
MODAL NORMATIVISM ON SEMANTIC RULES

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According to Amie Thomasson's (2020a) *modal normativism*, the fundamental error of contemporary treatments of modality is in thinking that the function of modal discourse is to *describe* features of reality. Instead, modal language serves a *normative* function. In particular, it serves the function of conveying semantic rules. For instance, a sentence like:

(Bach Nec) Necessarily all bachelors are unmarried.

conveys the semantic rule:

(Bach Rule) One ought to apply the word 'bachelor' only to things that one applies the word 'unmarried' to.

Speakers use (Bach Nec) to endorse (Bach Rule) and make explicit that the rule regulates our language use. And, they do so in the convenience of the indicative mood, without having to mention the expressions of the language. The long-standing metaphysical and epistemological puzzles associated with necessity thereby boil down to the status of rules like (Bach Rule). With this realization, such puzzles are more easily solved. For instance, our knowledge of metaphysical modality boils down to our knowledge of semantic rules.

From a historical empiricist perspective – one not yet steeped in contemporary post-Kripkean literature – the maneuver of explaining modal talk in terms of semantic or conceptual competence can appear irresistible. After all, our knowledge of (Bach Nec) is apparently *a priori*, and semantic competence is an attractive way to explain *a priori* knowledge. But from the perspective of contemporary modal metaphysicians – those who see their investigations as continuous with the sciences – the view can appear outlandish. After all, on its face (Bach Nec) is about *bachelors* not words (WILLIAMSON, 2007)! And some modal claims are not *a priori* (KRIPKE, 1980)! The modal normativist attempts to hold onto the attractions of understanding modal knowledge as semantic knowledge, while diagnosing post-Kripkean worries as aimed at overly-simplistic developments of that core idea. In particular, the modal normativist claims that once we recognize the normative function of modal talk, resistance to the historical empiricist maneuver can be overcome.

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Thomasson’s position is refreshingly ambitious, with profound implications across huge swaths of metaphysics, philosophy of language, and epistemology. The modal normativist uses new tools to revitalize a forgotten position, one in a long-standing philosophical debate with deep battle lines. Thomasson makes her case by weaving together strands of historical empiricism, threads of contemporary deflationism, and her own characteristic inventiveness. Objections are given detailed and subtle assessments. But the thematic currents that drive her defense are never far, pulling at the open-minded reader, coaxing them to see modality through a radically altered lens. The result is an impressively compelling position – one within a tradition in modal metaphysics that many have long written off.

At the center of the case for modal normativism is the notion of a semantic rule. My primary aim in this paper is to try to better understand what Thomasson has in mind with this notion. I’ll do so by interrogating it from three different angles. First: I’ll consider Thomasson’s treatment of *a posteriori* (§1) and *de re* (§2) necessities as expressions of semantic rules, pushing an objection that this treatment over-generates such necessities. Second (§3): I’ll consider Thomasson’s account of the inferential role of modal talk – her specification of the semantic rules that govern modal talk itself – raising a circularity worry for that account. Finally (§4): I’ll ask whether semantic rules carry the authority and force we find with other substantive flavors of normativity.

I *A Posteriori* Necessities

At least to a first approximation, semantic rules are “the rules for properly applying and refusing expressions (as a competent speaker)” (17).¹ Conforming to these rules is constitutive of semantic competence and language learning is a matter of mastering them. (Bach Rule) is one such rule. If someone fails to conform their linguistic behavior to that rule – imagine they walk around applying the term ‘bachelor’ to things that they refuse to apply the word ‘unmarried’ to – they are making a semantic mistake and, to that extent, are not competent with the terms. That seems well-and-good when we are focused on rules like (Bach Rule) which we can supposedly convey with *a priori* and *de dicto* necessities like (Bach Nec). But how do semantic rules explain the *a posteriori* and *de re* necessities that Kripke (1980) and Barcan Marcus (1961) pointed us to? Such necessities include claims like:

(Natural Kind) Necessarily water is H₂O.

(De Re) Necessarily Kamala Harris is a person.

¹Unless otherwise stated, all page numbers are to THOMASSON (2020a).

In this section and the next, I'll look at Thomasson's strategy for explaining these two "Kripkean" necessities, trying to come to a better understanding of how she is thinking of a semantic rule. I'll do that by pressing an objection: that any sense of "semantic rule" which can support the modal normativist's explanation of Kripkean necessities over-generates necessities, allowing us to conclude necessities that are obviously false.

