

MODAL EXPRESSIVISM AND METAPHYSICAL PRAGMATISM

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No notion plays a more central role in metaphysics than modality. Modality of course appears as a central topic of metaphysical discussion in its own right in debates about how we should understand modal discourse and whether modal properties are ‘genuine features of our world’. But it also appears just beneath the surface in virtually every classic metaphysical debate, including debates about persistence (which are debates about what sorts of change an entity can and cannot survive), about identity, reduction, and material constitution (since the main barrier to reduction and identity theses is often said to be that the entities have different modal properties), and even about existence (since the existence of objects or kinds is often thought to be tied to the question of whether or not there is anything with the relevant ‘intrinsic modal features’).

The importance of modality to metaphysical discussion and the tendency to read all discourse as fulfilling the same—descriptive—function, combined with the desire to believe that metaphysics can discover hidden and previously unknown facts about the world, have led hyper-realist views of modality to be extremely popular in contemporary metaphysics, even to the point of being the ‘default’ view one denies only at the risk of creating an army of enemies. Such hyper-realist views treat modal discourse as being descriptive of a range of modal facts or properties, which the metaphysician can hope to discover much as the physicist hopes to discover hidden physical facts. This picture enables metaphysicians to peddle a great many ‘surprising’ views about what exists, or what its nature, persistence, or identity conditions are, that are often radically at odds with common sense views—and indeed has led to increasing trade in revisionary metaphysical views throughout philosophy.

But the hyper-realist view of modality has its own long-standing ontological and epistemological embarrassments, especially for philosophers of vaguely naturalist or empiricist persuasions. For, the question is often asked, what are the modal facts and properties needed to make our modal claims true supposed to be, and how can they be part of the ‘fabric of reality’? Moreover, how could we come to know of their existence, or refer to them, given that they can’t simply be perceived or otherwise empirically detected?

The difficulties for hyper-realist views of modality have inspired recurrent efforts to develop a different understanding of modal discourse that take its primary role not to be performing a descriptive function, but rather an expressive function. As Huw Price has described it, these expressivist views consist in:

1. A negative thesis to the effect that modal vocabulary isn’t genuinely representational¹
2. A positive thesis “which proposes some alternative account of the function” of modal vocabulary

Two of the most important recent defenders of expressivist views are here today, and an earlier expressivist view was developed by Gilbert Ryle. But views along these

lines were initially developed by positivists like A. J. Ayer, who held that necessary propositions are analytic truths which “do not make any assertion about the empirical world, but simply record our determination to use symbols in a certain fashion” (1952, 31). This version of expressivism, of course, came to be known as ‘modal conventionalism’, as it held that modal statements were ‘illustrations’ of linguistic rules or conventions (Ayer 1952, 79).

But conventionalism faced a barrage of criticism that led to decades of neglect of similar approaches to modality, and even to the dominance of hyper-realist views of modality as reactions against the apparent failings of conventionalism. As Ted Sider puts it “The old ‘linguistic’ or ‘conventionalist’ theory of necessity has few contemporary adherents, for the most part with good reason” (2003, 199). Indeed even those who now defend other versions of expressivism tend to avoid association with, or even much discussion of, their conventionalist forbears.

What I want to do today is to show one way to develop an expressivist line on modality inspired by the original conventionalist views and able to make sense of the idea that we can account for modal truth without positing modal properties as truthmakers (thus mitigating the ontological worries), while providing a route for understanding knowledge of modal facts without relying on perceptual analogies (mitigating the epistemological worries). The crucial move in developing this view, of course, will be to defend it against the major lines of criticism to which conventionalism has been—and still is—subjected. Given the centrality of modality to a range of other metaphysical debates, as I will argue at the paper’s close, this view of modality also has the potential to deflate a great many other debates in metaphysics and suggest that they are best approached in a pragmatic Carnapian spirit.

1. Conventionalism and its Critics

As Robert Brandom has rightly emphasized (following Kant, Sellars, and—I would add—Husserl), *using* straightforward descriptive vocabulary “presupposes grasp of the properties and relations made explicit by modal vocabulary” (Brandom L4, p.7). The basic idea behind expressivist views of modality is that modal terms are used in making the rules of use of our (other) terms explicit (cf. Brandom L4, p.9).

