

# Thomasson on Modal Language

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## *Abstract*

In recent work, Amie Thomasson has defended what she calls normativism about metaphysical modality. She claims that discourse about metaphysical modality primarily serves a non-descriptive function, and builds a theory of such discourse around this claim. In this text, I critically discuss Thomasson's view. Chief among the problems I go on to discuss is that Thomasson's account of the meanings of modal expressions does not solve the problems she intends it to solve (among them solving the Frege-Geach problem), that there is no significant ordinary practice of making metaphysically modal claims in the first place, and that the general problem she identifies and seeks to solve goes beyond discourse about metaphysical modality so a theory focused on metaphysical modal discourse is not general enough to deal with the problem.

## *Keywords*

Modality, normativism, Frege-Geach problem, analyticity

## **1. Introduction**

In many of her writings, Amie Thomasson has sought to challenge orthodox conceptions of metaphysics. Most prominently, she has defended an “easy ontology” view on the nature of ontological questions.<sup>1</sup> While I myself am somewhat attracted to something like Thomasson's outlook, I have elsewhere criticized Thomasson's specific view and her arguments for it.<sup>2</sup> More recently, most prominently in her (2020) book, Thomasson has turned to the issue of metaphysical modality.<sup>3</sup> The overall tenor of her view on modality is the same as the tenor of her view on ontology: on Thomasson's view, theorists see substantive metaphysical issues where there are none. I think Thomasson's view on modality faces many severe problems, and in the following I will go through them. Chief among the problems I go on to discuss is that Thomasson's account of the meanings of modal expressions does not solve the problems she intends it to solve (among them solving the Frege-Geach problem), that there is no significant ordinary practice of making metaphysically modal claims in the first place, and

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<sup>1</sup> See Thomasson (2014).

<sup>2</sup> See Eklund (2016) and (2017).

<sup>3</sup> In what follows all references will be to Thomasson (2020) except where specified.

that the general problem she identifies and seeks to solve goes beyond discourse about metaphysical modality so a theory focused on metaphysical modal discourse is not general enough to deal with the problem.

## 2. Thomasson's view on modality

Modal discourse concerns what necessarily is the case, what possibly is the case, what might be the case, what must be the case, what can be the case, what would be the case, etc. As is well known, and as I will get back to, it seems that we can express many different sorts of things using modal expressions. We can make paradigmatically normative claims (“you must save that drowning man!”), we can make epistemic claims (“the keys must be in the car”), we can make claims about what is compatible with the laws of nature (“nothing can travel faster than the speed of light”) and about what is metaphysically necessary and possible (“2+2 must be 4, and would be so even if the laws of nature were different”).

In her (2020), Thomasson deals primarily with metaphysical modality – matters of the last kind mentioned. Thomasson notes that there are seeming metaphysical and epistemological problems concerning metaphysical modality. What in the world can make such metaphysically modal claims true? How can we have knowledge of what metaphysically must and might be the case, as opposed to knowledge merely of what actually is the case?

Thomasson's solution is to appeal to what she calls *normativism*. Here is how she introduces the view:

I call the view “modal normativism” since, on this view, basic metaphysical modal claims do not have the function of tracking or describing special modal features of this world— or other possible worlds. Instead, on this view, modal language serves the function of mandating, conveying, or renegotiating rules or norms in particularly advantageous ways.<sup>4</sup>

As indicated by how Thomasson characterizes the view, much of her discussion concerns the *function* of having metaphysically modal vocabulary in our language. She thinks the function is normative. She notes that addressing the issue of the function of this vocabulary does not immediately amount to addressing the issue of what *meanings* the relevant expressions have, and she separately addresses the question of meaning, but her view is that attending to the

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<sup>4</sup> p. 15.

question of the function serves important role in theorizing about the meaning of the relevant expressions.

The relation between Thomasson's account of metaphysical modality and the more orthodox accounts she opposes is somewhat delicate to describe. As we will see, Thomasson too allows that modal claims are true and false. But she does say, to repeat, that "basic metaphysical modal claims do not have the function of tracking or describing special modal features of this world", and later she speaks of modal statements being true or false "without their having to be made so by modal features of the world".<sup>5</sup> This is suggestive of what the difference may be. I believe there is more to problematize here, but for the purposes of my discussion I will treat the difference between Thomasson and the orthodoxy as passably clear.

As noted, metaphysical modality is just one kind of modality. One may think that the correct theory about how modal vocabulary works must be a properly unified account. Thomasson stresses this herself, and takes it to be a point in favor of her theory that it promises to provide such an account. Moreover, and relatedly, one may think that some of the problems pertaining to the metaphysically modal also pertain to other kinds of modality. One may for example think that nomological necessity presents the same sorts of philosophical problems.

Before proceeding, I should mention some difficulties regarding how best to talk about the matters at issue. First, in the quoted passage, Thomasson describes the target of her account as "metaphysical modal claims" and as "modal language" (where this must be understood as metaphysical modal language). But elsewhere she speaks of "metaphysical modal expressions", "metaphysical modal terms", "metaphysical modal vocabulary" and "metaphysical modal terminology".<sup>6</sup> It is convenient to speak in both ways and when discussing Thomasson I may occasionally do the same. But formulations of the latter kind, where specific expressions are called metaphysically modal, are problematic, for metaphysical modality is typically expressed by the very same expressions that are used to express modality of other kinds, so the expressions are not dedicated to the metaphysically modal. In an account of the expressions/terms/vocabulary/terminology at issue, a central desideratum may be to account for how these expressions can be used to express different kinds of modal claims. As mentioned, Thomasson herself brings up this desideratum.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> p. 86.

