



Philosophical Review

Modal Thinking by Alan R. White

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The Philosophical Review, Vol. 86, No. 2 (Apr., 1977), pp. 251-254

Published by: [Duke University Press](#) on behalf of [Philosophical Review](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2184017>

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tence of an innate mathematical faculty. This is inevitable given the Quinean epistemology—it seems as if a specifically mathematical faculty⁴ is at stake, whereas only general cognitive abilities are allowed.

Pages 102–108 contain the best version of a nontrivial argument for nondeductive mathematical knowledge that I have seen in print. There is no interesting discussion of proof, however. (Although the section on definition is very good.)

In summarizing *Mathematical Knowledge*, I have briefly indicated some relative shortcomings. Many of these are sins of omission whose correction would have required a much larger book. As it stands the book is admirable, stimulating and worthy of more detailed discussion than I have been able to give it here. I hope it is read and its central issues debated.

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MODAL THINKING. By ALAN R. WHITE. Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1975. Pp. 190. \$12.50.

This is a paradigm of ordinary language philosophy in its virtues and vices. The program is orthodox: a description of “the actual nature of [the modal] concepts of our everyday thinking” via a description of the use in our everyday uttering of the words expressing those concepts. There are chapters on ‘possibility,’ ‘can,’ ‘may,’ ‘probability,’ ‘certainty,’ ‘necessity,’ ‘must,’ ‘need,’ ‘obliged,’ ‘ought,’ and the nature of modality (mainly about *de re* vs. *de dicto*.) The tradition’s procedures are reformed by the recent progress in discriminating those features of linguistic usage indicative of word meaning from those that are not, and by a cause and consequence of that advance, a preference for unified, univocalist accounts. Some backwardness regarding syntax remains: e.g., contra White, the grammatical object of ‘want’ is a sentential ‘for NP to VP’, not the ellipses “either something X or to V”; ‘possible’ is predicated of ‘that S’ or ‘for NP to VP’, not “to V”; and ‘right’ (like ‘true’) is predi-

the fact that the Frege-Russell choices were not arbitrary. This makes plausible construing numbers as properties (i.e., numbers are properties). This bypasses objections either by making the choosing of sets not *ad hoc* or shifting dubiety to the reduction of properties to sets.

⁴I put the issue this way since innateness claims seem to attain empirical bite only when taken to assert the existence of nongeneral cognitive ability.

cated of a sentential element, not (like 'best') of some 'NP'. Still, despite the foibles and beyond the refined procedures, White displays a true talent for his task that theory alone cannot match. The book is dense with fine linguistic discriminations; this wealth of acute observations is its riches. The treasures are numerous niceties, not large novelties; the main generalizations are original mainly only in details. Then too, White's ear is not unerring; the frequency of linguistic claims in the range of dubiousness from slight to utter is high enough that the cautious reader had best check them all. Yet even when fact gets fouled with fantasy, the product is often an improvement in both clarity and accuracy over its predecessors or at least aidant advice (like a slightly askew signpost that, after straightening, still surely directs.)

These linguistic descriptions, however, are not autotelic, but directed at philosophical ends. Would that White's sense of philosophy were the equal of his sense of the language. The latter can indeed abet philosophical progress. Sometimes this is because, by untangling our talk about a topic, we may be untangling our thoughts about it too: for instance, White's neat account of 'need', 'want' and 'interest' did just that for me (despite its defects.) Commonly, however, this is only because some (linguistic) philosopher has misconceived a philosophical conception by formulating it in the formal mode or by defending it with erroneous or irrelevant semantic theses. White appreciates this—sometimes. Thus, a warning closes his analysis of 'could have done otherwise': the issue of free will "has not, of course, been based solely on an assumption about the meaning of 'could have done otherwise' "; hence its resolution "is not dependent on any analysis of" it. Again, after secerning 'sure' from 'certain' he cautions that the "philosophical implications" of his virtuoso exercise "should not be overemphasized." Yet the moments of welcome modesty seem too much in the minority. More often, in varying ways and degrees, White strains for philosophical effects, his ambitions overreaching his efforts. Like others before him, he would honor his efforts by belittling his targets, bidding us believe that a "source", "cause"—even "main source", "root cause"—of this, that or another august conception is some sorry semantics, infelicitous diction, hardly more than a slip of the tongue. Of course this is cant (symptomatic of a philosophy uncertain of the seriousness of its subject, of itself); the evidence of causation is never more than that some (at least one) philosophers have presented (bad) arguments in defense of a conception. Not that the deficient data base much matters, for causation is not the issue; at stake in such explanations is a conception of philosophical conceptions, the sense of the subject. (Though Bradley's famed contrast between the cause of our conviction

tions and the reasoning we invent is not wholly just, it is more insightful and less insulting than their identification.)