The basic idea of conventionalism was much the same. A. J. Ayer, for example, held that in expressing analytic propositions, “I am simply calling attention to the implications of a certain linguistic usage” (1952, 79), and “indicating the convention” (1952, 79) or “illustrating the rules” which govern our usage of the relevant terms (1952, 80). Thus, as Ayer notes (1952, 79-80), analytic statements in some sense add nothing to our knowledge—but they do make explicit what is already implicit in the proper usage of terms.

Here we have slipped tacitly from talk of modal propositions to talk of analytic propositions—of course, this is not accidental for Ayer, since he held that necessary propositions were “without exception analytic propositions” knowable *a priori*. The idea that analytic statements are illustrations of the rules of use for our terms was supposed to *explain* their necessity: they cannot be “confuted by experience” since they make no assertion about the empirical world at all, and “we cannot deny them without infringing the conventions which are presupposed by our very denial, and so falling into self-contradiction” (1952, 84).

The idea that all necessity may be explained in terms of analyticity was rejected on grounds that it cannot account for the presence of Kripkean *a posteriori* necessities, but newer versions of a conventionalist approach have been developed to cope with that problem (Sidelle 1989). The idea is that we can distinguish *basic*

modal claims—e.g. that whatever chemical structure water *actually* has, it has *necessarily*—from *derivative* modal claims, e.g. that water necessarily has chemical structure H₂O. The neo-conventionalist holds that only *basic* modal claims are analytic, but that basic modal claims may be combined with (non-modal) empirical truths (e.g. that water actually has the chemical structure H₂O) to yield derivative *a posteriori* necessities. I have argued elsewhere that this line can be made to work (2007)—but will leave it to one side here, and deal for the present just with the *basic* modal truths that are more plausibly held to be derived from analytic claims.

Another reason the idea that necessity may be explained in terms of analyticity was rejected was, of course, that Quine raised general suspicions about the notion of analyticity: if there is no such thing as analyticity, then it cannot be used to explain necessity. This is also a line of objection I have discussed extensively elsewhere (2007) and will leave to one side. Here I want to discuss a deeper worry: that even if we allow that there are analyticities, we cannot explain analyticity (and thereby necessity) by appealing to the conventionalist's idea that analytic claims illustrate the rules (or conventions) for using terms.

While arguments that conventionalism is a non-starter have been around for fifty years or more, they have recently been revived and extended (e.g. Boghossian 1997, Sider 2003). A first objection (Boghossian 1997, 336, Sider 2003, 199-200) is that conventionalism makes “the truth of what is expressed [by an analytic claim] *contingent*, whereas most of the statements at stake in the present discussion are clearly necessary” (Boghossian 1997, 336). For if analytic statements were “actually about language use” (Sider 2003, 199)—if, e.g. “All bachelors are men” meant “It is a linguistic convention that ‘bachelor’ is to be applied only where ‘man’ is applied”—then it would clearly be contingent, since we might have adopted other linguistic conventions to govern these symbols. This not only seems false but would block the attempt to explain necessity in terms of analyticity, and analyticity in terms of expressions of linguistic conventions.

The second, related, criticism is that the very idea of truth by convention is untenable, since that would be to hold that we can *make* certain statements (the analytic or basic modal ones) true ‘by pronouncement’, but (as Boghossian puts it) “how can we make sense of the idea that something is made true by our meaning something by a sentence?” (1997, 336). Sider develops the argument further as follows:

I cannot make it the case that it rains simply by pronouncing, nor can I make it the case that it does not rain simply by pronouncing... Therefore, I cannot make it the case that either it rains or it doesn't rain, simply by pronouncement. (2003, 201).

Both of these criticisms, I will argue, are based on a fundamental misunderstanding of the conventionalist approach to modality. Conventionalism has to be formulated very carefully to be tenable, and there is no doubt that some past formulations led to the difficulties seized on by critics. In fact, the term ‘conventionalism’ is now so strongly associated with the view that linguistic conventions *make true* our modal statements that we might do better to drop the term entirely—and instead use the term ‘expressivism’ which, as we will see, also makes much more evident why the standard objections simply don't apply to this view.

2. An Expressivist View

We can begin from the basic idea that (in Ayer's words) analytic propositions are “illustrations of” linguistic rules (1952, 79). The rules of use for our terms may be thought of as constitutive rules—that is, rules the following of which is constitutive of

using that term (as opposed to a different homophonic term) at all. They are thus on a par with constitutive rules in other arenas, e.g. rules of social institutions or of games (cf. Searle 1995). I'll begin by discussing constitutive rules in other arenas, and then move to suggest how this can help us understand the constitutive rules of language use and their expression in modal statements.