<sup>6</sup> See pp. 16, 18, 52, 58, 63, 64, 69, 70, 71, 77, 81, 82, 85, and 138.

<sup>7</sup> Of course there are some dedicated metaphysical modal expressions – "metaphysically necessary", "metaphysically possible", etc. – but they are complex and somewhat technical. Thomasson herself focuses on simple modal expressions like "necessary" and "possible".

Second, while it of course is standard to speak of the kind of modality that Thomasson is concerned with as metaphysical, the terminology is somewhat unfortunate. It is used in part to contrast metaphysical modality with deontic and epistemic modality – but also nomological modality contrasts with deontic and epistemic modality through at least on the face of it being concerned with the way the world is, by contrast with how it ought to be and with what is compatible with what we know. Sometimes metaphysical modality and nomological modality are grouped together under the heading of *alethic* modality, and grouping these kinds of modality under the same heading makes good sense.

Central to Thomasson’s discussion is the point that not all terminology serves a “descriptive” function. And a general idea is that certain metaphysical problems arise because of mistaken assumptions to the effect that a descriptive function is served. This idea has been implemented elsewhere in the literature. One prominent example is non-cognitivism in metaethics. Non-cognitivists prominently hold that it is given the assumption that “good” and “right” are descriptive that metaphysical problems regarding the normative arise and once we see that these expressions serve a non-descriptive function the metaphysical problems are avoided. Thomasson seeks to defend an analogous view on metaphysically modal vocabulary, and to put it to the same use. But while Thomasson may be right that we should be skeptical of the idea that all superficially descriptive discourse really serves a descriptive function, I have doubts regarding what actually follows from this. And I have some specific doubts about the application of this general idea to the case of metaphysical modality.

Here is the plan for this paper. In section 3, I discuss the distinction between the function of some expressions and the meanings of these expressions, and use this to present some problems for Thomasson. I also highlight that there are central questions about meaning that her account fails to address. In section 4, I criticize her attempt to deal with the Frege-Geach problem, as it arises for her account. In section 5, I raise a general methodological problem for Thomasson: we hardly ever speak of what is metaphysically necessary and possible in ordinary discourse. In section 6, I bring up the desideratum of a unified account of modality and discuss how Thomasson proposes to deal with nomic modality and other weaker alethic modalities. In section 7, I note that given the way Thomasson herself brings up the problem that animates the book, it does not have to do with metaphysically modal discourse so much as with more general issues such as how an empiricist can account for the metaphysics and epistemology of, e.g., logical and mathematical truths. I go on to note that one can glean from Thomasson’s discussion also a suggestion for how to deal with such

issues: the suggestion amounts to a theory of analyticity. I close by discussing this theory of analyticity, and comparing it to the theory of modality that Thomasson offers.

### 3. Function and meaning

As already indicated, claims about the function of metaphysically modal talk are central in Thomasson's account. Thomasson sums up her claims about the function and use of metaphysically modal vocabulary as follows:

Function: Having metaphysical modal terms fulfills several functions:

1. "Necessarily" makes explicit that the expression has regulative status.
2. Modal terms enable us to make explicit our ways of reasoning with rules.
3. "Possibly" enables us to convey permissions as well as requirements.

Use: Basic (unembedded) claims of metaphysical necessity are characteristically used to convey, enforce, and/ or advocate for semantic rules or their consequences (while *using* those very terms in object-language indicatives).<sup>8</sup>

As Thomasson notes, and stresses, these claims about function and use do not yet amount to a theory of the *meanings* of the expressions in question.<sup>9</sup> To give an account of what functions some expressions serve and of how they are used is not immediately to give a theory of the meanings of these expressions. And it is reasonable to take the theory of the meanings of the expressions to be the more pressing issue. If I hold, regarding some seemingly metaphysically problematic discourse, that the discourse has some non-descriptive function, but the meanings of the sentences are of the orthodox descriptive kind, I seem not to have evaded the metaphysical problems. So long as some of these sentences are true, we can ask what the world must be like in order for them to be true.

Much of Thomasson's rhetoric when she motivates her normativist view revolves around what she calls the "descriptivist assumption". This is the assumption that modal discourse has the "function" of "*describing* either some features of our world, or features of other (possible) worlds".<sup>10</sup> She finds this assumption problematic:

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<sup>8</sup> p. 81f.

<sup>9</sup> p. 79.

<sup>10</sup> p. 52.

As Ryle [...] noted, we have reason to look for a non-descriptive story particularly in cases where the descriptivist assumption leads us to puzzles, problems, or paradoxes—for example, where ontological placement problems arise in figuring out what the “entities” described could be, or how they could relate to physical objects; where epistemological puzzles arise because we do not seem to have the same way of “detecting” the relevant facts as we do for straightforward empirical truths; where “motivational” puzzles arise about how such properties or objects could do the job they are supposed to do (say, of motivating action, norming our belief, guiding our credences, or guiding our theorizing). Some areas of discourse for which one or more of these problems have classically arisen—and for which alternative, non-descriptive views have been developed—include morality, truth, mathematics, probability, meaning, and modality.<sup>11</sup>

But – as, again to stress, Thomasson herself notes – it is one thing to describe the function of a certain discourse and another to say what kinds of meanings sentences belonging to the discourse have. Any view on the meanings of these sentences given which their truth demands something of the world, one can discuss the demands and whether they are met. It does not matter whether the basic function or purpose of having these expressions in our language is to describe the world.

