

On Blackburn’s Dilemma and the “Antinaturalistic Core” of Necessity

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Abstract

Blackburn’s dilemma (as commonly understood) is that in explaining truths of the form ‘Necessarily-P’ we have to appeal either to a necessary truth, in which case we don’t seem to make the right kind of progress, or to a contingent truth, in which case we seem to undermine the necessity we were meant to be explaining. This paper advances two claims. First, it is argued that the dilemma is wider in scope than usually supposed. The standard assumption (evident also in Blackburn’s original paper (1993)) is that the dilemma applies to explanations of truths of the form ‘Necessarily-P’. I argue that the real problem identified by Blackburn doesn’t just apply to explanations of truths of this form, but to explanations of necessary truths in general (e.g. truths of logic, mathematics, etc.). In the course of this argument it also transpires that the real problem on the necessity horn is rather different—and rather less susceptible to obvious objections—than it is usually taken to be. It concerns the antinaturalistic core of necessity. Second, it is argued that there is an escape from the antinaturalistic core on the contingency horn. In the footsteps of Wright (1985), the claim is that the contingency horn is tenable for those who believe that the necessary truth in question is analytic, i.e. follows from its meaning.

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1. The Dilemma

Blackburn (1993) argues that there is a dilemma for explanations of the form ‘Necessarily-*P* because *Q*’ (where both necessarily-*P* and *Q* are truths, i.e. true statements/propositions). The dilemma is generated by the question of whether *Q* is necessary or contingent. If it is necessary; if for example we give an essentialist explanation along the lines of Hale 2013, then, says Blackburn, that doesn’t represent the right kind of progress. The necessity of the explainer (i.e. the truth doing the explaining) constitutes a “bad residual ‘must’” (Blackburn 1993: 53). This is the necessity horn. On the contingency horn, we explain necessarily-*P* by appealing to a contingent *Q*, for example by trying on a linguistic or a conceivability-based approach. In this case, says Blackburn, “there is strong pressure to feel that the original necessity has not been explained or identified, so much as undermined”

(Blackburn 1993: 53). The explanation goes through only at the expense of losing that which wanted explaining. Since the explainer must be either necessary or contingent, we get a dilemma.

In the first half of this paper I wish to raise a clarificatory question about what the affected kind of explanation is an explanation of. I think we can say without presupposing the issue that the truth to be explained is *a necessity*. But the notion of ‘a necessity’ can be understood in two different ways. First, a truth might count as a necessity by *invoking* necessity, that is, by saying that something holds necessarily; by being of the form ‘Necessarily-P’ (or synonymous with a sentence of this form). This is the sense of ‘a necessity’ employed by Blackburn in presenting the dilemma, and subsequent writers have gone along with it. But there is also a second way in which a truth might count as ‘a necessity’: simply by *being* necessary, that is, by *possessing* the modal status of necessity (as opposed to contingency). Such truths have in common that they would not fail to hold no matter how different the world was, indeed *could* not, and although there is no universally agreed list of precisely which truths really qualify as necessities in the second sense, it is very widely held that at least truths of logic and mathematics make the cut (‘All bachelors are bachelors’, ‘ $2+2=4$ ’, etc.). It will be useful to name these two ways in which a truth can count as a necessity. The first kind I will call *invocation-necessities*, since they invoke necessity. The second are *possession-necessities*, since they possess the modal status of necessity (the terminology is from van Cleve 2002: 43).

I don’t think the possession/invocation distinction requires any argumentative support, for it is obvious that possessing and invoking a modal status are different things, but that is not to say that there is no overlap. Clearly many possession-necessities are not invocation-necessities, like logical truths (‘All cats are cats’) which simply *are* necessary without saying anything *about* necessity. But it is less clear whether invocation-necessities are possession-necessities, that is, whether truths of the form ‘Necessarily-P’ are themselves necessary, which is equivalent to the question of whether the characteristic axiom of modal logic S4 is true. This issue is certainly relevant to the dilemma (as we shall see), but it is not one on which we need to take a stance.

The question, rather, is whether the dilemma applies to explanations of invocation-necessities (i.e. ‘Necessarily-P because Q’) or of possession-necessities (i.e. ‘P because Q’, where P is necessary). This issue has just about been mentioned in the literature (Hale 2002: 308 asks whether the dilemma applies to explanations of why a given necessary truth is *true* or of why it is *necessary*), but it hasn’t to my knowledge been seriously discussed, and I believe that a discussion of it yields some surprising results.

In particular, the consensus on the issue appears to be false. Although the distinction between possessing and invoking necessity isn’t always made explicit in the literature on the dilemma, it is *always* assumed that the truth to be explained is an invocation-necessity. This is explicit in Blackburn’s initial presentation of the dilemma, in Hale’s reconstruction (“Let necessarily-p be the necessity to be accounted for...” (Hale 2002: 302)) and in all other papers on the issue (see e.g. Morato 2014, Cameron 2010, Hanks 2008, Lange 2008 and Wildman 2017).

