actions. We think that the CA, DA, ACA, and

OFA have their metaphysical explanations backwards. The reason why the counterfactuals appealed to in each kind of account turn out right is *because* agent's have abilities of a certain sort (cf. McKenna 2019). The analyses under discussion, then, seem to get something strikingly correct, insofar as they aim to explain the whole of agentive modality in terms of some privileged subset of an agent's abilities. Nevertheless, they do so *without* a substantive theory of what those abilities consist of. This strikes us as a deeply problematic lacuna in these accounts, from which the problems we have highlighted stem.

Instead of starting with a substantive theory of the abilities in question and using these abilities to explain the pertinent counterfactuals, manifestations of agency, practically available options, or obstacles to action, conditional analyses simply help themselves to a kernel of basic agentive modality to explain the complexities of the rest. What ends up looking like a reduction of abilities to counterfactual considerations, and so of agentive modality to the modality of the counterfactual conditional, ends up succeeding only in exposing the need to account for the abilities that feature in the reduction base. The key issue is that, in order for the ACA, for instance, to say *anything* about the metaphysics of abilities, those accounts must be supplemented with a theory of basic abilities, which are perhaps the most significant abilities at issue in debates over free will and moral responsibility. Like the CA and DA, the ACA only looks like it could pave the way for a metaphysics of abilities *writ large* because it helped itself to an agent's abilities to perform basic actions in order to explain the much larger and more complex set of the agent's abilities to perform non-basic actions. Similar remarks could apply to the OFA taken as a semantics rather than a reductive metaphysical analysis as Lewis seems to have intended it.

If we're right that any conditional-style analysis will have this problem, the solution is, first, to stop holding our breath about the prospects of the longstanding enterprise of trying to glean, more or less reductively, a general metaphysics of agentive modality from our best semantics of agentive

modals, and second, to start theorizing more directly about basic agentive modality. Before concluding, we'll briefly gesture at what such theorizing might look like.

Take Barbara Vetter's (2013) work on "potentialities", the genus of dispositions, abilities, and related phenomena (although her focus was on potentiality in general, rather than specifically on the potentialities characteristic of agency).[15] Although her view *does* purport to reduce agentive modality into modality of another sort, this other sort of modality—that of potentiality—is much more metaphysically committal or heavyweight than the modality of the counterfactual conditional.

Or take John Maier's (2015, 2018) view of abilities, where abilities are understood in terms of options. An agent's options "are simply all and only those actions that are…open to her" (2018, p. 423). In other words, Maier explains abilities–including abilities to perform basic actions–in terms of a well-defined notion of options, and, in turn, he elucidates options in terms of openness. Following G.E. Moore, he argues that the notion of an option is indispensable for making sense of morality and rationality (2015, p. 119). But unlike Moore's conditional analysis, which presupposes that an agent can freely try and so simply presupposes that agents have free will, Maier's view leaves these debates open (2015, p. 133). To settle them, one must directly theorize about the nature of optionality. Thus, we believe that Maier's view preserves many of the virtues of at least one kind of classical conditional analysis without itself being a conditional analysis.

And as we argued above, Lewis's posthumous project can be understood as accounting for basic agentive modality in terms of basic actions and obstacles. Lewis is clearly not offering a form of anti-reductionism about basic agentive modality, even if his proposal invites new questions about the nature of basic actions and obstacles. We think Lewis himself would want to endorse a reductive or deflationary understanding of these notions (per his 1983, 1986, and elsewhere), but that should not deter interest in developing OFA in a non-reductive or anti-reductive way, or cause us confusion about the structure of his proposed view.

It's worth stressing that all of these metaphysical projects—Vetter's anti-reductionism about modality, Maier's anti-reductionism about options, and a possible Lewis-style non-anti-reductionism about basic agentive modality—give rise, very naturally, to an accompanying semantics wherein the truth-conditions of agentive modals bottom out in facts about agentive modality. And if facts about agentive modality are themselves explained in terms of a privileged subset of basic agentive abilities (be they ultimately explained in terms of possessed potentialities or openness or available-basic-actions-plus-obstacles), one's semantics of agentive modals will inherit this structure from one's metaphysics. The project of explaining semantic complexity in agentive modals in terms of a privileged subset of modals involving basic agentive modality will be in good standing. Thus, the *link* between semantics and metaphysics that was so appealing about sophisticated conditional analyses like the ACA is preserved, although the *direction of explanation* is inverted.

7. Conclusion

In this paper we have considered two recent analyses of agentive modality—the act conditional analysis (ACA) and the obstacle-free analysis (OFA). We have argued, somewhat pessimistically, that both the ACA and OFA face serious problems. The problems stem from the fact that each account helps itself to—and so fails to explain—one centrally important aspect of agentive modality, an agent's abilities to perform basic actions. We suggested that these are the very same problems that plagued the classical conditional analysis of abilities (CA) and the related dispositional analysis of abilities (DA). Given this, we are tempted to conclude that, probably, no conditional-style analysis will succeed. We suggested that this project does seem to get something right, if for the wrong reasons: the truth of the pertinent conditionals seems to follow from the fact that agents have abilities of a certain sort, namely the abilities to perform basic actions. But this only highlights the need for a theory of these abilities directly. While a semanticist seeking to explain and systematize a range of agentive modals can take

some abilities for granted, the metaphysician tasked with explaining the nature of agentive modality cannot. Everyone should agree that the metaphysics and the semantics of abilities are related. But we concluded with a surprising inversion: the metaphysics should have explanatory priority over the semantics, and not the other way around.