Focus first on (Natural Kind). In order to explain (Natural Kind) as an expression of a semantic rule, Thomasson distinguishes two sorts of semantic rules. On the one hand, we have rules such as (Bach Rule):

(Bach Rule) One ought to apply the word 'bachelor' only to things that one applies the word 'unmarried' to.

which relates our use of 'bachelor' and 'unmarried.' They are what Thomasson calls *intra-language rules* in the sense that they relate our linguistic behavior regarding one term to our linguistic behavior regarding another term. Intra-language rules are the key to explaining simple necessities – the pre-Kripkean necessities that seem to overlap with analyticities. For the most part, statements of simple necessities like (Bach Nec) are supposed to be object-level expressions of intra-language rules like (Bach Rule). In order to explain (Natural Kind), Thomasson notes that, in addition to intra-language rules, there is a second class of rules: *world-language rules*. As I understand world-language rules, they are *conditional* rules governing our use of terms, where the conditions that trigger the rule are descriptive properties of the world. So, for instance, Thomasson claims that the following world-language rule governs our use of the term 'water' (110):

- (1) One ought to apply the term 'water' only to whatever has (whatever microstructure the relevant sample has).

One instance of this rule is:

(World-Water) If the relevant sample has microstructure H_2O , one ought to apply the term 'water' only to whatever has microstructure H_2O .

Note that this rule conditions the correctness of our linguistic behavior on a descriptive property of the world. A world-language rule has two parts: a *world-condition* (that the relevant sample has microstructure H_2O) and an *consequent rule* (that one ought to apply the term 'water' only to whatever has microstructure H_2O).

From (World-Water) and the fact that the relevant sample has microstructure H_2O , we can derive the consequent rule:

- (2) One ought to apply the term 'water' only to whatever has microstructure H_2O .

And according to Thomasson, this consequent rule can be conveyed using the modal claim we were aiming to derive, (Natural Kind).

Note that the modal claim is used to convey the consequent rule rather than the conditional rule. The reason (Natural Kind) is *a posteriori* is because our derivation of the consequent rule relied on *a posteriori* knowledge about the microstructure of the relevant sample. This is Thomasson's general strategy for accounting for *a posteriori* necessities. As she puts it: "The problems thought to arise for earlier views in accounting for such necessities were problems that arose from having too narrow a conception of the forms semantic rules could take" (110).

Many will find it plausible that the world-language rule (World-Water) is indeed a semantic rule. Suppose someone fails to master (World-Water). That is, suppose they learn that the relevant sample has microstructure H₂O, but knowingly apply the term 'water' to XYZ on twin-Earth. To that extent, the person is semantically incompetent. In other words, world-language rules like (World-Water) have the following link to semantic competence and mastery:

Link If someone fails to master a world-language rule (they believe that the world-condition obtains but knowingly fail to conform their linguistic behavior to the consequent rule) they are to that extent semantically incompetent.

Indeed, it is presumably that link that makes the world-language rule a semantic rule. A similar link between mastery of a rule and semantic incompetence does not hold for the consequent rule (2) because a language user might be mistaken about the microstructure of the relevant sample. So, if someone has misleading evidence that the watery stuff on Earth is XYZ and then knowingly applies the term 'water' to XYZ, that does not *ispo facto* mean that they are semantically incompetent. If someone fails to master a consequent rule (they knowingly fail to conform their linguistic behavior to that rule) they need not be semantically incompetent.

Given that the consequent rule lacks the link to semantic competence, should we continue to call it a "semantic rule"? Relatedly, do we want to say that our ignorant chemist is making a "semantic mistake" in misapplying the term 'water' to XYZ? I don't think too much hangs on how we choose to apply the labels "semantic rule" and "semantic mistake." Let's go ahead and call both the conditional rule and the consequent rule "semantic rules" and say that the confused chemist is making a "semantic mistake" in misapplying the term 'water.' What is important is that only the conditional rule – and not the consequent rule – bears the link to semantic competence. When we need to make that link explicit, we can refer to the conditional rule (and not the consequent rule) as a *properly* semantic rule.

Now here's the rub. *Pace* direct reference theorists, I agree with Thomasson that excluding world-language rules like (World-Water) from the class of (properly) semantic

rules is to take “too narrow a conception” of semantic rules (110). But once we take the more expansive view of semantic rules, I worry that there are *too many* semantic rules for the modal normativist’s purposes. For instance, consider the following semantic rule *par excellence*:

(World-Grass) If grass is green, then we ought to apply ‘green’ to grass.