For the truth doing the explaining, meanwhile, the consensus is that it is *possessing* necessity (on the necessity horn) or not (on the contingency horn) which is

relevant. This is how Hale's (2002) influential reconstruction of the dilemma sees the explainer, and it seems to be the only real contender.¹

The standard interpretation of the dilemma thus mixes the two forms of necessity identified: *invocation* in the truth to be explained, *possession* in the explainer. In the first half of the paper, I will argue that this "mixed" dilemma is at best a special case of the "straight" dilemma, where the relevant form of necessity is possession-necessity in both explanandum and explanans. As I see it, the real problem Blackburn identifies applies to explanations of necessary truths in general ('P because Q', where P is necessary) rather than just explanations of invocation-necessities ('Necessarily-P because Q'). As such, the dilemma is just as relevant for the philosophies of mathematics, logic and whatever other non-contingent realm there might be as it is for philosophy of modality.

What is at stake, then, is the scope of the problem. But I also believe that taking the proposed perspective allows us to shed some new light on the "bad residual must" of the necessity horn, and that criticisms of that horn based on the "mixed" interpretation (such as Hale's 2002) therefore don't engage with it in its strongest form.

The question here is not primarily exegetical. It concerns which version of the dilemma is strongest, not which fits best with Blackburn's intentions. There is no doubt that a good case could be made for thinking that Blackburn saw the dilemma as pertaining to explanations of truths invoking necessity, in line with the standard "mixed" interpretation. My conclusion might therefore be read as being that Blackburn's dilemma is actually slightly different even from how Blackburn conceived it. Whether it still deserves the name 'Blackburn's dilemma' is perhaps debatable—or it would be, were it not for the fact that, as we shall see, even the straight dilemma is identified in his original paper.

2. The Mixed vs. the Straight Contingency Horn

On the mixed contingency horn an invocation-necessity is attempted explained by a contingent truth, that is, the explanation is of the form 'Necessarily-P because Q', where Q is contingent. Blackburn says that in this case, "there is strong pressure to feel that the original necessity has not been explained or identified, so much as undermined" (Blackburn 1993: 53). Hale's (2002) attempt to identify an argument in Blackburn's feeling runs as follows. If Q explains Necessarily-P, then if Q weren't the case, then Necessarily-P wouldn't be either. And since Q might not have been the case (because contingent), Necessarily-P might also not have been the case. But given the characteristic principle of S4, all truths of the form 'Necessarily-P' are themselves necessary. So P isn't necessary after all. Its necessity has been undermined.

Hale doesn't think this a particularly convincing argument. He doubts (Hale 2002: 302) the counterfactual principle behind the first step (that whenever A explains B, if A were false, then B would be too) on the basis of familiar counterexamples from

¹ To pre-empt a potential confusion, it should be noted that in presenting the dilemma, Blackburn actually says that the explainer will either "claim just that something *is* so, or it will claim that something *must be* so" (1993: 53) i.e. that the explainer is an invocation-necessity or not. But it is unclear how this would work on the contingency horn. In discussing the contingency horn, he switches to talking about the explainer as a possession-necessity (the necessity to be explained is undermined if its explainer 'does not *have to be* so' (1993: 53)).

the causal realm (if I shoot a balloon, causing it to burst, then my shooting the balloon explains its bursting even if my bullet was just the first of many heading for the balloon, meaning it would have burst anyway). He also doesn't think anyone likely to grasp the contingency horn (a conventionalist, say) can be expected to accept S4.

I disagree with Hale. I think there is a way of setting up the contingency horn in such a way that it represents a genuine—albeit ultimately solvable—problem. We will return to this in due course. For now, the issue I wish to draw attention to is this argument's intended scope. For by aiming the above argument only at explanations of invocation-necessities, Hale is rather unnaturally restricting its potential impact. All that is required for the argument to go through is that the truth to be explained is a possession-necessity. If the explanation is of the form '*P* because *Q*', where *P* is necessary and *Q* contingent, then one can go through the same steps as before to reach the conclusion that *P* is not necessary after all. In fact this argument is better, since it doesn't rely on the S4 principle.

So the problem of the mixed contingency horn is just (at best, assuming the S4 principle) a special case of a more general problem that we come up against in explaining any possession-necessity in terms of a contingent truth. And explaining a possession-necessity in terms of a contingent truth is just what is done on the contingency horn of the *straight* dilemma. So the problem of the *mixed* contingency horn is (at best) a special case of the problem of the *straight* contingency horn.

