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What's Metaphysical About Metaphysical Necessity?¹

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Abstract

I begin by contrasting three approaches one can take to the distinction between the essential and accidental properties: an ontological, a deflationary, and a mind-dependent approach. I then go on to apply that distinction to the necessary a posteriori, and defend the deflationist view. Finally I apply the distinction to modal truth in general and argue that the deflationist position lets us avoid an otherwise pressing problem for the actualist: the problem of accounting for the source of modal truth.

Modal Properties

Compare two positions with respect to modality de re. Both positions accept Lewis' ontology of concrete possibilia² but while one, counterpart theory³, holds that each concrete object is world-bound the other, modal realism with overlap⁴, holds that there are literal trans-world identities.

According to the counterpart theorist, what it is for an object to be essentially Φ is for all the counterparts of that object to be Φ ; likewise, an object is accidentally Φ iff it is Φ but has counterparts that are not Φ . The modal realist with overlap, on the other hand, holds that an object is essentially Φ iff it is Φ in every world in which *it* – that very object, not a counterpart of it – exists; likewise, an object is accidentally Φ iff it is Φ but is not Φ in some world in which it exists.

If an object is literally present in many worlds, then how can its properties vary from world to world? How can Sara be sitting (because she is sitting in the actual world); and also not sitting (because she is not sitting in another world)? Doesn't this amount to a single object having the contradictory property of *sitting and not sitting*? This problem is exactly analogous to the problem of temporarily true predications: if Sara wasn't sitting but now is, isn't she both sitting and not sitting? And since modal realism with overlap is analogous to endurantism⁵, one would expect the modal realist

¹ Thanks to Elizabeth Barnes, Katherine Hawley, Peter Simons, Robbie Williams and Dean Zimmerman, for helpful discussion on issues dealt with here. I owe special thanks to an anonymous referee for *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* who gave me excellent feedback on an earlier version of this paper; s/he went above and beyond the call of duty, and taking into account his/her comments improved the paper immensely.

² Lewis (1986) is the classic presentation of Lewis' concrete realism about possibilia.

³ Lewis (1983a) sets out the formal apparatus of counterpart theory. See also Lewis (1983b) for significant philosophical developments in Lewis' thought concerning that theory.

⁴ See McDaniel (2004) for the development of such a theory.

⁵ Objects wholly exist at every world at which they exist, just as, for the endurantist, objects wholly exist at every time at which they exist. The analogous position to counterpart theory in the persistence debate is stage theory. The stage theorist claims that objects are time-bound – they exist only for an

with overlap to treat contingently true predications much like the endurantist handles temporarily true predications. One option is to simply index property and relation instantiation to worlds, so *a* is neither *F* nor not *F* simpliciter, but rather *F*-at-*w* and not *F*-at-*w**; but such a view has its drawbacks.⁶ A better option⁷ is to distinguish between regions of space-time and material objects: the former we treat as worldbound; the latter, as non-worldbound. Property-instantiation is then taken to be relative to these worldbound regions of spacetime rather than to worlds. Worlds are identified with certain regions of spacetime: those such that each part of that region is spatio-temporally related to every other part, and not spatio-temporally related to any other region of spacetime. So an object *a* could be *F* iff *a* is *F* relative to some region of spacetime, *R*, which is a part of some possible world *w*. So Sara is sitting relative to some region of spacetime which is a part of that region of spacetime which is the actual world, and not sitting relative to some other region of spacetime which is part of some non-actual world.

Now, it is natural to think that the modal realist with overlap treats modal properties as more “ontologically robust” than the counterpart theorist. Both theorists agree that a distinction is carved between the essential and the accidental properties of a thing, but the modal realist with overlap seems to think of the carving with more metaphysical seriousness. What does this extra ontological robustness amount to?