On some views, prominently fictionalist views, an account of what the sentences of some discourse semantically express is distinctly unimportant in an overall account of the commitments of the discourse: for what the sentences are used to communicate is something different from what the sentences semantically express.<sup>12</sup> But Thomasson does not emulate that fictionalist strategy, and for her it then seems to remain important what is semantically expressed by uses of the sentences.<sup>13</sup>

By Thomasson’s own lights, what is important for her to deny is that metaphysically modal sentences have meanings of such kinds that their truths demand something of the world that might be held to be, for metaphysical reasons, problematic. *That* is the relevant “descriptivist” assumption. To deny that assumption it is not sufficient to deny that modal discourse has a descriptive *function*.

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<sup>11</sup> p. 55f.

<sup>12</sup> For an overview of fictionalism, see Eklund (2019).

<sup>13</sup> In her (2013), Thomasson criticizes fictionalism as a strategy in metaphysics.

Let me then turn to Thomasson's actual account of meaning. When Thomasson discusses meaning, she invokes inferentialism: the view that the meanings of the terms in question are given by inference rules. The connection between the function and the inference rules is this:

The two parts of the analysis are closely related. As [Michael] Williams makes clear, the analysis is still *functionally* driven: the content-determining component articulates the *rules* that the term follows that enable it to serve the *functions* identified in the functional component (as well as enabling it to be *used* in these characteristic ways). That enables us to make clear why we would want to have a term that followed these inferential rules.<sup>14</sup>

The inference rules themselves are the following:

(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.<sup>15</sup>

(E) If you have *Necessarily p* as a premise, you may use *p* as a premise in your reasoning anywhere, under any subjunctive suppositions.<sup>16</sup>

One concern about these rules relates to a point I made before: it seems to be the same expressions we use when expressing metaphysically modal claims as when we express other kinds of modal claims. It then seems odd to give a semantic account of “Necessarily” given which what it means is, in all contexts, *metaphysically necessarily*. A semantic account like this makes good sense only against the backdrop of a view according to which, implausibly, “necessarily” is simply ambiguous and we are giving an account of one of the meanings it is associated with. But I will not discuss this concern further. However, it could be that the account Thomasson gives is compatible with a more plausible semantics of “necessarily”, and

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<sup>14</sup> p. 80.

<sup>15</sup> p. 83.

<sup>16</sup> p. 84. I should note that Thomasson's rule E seems to run into obvious problems with counterpossibles, and generally, reasoning under necessarily false suppositions. Not everything that is necessary still holds under a necessarily false supposition.

Thomasson (p. 142f) says that her account is of use also regarding the hyperintensional, and she refers to Theodore Locke's (2019) work. Locke does indeed seek to apply Thomasson-style ideas to the hyperintensional, but he does not refer to the specific rules I and E, and he does not suggest any other such specific rules.

can be seen as an account of what “necessarily” semantically expresses in contexts where it expresses metaphysical necessity, and I will set this specific problem aside.

Inferentialist accounts like the one Thomasson proposes do not generally preclude that the expressions governed by the inference rules in question stand for entities in the world, such that familiar metaphysical questions can be asked about these entities. Thomasson’s rules are for the adverb “necessarily”, but they could equally well have been proposed for the predicate “is necessary” – Thomasson does not emphasize the “necessarily”/ “is necessary” distinction. If so, the following question would have been natural given the proposed rules: which property does ‘is necessary’ stand for, such that these rules are valid? What is more, the sorts of properties that ordinary descriptivists about the modal say that “is necessary” stands for do seem to be excellent candidates for being what “is necessary” stands for, given that these are the rules governing it. For example, if “p is necessary” means that p has the property of being true in every so-called possible world, on any standard construal of “possible world”, these rules are certainly validated.

Perhaps anticipating concerns like this, Thomasson also appeals to deflationism about truth:

Adopting a deflationary theory of truth also enables us to classify modal statements as true or false. We can begin from “All bachelors are men,” and (since that claim is an object- language expression of a semantic rule) rule (I) licenses us to add “necessarily” and assert “Necessarily, all bachelors are men.” On the deflationary view, the concept of truth is simply governed by the equivalence schema:  $\langle p \rangle$  is true if and only if p, so we can recognize the equivalence of this with “‘Necessarily, all bachelors are men’ is true.” The uncontroversial equivalence schema applies just as well to modal as non-modal indicatives, so there is no problem in allowing that modal claims may be true. Once we have allowed that basic modal claims may be true or false, it is clear that they may be used in standard forms of truth-conditional reasoning.<sup>17</sup>

Thomasson offers no independent defense of the kind of deflationism she describes. Nor does she elaborate on what exact deflationist thesis she relies on, beyond what she says here.

Perhaps Thomasson is relying on the pair of theses that a deflationist theory of truth holds *across the board* and, furthermore, that (therefore) no claim is made true by features of the

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<sup>17</sup> p. 86f. Thomasson uses “ $\langle p \rangle$ ” as short for: the proposition that p.



world in the way a correspondence theory demands.<sup>18</sup> But if this is what she relies on then that would seem by itself to do all the work in avoiding a traditional modal metaphysics. No claims specifically pertaining to the function and meaning of metaphysically modal discourse are needed. Moreover, importantly, it should be noted that the second claim goes beyond the first. One can in principle think that deflationism provides the correct account of the concept of truth and that nothing about the concept of truth in any way requires that truths have truthmakers, but still hold that in fact truths often or always have truthmakers.