In so far as (World-Water) is a properly semantic rule so is (World-Grass). After all, it conditions a rule for linguistic behavior on a property of the world. And, most importantly, it bears the same link to mastery and semantic incompetence: if someone believes that grass is green, but knowingly fails to apply ‘green’ to grass, then they are to that extent semantically incompetent with the term ‘green.’

Given that grass is green, we can derive the consequent rule:

(3) One ought to apply ‘green’ to grass.

Of course, (3), like (2), lacks the link to semantic competence that the conditional rules (World-Water) and (World-Grass) have. Knowingly failing to conform your behavior to the consequent rule (3) does not *ipso facto* mean one is semantically incompetent because an ignorant botanist may not realize that grass is green. As with the ignorant chemist’s misapplication of the term ‘water,’ we might want to say that the ignorant botanist is making a “semantic mistake” in refusing to apply the term. But the semantic mistake is not one of semantic incompetence.

So, even though (3) lacks the link to semantic competence, according to the modal normativist we should be able to convey this consequent rule (3) in modal terms as:

(Absurd A Posteriori) Necessarily grass is green.

which is plainly false. We have a reductio.

How might a modal normativist reply? The modal normativist might think that we’ve cheated by using the modal term to express the consequent rule, which isn’t a *properly* semantic rule in that it lacks the requisite link to semantic competence. Instead, they might think we can only use the modal to express the properly semantic rule (World-Grass) as:

(4) Necessarily: if grass is green then grass is green.

But, of course, in the case of ‘water,’ the modal normativist implored us to express the *consequent rule* (2) using the modal claim in their derivation of (Natural Kind) and (2) is also not a *properly* semantic rule.

Perhaps a modal normativist would not count (World-Grass) as a properly semantic rule, on the same level as (World-Water).² But this looks *ad hoc* – I’m hard pressed to see what principled reason we might have to not count (World-Grass) as a properly semantic rule. After all it gives conditions of proper linguistic usage and bears the appropriate link to conceptual competence.

Thomasson does say that world-language rules are “the sort of rules taught through ostensive definition” (68) with demonstratives, and (World-Grass) doesn’t involve a demonstrative. But even if that means we don’t apply the technical term “world-language rule” to (World-Grass), that doesn’t explain why we can’t express its consequent with a modal. Besides, (World-Water) doesn’t involve a demonstrative either. (Perhaps “the relevant sample” of watery stuff is picked out with a demonstrative, but it needn’t be.) And we can always add a demonstrative to (World-Grass). (“If *that* [pointing to grass] is green, then we ought to apply ‘green’ to *it*.”)

(World-Grass) is a disquotational rule, but, again, I don’t see why that should matter. We can express the same rule in Spanish. (“Si la hierba es verde, entonces deberíamos aplicar ‘green’ a la hierba.”) Regardless, the same worry can be raised using non-disquotational schemas that Thomasson herself is under pressure to accept as properly semantic rules. Borrowing from her (2015), let’s consider a rule linking the application conditions for ‘tables’ with an existence claim. Pretend that these application conditions are captured by the quasi-English sentence “there are simples arranged tablewise.” Then we should accept:

(5) If there are simples arranged tablewise then one ought to accept ‘tables exist.’

But, of course, just because there happen to be simples arranged tablewise, that does not mean that *necessarily* tables exist.

Perhaps the modal normativist would claim that, despite initial appearances, failing to master the consequent rule (2) *is* a form of semantic incompetence in a way that failing to master the consequent rule (3) is not. On this reply, (2), but not (3), is a properly semantic rule. Accordingly, the ignorant chemist *is* semantically incompetent, perhaps with the added caveat that they aren’t criticizable for their semantic incompetence and that their semantic incompetence is excusable.

I don’t find this line promising. First: Once we’ve stretched the notion of semantic incompetence to include the ignorant chemist, I don’t see why it shouldn’t also include the ignorant botanist. Second: We can press our worry using different rules, where (given that the world condition is satisfied) following the unconditional rule is surely a matter of semantic competence but the corresponding modal claim is still absurd. Consider in particular introduction rules for observational predicates:

²Thomasson’s prime examples of world-language semantic rule are “application conditions” – the conditions under which sortals apply – and in earlier work (2015, §2.3) she excludes “K’ applies iff K exists’ as an application condition for ‘K.’