A first thought, but one that will be rejected, is that for the modal realist with overlap the distinction is carved by the world⁸, whereas for the counterpart theorist the distinction is carved, in some sense, by us. The modal realist with overlap, after all, thinks that what properties a thing has essentially or accidentally is determined by what properties that thing has in each world in which it exists, and certainly this is nothing to do with us. But for the counterpart theorist what properties a thing has essentially or accidentally is determined by what properties its counterparts have; and whether or not a thing is a counterpart of another thing is determined by whether or not it is similar in relevant respects to that thing; and whether or not two things are relevantly similar is determined by *us*, since we decide on the standards of similarity that are relevant. For example, the clay could be squashed because it has counterparts which are squashed; it has counterparts which are squashed because squashed things are relevantly similar to it; but *that* squashed things are relevantly similar to the clay is because we are thinking about the clay qua clay, and not qua statue. Had we been thinking about the clay qua statue the relevant similarity relation would not have held between the clay and a squashed thing, and so the clay could not have been squashed. Since the standards of relevance are up to us, it would be easy to conclude that whether an object is Φ essentially or accidentally is likewise up to us on the

instant – and analyses ‘*a* will be *F*’ as ‘*a* has some future temporal counterpart who is *F*’. For defences of stage theory see Hawley (2001) and Sider (2001). Perdurantism is analogous to the doctrine that things have modal parts: so for every world in which the object (wholly or partly) exists, it has a part that wholly exists in that world and which does not (even partly) exist in any other world; on this view ‘*a* could be *F*’ is true iff *a* has a modal part that is *F* (simpliciter).

⁶ It does not allow for a reduction of modality; see McDaniel (ibid. p143)

⁷ This is very condensed: for details see McDaniel (ibid. p145-153). In particular, one needs two distinct parthood relations if this account is to avoid commitment to mereological essentialism: a two-place parthood relation ‘*x* is a part of *y*’ that applies to regions of spacetime, and a three-place parthood relation ‘*x* is a part of *y* at region *R*’ which applies to material objects.

⁸ Or, perhaps better (since we are supposing there not to be just one world but many), carved by reality.

counterpart theorist's story.⁹ So the sense in which the modal realist with overlap treats the distinction between the essential and accidental with more ontological robustness than the counterpart theorist is, it might be thought, that they hold that the world draws the distinction whereas the counterpart theorist holds that we draw it.

That thought is seductive, but not quite right. The above thought has the counterpart theorist sounding like an anti-realist about modal properties: as thinking that whether or not an object is essentially Φ is a mind-dependent matter. But between the modal realist with overlap and a real anti-realist concerning modal properties – one who holds that what it is for an object to be essentially Φ is for it to be inconceivable that the object is not Φ , for example – the counterpart theorist is clearly closer to the modal realist with overlap.

It is a mistake to think that according to counterpart theory it is a mind-dependent matter whether or not a thing has a certain modal property. Consider the property we are attributing to the clay when we say it could be squashed. It is true that were we to utter the words “the statue could be squashed” we would utter a falsehood. But that is *not* because this one thing has different properties depending on whether or not it is thought of as the statue or as the clay, rather it is because in referring to the thing as the statue we create a context in which the property that we truly predicated of the clay no longer deserves to be called the property *could be squashed*.

This is a familiar phenomenon. It is true to say of me that I am tall, but it would be false to say that of me were I attending a convention of basketball players, and that's because the standards of tallness have shifted. But that obviously doesn't make it a mind-dependent matter whether or not I am tall. I need not have undergone any (non-Cambridge) change between the time when it is true to say that I am tall and the time when it is false to say that of me; all that has happened is that it has become no longer appropriate to say of that property that I have that it is the property of being tall. Similarly, it is true that the statue has the property the clay was said to have when we said that the clay could be squashed; but when we speak of that one thing as the statue it is no longer appropriate to describe that property so. When speaking of the thing as the statue we are in a context in which ‘could be squashed’ picks out the property of having squashed statue-counterparts; when speaking of the thing as the clay we are in a context in which ‘could be squashed’ picks out the property of having squashed clay-counterparts. The statue/clay has the property of having squashed clay-counterparts but it does not have the property of having squashed statue-counterparts; this is a mind-independent, context-independent truth that is settled by how things are, and has nothing at all to do with us. What's up to us is just which of these properties ‘could be squashed’ picks out. But there's nothing special about counterpart theory here: it's *always* up to us what our words pick out.