Other theses Thomasson might be relying on are more specific to the modal case. Maybe the view is only that a deflationary theory of truth holds for some kinds of claims, among them metaphysically modal claims. Or maybe the view is that while a deflationary theory of truth holds across the board some claims still need truthmakers, but metaphysically modal claims are not among them. But any more specific claim of this kind would surely need to be accompanied by an account of what makes metaphysically modal claims special. Why does a deflationary theory of truth hold for them? Why do they not need truthmakers? Nothing about the inference rules themselves suggests anything about why the claims would be special. Again to stress, the thesis that the claims have a non-descriptive function may be special but if this function is not reflected in what contents the claims have, or the actual meanings of relevant sentences, how is this relevant to what sort of thing is needed for the claims or sentences to be true?

#### **4. The Frege-Geach problem**

Thomasson gives an account of the meanings of the modal expressions involved in part because she seeks a way around the well-known Frege-Geach problem. Her view is that the way to deal with this problem is to give an account not just of use but also of meaning:

The Frege-Geach problem, in its basic form, is that one cannot give an account of the meaning of a troublesome term by saying what it is *used to do* (say, treating the meaning of “good” as given by noting that the term is characteristically used to commend), since “good” may also appear embedded in the context of conditionals (“if this is good, we should buy it”) or negations (“what he did was not good”). In such cases “good” is not used to commend at all. But we must assume it has the same meaning in these contexts in

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<sup>18</sup> It is by no means obvious that just because the concept of truth is “governed by the equivalence schema”, statements are not generally made true by corresponding features of the world. All that follows is that there is nothing about the concept of truth that this demands that this is so.

order to make sense of the validity of simple modus ponens arguments involving the term (“if this is good, we should buy it,” “this is good,” so “we should buy it”).<sup>19</sup>

In its original formulation, [the Frege-Geach problem] was raised against attempts to give the *meaning* of a term by appeal to its *use*. As Searle put it, many analyses go astray by [conflating] giving an analysis of what speech act an expression is commonly *used* to perform (e.g., that “good” is used to commend or “true” to endorse a statement) with what the word *means* [...] Peter Geach similarly sums up the error as attempting “to account for the *use* of a term ‘P’ concerning a thing as being a *performance* of some other nature than describing the thing”...[italics Thomasson’s]. For any given term may be used in a variety of ways, and yet we think the meaning remains constant.<sup>20</sup>

Some care is needed regarding why exactly the Frege-Geach problem arises.<sup>21</sup> Some of Thomasson’s formulations suggest that she thinks the problem arises insofar as we do not distinguish between an account of meaning and an account of use. But this does not go to the heart of it. The view that “good” is used to commend is not even satisfactory as a general account of its use. It may apply to its use in “this is good” but it does not work regarding its use in “if this is good, we should buy it”.

While noting that to give a functional account is not yet to give an account of meaning, Thomasson stresses the following:

[Giving this functional analysis] does provide the basis for giving a meaning analysis: we can give the meaning by giving the rules of use that enable the term to fulfill its function— rules that remain constant even in embedded contexts. Since we also believe modal claims and reason with them, whatever account we give should also enable us to make sense of how these beliefs and this reasoning are possible.

The best way to meet this challenge seems to me to combine the modal normativist account of the *function* of modal language with a deflationary inferentialist approach to its *meaning*.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> p. 78.

<sup>20</sup> p. 79.

<sup>21</sup> For further discussion of the Frege-Geach problem, see my (2009).

<sup>22</sup> p. 79.

She then goes on to present the inference rules I and E, quoted earlier.

Here is one thing I find peculiar about the strategy. The Frege-Geach problem is fundamentally about *embedding*: how do the expressions concerned work in more complex contexts? But the rules I and E do not immediately help with that. Thomasson stresses the supposed fact that the problem is a matter of accounting for meaning and not only use. But at bottom embedding is what is at issue.

This complaint about rules I and E may seem unfair. After all, these rules have the same general form as other rules inferentialists appeal to when giving their preferred accounts of meaning. They are introduction and elimination rules. And it is not as if inferentialists do or need to give separate accounts of how expressions work in sentences embedded in conditionals, disjunctions, etc. However, other inferentialist accounts work because they provide recipes for understanding how the expressions characterized work also in more complex sentences. By contrast, armed only with I and E, a speaker may not know what to do with “necessarily” as it occurs in more complex sentences, for example sentences of the form “If necessarily P, then Q”. Let me explain. One way, although perhaps not the only way, for an inferentialist account to have the requisite generality and explain also how the expressions introduced function in complex sentences, is for the account to determine semantic values – contributions to truth conditions. Introduction and elimination rules for an expression determine how that expression contributes to the truth conditions of the simplest sentences of which they are part. Roughly, the contribution to truth conditions is whatever it needs to be in order to make the inference rules apt. Just to take a simple, familiar example: the rules for “&” are

From p, q to infer: p & q

From p&q to infer p and q, respectively,

and the semantic value for “&” that renders these rules apt is the standard truth function associated with conjunction. The truth conditions of the simplest sentences of which the expression is part then in turn help determinate the truth conditions of more complex sentence. However, Thomasson does not provide an account of truth conditions of sentences containing “necessarily”, except for appealing to the equivalence between “p” and “the proposition that p is true”. (She could say something along the lines of: “necessarily” (and “necessary”) has the semantic value it needs to have in order for the rules to come out correct.