(Obs Rule) If something produces reddish visual conditions, then you ought to apply the term ‘looks red’ to it.³

Once again, this is a semantic rule that conditions a rule of linguistic behavior on a property of the world. When the world-condition is met, following the consequent rule is very plausibly required for semantic competence. Brandom, for one, seems to agree. When discussing his inferentialism, he writes:

...in using any expression, applying any concept, one is undertaking a commitment to the correctness of the (in general, material) inference from the circumstances in which it is correctly applied to the correct consequences of such application. And this is so even where some of those circumstances or consequences of application are non-inferential. Thus the visible presence of red things warrants the applicability of the concept red – not as the conclusion of an inference, but observationally. (BRANDOM, 2007, 658)

Suppose a patch of cloth is causing a reddish visual experience in the subject. Then a semantically competent speaker will conform their linguistic behavior to the consequent rule:

(6) You ought to apply the term ‘looks red’ to it.

On this view (supposing the patch does in fact cause a reddish experience), anyone who doesn’t apply the term ‘looks red’ to it is *ipso facto* semantically incompetent with that observational predicate – semantic competence demands immediate non-inferential application of the observational predicate.

So, (assuming the patch is causing a reddish visual experience) (6) has as good a case as any rule to be labelled “properly semantic.” But, of course, we should not conclude that the patch necessarily looks red! This is all to say that even if the modal normativist were able to somehow convince us that the difference between (2) and (3) was that following the former but not the latter was required for semantic competence, they would still have the problem of generating too many necessities.

Of course there *is* a difference between, on the one hand, the relationship between grass being green and our semantic obligations with respect to ‘green’ and, on the other hand, the relationship between H₂O filling our lakes and oceans and our semantic obligations with respect to ‘water.’ But the difference is one of modal strength. If H₂O fills our lakes then our term ‘water’ *necessarily* ought to be applied only to H₂O. If grass is green, then it’s not the case that our term ‘green’ *necessarily* ought to be applied to grass. The modal normativist, though, has to articulate this distinction in their own terms and must explain why the distinction so articulated is relevant to expressions of modal necessities.

³Interestingly, in earlier work (2015, 95, fn. 13), Thomasson herself suggests (Obs Rule) as an instance of application conditions, on the same model as those for chemical kind terms like “water.”

My worry does not target the claim that natural kind terms can participate in analyticities, including modal ones, or that our knowledge of such necessities is gained via these analyticities. For all I've said, claims like:

- (7) If that (actual) watery sample has microstructure H_2O , then necessarily water is H_2O .

and:

- (8) Water is whatever chemical kind actually fills our lakes and oceans.

are indeed analytic. What I am worried about is understanding modality *in terms of* analyticity and, in particular, the expression of semantic rules.

2 *De Re* Necessities

Turn now to claims like:

(De Re) Necessarily Kamala Harris is a person.

As I understand it, Thomasson's strategy for explaining this necessity is to argue, *pace* direct reference theorists, that the name 'Kamala Harris' is associated with some conceptual content which determines the sort of entity the name refers to. Thomasson argues that names are governed by a world-language semantic rule according to which, if such-and-such application conditions are met, the name ought to refer to so-and-so kind of entity. In the case of the name 'Kamala Harris,' for instance, the rule might be: If that thing over there is made of flesh and blood rather than silicone and [...] then 'Kamala Harris' ought to refer to a person. Or more succinctly:

(Person-Name Rule) If the application conditions for 'person' are fulfilled then 'Kamala Harris' ought to refer to a person.

Because the consequent is a semantic rule, we can convey it in the object language using a necessity claim such as:

- (9) If the application conditions for 'person' are fulfilled then necessarily Kamala Harris is a person.

And, because the application conditions for ‘person’ are fulfilled, we can conclude (De Re), that necessarily Kamala Harris is a person.

I worry, however, that Thomasson’s strategy here fails to engage the full force of Kripke’s insights. He showed us that metaphysical modal operators operate on the referent of a name rather than on any means by which the name acquired that referent. That’s why we can substitute co-referring names *salva veritate* under the scope of a metaphysical modal. And that’s why we can move from (De Re) to the β -equivalent claim “Kamala Harris is necessarily a person” and to the quantified version “There is some person that is Kamala Harris, and necessarily it is a person.” It’s because metaphysical modal operators operate on the name’s referent that claims like (De Re) really are *de re* claims!

This lesson holds *even if* considerations like Frege’s Puzzle lead us to deny direct reference theories and accept that names have conceptual content. We might think that names “lock onto” their referent via some conceptual content, but what we learned from Kripke is that the modal isn’t sensitive to this way of locking on. In Fregean terms, even if names have senses that determine their referents, metaphysical modal operators are insensitive to that sense. Rather, they operate at the level of reference. This raises a suspicion that Thomasson’s strategy makes metaphysical modal operators inappropriately sensitive to the conceptual content associated with a name.