If we accept the Lewisian picture of properties as sets of possible individuals the picture is this. When you truly say, outside the basketball players' convention, that I am tall, the truth-conditions of this are that I am a member of a certain set – the set of all the tall people in all the possible worlds – call it TallSet. When you truly say at the basketball players' convention that I am not tall, it is not that I am no longer a

⁹ Of course there is a variant of Lewisian counterpart theory which only has one counterpart relation, but I will ignore this option.

member of TallSet. That would be nonsense: sets cannot change their members over time. I am a member of TallSet during the basketball players' convention if I ever am; all that has happened is that the term 'the property *being tall*' is picking out a different set of possibilities – one that includes (at least some of) these basketball players, but not me – call that set SuperTallSet. I am not a member of SuperTallSet, nor have I ever been; so I do not have, nor have I ever had, the property that is SuperTallSet. So my properties are remaining constant here: what is changing is simply how those properties are appropriately described.

Likewise, when I say of the clay that it could be squashed, the truth-conditions of this are that it is a member of certain set – the set of all the possibilities which have squashed counterparts – call it SquashSet. The clay does indeed have this property because it is a member of SquashSet; and of course the statue has that very property as well, since the statue is the clay and whether or not a thing is a member of a set is not a context-dependent matter. But in speaking of the statue/clay as the statue we create a context in which it is no longer appropriate to describe SquashSet as the set of all the possibilities which have squashed counterparts, since it includes the statue/clay as a member, and the counterpart relation invoked is such that this thing has no squashed counterparts. So the thing's properties are not changing from context to context here: what is changing is simply how those properties are appropriately described.

The sense in which the distinction between the essential and accidental properties is more ontologically robust for the modal realist with overlap than for the counterpart theorist is nothing to do with mind-dependence or mind-independence. To think otherwise is a mistake based on confusing the phenomenon of the appropriate description of a thing's properties changing from context to context with the phenomenon of a thing's genuinely changing its properties from context to context. The sense in which the modal realist with overlap treats the essential/accidental distinction more robustly is this: that for the modal realist with overlap, modal properties are very natural, whereas for the counterpart theorist they are very unnatural.

The distinction between natural and unnatural properties is as familiar as it is hard to analyse. Natural properties carve the world at its joints, unnatural properties do not; natural properties account for objective similarity, unnatural properties do not. Being charged is (reasonably) natural: there is a natural distinction between the charged things and the uncharged things: all the charged things objectively resemble one another in virtue of sharing this property, and they do not resemble any uncharged thing in this respect. Being charged or a microwave oven, on the other hand, is pretty unnatural. There is no natural distinction between the things that are either charged or microwave ovens and things that are neither. Nor do two things objectively resemble one another simply because they share this property.

For the modal realist with overlap, modal properties are very natural. To be possibly Φ is to be Φ at some world, and to be Φ at a world w is to occupy some region R that is a part of w , and to be Φ at R . So what it is to be possibly Φ can be analysed in terms of *parthood*, *region*, and *occupation*, and these look to be good candidates for highly natural properties. For the counterpart theorist, on the other hand, modal properties are pretty unnatural. To be possibly Φ is to have a counterpart that is Φ , which is to be sufficiently similar to something that is Φ . But the standards of

similarity can be so unnatural that to be possibly Φ is very unnatural as a result. To make the point salient, consider Lewis' account of how the counterpart theorist can be a truthmaker theorist. Lewis said that the counterpart theorist needed to focus on a special kind of counterpart relation: the counterpart relation invoked by thinking of things *qua* truthmakers.¹⁰ Particularly interesting is his (together with Gideon Rosen) story concerning negative existentials¹¹: the truthmaker for <there are no unicorns> (say) is the world *qua* unaccompanied by unicorns. Ordinarily, it is true to say that the world could have contained unicorns; but when we speak of the world *qua* unaccompanied by unicorns we invoke a counterpart relation according to which there is no counterpart of the world which contains a unicorn. It is true, then, to say that the world *qua* unaccompanied by unicorns has the property *essentially contains no unicorns*. This is a highly unnatural property. The members of the set that is this property do not objectively resemble each other to a high degree. Two worlds can be unlike as you want except that they must both contain no unicorns and they will 'resemble' each other in this respect; but that is no more genuine a resemblance than the resemblance you and I share in virtue of both not being beanbags.