Games have constitutive rules: rules, the following of which is constitutive of playing that game. In their most basic form, rules are issued as commands (presumably to those who want to play the game), e.g. the second rule of Scrabble is: "2. Complete your turn by counting and announcing the score for that turn..." But rules need not be stated in the imperative form, for—provided the context is clear, as it is, e.g., on the box top of a board game—the constitutive rules may also be expressed in the indicative mood, either in universal indicative form (e.g. "Each player completes his/her turn by counting and announcing the score for that turn"), or in superficially singular form (e.g. "A player completes a turn by counting and announcing the score for that turn ...").²

Utterances of the last two sorts, however, might—where the context is insufficiently clear—be mistaken for mere descriptive reports of what happens to occur in such games (in the universal case) or in a particular game (in the singular case). We can, however, remain in the indicative mood while making it explicit that the utterance is not a report but an expression of a constitutive rule (and thus a disguised command) by inserting a modal verb, e.g. "2. Each player *must* complete his/her turn by counting and announcing the score for that turn."

The various different ways of expressing the same constitutive rule of a game (in the form of a command, universal indicative, singular indicative or modal indicative) all apparently serve the same function, and are used interchangeably in stating the rules of games.³ This suggests that modal talk enters into language as a way of turning utterances that have the form of *commands* into rules stated in the indicative form, where the addition of the modal verb makes their status as rules more explicit than it is in the nonmodal universal or singular indicative form.

Notice, however, that this transformed statement is not a descriptive *report* that such a command was given (the truthmaker for which would be the utterance of the command); none of the above expressions of rules are the same as *reports about rules* such as "The box top states that each player must complete his/her turn by counting and announcing the score for that turn", nor are they made true *by* utterances of commands. Instead, they *are* commands, whether explicitly stated in imperative form, or expressed in the indicative mood.

Language also has constitutive rules governing proper use of its terms, the following of which is constitutive of using that piece of language rather than a homonym. The rules of language use, if explicitly stated, are stated in a metalanguage, though to say that language has constitutive rules is not to say that these rules may all be *stated* in a metalanguage, nor that competent speakers must be capable of reciting these rules (instead, they must simply be masters at *following* them). Nonetheless, it will make the structure of the view easier to see to begin from a case in which the rules can be so stated—so I'll begin from the standard example.

A rule for proper use of the term 'bachelor' may be stated in the imperative mood: "Apply 'bachelor' only where 'unmarried man' applies". This command, like other rules, may also be stated in the indicative mood either as a universal claim ("'Bachelor' is always applied only where 'man' applies") or a singular claim ("'Bachelor' is applied only where 'man' applies"). The status of this as an expression of a rule (though it is in the indicative mood) may be made explicit by adding a modal

auxiliary (“‘Bachelor’ *must* only be applied where ‘man’ applies”). In the metalanguage expression of the rules, the key term ‘Bachelor’ is *mentioned*, not used—it states a rule for properly using the term mentioned.

These expressions of rules aren’t the same as the analytic claims and basic modal claims we are concerned with, since the latter are formulated in the object-language, *using* the terms in question. An additional move is made here: the rules of language use that might be stated in the metalanguage are converted to the object language (while remaining in the indicative mood), giving us, e.g. “Bachelors are [always] men” (the analytic claim) or “Necessarily, bachelors are men” (the basic modal claim). The analytic claim does not *state* the rules for using language (since they are not put in the metalanguage), but it does (as Ayer put it) *illustrate* the rules or provide a *demonstration* of rules of use of the term.

In fact, this is not such a great difference from the case of other constitutive rules: in each case, rules may be stated, or they may be conveyed by *demonstration*. So, for example, one may state the rules for properly setting up a corner kick, or simply *show* how it is done. The speaker who utters an analytic statement may be naturally understood as (perhaps correctively) illustrating or demonstrating a rule of use for a piece of language *by* using it, just as a gym teacher may teach the proper way to set up a corner kick *by* doing it. The difference is only that, where the game is language use, both the recitation of the rule and the demonstration of it involve speaking (*stating* the rule in the metalanguage by *mentioning* the term or *demonstrating* it in the object language by *using* the term). The fact that we can communicate rules (of language or anything else) by demonstration rather than by explicit statement is useful, for it enables rules to be in force even if no explicit statement of them is available. So there may be rules of use for our terms that cannot be expressed in the form of neat conditions in a metalanguage, just as there may be rules for performing a dance that can’t be expressed in our impoverished movement vocabulary.