One way to develop that suspicion is to consider a broader range of conceptual contents that we might associate with a name in order to lock onto the same referent. ‘Kamala,’ we’re supposing with Thomasson, is a person-name and thus associated with (Person-Name Rule) linking application conditions for ‘person’ with a semantic obligation. On her view, in addition to person-names, there are names associated with other sortals: statue-names, animal-names, etc. The sortals she discusses are all essential properties. But given that, on her view, there are names associated with essential sortals, we can imagine a language with names associated with non-essential sortals. Imagine we add to our language *sibling-names* that must apply to a sibling. Let ‘Shamala Harris’ be such a sibling-name: say I use the name for the first time with the intention to refer to a sibling. And, suppose whatever other conditions of reference are satisfied so that I manage to get ‘Shamala Harris’ to refer to Kamala Harris. So, the sibling Shamala Harris is the person Kamala Harris. The sibling-name ‘Shamala Harris’ is associated with the rule:

(Sibling-Name Rule) If the application conditions for ‘sibling’ are fulfilled then ‘Shamala Harris’ ought to refer to a sibling.

which we can express as:

- (10) If the application conditions for ‘sibling’ are fulfilled then necessarily Shamala Harris is a sibling.

Because we’re assuming the antecedent is satisfied, we’re entitled to conclude:

(11) Necessarily Shamala Harris is a sibling.

But that's absurd. We can make the absurdity more obvious. After all, we've just said that Kamala Harris is Shamala Harris, so, from (11) we can conclude:

(Absurd De Re) Necessarily Kamala Harris is a sibling.

which is obviously false.

How might a modal normativist reply? They might try to deny that Shamala Harris is Kamala Harris. But that's implausible: If Shamala Harris is a sibling, she is a person. So, unless there are two people in the vicinity of Kamala Harris, Shamala Harris just is Kamala Harris.

Alternatively, a modal normativist might accept that Shamala is Kamala but deny the inference from "Necessarily Shamala Harris is a sibling" to "Necessarily Kamala Harris is a sibling." Again, though, Kripke showed us that co-referring names are intersubstitutable in modal contexts. Indeed, we can break the substitution into two steps. (11) entails the β -equivalent claim "Shamala Harris is necessarily a sibling," which together with the identity claim and Leibniz's law, entails "Kamala Harris is necessarily a sibling" and its β -equivalent (Absurd De Re), both of which are plainly absurd. The only remaining option would be to deny β -equivalence for sentences with names in the scope of the modal. But, given our willingness to make such inferences, that's implausible on its face. Besides, to deny β -equivalence would be to deny that claims like (De Re) are genuinely *de re* claims as opposed to *de dicto* claims. The modal normativist would then owe us a *separate* explanation of genuinely *de re* necessity claims like "Kamala Harris is necessarily a person" – one that doesn't allow us to generate the absurd *de re* claim that she is also necessarily a sibling.

Instead, it looks like the modal normativist needs to draw a distinction between semantic rules associating a name with a sortal like 'person' and the purported semantic rules associating a name with a sortal like 'sibling.' But what is the difference between the relevant sortals that could warrant such a distinction? Of course, the sortals are of different modal strength – one sortal is essential and the other isn't. And perhaps an "inflationist" about modality can appeal to this fact to explain why we don't easily find sibling-names in our language. But the modal normativist presumably cannot help themselves to such modal distinctions in explaining modal talk. So we're left wondering why the rule governing the person-name 'Kamala Harris' is suited for expression by a modal but not the purported rule governing the sibling-name 'Shamala Harris.'

Note that my worry here is entirely consistent with Thomasson's idea that names are associated with conceptual content – a claim that I am sympathetic to. For all I've said, it might be analytic that if Kamala Harris exists, she is a person. Nor does my worry conflict with the idea that *de re* necessities can participate in analyticities or that our source of *de re*

knowledge is via such analyticities: perhaps it's analytic that if someone is a person, they are necessarily a person. As in the previous section, what I am worried about is the modal normativist's attempt to understand modality *in terms of* analyticity and, in particular, as the expression of semantic rules.⁴

3 The Semantic Rules for Modality

We use modal talk to convey semantic rules. But the use of an expression should not be confused with its meaning – that's one lesson of the Frege-Geach Problem for early non-descriptivist treatments in ethics. For instance, we might choose a truth-conditional treatment of the content of ought claims (e.g. as described by KRATZER (1977, 1981)). This truth-conditional specification of content need not conflict with the observation that we can use ought claims to do things like command or advise: we can combine the semantic theory with pragmatic theories to explain how we use a sentence with that meaning to perform speech acts with various perlocutionary effects (e.g. as described in LEWIS (1979b,a)).