We can discern, then, three positions with respect to modal properties and the sense in which the distinction between the essential and the accidental is determined by the mind-independently existing reality. The first position is that reality carves a natural joint between the essential and the accidental properties; the second that reality makes a division between the essential and the accidental properties, but that it is not a joint in reality – it is an unnatural distinction; the third position is that there is no such distinction in reality – the distinction is a mind-dependent one. Let us call these three positions the ontological view, the deflationary view and the anti-realist view respectively.

The necessary a posteriori

Let us turn to the necessary a posteriori: truths of form <Necessarily, water is H₂O>, or <Necessarily, gold has atomic number 79>. Here we face an analogous choice between the ontological, the deflationary, and the mind-dependence view. According to the deflationary view, the necessary a posteriori is primarily a linguistic phenomenon rather than a metaphysical one. The phenomenon of the necessary a posteriori arises, on this view, from considerations about how we properly *describe* certain situations. The lesson we should take from Kripke and Putnam, so the view goes, is that we can only know a posteriori that certain sentences truly describe every possible situation. But that is not because we need empirical evidence to discover that the state of affairs that those sentences claim to obtain obtains necessarily; rather it is because we need empirical evidence to discover just what state of affairs those sentences claim to obtain. If I utter the sentence 'there is some non-H₂O water around' then I utter a necessary falsehood. Why? Because the state of affairs that sentence claims to obtain is one where there is some of the H₂O substance in its liquid form that is not H₂O. That state of affairs cannot obtain, and I know a priori that it cannot obtain; but what I cannot know a priori is that that is the state of affairs said to obtain by that sentence. To know that I need to discover the chemical composition of water: I need to know that water is the H₂O substance in its liquid form. There is no

¹⁰ Lewis (2003)

¹¹ Lewis and Rosen (2003)

claim here that 'water' *means* 'the H₂O substance' – that is not plausible, since we understood the term 'water' before we knew anything of chemical theory; rather the claim is simply that knowing the meaning of the words in a sentence is not always sufficient to know what state of affairs is said to obtain by that sentence. Sometimes we must also know some a posteriori facts about the things that our words talk about.

The phenomenon of the necessary a posteriori arises, according to the deflationist, because there are certain *sentences* which truly describe every possible world but which can only be discovered to do so by empirical means. The phenomenon of the necessary a posteriori does *not* require us to admit that there are *worlds* which are impossible which we can only discover to be impossible by empirical means. Our opinion on what worlds are (metaphysically) possible did not change post Kripke/Putnam, says the deflationist; all that changed was our opinion on how some of those worlds are correctly *described*, which has an impact on our opinion as to what *sentences* are necessary (or, if you prefer, what sentences express necessary truths).

I have a great deal of sympathy for the deflationist story here. The most convincing consideration, to my mind, that water couldn't have been anything other than H₂O is the Twin Earth thought experiment. We were asked to consider a world in which there is a counterpart of Earth where the clear, odourless, colourless liquid that falls from the sky, makes plants grow, quenches thirst etc is not H₂O but XYZ, and then asked whether or not this is a world which contains water. We answer that it isn't. Now what is crucial is that what the Twin Earth example elicits from us is an opinion about how we should *describe* the world in question. It's not, or so it seems to me, that one of the ways we thought a possible way the world could be turned out not to be possible; it's that it turned out that we were misdescribing one of the possible ways for the world to be as a way according to which water was not H₂O, when in fact the proper description is that it is a way for the world to be in which there is no water, but merely twater. Our conception of the underlying modal facts, then, is no different post Kripke/Putnam from how it was pre Kripke/Putnam; all that changed was our opinions on how to properly describe those facts: on what sentences express truths as a result of the modal facts being what they are. What Kripke and Putnam did is convince us that some of the possibilities were being misdescribed; and the phenomenon of the necessary a posteriori arises because to know whether or not a possible situation is properly described as one where there is water we need to do some empirical work – we need to discover the *actual* chemical composition of water.