Compare discussion above. But she does not. And if she did, then the differences between her account and more orthodox accounts would become less clear.)

The point I am raising regarding Thomasson is essentially just an application of Jamie Dreier's "hiyo"-argument.<sup>23</sup> Dreier imagines that we introduce a convention where instead of saying "Hiyo Bob" we say "Bob is hiyo". He notes that given a suitable deflationary account of truth, we may say such things as "It is true that Bob is hiyo". But this leaves it fundamentally unclear how "Bob is hiyo" could function when embedded: what could a sentence of the form "if Bob is hiyo then..." even mean? Similarly, Thomasson's inference rules together with a deflationary account of truth do not explain how conditionals of the form "if necessarily P, then..." work. Thomasson does bring up the "hiyo" argument. I quote in full what she says:

But while [Dreier's] problem is a legitimate one, it is not a threat for the [normativist] account of modality. The view here is that statements expressing metaphysical necessities give us ways of conveying rules in object-language indicatives. But rules (even in their more overt forms) are always usable in making inferences when expressed in indicative form (in imperative form they can't be embedded in the antecedents of conditionals, but they are in the consequents). We make inferences using rules when we say, for example, "If the white player must move first then Julie must move first," "If players must wear helmets then I'm not going to play," and so on. Expressions of rules (unlike acts of accosting) already are suited to figure in inferences, so there is no threat of failure here as there is in the "hiyo" case.<sup>24</sup>

But first, Thomasson's response to Dreier's problem just amounts to saying that "the white player must move first" as a matter of fact can figure meaningfully in antecedents of conditionals. But that was never at issue. The issue is whether Thomasson's account of such sentences respects this fact. And second, again to stress, it is natural to wonder how Thomasson's inference rules help with how "necessarily" (*metaphysically* necessarily) functions in complex sentences, Thomasson does not really address that issue, either in her response to Dreier's problem or elsewhere. She says that "expressions of rules" already are suited to figure in inferences. But what are so suited are explicit expressions of rules: "If the rules of chess say that...", which are about what the rules say. Thomasson's distinctive view

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<sup>23</sup> Dreier (1996).

<sup>24</sup> p. 88.

is that certain modal statements serve as *expressions* of rules without being *about* rules, and still are suited to figure in inferences.

## 5. Metaphysical modality and ordinary language

Let me now turn to a different matter – a more general, methodological problem with Thomasson’s discussion. One central point that Thomasson makes is that not all ordinary discourse that is superficially descriptive really has a descriptive function. But even someone who agrees with Thomasson about that general claim may have reason to doubt its application to the metaphysically modal. A striking difference between the moral “good” and “right” on the one hand (to relate to one case where some vocabulary famously has been argued not to have a descriptive function) and the metaphysically modal vocabulary like “must” on the other is that whereas the former undeniably are part of ordinary discourse, the latter at most play a peripheral role in ordinary discourse. We philosophers regularly use “must” to express metaphysical necessity. But how often does this happen in ordinary discourse? Thomasson provides few actual examples. And I think many of us as teachers have found that while it certainly is possible to get undergraduates to glom onto what metaphysical modality is, it takes a good deal of work. (For example, one might get them to agree that in some sense not even laws of nature are necessary, while getting them to agree that some claims, such as logical and mathematical truths, still are necessary in this sense.)

One might even worry that there is no such thing as the use and function of metaphysically modal vocabulary in ordinary discourse at all. Those who use metaphysically modal vocabulary are philosophers, and philosophers who undeniably use in for descriptive purposes. Then to say, with Thomasson, that the function is non-descriptive seems odd.<sup>25</sup>

We certainly seem to use, in ordinary language, sentences that express metaphysically necessary truths. And there may be a question of what function utterances of such sentences serve. But investigating this is different from what Thomasson officially focuses on, which is modal discourse itself. The fact that I use a sentence which expresses something with a given

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<sup>25</sup> Thomasson does say,

There are interesting interpretive questions about whether a given philosopher, on a given occasion, uses a metaphysical modal claim descriptively— one can’t assume they are always used that way, even in metaphysics. In Thomasson [2017] I discuss certain historical cases in which it is not so obvious that metaphysical modal claims are used descriptively. (p. 69fn24)

But the only “historical cases” I can see that Thomasson discusses in her (2017) are debates over works of art, and what she argues is that some such debates are best understood as instances of metalinguistic negotiation. Debates over art may plausibly be held to be a special case, and moreover, metalinguistic negotiation may be had about everything.

modal property (e.g. what it expresses is metaphysically possible) is different from me saying something about what modal property something has. I will get back to similar issues in section 7, where I discuss analyticity.

Even if one thinks that the worry just mentioned is exaggerated—perhaps it happens in ordinary discourse that we use modal vocabulary and mean to express something about what is metaphysically necessary and possible—one may think, less radically, that expressing claims about metaphysical modality in ordinary discourse is marginal and serves as a generalization of more ordinary uses of modal vocabulary, like when I say “I can’t eat another bite” even when it clearly is metaphysically possible for me to eat another bite. There is then room in principle to account for metaphysically modal discourse by appeal to ordinary function, but the investigation would naturally need to start with the more common kinds of uses. Thomasson doesn’t conduct her investigation into modal vocabulary in that way. Her discussion is not very much focused on specific examples, but where she does discuss examples she tends to go straight for the metaphysically modal.