That the problem on the mixed contingency horn is a special case of something more general is not unknown (see e.g. van Cleve 2002: 42). What has not been noticed, and what I intend to show in the next two sections, is that the same is true of the problem of the mixed necessity horn: that it too is a special case of the problem of the straight necessity horn. I will first, in section 3, criticise the problem as it is usually understood (essentially on the same grounds as Hale's well-known discussion (2002)) before identifying another, largely neglected problem of the necessity horn in section 4. It is this second problem which is just a special case of the problem on the straight necessity horn.

3. The Mixed Necessity Horn

On the mixed necessity horn, an invocation-necessity is explained via appeal to a possession-necessity, that is, the explanation is of the form '*Necessarily-P* because *Q*', where *Q* is necessary. This is meant to result in a "bad residual must". Identifying this residue, however, is difficult.² After all, the same explanatory structure occurs for other phenomena besides necessity. If we wanted to explain why some *P* was reasonable, to borrow van Cleve's example (2002: 43), we would presumably have to appeal to a *Q* which was itself reasonable. Are we really to believe that there is a "bad residual reasonableness" in this explanation? That seems

² A possible "bad residual must" (addressed on the helpful advice of an anonymous reviewer) might be that the situation results in an infinite regress. Since the explainer *Q* is necessary, we can ask what explains its necessity, and the eventual answer *R* will itself have to be necessary, at which point we can ask what explains the necessity of *R* and so on *ad infinitum*. But notice that what explains the necessity of *P* is not *necessarily-Q*, but simply *Q*. Consequently, although it is true that we *can* ask about the necessity of *Q* (and of *R*, etc.), this is a separate explanatory issue from that of the necessity of *P*. The explanation of the necessity of *P* stops at *Q*. So it doesn't seem right to call this a regress.

highly odd. But then, why think there is a bad residual must with explaining why something is necessary by appealing to something which is itself necessary?

Blackburn in effect gives two answers to this in his paper. Here I discuss the first (henceforth referred to as the 'first reason'), which is specific to explanations of invocation-necessities, presented by Blackburn in connection with the dilemma, and inadequate. (The second, which shares none of these traits, will be the subject of the next section.) The first reason he gives for thinking there is a bad residual must on the necessity horn is that

the advance will be representable as 'if we see why this must be so, we can now see why that must be as well' (Blackburn 1993: 53-54).

The claim, in other words, seems to be that the explanation on the necessity horn is of the form 'Necessarily-*P* because necessarily-*Q*'. If the explanation on the mixed necessity horn really was of this form, then that would obviously be a) unsatisfactory and b) a problem specific to explanations of invocation-necessities. But it isn't. Blackburn isn't distinguishing properly between invocation- and possession-necessities. An explanation of the form 'Necessarily-*P* because necessarily-*Q*' is an explanation of an invocation-necessity in terms of another invocation-necessity. On the necessity-horn of the mixed dilemma, however, we explain an invocation-necessity by appealing to a *possession*-necessity, i.e. 'Necessarily-*P* because *Q*'. Of explanations which might fit the bill, though I don't endorse either of them, *Q* might be a truth about (necessarily existing) essences or about a (necessarily existing) plurality of worlds. Of course, you might think that claims about worlds/essences are just thinly veiled claims about necessity, but the point is that nothing in Blackburn's first suggestion for a "bad residual must" shows that they must be. The first reason fails.

This assessment of Blackburn's first reason is not absent from the literature. Van Cleve (2002: 42) reaches the same conclusion, as does Hale (2002: 310). In Hale's terminology, explanations which appeal to an invocation-necessity are "transmission" explanations; those which appeal to a possession-necessity are "non-transmission"; and the problem with Blackburn's suggestion above is that it assumes that all explanations on the necessity horn must be of the "transmission" variety.

It is worthwhile to flag a possible confusion about this assessment of Blackburn's first reason which needs avoiding. On the necessity horn as standardly understood, the relevant form of explanation is

(1) Necessarily-*P* because *Q*,

where *Q* is necessary. But if the contingency horn really is untenable, then *Q* *must* be necessary in order for this to be a good explanation, lest we undermine the necessity of *P*. And this might seem to reopen the door to the first reason. Thus Hanks (2008: 140) asks: if *Q* *has to* be necessary for this explanation to work, doesn't that mean that really (1) is just a "disguised" version of

(2) Necessarily-*P* because (*Q* and necessarily-*Q*)?

If so, Blackburn's first reason is back on. Hanks's claim, then, is that (1) only seems like a good explanation because we're smuggling in an appeal to *Q*'s necessity, making "implicit use" of it (Hanks 2008: 140).