Contrast this with the ontological view: a view which places ontological importance on the necessary a posteriori. Consider, for the sake of illustration, a view according to which there are two distinct universals: a simple universal of being water and a structured universal of being H₂O. Something is water iff it instantiates the being water universal, and it is H₂O iff it instantiates the structured universal of being H₂O. Now certainly there is no *logical* contradiction in something instantiating one and not the other but, according to this view, such a situation is metaphysically impossible. On this view the necessity of water being H₂O is not simply a result of how we describe the space of possible worlds – whether or not something instantiates the water universal is independent of whether or not we would call that something 'water'. This view claims that there are two distinct universals which as a matter of necessity must be either both instantiated by a substance or both uninstantiated. In

contrast to the deflationary theorist this theorist thinks that we did learn something about what worlds were possible from Kripke/Putnam, not just about how to correctly describe the space of possible worlds. According to this theorist we can only know a posteriori what situations are possible. A priori reasoning cannot reveal that the world where something instantiates the water universal but not the H₂O structured universal is an impossible world.

That way of taking the necessary a posteriori with ontological seriousness is not very attractive, but I am merely aiming at the moment to illustrate the distinction, and I hope I have done that. That particular theory is not very attractive because it is not very plausible to think that there are two distinct universals, the water universal and the H₂O universal. If you believe in universals it is likely that you only believe in simple universals corresponding to sparse properties and complex universals constituted from them; you will probably not believe in a simple universal of being water. If you want to take abundant properties such as being water with ontological seriousness, chances are you take them to be something like functions from possible worlds to sets of individuals. Assume that is the case. So the property of being water is a function such that when it takes a world *w* as its argument it yields as its value the singleton of the substance water, or perhaps the set of all the water molecules, in *w*. So there are indeed two distinct properties – the structured universal being H₂O is not identical to this function – but nevertheless this is a road back to deflationism. For the reason that nothing can be water and not H₂O according to this view is not plausibly to be taken as the result of some necessary connection between the structured universal being H₂O and the function being water, as is the case according to the previous view, but rather because our usage of the term ‘water’ is such that the term would not apply to any function which took you from a world to a thing in that world that did not instantiate the H₂O structured universal. And so the peculiarity of the necessary a posteriori remains wordy rather than worldly.

It is only knowable a posteriori that our usage of the term ‘water’ imposes such a constraint on what function is the property of being water, for it is obviously not analytic of the term ‘water’ that a function is only the property of being water if it never takes you from a world to a non-H₂O substance in that world; rather the view would be that it is analytic of the term ‘water’ that a function is only the property of being water if it never takes you from a world to a substance in that world which has a different chemical composition from the actual watery stuff. Since it is an empirical matter what that chemical composition is it is an empirical matter what the constraint is that is placed on whether or not a function deserves to be called the ‘being water’ property. Again then, according to this view we know a priori the space of possibilities but we do not know a priori how to describe the space of possibilities, because in order to know that the function that takes you from the Twin Earth world to the watery XYZ stuff is not the property of being water you need to know that water is not in fact XYZ.

