



PROJECT MUSE®

Meaning and Metaphysical Necessity by Tristan Grøtvedt Haze
(review)

Chenyu Bu

The Review of Metaphysics, Volume 77, Number 2 (Issue No. 306),
December 2023, pp. 351-353 (Review)

Published by The Philosophy Education Society, Inc.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/rvm.2023.a915468>



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/915468>

the post-Enlightenment, liberal period as the more explicit articulation of something already implicit in an earlier tradition that, for example, prioritized the metaphysical importance of substance over properties, emphasized the intrinsic value of human rationality, thought of human beings as an image of God, and recognized rights and duties in due course as a matter of justice.

Alas! Franklin's use of a slightly vague account of supervenience as a grounding relation for morality will not satisfy the fervent antirealist. One mathematical example of supervenience he mentions is the singleton set [Socrates] that supervenes on the flesh-and-blood individual Socrates. But the antirealist, in mathematics as in morality, will complain that the set theoretician is adding something extra to the world, a useful fabrication of the human mind perhaps, but not something that exists "out there" as part of the metaphysical fabric of things. Although antirealists are often guilty of a double standard that champions mathematics or science over morality, they are not about to give up on the idea that morality is pure human invention, something that we literally make up or contrive. Despite recent changes in terminology, I am not sure that the present-day analytic fascination with supervenience (or metaphysical grounding) decisively changes time-honored disputes about how to make sense of morality.

The Worth of Persons is a most worthwhile read, particularly for an audience invested in the analytic tradition that still holds sway over much of contemporary academic philosophy. In these pages, readers will find a moderate, well-reasoned, careful analysis of things that reaffirms and reinforces the epistemic validity of morality.—Louis Groarke, *St. Francis Xavier University*

HAZE, Tristan Grøtvedt. *Meaning and Metaphysical Necessity*. New York: Routledge, 2022. ix + 204 pp. Cloth, \$136.00—In this book, Haze advances the thesis that all necessarily true statements are such that their necessities can be known a priori via an analysis of meaning. The book responds to the Kripkean insight about the distinction between necessary truths and a priori knowledge. Some true statements are necessary but cannot be known a priori (for example, "hesperus is phosphorus," "water is H₂O"), and some are a priori but only contingently true (for example, "air is airy stuff"). However, the conceptual gulf between necessity and apriority should not cast doubt on the significance of meaning in our considerations of metaphysical modal issues. By factorizing the notion of necessity and developing an anti-reference-based conception of meaning, Haze argues that there is indeed something a priori about our knowledge of necessary truths, that is, of the statements that are true no matter how the world had turned out, and that such apriority lies in a rational reflection on the meaning of words.

Haze analyzes necessity in terms of what he calls a “genuine counterfactual scenario description.” Counterfactuals concern what could have been the case, rather than what is (or could actually be) the case. Describing counterfactual scenarios is a part of our linguistic practice where we can specify alternative ways things could have turned out when some statements are held true. A counterfactual scenario description is said to be genuine if the scenario being described is coherent. For example, Haze points out that the description “If a logician had succeeded in giving an effective decision procedure for first-order logic . . .” is not coherent and thus not genuine (since it can be known a priori that the first-order logic undecidable). By contrast, a genuine description may contain statements that are necessarily false but can be coherently held true in considering a counterfactual scenario, such as “hesperus is distinct from phosphorus.” This analysis illuminates the following link between necessity and apriority: “For any statement P that can be known to be necessarily true, there is a true statement Q such that it can be known via a priori analysis that $(Q \rightarrow (P \rightarrow \text{Necessarily } P))$.”

The relevant analysis, Haze claims, is a semantic matter of figuring out whether a putative counterfactual scenario description is genuine. Accordingly, any necessary truth that can be known only a posteriori will be implied by some true statement that is knowable a priori. For example, the statement “air is airy stuff,” although itself can’t be known a priori to be necessary (assuming that it can’t be known a priori that air is not a natural kind), is implied by a piece of a priori knowledge that if air is not a natural kind, then it is necessary that air is airy stuff.

Haze distinguishes the two aspects of linguistic meaning: internal meaning, which concerns the way an expression is used, and external meaning, which concerns the worldly states of affairs. He argues that it is the internal meaning that determines whether a putative counterfactual scenario description is genuine and that explains the apriority of our modal knowledge about necessary truths. Propositions, as objects of propositional attitudes such as belief and assertion, are regarded as expressed-meanings: They are *sui generis*, inherently representational entities expressed by sentences, and their granularity is sensitive to the specific contexts of utterance.

On this proposal, necessity is construed as a property of propositions. The targeted modal notions are thus *de dicto*, which have to do with our linguistic practice (for example, entertaining concepts and expressing propositions). However, there is a sense in which metaphysical modalities are *de re*, that is, about the things which the propositions are about or said of. It seems to be an open question how the proposal might be extended beyond the semantic modal notions. The necessary truths have been taken to be those that cannot be represented coherently as being false on the modal space given by the genuine counterfactual scenarios, but it might turn out that the relevant, philosophically significant modal space is narrower. In the final chapter, Haze addresses such concerns by sketching a skeptical view about the “strongly metaphysical” modal

notions, according to which there is not a particular objective modality that is uniquely important and fundamental. Nonetheless, he suggests that the proposal at least says what is sufficient for something being necessarily true even on a strongly metaphysical understanding of modality.

Throughout the book, I found myself struggling with a worry that might be seen as the flipside of the skeptic metaphysician's—it concerns the relevant notion of apriority rather than that of necessity. Granting that the meaning manifested in our linguistic apparatus somehow captures all necessary truths, one might still ask: In virtue of what are the necessary truths a priori knowable for us linguistic practitioners? Despite the disputable a priori/a posteriori distinction, Haze commits to the orthodox idea that something is knowable a priori if it can be known without worldly experience. The ground for apriority, then, is not to be found in the meanings of the statements where the necessary truths are expressed. Indeed, Haze admits that in order to understand and to make use of statements, we need to have certain experiences to acquire the concepts involved, so meanings themselves are not a priori knowable to us. Given this, Haze's answer to the question seems to be that in order to acquire modal knowledge, that is, to know whether a given statement is necessary, we do not need any further experience—beyond what is required to understand the statement. In other words, what is a priori for us is the analysis of meaning rather than meaning itself. Unfortunately, the answer seems to lose its grip regarding some paradigm cases, such as logical truths. A statement like " $a = a$ " (or " a is self-identical") is necessarily true and knowable a priori regardless of which worldly object a might refer to or what it means (for some linguistic practitioner). Its a priori knowability seems to have nothing to do with linguistic meanings or our semantic analysis of them. Haze might reply that our modal knowledge regarding such logical truths does not presuppose any meaning analysis but is nonetheless a priori, since it does not presuppose any concepts, either. But it would be a high demand on us linguistic practitioners to always be able to distinguish statements that do presuppose concepts from those that do not. Alternatively, he might bite the bullet and deny that " $a = a$ " is a statement if it is not already meaningful for some utterer. But this seems to shift the book's main focus from explicating what is a priori about necessary truths to a revisionary account of which statements are legitimate.

Despite these reservations, the overall view Haze defends is carefully developed and full of interesting arguments and insights beyond what I can review here. I would recommend the book for anyone interested in interdisciplinary issues in metaphysics and philosophy of language.—
Chenyu Bu, *The University of Texas at Austin*