In specific cases it may well be true that an explanation like (1) only works because of an implicit appeal to *Q*'s necessity. Romero (2019) argues that this is

the case in Hale's essentialist programme. But Hanks's point is intended to be more general. He claims that if an explanation like (1) depends on the necessity of Q, then that alone is sufficient to make it a disguised version of (2) (Hanks 2008: 140).³ And it is hard to see that this should be so. He seems to be relying on this general principle:

If the correctness of 'A because B' depends on some fact C, then really the explanation is 'A because (B and C)'.

But no support is offered for this principle, and it rings false. In general, an explanation of A by B will depend on all sorts of things. It will depend, for example, on there being an appropriate relationship between A and B. If the principle were sound, then *really* the explanation 'A because B' would be a disguised version of 'A because (B and the existence of an appropriate relationship between A and B)'. But this a) is nonsense: if there is an appropriate relationship, then that enables 'A because B' to be a good explanation *without* the need to be thus transformed, and b) leads to an infinite regress: this further explanation 'A because (B and C)' would also depend on some further fact D, which would then need to be subsumed into the explanation, and so on. Without the above principle, there is no reason—at least none provided by Hanks—to think that if the necessity of Q is required for (1) to be a good explanation, then really the explanation is like (2).

The first pass at identifying the “bad residual must” is unsuccessful. Since the first reason is the only one Blackburn gives while outlining the dilemma, this result has been taken to show that there is no real problem on the necessity horn (e.g. Hale 2002: 314). In fact, however, Blackburn argues for what amounts to another candidate for the bad residual must. And this, we shall now see, provides a bridge from consideration of the mixed necessity horn to the straight.

4. From the Mixed to the Straight Necessity Horn

The second candidate for the “bad residual must” comes towards the end of Blackburn's paper, some twenty pages after the initial appearance of the dilemma. The context is that he has attempted to explain the necessity of P by appealing to the inconceivability of its negation (that we can make nothing of it, in his words). He then claims that if we could further explain the inconceivability of its negation “naturalistically”, i.e. if we could see our inability to make anything of it as due to some “contingent limitation” of our psychology or neural wiring or some such, then this would undermine the original commitment to the necessity of P. This is just the reasoning of the mixed contingency horn. He concludes:

this means that there is bound to be a residual 'surd': our incapacity to make anything of the thought that some propositions are true has to be resistant to natural explanation, if it remains a good candidate for modal commitment. ... [T]he phenomenon is antinaturalistic at its core (Blackburn 1993: 71-72).

I propose this “residual surd”, this resistance to natural explanation, as the real “bad residual must” of the necessity horn. I will shortly explain Blackburn's thinking in more detail, but first note that, exactly as with the contingency horn, the

³ In Hanks's defence, he might be misled by some loose talk in Hale's objection to Blackburn's first suggestion, where he (Hale) also seems to endorse something like this principle (Hale 2002: 312, quoted in Hanks 2008: 139).

problem here isn't unique to explanations of truths of the form 'Necessarily-P' but rather generalises to explanations of all necessary truths. They, too, will need to be explained by appeal to a necessary truth (assuming the contingency horn really is untenable), which will thwart the explanation's status as naturalistic. The "residual surd" plagues not only invocation-necessities, but all possession-necessities. Just as with the contingency horn, then, the problem of the mixed necessity horn is just a special case of the straight.

Why might Blackburn think that using a necessary truth as explainer won't amount to a *natural* explanation? The idea is that the contingent world is the natural world: it is the world of matter, where things change, start to exist, cease to exist, and exist in some places and not others. The necessary realm, on the other hand, is eternal and unchanging. Possession-necessities remain constant throughout any change in the contingent facts, but what kind of fact is immune to variation, say, in the event of the Big Bang? How can there be such things which would remain untouched even if, as seems possible, physical reality had never existed in the first place? The existence of possession-necessities seems to require a parallel track, a paraphysical reality, more to the world than meets the eye.

There is nothing new in the idea that possession-necessities are mysterious. Traditionally, as Casullo (2005: 97) points out, necessary truths were thought to be about *abstracta*, and just consider Kant's aphorism that experience can tell us what *is* the case, not what *must* be (1781/1963: 43). Faced with possession-necessities, those not fond of mysteries can choose between two Es: explain or eliminate. These days elimination, usually associated with Quine, is widely seen as ignoring the problem rather than solving it. Explanation is more attractive; one allows for the existence of necessary truths while collapsing them, as it were, into contingent truths via explanation, thus removing the air of mystery. If it is right, however, that the contingency of the explainer undermines the necessity of the truth to be explained, then this kind of explanation is simply impossible. The problem of the necessity horn, then, and the badness of Blackburn's residual must, is that the initial weirdness of necessary truths is set to remain.