The connection with the case of modal properties should be fairly clear. The ontological theorist – one who postulates a necessary connection between two distinct universals: the water universal and the H₂O universal – thinks that the necessary a posteriori has its source in very natural features of logical space: what universals there are and where they are instantiated. Those are natural features *par excellence*. The deflationist gives reality a less important role. The necessary a posteriori arises as a

result of how we use kind terms. That's not to say that it is merely a matter of convention that <water is H₂O> is necessary, of course; the deflationist agrees with the ontological theorist that these facts are mind-independent, worldly facts. They're just not that interesting for the deflationist! The ontological theorist thinks she has discovered necessary connections between distinct existences; she is rejecting what Lewis thought was the fundamental principle that guided us in our modal epistemology: the Humean denial of necessary connections.¹² The deflationist makes no such claim. According to the deflationist, all that's going on is that the kind term 'water' picks out the chemical kind and not the phenomenal kind. But it's not that the chemical kind is somehow a better candidate, more eligible (to think that would be to move back to an ontological view); that's just what we do. There would be no facts about modal space we would be missing were we to have used 'water' to pick out the phenomenal kind instead; nor would we be using the term to pick out a less eligible candidate.

What would the third position – the anti-realist view – look like with respect to the necessary a posteriori? Glimpses of such a view can be seen in Putnam. Putnam said that he wanted to accept the necessary a posteriori but to “assimilate [Kripke's] *metaphysical* intuitions to . . . *linguistic* intuitions.”¹³ To arrive at “a theory which was related to Kripke's, but which was stripped of metaphysical assumptions to the point where *Carnap* might have accepted it.”¹⁴ Now that sounds to me like the deflationist thought, but he then goes on to say¹⁵

[For Kripke] statements about “this table” [or about water, gold, this person etc] require . . . an intuitive knowledge of what is “essential” to the table – an intuitive grasp of the limits of the possibilities in which the hypothetical object would bear the primitive logical relation “=” to the table I am pointing to [or to the substance water, or etc]. [In contrast] Criteria of table-identity are conceived of (by me, anyway) as to some extent *up to us*. [Whereas] Facts about “=” are not (in Kripke's view, anyway) at all up to us.

Taken at his word here, Putnam seems to be saying that there are mind-dependent cross-world identity facts: that whether a thing A in world w₁ is identical to the thing B in world w₂ is something that we can decide. That is an anti-realist view. It is necessary that water is H₂O because in every world w, the substance in w that is identical to the substance in our world picked out by 'water' is also identical to the substance in our world picked out by 'H₂O'. But Putnam's view seems to be that these cross-world identities hold in virtue of some decision of ours, so it is a mind-dependent fact that water is necessarily H₂O. Had we made different decisions, or had there been no mental activity at all, these facts concerning cross-world identities would not have held. Now maybe this is a misrepresentative passage of Putnam, and that he doesn't literally mean to be endorsing the mind-dependence of cross-world identity facts; but even so, we can see what an anti-realist position concerning the necessary a posteriori would amount to.

¹² Lewis (2001, p611)

¹³ Putnam (1990, p64)

¹⁴ *ibid.* p63-64

¹⁵ *ibid.* p67

Possible worlds and the source of necessity

We have contrasted three approaches to modality – ontological, deflationary and anti-realist – as they apply to modal properties and the necessary a posteriori. For my money, the best position in either case is the deflationary position; ontological positions err by making modality too special, anti-realist positions err by making it not special enough. In this section I want to try and use the threefold distinction to suggest that a certain seemingly pressing problem in modal metaphysics is far more tractable than it has often appeared.

The problem is that of the source of modal truth: what makes it the case that some propositions are necessary, and some merely possible? The way things are seems only to account for what is in fact the case, not what must be the case, or could have been the case but isn't. Now one way to answer the problem is to be a Lewisian realist. For Lewis, providing an ontological grounding for modal claims is as easy as providing one for non-modal claims: modal claims are grounded in what there is *unrestrictedly*, whereas non-modal claims are grounded in what there *actually* is. Lewis responds to the problem of modal truth in an exactly analogous manner to how the eternalist responds to the problem of tensed truth. Just as the eternalist solves the problem of what grounds truths of the form <there were dinosaurs> or <there will be Martian colonies> by accepting the existence of past times containing dinosaurs and future times containing Martian colonies, so Lewis solves the problem of what grounds truths of the form <there could be talking donkeys> by accepting the existence of non-actual talking donkeys.¹⁶