The expressivist view on offer, in sum, is that analytic claims are just constitutive rules of use for our terms, expressed in the indicative mood and converted to the object-language—and thus serving as *demonstrations* of the rules for using the terms properly. This conforms well with the actual use of analytic statements in ordinary English—as these are most often uttered as correctives to someone we feel is misusing the term. (E.g. when a child says that Aunt Linda is a bachelor, she might be informed: ‘Bachelors are men, dear’.) Basic modal statements do the same, while making the status as rules explicit by adding a modal verb (‘Bachelors *must be* men’ works even better as a corrective—or, for the pretentious parent ‘Necessarily, bachelors are men, dear’).

It might be thought that *all* (proper) speech involves demonstrations of the relevant rules of use, so that this doesn’t adequately distinguish analytic and basic modal claims from any others. But this would be a misunderstanding. Analytic and basic modal statements are illustrations of *constitutive* rules of use for that term, such that, if you violate them, you’re just not using that term at all—if you deny that a bachelor must be unmarried, you are either misunderstanding and misspeaking or changing the subject (e.g. by employing a related notion of ‘bachelor’ to mean, e.g., someone who acts in the ways bachelors are stereotypically said to). Other well-formed claims (e.g. “Bob is a bachelor”) may properly apply rules and be examples of proper usage, but affirming them is not required to be counted as using that term (rather than a homonym) at all.

3. Overcoming standard Objections

We are now in a position to see how this expressivist view of modality enables us to overcome the standard criticisms of conventionalism. The first criticism was that conventionalism makes analytic claims come out as contingent (since the adoption of those conventions is contingent) rather than necessary. But by now it should be clear that that does not apply to the view on offer here. The most basic uses of analytic and basic modal statements are not *descriptions of* linguistic rules, so we should not say that analytic claims or basic modal claims are “true in virtue of the semantical rules alone”⁴ or are made true purely by linguistic conventions, which would make them contingent. Instead, they are object-language indicative mood *demonstrations of* the rules of use of our terms themselves, which play a part in establishing the meanings of our terms and the truth-conditions of the sentences they figure in.

This also makes it clear why the second criticism—that conventionalism requires accepting that analytic (and basic modal) claims are ‘made true by pronouncement’—is out of place for a properly expressivist view. *Reports* of what the rules are may be true or false—so, e.g. the statement “It is a rule of Othello that black goes first” is true, and made true by the rule in question’s being in force. But a rule is not the same as a *report* of a rule. Rules themselves are not *made true* by pronouncement or by our ‘meaning something by a sentence’ for the simple reason that they are not in the business of being true or false at all. The rules for proper term use (“Apply ‘Bachelor’ only where ‘man’ applies”), whether phrased in command form, or in a modal or nonmodal (universal or singular) indicative statement, should not be taken to be *descriptions*, and are properly speaking, neither true nor false (though attempted reports *of* these rules may be true or false).

Critics misconstrue the central idea behind conventionalism by suggesting that the conventionalist takes modal statements to describe linguistic conventions (or acts of adopting them) rather than taking them to describe modal features of the world. But the crucial point behind these views is that modal talk should not be understood as *describing* a range of facts and reporting on them at all—that instead, it performs a different function entirely—that of *expressing* or *demonstrating* the rules of use of our terms. For that reason, as well as the entrenched association of conventionalism with the straw view dismissed by critics, it is perhaps better to speak of ‘modal expressivism’ than ‘modal conventionalism’.