Blackburn's insight thus surpasses that of Kant. Not only does he recognise the initial problem with possession-necessities; he has an argument for thinking that any attempt to sanitise them via explanation will fail. It can only refer to another possession-necessity, and that will present the same problem again. Necessity is like an antinaturalistic curse. We may explain a truth which possesses it, but then the truth doing the explaining must itself be tainted. Victimless relief can be gained only by doing something which Blackburn doubts is possible: explaining a possession-necessity in terms of a contingent truth.

Just how problematic is the necessity horn thus construed? Of course, the necessity horn, unlike the contingency horn, doesn't aim to refute the explanations which fall on it; it simply imposes a limit on what such explanations will achieve. So if your explanation lacks even the pretence of doing away with the *prima facie* weirdness of possession-necessities, then the necessity horn has nothing on you. It may be questioned whether it is even successful in imposing this limit. What, for example, does it say about *a posteriori* possession-necessities like water being H₂O? This kind of case puts pressure on the idea that possessing necessity is inherently antinaturalistic. But even in these cases there is a problem in the immediate vicinity. It is widely held (even by Kripke 1993: 180) that in such cases there is an associated principle, known by "*a priori* philosophical analysis" as Kripke puts it, saying that, in the water case, if water is composed a certain

way, then it is necessarily composed that way. So even if 'water is H₂O' is not itself strange, this associated principle plausibly is. Even in these cases there is a 'surd'.

I will not argue further for the sharpness of the straight necessity horn. I put it out there for consideration as an improvement on the mixed necessity horn as standardly conceived, which bore no threat at all. But it is worth noting its potential force. The point is not simply that possession-necessities are strange when taken at face-value, nor that we currently have no remedy for this strangeness, nor that we are simply too stupid to ever have a remedy, like dogs trying to understand relativity theory. The point is that there *is* no remedy. The phenomenon is antinaturalistic at its core. That is the potential force of the straight necessity horn.

It would be good, therefore, if we could make the contingency horn work instead, and in what remains I will argue that we can.

5. Clarifying the Contingency Horn

To give a solution to the problem of the contingency horn it is necessary to get clear about exactly what the problem is, and that is the project of this preparatory section.

It has transpired that on the contingency horn the explanation takes the form '*P* because *Q*', where *P* is necessary and *Q* contingent. The problem is supposed to be that this explanation undermines the *P*'s necessity. We saw Hale's attempt to make this into a formal argument earlier using a counterfactual covariance principle of explanations to the effect that whenever *P* explains *Q*, if *P* were false then *Q* would be too. But there are familiar counterexamples to this noted by Hale himself, e.g. overdetermination cases in causal explanations (see section 2).

Doubtless it would be possible to resurrect the problem of the contingency horn using a weaker counterfactual covariance principle. However, the problem of the contingency horn is easier to appreciate and certainly to discuss (as we shall see) when formulated in terms of the more lightweight notion of a *guarantee* instead of the more heavy-going *explanation*. Guaranteeing (which is just factive entailment) is a broader notion than explanation, and in particular it seems unlikely that anyone would deny that a contingent truth can guarantee a necessary truth. Consider the pair of truths:

- (1) Brutus killed Caesar
- (2) Brutus killed Caesar or he didn't.

The first of these is contingent, the second necessary, and yet there seems little doubt that the former guarantees the latter, being a disjunct of it.⁴ Perhaps the word 'explanation' is flexible enough to cover even this kind of case, but it seems implausible that appealing to (1) should account for (2) to a philosopher's

⁴ Of course, if entailment turns out to be nothing more than strict implication (as some think, e.g. Lewy 1976), then anything will guarantee a necessary truth like (2). This might seem to trivialise talk about what guarantees necessary truths like (2), for although it is true that (2) will indeed be guaranteed by (1), it will also be guaranteed by e.g. the existence of cars. I will ignore this complication here, except to say that I don't think this trivialisation would actually occur. For even if (1) trivially guarantees (2) (in virtue of (2)'s necessity), that doesn't interfere with it *non-trivially* guaranteeing it *as well* (in virtue of (1)'s being a disjunct of (2)).

satisfaction—if it did, Blackburn's dilemma would of course be very easy to solve indeed. The reason for this, I believe, is that even after appealing to (1) the feeling remains that there must be more to be said about the truth of (2)—after all, (2) would have been just as true even if Brutus hadn't killed Caesar (another way to reach this conclusion is epistemological, since we know disjunctions of this kind before knowing which disjunct is true). Insofar as we're on the contingency horn precisely to dispel fears that there might be something weird going on with necessary truths, this is an unsatisfactory state of affairs. What we want is to account for (2) and other necessary truths in such a way that we scratch that philosophical itch; that we aren't left feeling that there might be more to it.