For a long time I thought this was a major, perhaps decisive, consideration in favour of Lewisian realism. The ersatz possible worlds theorist had no similar solution to the problem of modal truth to hand, for familiar reasons: they had to accept as primitive the distinction between possible worlds and impossible worlds. While Lewis can happily deny the existence of impossible worlds, and claim therefore that the existence of a world containing a talking donkey is a sufficient grounding for the possibility of talking donkeys, the ersatzist must seemingly admit impossible worlds as well as possible worlds. If worlds are not concrete spacetimes but sets of propositions, say, then there will be sets of propositions that couldn't all be true together just as there will be sets of propositions that could all be true together, and similarly if worlds are maximal properties, or world books, or etc. So the ersatzist cannot appeal to the existence of a world in which there is a talking donkey as the grounding of <Possibly, there are talking donkeys>. She must appeal also to the fact that this world is *possible*: that it represents a way things could be as opposed to a way things couldn't be. But now we are just back to our original problem: what grounds this modal truth that this world represents a possibility? The ersatzist, seemingly, has no answer: it simply *just is the case* that some worlds are possible and some not. This is no better than the presentist claiming that it *just is the case* that some things happened, and not offering a further grounding, and so if the ersatzist cannot find anything more illuminating to say we have a strong case for Lewisian realism.

¹⁶ The analogy between the problems faced by the presentist in accounting for tensed truths and the actualist in accounting for modal truths is discussed by Sider (2001, p40-41) and (2003, p185).

As I said, I used to doubt that the ersatzist could say anything more illuminating, and I took this as a strong reason to prefer Lewisian realism, or perhaps to move towards a non-cognitivist position on modality; but now I think that the deflationist offers hope to the ersatzist. Reflect on what the problem is meant to be for the ersatzist: they need to say what it is in virtue of which a certain proper subset of all the worlds that there are represent a way things could be, and the only answer that seems available to them is that they are the possible worlds and not the impossible worlds. But why is this meant to be bad?

I think the worry being levelled against the ersatzer stems from the thought that there must be something *special* about the possible worlds that the impossible worlds lack, and that the ersatzer faces the challenge of accounting for why some worlds and not others have this special status. It is as if the possible worlds had some sort of metaphysical ‘glow’ – the glow of possibility – that the impossible worlds lacked. If that were right the ersatzist would indeed have to face the hard task of accounting for why some worlds glowed and others didn’t: in virtue of what is this world a glowing world and not a non-glowing world? But that worry takes the ersatzist to be an ontological theorist. If there really were anything akin to a glow this would mean that there would be a natural division between the possible and the impossible worlds that reality carves by making some worlds glowing worlds and some worlds non-glowing worlds. But while the ersatzist *could* hold such a theory, they needn’t do so. More attractive, to my mind, is the thought that while there is a genuine, mind-independent, distinction between the possible worlds and the impossible worlds, it is a highly unnatural distinction: one that we latch on to with our modal vocabulary not because of any intrinsic eligibility enjoyed by that distinction between the worlds (as opposed to some other distinction: one that drew a different boundary between worlds), but because of our interests.¹⁷

An example of the kind of deflationary view I have in mind is the neo-conventionalism of Ted Sider.¹⁸ Traditionally, the conventionalist claims that the necessary truths are those which are true by convention (or true in virtue of convention). But this theory is hopeless. What is a matter of convention is that sentences express the propositions they do, for we could have used the same sentences to say something different. So if a sentence S expresses a truth then in this sense it does so in virtue of convention; we could have used S to express a falsehood. But in this sense *every* true sentence is true by convention; no distinction is carved between the necessary and the contingent. If such a distinction is to be drawn then the sense of ‘true by convention’ the conventionalist is interested in must not simply be the trivial sense in which all sentences are true by convention; rather, the conventionalist must hold that there is a notion of ‘true by convention’ such that not only is it a result of convention that a sentence S expresses a truth but that it is a result of convention that the truth expressed by S is true. So while a contingent sentence S and a necessary sentence S* are both ‘true by convention’ in the sense that we could have used those sentences to express falsehoods, the truth expressed by S* but not the truth expressed

¹⁷ What these interests are, and why we single out certain kinds of proposition in this way, is another question. A satisfactory answer to it would require a discussion of the purpose of modalizing, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

¹⁸ Sider (2003)

by S holds in virtue of convention. It is in this sense that the necessary truths are true by convention.