So, Thomasson needs an account of the meaning of metaphysical modal expressions beyond the expressions' use and function. To provide such an account, Thomasson eschews truth-conditional semantics for an inferential specification of contents. (In other words, she specifies the content of modal expressions in terms of the semantic rules that such expressions participate in!) Such a departure from semantic orthodoxy should not be taken lightly: truth-conditional semantics has been an immensely productive enterprise in a discipline where such success can be elusive. (A particularly relevant example: one virtue of Kratzer's truth-conditional semantics is that it unifies the meaning of various flavors of modality found across natural languages.) But perhaps the metaphysical and epistemological puzzles of metaphysical modality warrant such a departure.

The inferential specification of content that Thomasson gives for metaphysical modals comes in the form of introduction and elimination rules: she give the rules for correctly reasoning with such expressions. Importantly for what is to come, that specification involves how we reason with modal expressions under counterfactual or subjunctive supposition, where such suppositions involve considering “ways the *world would have been, if things had gone differently*” (83, her emphasis). For instance, she says that the metaphysical modal ‘necessarily’ is associated with the following “elimination rule”:⁵

⁴See also DONALDSON AND WANG (2022) for a different worry for Thomasson's treatment of *de re* modality, along with a positive proposal for how the modal normativist should understand the semantic rules that figure in such modal claims. (Their paper was published while this paper was under review, so I have not had a chance to consider whether their proposal would help the normativist with the worries I raise.)

⁵The complementary “introduction” rule also specifies the inferential role ‘necessary’ plays in the context of subjunctive suppositional reasoning.

(Nec-Elim) “If you have *Necessarily p* as a premise, you may use *p* as a premise in your reasoning anywhere, under any subjunctive supposition” (84).

Here’s my worry. The normativist has specified the meaning of the notion of necessity in terms of the role that notion plays in subjunctive supposition. However, without an independent account of subjunctive supposition, that is objectionably circular. Plausibly, when I am engaged in subjunctive supposition, I am having thoughts with modal content; I am (in her words) considering ways the world *would have been!* My grip on subjunctive supposition is therefore based on my grip on belief in associated counterfactuals. (And, it’s worth noting, we can define metaphysical necessity in terms of such counterfactuals.⁶) So Thomasson is appealing to modal contents to explain modal contents. My claim is that such an appeal is illicit. In order to legitimately appeal to the mental state of subjunctive supposition in explaining the meaning of the notion of necessity, we would need an independent account of that mental state which does not treat it as having thoughts with modal content.

To be clear, my complaint is not simply that the modal normativist uses modal expressions in the meta-language to specify the meaning of modal expressions in the object-language. Such uses often figure into successful semantic explanations. But what is not explanatory is specifying the meaning of an expression in terms of a mental state that has that meaning as its content and leaving it at that. Compare the case with a moral expressivist. Suppose a moral expressivist tried to explain the meaning of the moral sentence “murder is wrong” by noting that the sentence expresses a belief with the content *that murder is wrong* – and left it at that. Such an explanation would obviously not be successful. It’s essential to the moral expressivist’s ambitions that they can characterize the mental states expressed by moral language without appealing to moral contents – e.g. a dislike of murdering.

Let’s not overstate the worry. Circularity complaints are delicate matters. And, even if I’m right that Thomasson owes us an explanatory debt, she may yet discharge that debt by giving an account of subjunctive supposition that does not presuppose mental states with modal contents. But, at the very least, the challenge to do so makes vivid just how much work is required before we can relinquish orthodox truth-conditional semantic theories for inferentialist ones.

4 Modals, Morals, and Manners

In this section, I’d like to consider how we ought to understand the nature of the normativity involved in semantic rules. Distinguish two sorts of claims we make with deontic vocabulary. Compare bolded usages like:

⁶See, e.g. LEWIS (1973, §1.5).

- (12) a. [A chess teacher to a student] The white player **must** go out first.
- b. [A club secretary to a club member] You **can not** bring ladies in the smoking room (FOOT, 1972)
- c. [A etiquette teacher] An invitation in the third person **should** be answered in the third person. (FOOT, 1972)

with, on the other hand, underlined usages like

- (13) a. [Two ethicists disagreeing over the trolley problem] She should push the large man to save the many.
- b. [Two theorists disagreeing over Newcomb's problem] She should take both boxes.
- c. [Two friends over coffee] What John did was outrageous: he should not have broken his promise to you.
- d. [A free spirit] An invitation in the third person **should** be answered in the third person – but to hell with etiquette – you should reply however you want!