It has often been said that analytic statements (unlike empirical statements) are not ‘about the world’ and need no truth-makers. Critics have often denied this, or treated the claim as mysterious. But the above gives us a way of understanding why analytic statements and the basic modal claims that may be derived from them do not require truthmakers: if analytic statements are simply demonstrations of rules of use for our terms, then, like other rules, they are commands in disguise, and do not require truthmakers since they are not candidates for being true nor false. To think that they require truthmakers is a category mistake engendered either by their indicative form, or by confusing analytic claims themselves (e.g. “All bachelors are unmarried men”) with attempted reports *about* what is analytic. This also gives a way of understanding Ayer’s claim that analytic statements cannot be “confuted in experience” since they do not “make any assertion about the empirical world” (1952, 84). Analytic statements should not be understood as making any assertion about the empirical world—not because they are making an assertion about some other world (e.g. a nonempirical world of meanings or essences), but because they are not genuine assertions at all.

But a lingering doubt may remain: surely (some may feel) analytic claims like “Bachelors are men” are *true*, and say something about *the world*, namely that all the bachelors in it are men. So the view that analytic claims are simply illustrations of rules of use for our terms, and as such are not properly said to be true or false, may seem unsatisfying. As Sider puts the objection:

...how could “All bachelors are male” not say anything about the world? It contains a quantifier over bachelors, and says of them that they are male. So it says something about the properties of bachelors—as worldly entities as one could ask for. (2003, 202)

There is a way to accommodate this, but we must tread carefully. Many pieces of language may be used to perform different speech-acts, e.g. “the door is open” may be used as a simple description, or as request to close it. So similarly, even if (as I have argued) the forms of expression that occur in analytic statements are fundamentally used as illustrations of rules (in which case they are neither true nor false—though they may be apt or inapt illustrations of the rules), they may also be used as descriptions, in which case the truth-conditions set by the rules of use are in force in establishing the truth-conditions for this (genuine) description.

The sense in which analytic claims seem to be about the world is that they are stated in the object-language, using terms that at least purport to refer to non-linguistic items of the world. But there is another perfectly good sense in which they “say nothing” about the world and are “entirely devoid of factual content” (Ayer 1952, 79). That sense is that—if we do treat them as true—it is clear that their truth does not depend on any empirical fact’s obtaining. Indeed as Husserl often emphasized through his appeal to bracketing, the truth of such statements does not even depend on the real existence of an external world at all—or any part of it. So the sense in which the analytic claim “All bachelors are male” is not ‘about’ bachelors or men is that, even if there were *no bachelors*, indeed *no men* whatsoever (and never had been), the sentence would be true.

But if we treat analytic statements, descriptively used, as guaranteed to be true, another classic problem rears its head: how can a sentence be guaranteed to be true ‘by definition’ or ‘in virtue of meanings’? I think there is a way to understand this on the above model—again without falling into the view that they are somehow *made* true ‘by pronouncement’.

As I have described it, the rules of use for our terms (which, where stateable, are stated in the metalanguage) set the application conditions for the terms they mention, and these play a role in fixing the truth conditions for sentences in which those terms are used. So consider the analytic claim “All bachelors are men”, or, rendered more formally, “ $\forall x(Bx \rightarrow Mx)$ ”. The relevant rule of use is: “apply ‘bachelor’ only where ‘man’ may be applied”, so the truth-conditions for “there is a bachelor” include that there is a man. This guarantees that *if* there is something which is a bachelor (i.e. to which ‘bachelor’ applies), then there is something which is a man (i.e. to which ‘man’ applies). This ensures the truth of the conditional, for if the antecedent is true, the consequent is guaranteed to be true. The truth of the analytic claim, taken as a genuine description (of universally quantified conditional form), is assured given the relations in the rules of use for the terms employed in the antecedent and the consequent—though the adoption of these rules is not a *truth-maker* for the claim (it only establishes the meaning of the terms involved and the truth-conditions for each part). It also makes sense of the idea that the truth of analytic claims such as “All bachelors are men” is independent of all empirical facts—even of there being bachelors or men, or indeed anything at all. And so, this expressivist view shows how

modal claims (when used descriptively) may be guaranteed to be true without requiring anything of the world—and so, *ipso facto*, without requiring truth-makers, thereby mitigating the ontological worries of hyper-realist approaches to modality.

4. Expressivism versus Hyper-Realism

Yet it would be a mistake to class this as an anti-realist view of modality, or a view according to which there are no modal properties or facts, or according to which these properties or facts are mind- or language-dependent. For on this view, there are modal truths which obtain, and their truth does not depend on the existence of speakers or language or the adoption of any convention—indeed it does not depend on any empirical facts at all. Moreover, we should allow that there are modal properties, since we can arrive at claims that entail the existence of modal properties by way of pleonastic transformations from modal truths. For example, from the basic modal claim ‘bachelors are necessarily men’ we can get ‘bachelors exhibit the modal property of necessarily-being-men’.

