

Norms and Necessity (Book Review)

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Norms and Necessity. By AMIE THOMASSON. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. Pp. xi + 232. Price £47.99.)

In *Norms and Necessity*, Amie Thomasson once again displays all the philosophical virtues that have made her into one of the most exciting philosophers living today. She possesses a great knowledge of the philosophical tradition, she tackles some of the most important philosophical questions in a clear and lucid manner, and actually goes into detailed dialogue with conflicting views. It is also her most ambitious book so far. Questions about modality are at the centre of many philosophical debates, ranging from the philosophy of language and logic to the philosophy of mind, epistemology, metaphysics, and philosophical methodology. Therefore, Thomasson's book will be of interest not only to specialists in the epistemology and metaphysics of modality, but to anyone who wishes to stay updated about the most important recent developments in contemporary analytic philosophy.

Thomasson defends a position called *Modal Normativism*, which holds that the function of modal claims is to express or renegotiate norms. Such a non-descriptivist account of modality has historical roots in the work of philosophers such as Wittgenstein, Ayer, Ryle, Sellars, and

has been more recently defended by Simon Blackburn and Robert Brandom. Thomasson focuses on *metaphysical* modality, and argues that the function of metaphysical modal statements is to convey or renegotiate the semantic rules that govern our terms, while staying in the object-language. Her account avoids heavyweight ontological commitments, demystifies metaphysical knowledge by re-describing it as the explicit knowledge of the implicit semantic rules that govern our terms, sometimes in combination with straightforward empirical information when the terms are governed by world-deferential rules (e.g. the rule ‘Apply the term ‘water’ to whatever shares the same chemical substance with *this*’), and leads to a re-interpretation of the study of metaphysics as a descriptive and revisionary conceptual enterprise.

Chapter 1 (‘The Rise and Fall of Early Non-Descriptive Approaches’) contains an excellent overview of the history of modal normativism as well as the traditional objections it faced. Thomasson outlines four main obstacles: (1) the traditional problems of *conventionalism*; (2) the Frege-Geach problem; (3) *de re* and *a posteriori* necessities; (4) Quine’s and other more recent attacks on analyticity (to which she has responded in earlier work). The discussion of traditional conventionalism already occurs in the first chapter of the book. Thomasson’s response to the Frege-Geach problem is based on a distinction between the meaning, use and function of modal discourse (developed in chapter 2 ‘The Function of Modal Discourse’ and chapter 3 ‘The Meaning of Modal Discourse’). *De re* and *a posteriori* necessities are addressed in chapter 4 (‘Handling *De Re* and *A Posteriori* Modal Claims’), which is one of the highlights of the book. Chapter 5 ‘Other Objections to Modal Normativism’ contains a response to some further objections, including the problem of ‘necessary existents’, modal demonstratives and certain circularity worries. After having dealt with the objections against modal normativism, Thomasson argues for the ontological, epistemological and methodological advantages her view offers (respectively chapter 6, 7 and 8).

I will make two remarks. My first concerns Thomasson's relation to Brandom's account of modality, which is (as Thomasson concedes) similar to her own position. In his *Between Saying and Doing* (2008), Brandom further develops Sellars' (Kantian) claim that "[t]he language of modality is [...] a "transposed" language of norms" (in Sellars' 1953 'Inference and Meaning' article). In Brandom's terminology, normative vocabulary is a pragmatically mediated metavocabulary for modal vocabulary: it explicitly specifies certain practical abilities necessary for meaningfully deploying modal vocabulary in the first place. Thomasson refers to Brandom and states that "[h]e draws no firm distinction between what we normally think of as metaphysical necessities (e.g., "Necessarily, all donkeys are animals"), and nomological necessities (e.g., "Necessarily, donkeys exposed to fire die"); both are, on his view, ways of restating certain counterfactual inferences" but that she, "[b]y contrast, think[s] that there is a difference in principle between those (nomological) modal claims that license inferences based on empirical evidence, and those (metaphysical) modal claims that do so based on conceptual competence; there is a difference in our mode of knowledge of each sort of modal" (Thomasson 2020: 50). But it is unclear why this should amount to a difference 'in principle' between these two accounts. After all, in this passage Thomasson makes a point about the *epistemology* of modality: whereas knowledge of nomological modal claims is based on empirical evidence, knowledge of metaphysical modal claims is based on conceptual competence. But the point in Brandom she emphasizes is a *logical* point. Claims about what is necessary are indeed equivalent to claims about what remains true given a set of counterfactual suppositions. The different flavours of necessity (e.g. 'physical' or 'metaphysical' necessity) then correspond to the different sets of counterfactual suppositions under which the claim remains true. But this *logical* point is perfectly compatible with the *epistemological* point, which Brandom does not need to deny, that our epistemic access to nomological modal claims might be different from our epistemic access to metaphysical modal claims.

A second point concerns Thomasson's methodological recommendations. Thomasson re-describes the study of metaphysics as a combination of (1) a *descriptive conceptual* enterprise, defending traditional methods such as conceptual analysis and the use of intuitions, and (2) a *revisionary conceptual* enterprise, arguing that we can have substantial discussions about which terms or concepts we *ought* to use (given certain purposes). As regards (1), she notes that 'conceptual analysis' should not be understood too narrowly in terms of breaking down concepts in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions. In this context she refers to Strawson's notion of a 'connective analysis', which "aimed at understanding the inferential relations and connections among our concepts" (Thomasson 2020: 197). But Strawson's notion of a connective analysis is a bit more interesting than just that. Although it is true that the aim of a connective analysis is not to reduce one (set of) concept(s) to another (set of) concept(s), it still aims at unearthing a set of *fundamental* concepts, i.e. concepts the mastery of which is always already presupposed whenever one masters another (set of) concept(s). Some examples Strawson discusses include the idea that mastering the concept of experience presupposes a grasp of the concepts of space, time (slogan: 'an experience is an experience of something *somewhere* and *somewhen*'), and objectivity (slogan: 'a grasp of how things 'appear' to me presupposes a grasp of how things objectively 'are)'), or the claim that a grasp of the concept of a private particular (a pain or sensation) presupposes a prior grasp of the concept of a person to whom such particulars can be ascribed. Such a kind of more *systematic* conceptual enterprise, which Strawson calls 'descriptive metaphysics' (as opposed to what he calls 'revisionary metaphysics' – note the parallel with Thomasson's division), is not discussed by Thomasson, but would definitely deserve a place in Thomasson's portrayal of a future metaphysics that is demystified and re-interpreted as a conceptual enterprise.

Norms and Necessity is an ambitious and important philosophical work, written in Thomasson's characteristically clear and lucid writing style. It is destined to have a huge impact not only on

contemporary debates about modality, but also on our general self-understanding as philosophers.