It may be suggested that if there is no ordinary practice of speaking of metaphysical modality, then Thomasson could just change her strategy: instead of presenting a theory of how ordinary metaphysically modal discourse works she could present a proposal for how to devise metaphysically modal discourse. But whatever the virtues of such a strategy may be, it is a very different strategy from the one actually pursued by Thomasson.

## **6. Metaphysical modality and weaker modalities**

As Thomasson herself recognizes, there are many different kinds of uses of modal vocabulary, and all things equal a unified account is preferable. She mentions as a consideration in favor of her view that she gives a unified account of modal vocabulary when it is used normatively and of such vocabulary when it is used to express metaphysical modality:

We thus have hope of gaining a unified understanding of modal terms: all are involved in enabling us to explicitly express and reason with rules and permissions. The ability to provide a unified account gives an important advantage, since it enables us to explain why these terms (for alethic, deontic, and epistemic modalities) tend to come together across a wide range of languages [...] and why children tend to learn to use modal terms for obligation, necessity, and possibility at around the same age [...] These commonalities would be masked by descriptive approaches to metaphysical modal

statements, which would take claims of metaphysical necessity and possibility to be descriptions of features of the world, while “may,” “must,” and “shall” are more naturally taken as issuing permissions or obligations.<sup>26</sup>

Thomasson writes as if she presupposes that a non-descriptive view is correct regarding deontic modal talk. Just to make a sociological point, many theorists would disagree – or at least would disagree if what is at issue is the *meaning* of such talk. I assume everyone would agree that when one describes the *function* of deontic modal discourse, one must centrally appeal to the non-descriptive. For example, one may issue permissions and obligations. But the step from there to a claim about meaning and content, to the effect that deontic claims do not have descriptive meanings of ordinary kinds, would be resisted.

But deontic and metaphysically modal uses of modals are not all the uses there are.

Thomasson also brings up nomological necessity, and says, e.g.,

Ryle [...] took statements of nomological necessities to serve as inference tickets, entitling us to make inferences, while Sellars [...] similarly took statements of scientific laws to serve the function of justifying or endorsing inferences. Despite their differences, these suggestions share a common theme: the idea that the function of modal discourse is, broadly speaking, normative— whether it has to do with conveying rules of reasoning, or speaking, of making empirical inferences, or adjusting our expectations and explanations.<sup>27</sup>

If we take a normativist approach, we can, for example, roughly take causal laws as norms for making empirical inferences based on empirical evidence— not as descriptions of some sort of special modal properties in the world, or as empirical generalizations requiring truthmakers.<sup>28</sup>

It is not clear to what extent Thomasson actually endorses the claims about nomological necessity she describes here. There is for example no defense of them.<sup>29</sup> But it seems crucial

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<sup>26</sup> p. 63. The works Thomasson refers to in this connection are Papafragou (1998) and Wells (1985).

<sup>27</sup> p. 57.

<sup>28</sup> p. 122.

<sup>29</sup> While there are the approving nods to Ryle and Sellars, Thomasson also says

there would still be some progress, even if the view developed here about claims of *metaphysical* necessity did require a descriptive account of claims of *physical* necessity. It is beyond the scope of this book to

for her that claims like the ones made by Ryle and by Sellars about nomological necessity are indeed acceptable. Given the seeming similarities between talk of nomological necessity and of metaphysical necessity it would be odd to give different accounts of these kinds of talk.

Moreover, nomological necessity is not the only weaker necessity on the worldly side. When I say “I can’t eat another bite”, I hardly mean that it is nomologically impossible to do so (let alone metaphysically impossible). Ryle and Sellars focused on laws, and it was statements of laws that were supposed to serve as inference tickets. It is hard to see how to apply that idea to my statement about my inability to eat another bite.<sup>30</sup>

Thomasson discusses necessary existence claims as a possible counterexample to her theory about metaphysically modal discourse. She mentions for example “God exists”. Many would be apt to hold that if God exists then God’s existence is metaphysically necessary, but “God exists” hardly records a semantic rule. Thomasson responds to this possible objection by saying that God’s existence would be nomologically necessary rather than metaphysically necessary. She does not do much to defend this response. The response seems to have little more to recommend it than that this may be what she has to say to defend her theory. I suspect many who consider the matter would find it natural to think that God could change the laws of nature and thus what is nomologically necessary, even while God himself exists regardless of what the laws of nature are, if God exists at all.<sup>31</sup>

## 7. Necessity and analyticity

In this section, I will turn to a structural problem that affects Thomasson’s discussion. When discussing precursors of the kind of view she seeks to defend, Thomasson starts as follows:

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adjudicate among competing views of physical necessities. But it is worth noting that there are available and plausible views of physical necessity claims that do not treat them as descriptive— indeed, non-descriptivist views of modality were first developed to address the status of scientific laws. (p. 121)

But this kind of passage is in tension with Thomasson’s aim to give a unified account of modal talk. And it would offhand be more odd to treat metaphysical and nomological modal talk differently than it would be to treat metaphysical and paradigmatically normative modal talk differently.

<sup>30</sup> It is also hard to see how to extend Thomasson’s account to epistemic modality, as in “the keys might be on the table”. There is plausibility to the idea that an utterance of this sentence serves to recommend looking on the table. But what is the underlying “rule” in this case?