Again, this conception of the problem appears in Blackburn's original paper. Considering a conventionalist explanation of ' $2+2=4$ ', he says: "if that's *all there is to it*, then twice two does not have to be four" (Blackburn 1993: 54, my emphasis). The challenge, therefore, to the philosopher seeking a comfortable life on the contingency horn, is to maintain both that some contingent A guarantees a necessary B *and* that this gets to the heart of the matter. The worry is that if we respect B's necessity, then B should persist even in those possible hypothetical situations where its (contingent) guarantor A is withdrawn—just like the disjunction that either Brutus killed Caesar or not would still hold even in the hypotheticals where Brutus didn't kill Caesar. But if so, how can we claim that A really gets to the heart of B, given that B manages just fine without it? If A isn't just overdetermining something which would hold anyway, then withdrawing A should produce a change in B. But that would interfere with its necessity.

And note that it would be insufficient at this stage to go revisionary and give up the necessity of the necessary truth, because exactly the same point can be made by reference to non-hypothetical situations where the contingent truth fails to hold. As applied specifically to the linguistic theory, the problem can be formulated by reference to the non-linguistic past. Thus Boghossian (1996: 365) asks: wasn't snow white or not long before language existed? I assume that denying this is beyond the pale.

The primary benefit of casting the dilemma in terms of guarantees rather than explanations is that it allows us to recognise one thing contingencies definitely can do for necessities—guarantee them. In the next section we'll see that this provides us with the foothold we need to provide a possible solution to the problem, sourced from the linguistic theory of modality. Incidentally the problem of the contingency horn as we now understand is identical to the historically prominent "contingency objection" to explaining possession-necessities by contingent truths. An early rendition of this objection is Russell's against Kant's theory of arithmetic (see van Cleve 2002: 38), and similar arguments against linguistic approaches appear frequently in the 20th century philosophy, e.g. in Lewis (1946: 148), Lewy (1976) and Stroud (1984).

6. The Straight Contingency Horn and the Linguistic Theory of Modality

According to the linguistic theory of modality, necessary truths, or at least an important subset of necessary truths, are analytic. Exactly what it takes for something to count as analytic depends, notoriously, on who you ask. Some see analyticity non-cognitively, more closely related to a species of rule than of truth (e.g. Ayer 1936b: 20); others see it as conventionally stipulated truth for the purpose of

implicit definition (e.g. Carnap 1937); others still see analyticity as a purely epistemic matter (Boghossian 1996). The kind of analyticity relevant to this article, however—and incidentally the only analyticity I believe in—is truth guaranteed by meaning. There is, I believe, a way of making the notion of truth-by-meaning both clear and plausible, but establishing that is the project of a different article. Here the existence of such a notion is instead assumed and put to use in the solving of Blackburn's dilemma, and given that the linguistic theory is supposed to be a victim of the dilemma, I assume that this strategy is legitimate. Suppose, therefore, if only for the sake of argument, that for a given possession-necessity—to take the trite example, that all bachelors are unmarried men—the conjunction of all the facts about the meaning of 'All bachelors are unmarried men' (saliently, I think, that 'bachelor' and 'unmarried man' are synonymous, though again this isn't the place to defend this claim) guarantees it. To give these two things a name:

C: The words 'bachelor' and 'unmarried man' are synonymous and... (etc. for all the other facts about D's meaning).

D: All bachelors are unmarried men.

And the assumption (for the sake of argument) is that C guarantees D (or that that-C guarantees that-D). Since, by common philosophical consent, linguistic facts are contingent and D necessary, this constitutes a case of a contingent truth guaranteeing a possession-necessity.

As we saw in the previous section, nothing in Blackburn's dilemma disproves that C guarantees D. What is potentially disproved is rather that this is the full story, that it gets to the heart of the matter. The reason for this denial is what we should say happens to bachelors' being unmarried men (i.e. that *D*) under the supposition that the contingent linguistic facts fail to hold (i.e. that not-*C*). We are faced in effect with another dilemma. Either we deny that it persists on that supposition, in which case we would be undermining its necessity. Or we respect its necessity and judge that bachelors would have been unmarried men no matter how we had used words, which appears to show that even if the relevant linguistic facts fully guarantees that bachelors are unmarried men, this only overdetermines it; there is more going on than that.