A sample of the workings of White's sense of the subject is his response to the "deterministic thesis" that 'X did not V' implies that it was not possible for X to V. He exposes its implications (that 'It was possible for X to V' is equivalent to 'X did V' is equivalent to 'It was necessary for X to V') and damns them for their "intuitive implausibility," being "queer," contrary to "our intuitive feeling," "absurd." All the while he betrays no feeling for the fact that the thesis is fatalism, not determinism; that its "implications" are its integral components, not embarrassing surprises; that its being implausible, queer, absurd, counterintuitive for an ordinary conception of the world is also no news, but rather provides it its point and power; that the controversial implications are alleged metaphysical relations and no linguistic facts imply their existence or nonexistence.

White calls his main target "modal subjectivism," the thesis that the modals are "used to express something about the user," a conception he finds expressed in a wide and heterogeneous group of philosophical views which form White's subsidiary targets. He offers in opposition "modal objectivism," better called "modal subjunctivism" because his univocalist account of the modals explains the crucial apparent systematic ambiguity of the modals (for example, "'You ought to be there soon.' " as "prediction" and "prescription") as only the difference between the indicative and subjunctive uses. This is a genuinely promising idea—but all we get is the promise. Despite the centrality and frequency of the claim and the diversity of its applications, just what the subjunctive use is (and for that matter, the indicative as well) goes unexplained; so we are left to look to the grammar books for the accepted explanation—and find it stated in unmitigatedly subjectivistic terms. In any case, reference to the grammarian's ill-understood categories will not ready an account fit for philosophical theory; if the philosophically significant structure of entailments split along this distinction (for example, "indicative necessity" implies actuality; "subjunctive necessity" does not), that only means that the philosophical problems are reformulable as problems about that distinction.

The content of White's objectivism comes out in his linkage of subjectivism to *de dicto* theories of modality and objectivism to *de re* theories. For White, "The basic question is what and how the modals qualify." Apparently, the question is whether a predicate is predicated of its subject qua formal, syntactic object (the subject term, sentence, proposition) or qua material, semantic object (the object designated, state of affairs).

He settles this nonissue, forcing the latter option by asking what a property is a property of: for example, if it is possible that *p*, what is possible, '*p*' or *p*? So he concludes that "there is no such thing as modality *de dicto*" and that "nothing is necessarily or possibly . . . so and so in itself, but only in virtue of being such and such." In my idiolect those are contradictory claims.

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A HISTORY OF GREEK PHILOSOPHY: Volume IV: *PLATO, THE MAN AND HIS DIALOGUES, EARLIER PERIOD*. By W.K.C. GUTHRIE, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1975. Pp. xviii, 603. \$34.50.

All readers of the Greek philosophers should be grateful for Professor Guthrie's *History*, which here reaches its fourth volume. This volume presents a mass of useful information, sober and helpful discussion, written in a fluent, readable style. But if we were looking for a major work on Plato, it is a severe disappointment.

Philosophical limitations severely handicap the discussion of the coherence and soundness of Plato's doctrines. The main authority on most philosophical questions is an introductory textbook of Flew's (even to quote Descartes, p. 497); a curiously large proportion of the few modern philosophical works cited are devoted to the "is-ought" question; and even discussions of Plato by philosophers are under-represented in the fairly generous, but haphazard, bibliography. I do not mean that Guthrie should have strained to modernize Plato; but too often he has done less than justice to the issues.

1. Guthrie suggests that the Socratic and Platonic Forms are universals (pp. 4, 117), that Socrates treats piety, justice and so on as universals, and Plato separates them from particulars. Universals are clearly distinguished from particulars by Aristotle, who complains that Platonists blur the distinction. When Guthrie says that Forms are universals, does he mean that Socrates is consciously seeking abstract entities, categorically distinct from particulars? This is surely implausible. Though some of the vocabulary of the earlier dialogues is used by Aristotle in drawing his distinction (for example, *Meno* 77a6), it includes no explicit distinction of particulars and universals. Does Guthrie mean that the Aristotelian