<sup>31</sup> There are also other purported examples of entities whose existence would be necessary, for example mathematical objects such as numbers. Thomasson’s preferred way of dealing with them is by appeal to the “easy approach” to ontology which she has defended elsewhere. (See especially her (2014).) She (reasonably) thinks that this strategy does not extend to the God case, so by her own lights she needs to deal with that case in some different way.



Empiricists face challenges in accounting for modal truths precisely because *modal* features of the world do not seem to be empirically detectable. As David Hume argued, we cannot be thought to know *necessary* matters of fact (or rather: to know that any matter of fact holds necessarily) on the basis of experience of the world. For however well a statement may be confirmed through experience, that only shows that it *does* (so far) hold, not that it *must* hold.

This, of course, leaves a significant problem in understanding our knowledge of the truths of mathematics and logic.<sup>32</sup>

The view Thomasson goes on to describe and defend, which concerns the function, use and meaning of modal vocabulary, is presented as a response to this problem.

But strikingly, the problem she starts out by presenting is not immediately bound up with modal vocabulary. The empiricist does, as she notes, have a problem regarding our knowledge of the truths of mathematics and logic. But while these truths may *be* necessary, no modal vocabulary is needed in *stating* them. The empiricist has a problem regarding our knowledge not just of “Necessarily  $2+2=4$ ” but also of “ $2+2=4$ ”. Thomasson suggests that the best course of action for the empiricist is “to deny that the necessary truths of logic or mathematics are factual claims at all— that is, in effect, to take a non-descriptivist approach to modal discourse”.<sup>33</sup> When she suggests that “the necessary truths of logic and mathematics” are not “factual”, I take it that the suggestion to the effect that the truths of logic and mathematics, which are necessary, are not factual. But if that is the suggestion, a “non-descriptivist approach to modal discourse” is not a way of making good on it. Again, the truths of logic and mathematics, although themselves necessary, are not themselves part of modal discourse. “Necessarily,  $2+2=4$ ” is part of modal discourse; “ $2+2=4$ ” is not. (Compare: while “Matti is sitting at *t*” expresses something that is possibly true, “Matti is sitting at *t*” is not itself part of modal discourse although “Possibly, Matti is sitting at *t*” is.)

Similar issues arise regarding other parts of Thomasson’s discussion. She later says, describing the view of the positivists, that “The basic statement of the positivist view of necessity, and often the only one passed down to us, is that “the truths of logic and mathematics are analytic propositions or tautologies” (Ayer 1936/1952, 77)— statements that thus say nothing about the world”.<sup>34</sup> But again, a theory about the truths of logic and

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<sup>32</sup> p. 21.

<sup>33</sup> p. 23.

<sup>34</sup> p. 24.

mathematics is hardly a theory of necessity, even though the truths of logic and mathematics are necessary.

The problems Thomasson aims to deal with seem clearly to go beyond our modal talk. But then theory merely about modal talk, as the theory Thomasson proposes, is not really responsive to the problem. What would promise to deal with the problems regarding the truths of logic and mathematics is a suitable theory of analyticity (whatever in the end the fate of such a theory). If these truths are analytic, then, one may think, the epistemology of these truths is straightforward: we know them by virtue of our semantic competence. A better statement of the positivist view *of necessity* is that all necessary truths are analytic (and maybe more strongly that this is what it is for them to be necessary).<sup>35</sup> Given that the truths of logic and mathematics are necessary, this applies also to them. But the view is not specific to logic and mathematics.

Actually, a theory of analyticity of the kind that can seem to do the trick can be extracted from Thomasson's discussion of necessity.<sup>36</sup> Recall Thomasson's rule (I) governing the necessity operator:

(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.

Since *Necessarily*,  $p$  entails  $p$ , it seems that given that Thomasson says this about "Necessarily" she should also be happy with the following principle:

(\*) 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  $p$ , regardless of any subjunctive suppositions,

Thomasson seems to be committed to the view a sentence is an object-language expression of a semantic rule, then it is true. The contrary view threatens to be in tension with (\*). Here is an auxiliary claim: a sentence that is an object-language expression of a semantic rule does not need anything to make it true. Thomasson is arguably committed to this claim too. Witness again how she takes her account of "necessarily" together with deflationism to have the consequence that modal statements can be true "without their having to be made true by

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<sup>35</sup> And of course the positivists also relied on specific conceptions of what analyticity is.

<sup>36</sup> In earlier work (2007, 2007a), Thomasson focused on analyticity. In my (2017) I criticized what she then said about that matter.

modal features of the world”. Together, the assumptions stated provide the materials for a theory of analyticity: a sentence is analytic just in case it is an object-language expression of a semantic rule (and hence is true without there being anything that makes it so.)<sup>37</sup>

I believe that both the claims underlying this theory of analyticity are problematic. But what is important for present purposes is just that Thomasson is committed to both. And what is more, it seems that given this theory of analyticity one can further account for metaphysical necessity as follows. The account is: metaphysically necessary statements are all analytic in this sense, and so are claims to the effect that these statements are in fact necessary. Given this account, there is no obvious need to provide a separate account of what necessity is. Any account given which analytic statements are necessary will do.

The theory of analyticity invites the question: why ever bother to utter sentences with this status? A more general version of what Thomasson describes as her theory of the function of modal discourse can serve as an answer to this question: the utterances of analytic sentences can serve normative purposes.