But the linguistic theorist has a comeback. The basis of the reply is that the contingent linguistic facts in C are *about* the necessary sentence D (or, if you will, about the sentence which expresses a necessary proposition). This is why D is *analytic*: it follows from facts about *its* meaning. Once this point is internalised, the linguistic theorist's reply is simple to understand. When her opponent asks whether bachelors are still unmarried men (i.e. whether *D*) on the supposition that the relevant linguistic facts fail to hold (i.e. that not-*C*), the linguistic theorist should seek to clarify exactly what is meant. Should we understand the question 'Whether *D*?' according to its customary English meaning? If so, then the linguistic theorist will have no problem accounting for a positive answer: although there is no synonymy (per supposition) *inside* the situation described, there doesn't need to be, for we supply it ourselves in our description of it. C—which remember is about D's meaning—simply hasn't been negated. So the linguistic theory's guarantor isn't withdrawn after all, and then it is no surprise that all bachelors are still unmarried men. On the other hand, if the question's meaning is not the customary English meaning, then it must be admitted that the linguistic theory's guarantor C really has been withdrawn. But then the answer depends on what new meaning we imbue the question with, and the pressure to give a positive answer will be

relieved *without* that undermining the necessity of bachelors being unmarried men. It would amount to nothing more than a change of subject.

In short: either the linguistic theory's guarantor is withdrawn and there is no threat to necessity, or it isn't and there is no need to posit anything else going on.

So for example, when Williamson asserts that bachelors would have been unmarried men no matter how we used words (2007: 59, adapted example), he's *using* 'bachelor' as synonymous with 'unmarried man' (etc.). This means that the supposition 'no matter how we used words' has failed to negate C and that the truth of D is still open to the linguistic diagnosis. In general, in order to negate the linguistic theory's guarantor of D, it is insufficient to focus on a situation without English, because we might still be using D in such a way as to verify C. And if we used D any other way, though that would be enough to negate C, it would also make the truth or falsity of the newly interpreted D entirely irrelevant to the necessity of bachelors being unmarried men.

This defence is similar to an idea pioneered by Wright 1985. He says that the linguistic theorist can defend herself against the contingency objection by claiming that there is a convention in force as follows:

What is true to say *of* a hypothetical state of affairs ... is to be determined by reference to our actual linguistic conventions, even if those are not the conventions that would then obtain (Wright 1985: 190).

And this convention (henceforth CON), Wright thinks, enjoins that analytic sentences, if there are any, will "remain assertible" even when considering counterfactual situations where the relevant linguistic facts don't obtain (191). So the fact that bachelors are unmarried men even in a possible world without English doesn't show that there is more going on with this truth than its linguistic guarantor. This basic idea has become more or less standard, see e.g. Einheuser 2006, Sidelle 2009, Nyseth 2017 and Toppey 2019.

I regard what Wright writes as essentially right. I particularly agree that when Williamson (or whoever) asserts that bachelors would have been unmarried men no matter how we used words, the linguistic theorist can and should see him as making use of the linguistic resources we have here in actual reality, which means that the linguistic guarantor of D hasn't been removed. But Wright's idea can, I think, be improved by making two modifications.

First, thus formulated CON overshoots. Not only does it make analytic sentences assertible even when considering non-linguistic counterfactuals, it does the same for ordinary metalinguistic sentences too, wrongly. For if you were to consider whether, say, 'bachelor' was synonymous with 'unmarried man' in some counterfactual scenario *sans* language and you followed CON, then you would have to say that it was, because CON dictates that sentences are evaluated "by reference to our actual linguistic conventions, even if those are not the conventions that would then obtain". But it is easy to modify CON in such a way that this consequence is avoided. Instead of saying that sentences have their truth determined by "reference to our actual linguistic conventions", we say simply that we evaluate sentences according to their customary English meaning; that we continue to use English in the ordinary way when we move from descriptions of present English reality to descriptions of non-linguistic counterfactual situations. This suffices to make analytic sentences always come out true, for their truth is guaranteed by their meaning, and it also avoids making metalinguistic sentences

like ‘bachelor’ and ‘unmarried man’ are synonymous’ always come out true, for these are not true in virtue of their meaning. If ‘bachelor’ and ‘unmarried man’ weren’t synonymous, the sentence reporting their synonymy would be false but it wouldn’t change meaning. The *meaning* of this metalinguistic sentence is independent of the meanings of ‘bachelor’ and ‘unmarried man’ even though its *truth* is not.

Given the first modification, a second comes naturally. Wright regards convention CON as something the linguistic theorist will claim is in force and the realist will deny (192-94). The realist, Wright thinks, will regard the relevant counterfactuals (that even if we had used words differently, bachelors would still have been unmarried) as the result of some kind of insight, “rationally demanded of us”, whereas the linguistic theorist sees them as a result of convention CON. When conceived in this way, the defence risks falling victim to the familiar realist phenomenological reminder of the appeal of the counterfactual: it is not something we choose to say as though we were choosing what to have for dinner, it is something we must say to speak truly. But given the previous modification, a) it is hardly right to think of CON as the presence of a convention rather than the absence of a contrary one—after all, we’re just continuing to standard English words according to their standard English meaning, and b) even if someone did stop hypothesising in accordance with CON, this would not be bad news for the linguistic theorist, for then they would not be using language according to its standard English meaning, and so whatever judgement they made would be quite irrelevant to the necessity of bachelors being unmarried men.

