

Book Review

Norms and Necessity, by Amie Thomasson. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. xi + 294.

Imagine you're teaching someone how to play chess. You might start by saying 'White *must* move first', where the word 'must' is used to convey a rule. You would have said basically the same thing if you had used the imperative 'If you're white, then move first'. And since imperatives prescribe rather than describe, it is natural to think that using a must-statement to convey a rule is importantly different from describing something. More specifically, at least when you are teaching someone a game, the word 'must' does not seem to describe what always happens or even to describe what the rule book says but rather to *affirm or institute rules*.

This may be the core function of deontic necessity modals such as 'must', but not every deontic use of this word can be translated into an imperative. For example, your pupil might reason 'If white must move first, then black must move second'. Here, the pupil has conditionalized on the rule, and in order to do so, the rule needs to be stated in declarative form to work grammatically as the antecedent of a conditional. Nevertheless, the resulting statement still seems to be something other than a description; the pupil has derived what we might call a normative consequence from the original rule.

There are other related uses of deontic 'must' that also seem to be non-descriptive. Sometimes, for instance, we negotiate the rules of a game by using deontic 'must'. For example, a more advanced pupil might propose 'Let's play a variant of chess where white must move twice before black moves'. Again, the function here of 'must' is not to describe what will definitely happen or what the rule book says but rather to negotiate the adoption of a rule.

Amie Thomasson's fascinating and well-argued book develops a sustained and detailed case for the surprising conclusion that the normal use of *meta-physical* modal vocabulary is very similar to the use of deontic 'must' in the examples just given. More specifically, she thinks that its meaning-determining function is normative rather than descriptive. This view is an integral part of her broader project to reconceive the epistemology of metaphysics as a branch of normative enquiry. (See especially her previous book, [Thomasson \(2015\)](#)).

For many students of contemporary metaphysics, this idea will be confusing. We are used to thinking of statements such as ‘The statue is necessarily co-located with its parts’ or ‘Transubstantiation is possible’ or ‘Bachelors are necessarily male’ as descriptions of their subjects. On a naïve view, they seem to be predications of modal properties (that is, being necessarily co-located or being metaphysically possible), and we typically regard these statements as true or false, and so apt to be believed or disbelieved. Accordingly, these statements would standardly be interpreted as representing modal reality.

Thought of this way, however, metaphysical modal statements raise thorny ontological and epistemological puzzles. What aspects of reality make them true or false, and why would humans have evolved to know anything about such modal features of reality? Sometimes philosophers analyse such statements in terms of what is the case in various possible worlds. But does that mean reality contains, in addition to the actual world, other merely possible worlds? If so, how could we ever know that these merely possible worlds exist, let alone anything about what’s true in them? Sometimes philosophers appeal to essences to make sense of metaphysical modal statements. But are there really enough essences to ground all of the metaphysical modal statements that we regard as true?

Maybe there are answers to these questions, but it is in light of these kinds of seemingly intractable puzzles that Thomasson proposes her radical and intriguing alternative. Philosophical discussions of metaphysical modalities often retreat to talking about what we mean (or should mean) by terms such as ‘bachelor’, ‘transubstantiation’, and ‘co-located’. Thomasson takes this phenomenon very seriously and combines it with the observation, illustrated above, that modal words such as ‘must’ have a core use which is pretty clearly normative instead of descriptive to defend a theory of the meaning of metaphysical modal vocabulary which she calls *Modal Normativism*.

More specifically, she posits introduction and elimination rules for metaphysical uses of ‘necessary’ (and relies on the standard definition of possibility in terms of necessity):

(I) If p is an object-language expression of an actual semantic rule (or a logical consequence of actual semantic rules), then you are entitled to introduce *Necessarily p*, regardless of any subjunctive suppositions.