So there is a clear sense in which the expressivist agrees with the hyper-realist: there are modal properties and modal facts, the existence of which is independent of any empirical fact. What, then, is the difference between these views? As Simon Blackburn (1993) has noted, the difference between them is hard to identify—and the onus may be put on the hyper-realist to explain what more he wanted that the expressivist doesn’t get us when she affirms that there are modal properties. Nonetheless, as Blackburn again has suggested, some differences may be found, especially about “what kind of explaining” modal facts and properties can do (1993, 58). For the hyper-realist thought we had to ‘posit’ modal properties to ‘explain’ what makes our modal claims true, assuming that these truths require modal properties as truthmakers. But the expressivist view explains the sense in which basic modal truths may stand without need of truthmakers, and takes the appeal to modal facts and properties as a hypostatization out of modal truths. If talk of modal properties and facts is based on hypostatizations from modal truths, then these posited facts and properties cannot be used to explain why the relevant claims are true, just as we can’t explain why poppies make us sleepy by appealing to the fact that they possess the dormitive virtue: true though it may be that they possess a dormitive virtue, this is just a hypostatized way of expressing the fact that they make us sleepy and cannot be used to explain it.

Another crucial difference arises between the views in terms of what can be known and how we can come to know it. The expressivist view enables us to understand how we can reach knowledge of basic modal facts without treating these as covert parts of the world we must go about investigating and discovering by some pseudo-perceptual procedure. The move from using language to knowledge of modal facts is just the move from having an ability to follow the rules for properly applying and refusing expressions, to being able to explicitly demonstrate these constitutive rules in the object-language and indicative mood. The basic modal truths are revealed in these explicit demonstrations of the rules of use for our terms, and the basic modal properties to which we are committed may be read off of these basic modal truths—a view that should alleviate the epistemological embarrassments of the hyper-realist view.

5. Metaphysical Pragmatism

But this methodological difference has still more important consequences for our understanding of and approach to other metaphysical debates, and it is here that

we can see most clearly the far-reaching impact of taking an expressivist rather than a hyper-realist approach to modality. Over the past thirty years or more, revisionary metaphysical theories have become commonplace—where, by a ‘revisionary’ theory, I mean one that claims to have ‘discovered’ certain surprising facts about the nature, identity, existence or persistence conditions for a certain kind of thing—for example, claims to have discovered that people can survive the destruction of the body, that paintings are really action-types that cannot be destroyed by burning the canvas, or that tables can’t really survive the loss of a single particle. The oddity of these views is often defended by saying that metaphysics, like physics, may make surprising discoveries that overturn common sense.

But on the expressivist view, the most basic modal truths about any sort of thing *S* are just object-language expressions of the most fundamental rules of use of the term ‘*S*’. As a result, the most straightforward understanding of a metaphysical view that purports to explicate the basic modal features of a given kind of thing—whether they involve the persistence conditions for persons, the identity conditions for works of art, the ‘modal profile’ of tables (and its relation to that of sums of particles), and so on—is as engaged in providing explicit (object-language) expressions of the rules of use for the relevant terms ‘person’, ‘work of art’, or ‘table’. These *cannot* turn out to be very surprising, since they are just a matter of making explicit what is already ‘known’ in the know-how of competent speakers who are capable of following the rules in properly applying and refusing the relevant terms.

How then can we understand these kinds of metaphysical theories and the debates in which they are engaged? If we accept the expressivist view of modality defended above, then we clearly cannot take at face value the serious metaphysician’s claims to be discovering surprising modal features of the world.

If we understand basic modal statements as commands expressed in the indicative mood, then the revisionist’s metaphysical claims cannot be criticized as being false *descriptions* of the rules of use—since they are not descriptions at all. Metaphysical claims may however be evaluated as apt or inapt, proper or misguided, demonstrations of the rules of use for the terms of standard English. (As ‘Bachelors must be men’ is a proper, and ‘Bachelors must be young’ an improper demonstration of the constitutive rules of use of that term.) In this case, revisionary views would simply be faulty demonstrations of the rules of standard English, and should simply be rejected in favor of views that give more proper illustrations of the constitutive rules of use for our English terms. (This seems to be something like Eli Hirsch’s (2002) view that metaphysical debates may be resolved by way of determining who among the disputants is speaking English.)