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<sup>37</sup> Appeal to this theory of analyticity also helps with another problem regarding Thomasson’s account.

Suppose that Thomasson is right about our metaphysically modal vocabulary. One can think that we might still introduce a notion of being what one may call *factually metaphysically necessary*, and of course also *factually metaphysically possible*, where this is metaphysical necessity and possibility understood as Thomasson’s opponent wants to understand it. The fact that we do not ordinarily express these notions does not mean that they cannot be introduced, and understood. I have the sense that I understand them, and my sense that I understand them does not seem to me to be bound up with a theory to the effect that ordinary modal vocabulary expresses factual metaphysical modality. And even assuming that Thomasson has a nice account of the metaphysical necessity of logical and mathematical truths, in the ordinary sense of “metaphysical necessity”, the truths can still seem factually metaphysically necessary, and accounting for their factual metaphysical necessity can seem as problematic as it ever did.

Thomasson brings up a version of this objection (p. 58fn9), saying that Michaela McSweeney raised it to her. Here is her response:

An initial response is to ask for more information: What would these “schmodal” terms be, how would they function, what rules would they follow? If I am right that our actual modal terms serve a *normative* function, it is hard to see how any descriptively functioning terms could be closely related enough to them to count as “modal” at all. Suppose someone said, “OK, I see how our salutation terms function. But now I want to introduce *schmalutation* terms, which are like those, but function descriptively— to talk about the *schmalutational* features of reality.” I think we would have no idea what these could be, or by what rights we would come to think there was any relation (other than phonetic) between the introduced terms and our familiar salutational terms.

This is a reasonable first response. But I think there is an obvious reply in turn. In the case of metaphysical modality, as opposed to the case of salutation, we need not turn to exercises of imagination to come up with factual alternatives. Just consider any of the orthodox accounts of metaphysical modality that Thomasson takes herself to oppose. Even if Thomasson is right in holding that such accounts fail as accounts of metaphysical modality they can well succeed as accounts of something or other – and this something would be factual metaphysical modality. So despite Thomasson’s attempted response the problem stands. But, returning to the theme of analyticity: a theory of analyticity of the kind sketched promises to explain the factual metaphysical necessity of these truths and thus to serve as a response also to this problem.

The theory of analyticity that I have briefly described involves reliance on a number of controversial claims. There is the commitment to the idea of semantic rules, and to “object-language expressions” of semantic rules. There is the commitment to the claim that when *p* is such an object-language expression, *p*’s truth does not demand anything of the world. Each of these claims may be problematic—I have raised a number of problems in earlier sections—but they are no more problematic in the general case of analyticity than in the specific case of modal vocabulary.

Moreover, whatever in the end to say about this theory of analyticity, it is in some ways in *better* shape than Thomasson’s theory of metaphysical necessity, for some concerns about the latter theory are no longer relevant. The complaint against Thomasson’s theory of metaphysical necessity deriving from the fact that we seldom or never express claims about metaphysical necessity in ordinary language has no counterpart in the case of analyticity: for the theory of analyticity is not committed to there being any ordinary expression that expresses analyticity. And the concern that Thomasson’s theory of metaphysical necessity cannot be generalized in a natural way to weaker alethic necessities likewise has no counterpart.

Let me close by emphasizing a concern that applies both to Thomasson’s explicit theory about modal discourse and to the theory of analyticity that I have extracted from her discussion of necessity. This concern relates to something that I have stressed in a number of works. Even granted that some sort of notion of semantic rule makes good sense, semantic rules may be incompatible – and they may be incompatible even while the practice of speaking the language characterized by these rules is a broadly successful practice. But if there can be incompatible semantic rules, then their corresponding object-language expressions cannot all be true. Compare rules of games. It could be that the rules of a game – baseball, or Dungeons & Dragons – are subtly inconsistent. Situations can arise where what one rule dictates is incompatible with what another rule dictates. In those situations, players of the game cannot abide by both rules. What about when this happens in the case of language use? A toy example would involve a predicate *F* where one rule says that anything that is *G* is *F* and another says that anything that is *H* is non-*F* – and then it turns out that some things are both *G* and *H*. In situations like this, principle (\*), which Thomasson apparently is committed to, leads to trouble. It licenses both “all *G*s are *F*” and “all *H*s are not-*F*”, which together with the empirical premise “some *G*s and *H*” entails “some things are both *F* and not-*F*”. Some

restriction of principle (\*) is necessary.<sup>38</sup>

## 8. Concluding remarks

I have discussed various problems regarding Thomasson's theory of metaphysically modal discourse. In a way the most basic problem is the one stressed in the last section: a theory of the kind Thomasson develops does not even promise to deal with the problems that motivate it, for the problems are more general. But in the last section I also made a constructive point: a nearby theory of analyticity would deal with these problems. I presented problems for this theory of analyticity, but I would not rule out that a revised theory could get around these problems.

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<sup>38</sup> See, e.g., Eklund (2002), (2007) and (2019a). In ch. 8 of her (2014), Thomasson discusses some cases of terms introduced by inconsistent stipulations. This is in the context of discussing her approach to ontology, and the question of under what conditions terms refer. She outlines conditions under which terms fail to refer even given her easy approach to ontology. Even granted that her response is successful in the context of the discussion of ontology (for some relevant discussion see my (2017)), the problem I present in the main text still stands. The response does not address how (\*) can be maintained given the possibility of inconsistent stipulations.

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