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NOTES

[1] Fara 2008, p. 468

[2] Here is one such problem. The semantics implicated by the CA cannot account for compulsion modals. Compulsion modals take the form "S cannot but φ", as in "Bobby cannot but eat another cookie". In these terms, the issue that Mandelkern, Schulteis, and Boylan point out for the CA (and DA) are that they can only account for a portion of the agentive modals claims (the ability modals), while failing to account for another (the compulsion modals).Here is a way to make the problem perspicuous: the only resources that the CA has to account for compulsion modals are by way of the following schema: S cannot but φ just in case: if S were to *try not to φ*, S would φ. Mandelkern, Schulteis, and Boylan (2017) have offered a counterexample to the CA as an account of compulsion modals, and so to a plausible semantics of ability-ascriptions in general:

> Elevator Jack: "Imagine an elevator where the '1' button goes to the basement and the 'B' button goes to the first floor. Jack wants to go to the basement. CA predicts Jack cannot but go to the first floor. But this is wrong. (Likewise, CA predicts he cannot but go to the basement. That's wrong and also straightforwardly inconsistent with the prior claim)" (2017, pp. 310-311)

In other words, the CA predicts compulsion incorrectly; an agent cannot be such that they *both* cannot but φ *and* cannot but not-φ. It is important to note that if the CA has trouble accounting for compulsion, so too do the DAs, since they are structurally similar. In short, the reason is that the DAs build the particular action, φ, and an agent's trying to φ, into the stimulus conditions of the disposition (whereas in the CA these were built into the antecedent of a counterfactual conditional). Say that Jack tries to go to the basement, but the elevator's buttons are switched such that the 'B' button goes to the first floor. The DA predicts that Jack is disposed such that he cannot but go to the first floor, since Jack is disposed to go to the first floor when he tries not to go to the first floor (that is, when he tries to go to the basement). Conversely, it predicts he cannot but go to the basement.

[3] Lewis (2020, p. 243)

[4] One important difference between Lewis's safety-style analysis of abilities and traditional safety conditions in epistemology is that the latter are conditions that, insofar as they are offered as necessary conditions on an agent's knowing that P, concern *successes*; knowing that P involves a kind of normative success, and safety conditions are supposed to help capture what that success amounts to. In particular, characterizing knowledge as safe belief helps rule out a certain form

of epistemic luck that reduces the extent to which a belief's being true is creditable to the agent, or to the exercise of her epistemic abilities (See especially Prtichard (2005; 2007) and Carter (2013), among others, for discussion). In contrast, Lewis's proposal is not about *successful* manifestations of abilities but instead about the *possession* of abilities themselves.

We note this difference here because, even though it bears mentioning, it does not detract from the family resemblance that the two sorts of accounts bear to one another. Indeed, Lewis seems to think that being unlucky is not an obstacle to the possession of an ability (2020: 243), and there might be an important connection between successfully φ-ing across various nearby circumstances and the possession of an ability to φ (e.g., Jaster 2020). But Lewis's own view does not appear to make this connection, and so we are left to wonder about how Lewis would have treated the relationship between safety as a condition on *possessing* an ability and safety as a condition on *creditably* (or *non-luckily*) *manifesting* an ability. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for prompting us to say more about this.

[5] This is how Sosa (1999) originally characterized safety, the counterfactual contrapositive of sensitivity.

[6] This is Williamson's (2000, p. 147) formulation. Elsewhere (2009), he characterizes safety as a kind of "local necessity" that rules out the "danger" of Gettier-style luck.

[7] There may also be mixed cases, ones which have important features of paradigmatically subjective and paradigmatically objective readings. We suspect that this will be true especially on the OFA. But we set this issue aside, as mixed cases will have problems for both horns of our dilemma.

[8] The ACA needs both construals of practically available options to be extensionally adequate. A subjective construal correctly predicts that a claim like "Lizzie can't put the plane on autopilot—she has no idea which button to press!" can be true while "Lizzie can win the prize; she just has to push the seventh button" can also be true even though Lizzie doesn't know that she can win by pushing the seventh button. (2017, pp. 320-321).

[9] For instance, I cannot open the safe unless I know the combination (compare Lewis 2020, p. 242).

[10] To be fair, Mandelkern, Schulteis, and Boylan do not say that an agent's being able to reasonably conclude in favor of something is either necessary or sufficient for her to have the option to do that thing, even on a subjective reading. Articulating candidate necessary and sufficient conditions is, as far as we understand them, beyond the scope of their project, concerned as it is with laying out a semantic framework. (Recall Maier's two problems articulated in the first section.) Instead, according to them, being able to reasonably conclude in favor of something "typically" or "normally" indicates that one has the option to do that thing (pp. 16, 21). And for the purposes of semantics, this claim strikes us as a plausible generalization.