But as I noted above, modal claims may also be used descriptively, so what if we take the modal statements of revisionary metaphysical views to be used descriptively? As I argued above, genuine analytic claims (taken as descriptions rather than as commands) are guaranteed to be true given the relations among the rules of use of the terms in question. So if a revisionary claim is interpreted descriptively and contradicts a genuinely analytic claim (or entails some claim that contradicts an analytic claim), it is guaranteed to be false. Again, revisionary metaphysical views on this understanding should simply be rejected—this time for stating necessarily false descriptions, using the standard English terms.

But there is a way to avoid simply taking the revisionary metaphysician to be bungling an attempt to express the constitutive rules of familiar English terms or to be stating necessary falsehoods using the familiar English terms. Since the revisionary metaphysician violates the constitutive rules for using some familiar English terms,

she may be seen as failing to use that term at all (since she is no longer following rules constitutive of what it is to use that term) and implicitly using a homophonic neologism. If we follow this route, then revisionary metaphysical views may be understood as tacitly proposing that we employ new terms with new rules of use—perhaps some that are clearer, more uniform, less prone to vagueness, or cohere better with other practices than those that make up the standard English usage.⁵ On this understanding, it would not be right to criticize revisionists on grounds that they are not really using the familiar English term at all. For the point may be to devise a replacement term with different rules of use—rules that would be expressed in the basic modal claims of a new metaphysical theory expressed in different terms which refer (if at all) to different entities.

It is here that pragmatics comes in—the choice of which terms, with which rules of use, we *should* adopt, is pragmatic. Thus insofar as different revisionary metaphysical theories may be understood as implicitly proposing the use of different languages, the question of which metaphysical theory to choose becomes, in Carnap's terms, an external question involving practical decisions about “whether or not to accept and use the forms of expression in the framework in question” (1947, 207). This might involve evaluating the efficiency, fruitfulness, and simplicity of the proposed rules of use—but these are practical considerations that make it advisable to accept the relevant tacitly proposed linguistic rules, not virtues that give us evidence that the metaphysical view is *true* (Carnap 1947, 208). (Although, of course, in the language with the newly proposed rules of use, there will also be analytic expressions of the relevant rules of use that—in that language—will be guaranteed to be true when used descriptively).

But what, then, about the choice between a revisionary and nonrevisionary view—between whether we attempt to explicitly illustrate the actual rules of use for our extant terms of standard English, or do revisionary metaphysics and instead propose new terms with new rules of use? That decision, too, I think, must be considered a pragmatic one, based on whether the goals of inquiry are to make explicit the rules of English usage (and the corresponding modal features of the things, if any, the relevant English terms refer to), or to devise a language that (given some goals or purposes) is ‘better’ than standard English is.

All that is truly essential, from the present point of view, is that one be clear about what metaphysical project one is engaged in, and not mistake proposed conceptual and linguistic revisions for deep discoveries about the referents (if any) of our standard English terms. And what is truly interesting is the way in which an expressivist view of modality (based on the original conventionalist account) turns out not only to be defensible, but also to lead us to a pragmatic understanding of a great many debates in metaphysics.

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¹ “Brandom and Hume on the Genealogy of Modals”, p. 4-5. Note that Price thinks that semantic deflationism undermines this point in any case, although Brandom’s discussion of semantic vocabulary suggests a sense in which this point need not be trivial.

² Scrabble Game Rules, Parker Brothers, 1999.

³ E.g. the Scrabble rules (Parker Brothers, 1999) continue from a singular description of rule “1. The first player combines two or more of his or her letters to form a word...”, to the explicit command form in the next rule: “2. Complete your turn by counting and announcing the score for that turn...”. Othello rules (Pressman Toy Corporation, 1990) use the universal indicative: “Black always moves first”.

⁴ As Carnap unfortunately puts his view of logical truth, in terms of which he defines logical necessity (1947, 174).

⁵ The difference between interpreting metaphysical debates descriptively versus as debates about what rules of use we *ought to* adopt mirrors the two ways of doing metaphysics as described by Strawson: “Descriptive metaphysics is content to describe the actual structure of our thought about the world, revisionary metaphysics is concerned to produce a better structure.” (1959/1963, xiii)