(E) If you have *Necessarily p* as a premise, you may use p as a premise in your reasoning anywhere, under any subjunctive suppositions. (pp. 83–84)

According to her, these rules determine the meaning of ‘metaphysically necessary’, and they are grounded in the core function of metaphysical modal vocabulary in languages such as English, which she argues is to affirm or institute *semantic* rules for how we use various words, or to draw normative consequences from these rules, or to negotiate which semantic rules to follow. This is what she views as the core meaning-determining function of

metaphysical modal vocabulary. Crucially, because rules such as (I) and (E) do not make reference to things in reality having metaphysical modal properties, on this view, metaphysical modal vocabulary is not descriptive of modal features of reality.

There are strong parallels in this idea with minimalist (or deflationary) theories of truth, which say (roughly) that truth is a mere logical device whose function can be characterized in a small number of relatively uncontroversial principles for use that do not make any reference to things in reality having some metaphysically mysterious property of being true. Thomasson's introduction and elimination rules aren't advanced as uncontroversial, but they are intended to provide a basis for explaining uses of 'metaphysically necessary' in a way that avoids ontological commitment to some metaphysically mysterious property of being metaphysically necessary. In fact, Horwich's minimalist theory of truth serves as a model for her own account of necessity. One might take up this thread by considering whether standard objections to deflationism about truth apply to Thomasson's theory of necessity.

Thomasson's main claim is that 'modal questions do not require a special form of philosophical insight or intuition into features of reality for their resolution. For properly understood, modal terms do not function to describe or track special modal features of reality that we must discover to render our verdict. Instead, they serve as perspicuous ways of mandating or enforcing, reasoning with, and renegotiating rules' (p. 6). Before pressing three sorts of critical questions about the book's argument for this claim, we briefly canvass three reasons we think Thomasson's case for her view is strong. This will serve as a brief summary of some of the key ideas in the book that make it well worth reading.

First, in developing a broadly pragmatist analysis of metaphysical modal discourse, Thomasson is clearer than most about the distinction between explaining the meaning of a word by appeal to how it is used and explaining the meaning of a problematic vocabulary in terms of its core communicative function. Her project is not to give an informative and reductive analysis of 'necessary', let alone a compositional semantics for every metaphysical modal sentence. Rather she aims to explain the core (and, as she sees things, meaning-determining) function of 'metaphysically necessary' in terms of rules such as (I) and (E) and to give an account of why it would be useful to speak a language with terms subject to such rules—without assuming that sentences deploying these terms describe modal reality. In our view, this nicely avoids some of the trouble moral expressivists have had in attempting to provide a use-theoretic 'expressivist' *semantics* for the target nondescriptive discourse.

Second, in attempting to account for the facts about human thought and discourse that explain why terms such as 'metaphysically necessary' mean what they do, it can be tempting to make bold but hand-wavey claims.

Thomasson does some of this, but she also digs in and attempts to apply her theory to various thorny cases, such as *de re* and *a posteriori* modal claims. From a naturalistic and pragmatist point of view, the positive view has many epistemological and ontological attractions, but admirably Thomasson spends the middle third of the book motivating her view by working in detail through some difficult cases.

Third, our description of Thomasson's view might remind you of the conventionalism about modal notions associated with early-Wittgenstein, Ramsey, Carnap, and Ryle. These philosophers offer different versions of the idea that modal truths derive not from how reality is but from the linguistic conventions governing the use of various terms. The first chapter of Thomasson's book offers a sympathetic introduction to this line of thought and a plausible explanation of why it fell out of favour. This allows her to situate her own Modal Normativism as inheriting what's attractive about conventionalism, while eschewing its problematic commitments. (However, we would have liked to see some discussion of Sellars's defence of what looks like the original version of Modal Normativism in his proposal to interpret 'the language of modalities ... as a "transposed" language of norms' (1953, p. 332).)