But that is simply false. It is not true by convention in this sense that $2+2=4$ or that all bachelors are unmarried etc; those claims are true in virtue of what numbers and bachelors are like. Every sentence is such that the fact that it expresses the proposition it does is a matter of convention, but every true proposition is true in virtue of how the world is. The *only* propositions that we could legitimately claim are true by convention in this required sense, then, are those that say something *about conventions*: e.g. that there are conventions, or that such-and-such a convention holds, etc. *Those* propositions are true by convention, in the same way that the truth that there are tables is true in virtue of the tables. So it is not the necessary propositions that are true by convention in this sense; it is this small subset of the contingent propositions that are *about* conventions.

Sider offers us a variant on conventionalism that abandons the useless notion of truth in virtue of convention. Sider's thought is this: that it is not true by convention that $2+2=4$, but rather a matter of convention that this truth is a necessary truth. The idea is that there is not something special (some glow of necessity) that the proposition $\langle 2+2=4 \rangle$ has that the proposition \langle there are monkeys \rangle lacks; it is simply that the conventions governing our modal language pick out the former and not the latter as a necessary truth. This is a deflationist view of modality. There is nothing special about the truths of maths, or analytic truths, or natural kind identities, etc, that we are latching on to when we single them out as necessary truths, it's just that we consider such propositions important, and so we use our modal language to accord them special status.

This is *not* a mind-dependence account. It is a wholly mind-independent matter that $\langle 2+2=4 \rangle$ is necessary and \langle there are monkeys \rangle contingent. The property that $\langle 2+2=4 \rangle$ has and \langle there are monkeys \rangle lacks would have been had by the former and lacked by the latter even if there had been no mental activity at all. The deflationist position is simply that this property is not a natural one; according to Sider it is a highly disjunctive property (many of the disjuncts of which are not even that natural): it is the property of being a truth of mathematics, or a truth of natural kind identity, or etc.

Let us return now to the alleged problem of accounting for the source of modality. We are asked: what makes these worlds possible and these worlds impossible? I answer: just that the first are possible. By this I mean that there is *nothing* more to the distinction between the worlds than that the first group are the ones we single out as the possible worlds. This is not to say that there is no mind-independent distinction between the two groups of worlds, no property that every world in the first group has and every world in the second group lacks. There is such a property, although it is hard to state: it is the property of representing things as being thus-and-so, or thus-and-so, or etc. But of course, for *any* distinction that you drew among the totality of worlds there would be such a property.

The deflationist holds that there is nothing ontologically special about this distinction as opposed to the myriad other distinctions that we could have latched on to. We draw the distinction where we do not because it is more eligible than any of the other

distinctions but because of our interests. There seems, then, to be nothing more required in accounting for why these worlds are the possible worlds than to account for why they occur on one side of the division we draw rather than the other, and that is easy to account for.

Suppose I am presented with a group of people and I point to a sub-group of them and call them the Φ s, with the remaining members of the group being the non- Φ s. If you ask me in virtue of what a non- Φ is a non- Φ the answer is obviously just that they weren't in the group I singled out as the Φ s; there is nothing more to be said. Likewise, if I single out a sub-group of all the worlds, not by pointing to them explicitly but by mentioning certain features of them – such as representing the mathematical truths as true, not making false actually true kind identities, etc – and I call the worlds in this sub-group the possible worlds, there is nothing more to be said about why they are the possible worlds than that they are in the group I singled out to be called that. Explanation stops there. We would only owe a further explanation if we thought that the distinction we were drawing was latching on to some natural joint between the worlds; then we would need to account for why some worlds had this natural property and others didn't. But this is exactly what the deflationist rejects.

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