I'll call the deontic claims of the first sort (*merely*) *formal ought claims* and claims of the second sort *substantive ought claims*. The distinction I have in mind is the one that Foot (1972) illustrated with similar claims, and that have been discussed by, e.g., Parfit (2011, 144-145), McPherson (2011) and Wodak (2019).⁷ Although it's hard to give a theory-neutral characterization of the distinction between these claims, it's hopefully an intuitive one: substantive ought claims purport to have a normative authority that formal ought claims do not.

If we have an independent grip on the notion of a reason, we can follow Foot (and Parfit) in understanding the distinction in terms of reasons.⁸ Considering the deontic language in (12b) and (12c) Foot writes:

...one might reasonably ask why anyone should bother about what should_e (should from the point of view of etiquette) be done, and that such considerations deserve no notice unless reason is shown. So although people give as their reason for doing something the fact that it is required by etiquette, we do not take this consideration *as in itself giving us reason to act*. Considerations of etiquette do not have any automatic reason-giving force, and a man might be right if he denied that he had reason to do "what's done." (FOOT, 1972, 309)

⁷As I read Foot, she treats the distinction as a version of the hypothetical/categorical imperative distinction. But I think this is misleading: some clearly hypothetical imperatives have the tie to reasons and actions that are characteristic of substantive ought claims.

⁸McPHERSON (2018, 258) seems skeptical of this approach – presumably because he is skeptical that we have an independent grip on the notion of a reason.

Following Foot, we might try saying that formal ought claims, even in combination with descriptive premises, do not analytically entail a bare claim about our reasons like “you have reason to ϕ .” (12c) does not entail that I have reason to reply in the third person, unless we add a premise about our reasons to follow the rules of etiquette. The same is not true of substantive ought claims: (13b) analytically entails that we have some reason to take both boxes. In that way, substantive ought claims are normatively “authoritative.”

Motivational internalists might instead try saying that judgements about what we substantively ought to do are intrinsically motivating or have an inferential role that connects up with intentions (or other attitudes) in the right way. Hewing closely to GIBBARD (2003), here’s a specific way to cash this thought out. When we ask ourselves “what to do” (or “what to believe” or “what do feel”), and come to an answer, we can express our decision as an imperative to ourselves (“visit my mother!”) or with an ought claim (“I ought to visit my mother”). Call that particular usage of “ought” – the one we use to express decisions about what to do/think/feel – the “final ought,” which we can disambiguate as “ought_f.” Other senses of ought can be understood in terms of their relationship to this final ought. For instance, we might try defining the moral ought used in (12a) in terms of when we ought_f to feel guilt about performing an action. This final ought and the family of oughts understood in terms of it, we might propose, constitute the class of substantive oughts.

However we choose to characterize the distinction, I take it that it’s one we must acknowledge. And once acknowledged, we can ask: is the ‘ought’ in (Bach Rule) being used substantively or formally? Does the modal normativist understand the semantic ‘ought’ as formal or substantive?⁹ In brief: is modality akin to morals or manners?

Thomasson doesn’t explicitly address this question (although some things she says suggests she takes the ‘ought’ at play in semantic rules to be merely formal).¹⁰ And, there are different answers to this question in the literature on the normativity of meaning.¹¹ But the answer we give dramatically changes the lens through which we see the modal normativist project. That’s because substantive ought claims are mysterious and atypical in ways that formal ought claims are not.

⁹Following BURGESS AND PLUNKETT (2013, 1095–1096), distinguish the question of *how* we ought to use such-and-such a concept and the question of *whether* we ought to use such-and-such a concept. Presumably the ought involved in the second question is substantive. Here, I am asking about the first question.

¹⁰For instance, the analogy between semantic rules and rules of a game looms large in her thinking. Whenever she discusses “the idea that our terms are being governed by semantic rules” like those in (Bach Rule), she tells the reader to think of such rules as “analogous to the rules of a game” like chess or basketball (71). But oughts used to state the rules of a game are paradigmatically formal ought claims. And when she explicitly considers ways in which semantic rules are and are not different from the rules of a game (71–76), there is no mention of a special normative authority accorded to semantic rules as opposed to chess rules.