A key move she makes in avoiding the pitfalls of conventionalism is to argue that metaphysical modal vocabulary is used not only to articulate and acknowledge (as opposed to describe) a semantic rule but also to derive normative consequences from such rules, to negotiate and collectively institute such rules, and to reason about the broader set of inference rules constituting our discursive practice with various kinds of vocabulary. As a result, Thomasson's Modal Normativism avoids trading in metaphysical quandaries surrounding notions of irreducibly modal reality for non-explanatory platitudes about the way language is conventional or for obscurities about how obviously meaningful language says nothing. In her view, there are metaphysical modal truths, and we can sometimes know them, but often that requires careful thought about our purposes in using particular words according to one rule rather than another rule. And in many of the most puzzling cases, there will be no set convention to appeal to but rather a set of competing practical desiderata which invite collective practical reasoning, negotiation, and decision rather than anything like the *discovery* of hitherto obscure bits of modal reality.

The first critical question we want to press has to do with Thomasson's focus on the use of terms such as 'necessary', 'possible', 'must', and 'can' to convey what most philosophers would recognize as metaphysical necessity and possibility, rather than other forms of necessity and possibility, such as physical, mathematical, moral, epistemic, and so on. By limiting the scope of her theory, it may seem easier for her to defend claims about why the target vocabulary is part of our language. But it is not clear this is the best methodology for making sense of the function of metaphysical modal vocabulary.

Linguists disagree about how modal vocabulary enters languages such as English, when children learn modal vocabulary in their native language, and how to understand the complex relation between modal vocabulary and grammatical mood. But most linguists would deny that there is some special species of *metaphysical* modal terms that gets introduced separately or learned at a separate stage of language acquisition. Indeed, it is debatable whether specifically metaphysical flavours of words such as ‘necessary’ and ‘must’ are widely attested outside of the technical discourse of philosophy. So, from a linguistic point of view, the interesting functional question is about what modal language *in general* does for us. There are important etymological and developmental corollaries about which flavours (deontic, epistemic, physical, and so on) come first in language evolution and acquisition. But more to the point, there are also important philosophical and semantic questions about how the meanings of different flavours of modal words relate to each other such that they’re all species of necessity and possibility, and not just homonyms. To answer these sorts of questions, we might expect to deploy a more top-down methodology than Thomasson does.

To be fair, Thomasson does suggest at several places that the different species of modality are united in having the meaning-determining function of making explicit and allowing people to reason with permissions and requirements. (See especially pp. 16, 57–8, 63, 121, and 126–8. In this, her view is closely related to the general account of modality developed in [Brandom \(2008\)](#).) Sometimes, however, she writes as if metaphysical modal vocabulary is a tool that is introduced modularly into a language for a particular set of functions, and her project is to identify those functions and explain why they don’t require thinking of the relevant necessity and possibility claims as describing reality. But if that’s not how modal language originates etymologically, developmentally, and semantically (see especially [Palmer \(2001\)](#) and [Portner \(2009\)](#) for good overviews of the relevant literatures), then it is questionable whether we can build accounts of individual flavours of modality piecemeal, hoping to stitch them together once we have all of the pieces in place.

This observation doesn’t directly undermine Thomasson’s specific conclusions about metaphysical modal vocabulary. However, we think it puts some pressure on her to situate and integrate Modal Normativism as a theory of metaphysical modal vocabulary with broader linguistic and philosophical theories of modality. For example, there is a well-known and extensive literature on the semantics for modals stemming from [Kratzer \(1977\)](#) and [Kratzer \(1981\)](#). In light of this, Thomasson’s book leaves one wondering how she thinks her project interacts with attempts to articulate the meaning of modal terms compositionally.

The second critical question we want to press has to do with Thomasson’s central idea that metaphysical modal vocabulary is normative. She thinks the core function of a sentence such as ‘Bachelors are necessarily men’ is not to

describe other possible worlds or even the modal features of bachelors but to make explicit or draw a consequence from a linguistic rule. We might use it to correct a child who describes a woman as a bachelor, where we mean roughly ‘It’s *wrong* to use the term “bachelor” to describe women’. Or we might use the sentence to open a negotiation about how to use the term ‘bachelor’ in situations we hadn’t previously considered (for example, can nonbinary people be bachelors?), where we mean roughly ‘We *ought* to continue to reserve the term “bachelor” for men’. In this way, metaphysical modal claims are, according to Thomasson, a species of *normative* claims. They’re about what’s right/wrong and how we ought to use language.