What emerges is that analyticity, far from undermining necessity, actually supports it. For if a sentence P follows from its meaning, then the question ‘Whether P?’ will have a positive answer no matter what possible world we aim it at. In fact, that analyticity explains rather than undermines necessity is what the logical positivists saw from the beginning (e.g. Ayer 1936a: 47, Hahn 1933: §3, Hempel 1945: 545), and the same line is towed even by some who reject analyticity (e.g. Fodor and Lepore 2006). It is certainly ironic that the very analyticity the positivists used to *explain* necessity was subsequently argued to *undermine* it, and it is curious that the two lines of argument haven’t, to my knowledge, been juxtaposed in the literature. I have argued that the positivists’ argument comes out on top.

7. An Objection

I turn finally to an objection to this line of argument. The objection is voiced by Wright himself:

The obvious worry is whether the defensive strategy supplied is not a little too powerful. If the status assigned by orthodoxy to subjunctive conditionals of the appropriate kind is not to the point, what *is* to be the appropriate form of the conventionalists’ co-variance claim? (Wright 1985: 195).

So far we have argued only that the counterfactual behaviour of necessities is not different from what the linguistic theory would expect it to be. Wright’s worry is that by accepting these counterfactuals, we thereby lose a way of formulating the linguistic theory. For how can we understand C as *explaining* D if we have no way of saying that if C were false, D would be too? For an explanation, we need to be

able to formulate some counterfactual sensitivity between C and D. Or so the imagined objection goes.

I can't see that there is a problem here, for two reasons. First, the linguistic theorist is in the same boat as anyone else on this matter, even those on the necessity horn of the dilemma. According to the counterfactual-modality link as standardly conceived, when A is necessary it would hold no matter what else was the case. So when we explain it with B, we can't require that varying the truth of the explainer would produce variation in the truth of A: nothing would do that. So the inability to formulate the sensitivity seems to be a general problem rather than something specific to the linguistic theory. Sidelle considers giving this response to Wright's worry, but rejects it:

It may be granted that when B is necessary, *nothing* will produce variation in it. But this is cold comfort to the Conventionalist, it will be urged, because there nonetheless *can* be variation in our *conventions* (Sidelle 2009: 231).

But I don't see why the variability in the linguistic facts should affect this point (as long as it doesn't undermine the necessity of the necessary truths, but that, given Wright's defence, isn't the case). Being in the same boat as anyone else seems like quite warm comfort. It means that the problem Wright identifies, if it really is a problem, isn't unique to the linguistic theory.

Second, it is not as if the linguistic theorist needs counterfactual sensitivity to separate her view from anyone else's. This point is made by Topey (2019: 1747), who is on the right lines when he suggests that the linguistic theorist can say that meaning linguistic conventions "fully guarantee" the analytic truths. I would only add that in order for this to be incompatible with realism, we need to combine this guarantee with a kind of 'and that's it'-clause: the guarantee holds and it gets to the heart of the matter; there is nothing else going on.

Sidelle (2009: 232) and Nyseth (2017: 122) seem to think that it is a fact about what explanation is or what 'explanation' means that it involves counterfactual sensitivity. If so, then maybe Blackburn got it right after all, indeed maybe Blackburn didn't go far enough, maybe all *explanations* of possession-necessities—not just on the contingency horn but the necessity horn too—really are doomed. But even if correct, this shouldn't worry the linguistic theorist. She will have missed out on explanation over a technicality, but what really matters, that her favoured guarantor provides the necessary illumination and scratches that itch, goes undefeated.

8. Conclusion

Blackburn's dilemma is better understood as applying to explanations of truths which *possess* necessity than of truths which *invoke* it. This shift leads to a more general dilemma and shines a light on the true problem of the necessity horn, where the "bad residual must" is an antinaturalistic "residual surd". The contingency horn nevertheless fails to show that we cannot satisfactorily account for a possession-necessity by appealing to a contingent truth. For this is possible in the special circumstance where that truth describes the meaning of the possession-necessity, i.e. where the possession-necessity is analytic; guaranteed by its meaning.

Of course, the solution depends on accepting the analyticity of at least some possession-necessities. The majority of contemporary philosophers will not grant

this assumption. On the other hand, the linguistic theory is one of the dilemma's most high-profile casualties, and even more significantly, the contingency horn and variations thereof is one of the most prominent reasons for rejecting the linguistic theory. The conclusion, therefore, is not just that there is a chink in the armour of Blackburn's dilemma, but moreover that the aforementioned majority will need a rethink—either of their reasons for rejecting the linguistic theory, or indeed of that very rejection.

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