¹¹GIBBARD (2013) argues that semantic oughts are substantively normative. As I read HATTIANGADI (2007), she argues that any semantic oughts would be merely formal.

Consider the relative epistemological status of the two claims. It's notoriously difficult to explain how we come to know claims of morality and rationality: they seem to be knowable *a priori* but are not analytic. By comparison, our knowledge of claims of etiquette are easier to explain: they are arguably a species of sociological knowledge. And our knowledge of the rules of a game are plausibly *a posteriori* (we watch gameplay and how referees react to various moves, we learn the rules by testimony, etc.) or analytic (anyone who knows the meanings of 'pawn' knows that they can only move forward).

Or consider the appropriate semantic treatments of formal and substantive ought claims. Again, it's notoriously difficult to explain the meaning of claims of morality and rationality. One trouble (according to motivational internalists) is that, unlike typical beliefs, judgments of substantive oughts are intrinsically motivational (or at least rationally require certain motivations). If we simply characterize substantive ought judgments as beliefs about the distribution of a special sort of normative property, we fail to explain this motivational element of the mental state. Similarly with the meaning of the sentences associated with those judgments: if we merely pair the sentences with some truth-conditions, we fail to explain the motivational quality of the mental state of accepting what is said by those sentences. It's troubles like these that have led philosophers to adopt expressivist semantics for substantive oughts. But these motivations don't obviously apply in the case of formal ought claims. Accepting a claim about the rules of chess or etiquette is no more intrinsically motivating than accepting a claim about the contents of my fridge. So, a truth-conditional semantics for formal oughts isn't left with the explanatory residue that motivates a departure from this otherwise successful semantic framework. And, as discussed above, truth-conditional semantics (e.g. Kratzer's) can arguably combine with pragmatic theories (e.g. Lewis's) to explain the variety of ways we use these formal oughts.

All of this is to say that the modal normativist's view of the nature of the semantic oughts conveyed by metaphysical modals has serious consequences for how we understand the epistemology and semantics of the semantic rules, and therefore metaphysical modal claims. The choice is not an easy one. If the semantic oughts are substantive, modality inherits the puzzles such oughts bring with them. How do we come to *know* substantive semantic ought claims? What feature of the world could normatively *ground* the semantic ought facts? On the other hand, taking the semantic oughts as merely formal comes with its own baggage. If modal claims do not warrant a truth-conditional semantics and express a semantic ought, then presumably the semantic ought also deserves a non-truth-conditional semantic theory. We have independent motivation to think truth-conditional semantics are inadequate for substantive oughts, which (I'm claiming) we lack for formal oughts.¹² So, insisting that semantic oughts are for-

¹²Although, see WODAK (2017) for an argument that, in so far as we adopt expressivism about substantive oughts, we are under pressure to adopt expressivism for others oughts as well.

mal requires more of a departure from our best semantic theories. Treating the semantic oughts as substantive offers a more conservative and unified semantic picture.¹³ Additional problems might be found when we reflect on modal disagreement: it's easier to construe modality debates as substantive rather than merely-verbal if they boil down to debates over substantive as opposed to formal ought claims.

The modal normativist thus faces a dilemma. And regardless of whether the dilemma is particularly worrisome, the choice point is a significant one – albeit one that is easy to miss.

5 Conclusion

The modal normativist's central thesis is that modal talk is non-descriptive, best understood in terms of semantic rules. The aim of this paper has been to get clearer on the conception of semantic rules they are working with. I've raised doubts that there is a conception available that can do the work the modal normativist needs such a notion to do. I've also emphasized the unfinished work that must be completed before we should abandon traditional semantic treatments in favor of the modal normativist's inferentialism.

But there is reason to be optimistic about the normativist approach. After all, compared to (say) treatments of the rules of morality or rationality, the notion of a semantic rule is no less subtle and much less worked-over. That makes it a promising place to search for new solutions to the old problem of explaining modality. Perhaps most importantly, we should be energized. The once popular strategy of understanding metaphysical modality as conceptual has been largely abandoned. And non-descriptivist treatments of modality remain marginalized. Under the banner of modal normativism, Thomasson has managed to join these positions and reinvigorate two languishing traditions. If unfinished work remains, then it's time to get to work! Given the stakes, it's work well-worth undertaking.

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¹³Compare: In her (2020b, fn. 29), Thomasson expresses some sympathy for non-cognitivist interpretations of the “ought” involved in questions of conceptual engineering, noting that such a treatment “goes naturally with the functional pluralism” that characterizes much of her work. See also the “Second Critical Question” raised in CHRISMAN AND SHARP (2022).

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