By itself, however, that idea doesn’t justify calling metaphysical modal claims nondescriptive, or advertising Modal Normativism as a nonrepresentational theory of metaphysical modal vocabulary that is capable of avoiding ontological and epistemological quandaries. For plenty of philosophers think that normative vocabulary is representational. More specifically, many meta-ethicists are going to insist that, insofar as we think claims about what is right/wrong or how we ought to use words are true, there must be some features of *normative* reality which they are correctly describing.

Of course, other metaethicists think this raises very similar metaphysical and epistemological quandries to those raised by descriptivist interpretations of metaphysical modal discourse, so they defend various nondescriptivist accounts of normative claims. But our point is that, even if Modal Normativism is successful, it looks as though Thomasson has pushed down one bump in the rug (metaphysical modal vocabulary) only to raise another (normative vocabulary). Does Modal Normativism rest on the defensibility of a nondescriptivist view about normative vocabulary? And if so, what exactly is Thomasson’s preferred form of nondescriptivism about normative vocabulary?

Many philosophers will suppose that it must be some form of expressivism, since this is often treated as the main family of views in metaethics that hold that normative statements are nondescriptive. (For discussion, see [Chrisman 2011](#).) The familiar idea is that normative claims mean what they do not because of how they describe reality but because of how they express nonrepresentational attitudes akin to desires and preferences in their psychofunctional role in motivating action. This view is often advanced by appeal to the intuitive assumption (sometimes called ‘motivational internalism’) that someone who makes a normative claim can, on that basis alone, be expected to be motivated to act in specific ways.

This assumption may look halfway plausible for *moral* claims (for example, claims about what one morally ought to do) which are categorical, but it is much less plausible when it is extended to other normative claims, including claims about how we ought to use language. These claims are usually broadly instrumental or prudential. And when it comes to instrumental or prudential normative claims, it’s more natural to assume that a

speaker is motivated to act in various ways in part by their antecedent desires or interests. For instance, in the case of claims about how we ought to use language, we'd suggest that speakers are motivated to act accordingly in part because they want to communicate with someone or they have an interest in teaching their children how to speak correctly. As a result, there is considerably less theoretical justification for viewing the attitude expressed by the sorts of normative claims Thomasson uses as a model for metaphysical modal claims as desire- or preference-like in their psychofunctional role in motivating action. If that's right, then the success of Modal Normativism would rest on the availability of an account of normative vocabulary that is nondescriptivist but also nonexpressivist. What is it?

(We have one to offer Thomasson: see [Chrisman \(2016\)](#) for a defence of a nonexpressivist, inferentialist account of the meaning of 'ought' that is designed to handle both moral and nonmoral uses of this term. On this view, the meaning of 'ought' is to be explained not in terms of the expressive role of conveying a speaker's attitudes to an audience but in terms of the commissive role of making explicit inferential commitments presumed to be implicitly held amongst participations to a conversation.)

Our final critical question is about modal logic. There has been considerable debate in the philosophy of logic about which principles govern inferences involving 'necessary' and 'possible'—S5, S4, some other logic? We found it difficult to assess how Thomasson's account of the function of metaphysical modal vocabulary in terms of rules such as (I) and (E) relates to this debate, and this will make some worry about her claim to have adequately characterized the function of metaphysical modal vocabulary in terms of normative uses.

She mentions in a footnote (p. 83) that her introduction and elimination rules are sufficient to derive all the validities of the modal logic S5, but as far as we could work out, this result depends on assuming the truth of several other modal principles such as the K axiom (that is, necessarily (if p then q) entails if necessarily p then necessarily q). And it is not clear to us how Thomasson's account of the meaning-determining function of metaphysical modal vocabulary would underwrite this axiom. This poses a challenge for her account, since one would expect all the relevant principles involving necessity to be in, or derivable from, the meaning-determining introduction and elimination rules for 'necessary'.