[11] Perhaps Lewis could offer a reductive account of basic actions that is informative without appealing to conditionals or dispositions. For instance, Vihvelin (2013, p. 176), in a Lewisian vein, offers a reductive view of trying in terms of the acquisition of a causally efficacious intention. Suppose we then plug this view into the OFA: we have that to be able to try (to A) is (i) to be able to acquire a causally efficacious intention (to A) and (ii) for there to be no obstacles to acquiring a causally efficacious intention (to A). This is just to say that an agent can try (to A) just in case she isn't robustly prevented from acquiring an A-intention.

If we identify basic mental actions, like tryings, with the safe acquisition of effective intentions, then it seems like our Lewis-cum-Vihvelin view can get around Vetter's purported counterexamples. Plausibly, all actions start from effective intentions. But are tryings "too cheap" on this view? That will depend crucially on how modally robust or fragile intention-acquisition is.
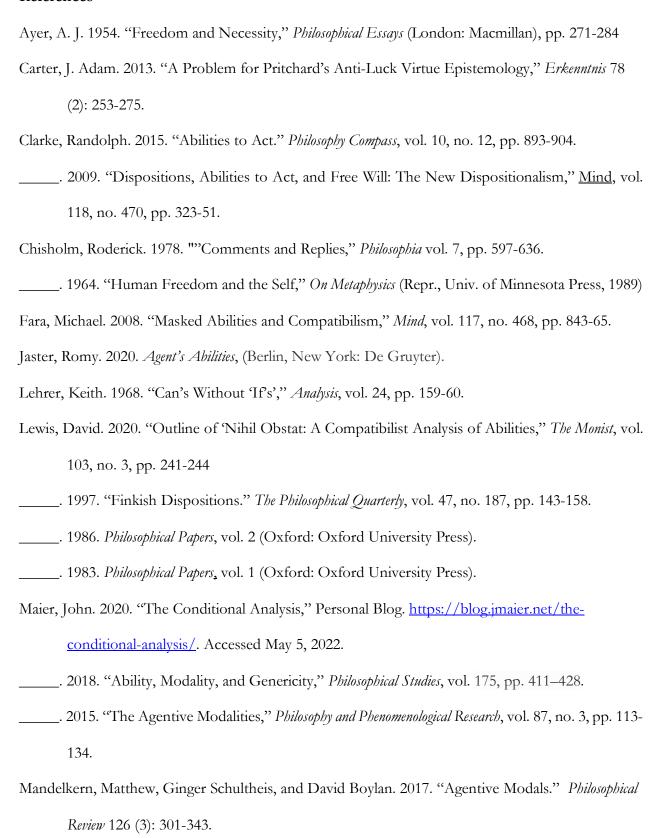
Still, a deeper problem is that the view does not explain what it is meant to explain; even if all basic actions are or involve the acquisition of a causally efficacious intention, not all acquisitions of causally efficacious intentions are or ground basic actions. Thus, tryings cannot *simply be* acquisitions of causally efficacious intentions; one worries that they must have, additionally, something agentive. So this can be, at best, a promissory note for a fuller theory of basic agentive modality.

The potential promise and problems of this view are, we think, too thorny to get into here, but we leave it as a point of future research. In any event, the defender of OFA would need to say more about basic actions to avoid either the extensional problem or the problem of cheap basic actions. We note this option for defenders of OFA both because we find it independently interesting, but more importantly, because this reductive strategy is general, and any defender of a conditional-style analysis might try to employ it (at their own risk!).

[12] Wallace (2021, p. 14) argues that this problem extends to the DA too, since the dispositions typically appealed to in the DA have the performance of basic actions as their stimulus conditions.

[13] Lewis, wisely, offers an independent argument that we need a compatibilist theory of abilities at the beginning of his outline (2020, p. 241). Still, we worry that OFA does not sufficiently explain why compatibilism is true insofar as it takes some agentive modality for granted.

[14] Consider that Peter van Inwagen, if he were to revise his famous *An Essay on Free Will*, "would not use even the adjective 'free'", that he "would not speak of free actions, free agents, or free choices." He would simply speak of choices, in whatever sense of 'choice' was most relevant to questions of responsibility (2015, pp. 16-17). Put otherwise, he worries that if determinism is true, we really cannot choose or try or decide in a meaningful sense of those terms.

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[15] She says, "Some people with obsessive-compulsive disorder have a disposition to wash their hands every five minutes. I do not have such a disposition. But like the OCDers, I do possess the potentiality to wash my hands, and the potentiality to wash them every five minutes. It is just that my potentiality has a rather low degree. Like the OCDers, I do have the ability to wash my hands every five minutes; it is just that unlike them, I do not feel the urge to exercise this ability. I share with OCD-afflicted people the potentiality to wash every five minutes, and the ability to wash every five minutes. It would be odd to think that these are two entirely distinct properties which we share. Rather, it seems that abilities, like dispositions, are a species of potentiality" (2013, p. 102).

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