Furthermore, it is not at all clear that a Modal Normativist should endorse S4 or S5 as the right logic of metaphysical necessity because of how restrictive these logics are. In S5, all iterated modalities (for example, 'possibly (necessarily (p))') are redundant, whereas in S4, all iterated possibilities (for example, 'possibly (possibly (p))') are redundant and all iterated necessities (for example, 'necessarily (necessarily (p))') are redundant. Because of this, S5 has less expressive power than S4, and S4 has less expressive power than weaker modal logics. And given Thomasson's idea that metaphysical modal

vocabulary gets its meaning from the way it can be used to make explicit and reason with actual or proposed semantic rules, she ought to be suspicious of the restrictions in expressive power that come with both S₅ and S₄.

To appreciate this point, consider how one might want to use modal vocabulary to distinguish between the force of various semantic rules. For example, both:

Racehorses are athletes

Racehorses are animals

can be interpreted as object-level statements of (or consequences drawn from) semantic rules, which the Modal Normativist would make more explicit with:

Necessarily, racehorses are athletes

Necessarily, racehorses are animals.

Nevertheless, the latter rule seems to be *more* mandatory in English. Someone who uses ‘racehorse’ to refer to something other than animals will be difficult to make sense of as speaking English, whereas someone who uses ‘racehorse’ in a way that precludes racehorses counting as athletes is surely interpretable as speaking a variant of English. Although it is somewhat awkward, one might try, in the spirit of Modal Normativism, to capture the way the first rule is more mandatory by saying ‘Necessarily, racehorses must be animals’. But, on both S₄ and S₅, it is redundant to apply ‘necessity’ to an embedded necessity claim. ‘Necessarily, racehorses must be animals’ doesn’t mean anything different from ‘Racehorses must be animals’. So, it is unclear how Thomasson can accommodate this distinction.

This worry is related to the difference between principles governing alethic and normative uses of modal vocabulary, which is a common theme in discussions of deontic logics, and it seems to us to raise further related issues for what the Modal Normativist says about the logic of ‘necessary’ and ‘possible’. For example, most alethic modal logics have the D principle (if necessarily p, then p) as an axiom or theorem, but no deontic modal logics have it. Does Thomasson’s endorsement of S₅ for ‘metaphysically necessary’ imply that she would embrace the D principle for the logic of semantic rules?

To see why she shouldn’t, consider the semantic rule ‘The word “phlogiston” must be used only to refer to something with negative mass’. In the spirit of Modal Normativism, we might expect this rule to be sometimes conveyed with the object-level claim: ‘Phlogiston is something with negative mass’, whose status as a semantic rule can be made explicit—via Thomasson’s (I) rule—by saying ‘Necessarily, phlogiston is something with negative mass’. But from these rules, it shouldn’t follow that the word ‘phlogiston’ is indeed used only to refer to something with negative mass. People make mistakes. It also shouldn’t follow—which it would seem


to by the D principle—that there is something with negative mass. These are reasons to think that the logic of semantic rules has to be different from the logic of metaphysical necessity. We think this observation just makes it more pressing for Thomasson to tell us how interpreting the language of metaphysical modality along Modal Normativist lines relates to the principles of both alethic and deontic modal logic.

Norms and Necessity is a fascinating book that provides the best case we know of for the idea that metaphysical modal claims are nondescriptive. Because Thomasson aims for a relatively compact defence of a surprising view about the metaphysics of modality for an audience of contemporary metaphysicians in the grip of various epistemological and ontological puzzles, the book cannot contain answers to all of the relevant questions. We put forward the critical questions above in the spirit of really wanting to know what Thomasson thinks about how the defence of Modal Normativism offered in this book could be fleshed out to interact with these issues.

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