Metaphysical modality, without possible worlds

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1 Introduction

In contemporary philosophy, there are two divergent understandings of metaphysical modality. Their divergence is a source of scepticism about metaphysical modality. It is indeed often unclear which of the two concepts is at stake in a specific discussion, allowing the sceptic the opportunity to attack metaphysical modality from two fronts. In this paper, I analyse these two views of metaphysical modality (the absolutist and the essentialist) and assess their main motivations and problems. In the light of my analysis of the two views, I also aim to show that possible worlds are not helpful in investigating metaphysical modality. At the end of the analysis I assess whether an absolutist or an essentialist is more entitled to use the expression “metaphysical modality”, given a general principle governing the choice of philosophical lexicon.

This paper is structured as follows. In §2, I analyse the absolutist view, according to which metaphysical modality is the extreme variety of objective modality. Metaphysical necessity is then equated with absolute necessity and a proposition is deemed metaphysically necessary if and only if it is necessary for every variety of objective necessity. I observe that the absolutist conception does not confer any unity to metaphysical modality and is blind to its sources, and this last claim is reinforced in §3 by the analysis of McFetridge’s thesis about logical and absolute modality. In §4, I scrutinise the essentialist view of metaphysical modality. According to it, metaphysical necessities are those that are explained or grounded by essences. Thus, the characterising mark of metaphysical necessity would not be its absoluteness, but its source or ground. In §5, with reference to some main theories of possible worlds, I argue that resorting to possible worlds is not helpful in analysing metaphysical necessity. In §6 I draw some conclusions about the preferable usage of phrases such as...
as “metaphysical modality” or “metaphysical necessity” in philosophy, and I suggest that essentialism has an edge over absolutism on this terrain.

Some methodological premisses (and a personal note) are important and the subject matter of this introduction. First, it is not my purpose to clarify the notion of metaphysical modality by pinpointing uncontroversial examples of metaphysical necessities or metaphysical possibilities. In the course of the analysis, I obviously cite some examples of prima facie good candidates for these roles, but it is wrong to expect a clarification of the concept of metaphysical modality to deliver uncontroversial examples. There is no reason to expect any example of metaphysical modal truth to come for free once the concept is clarified, and even less to be analytic with respect to the concept of metaphysical modality.

I do not think that metaphysical modality is unique under this viewpoint. Examples do not come for free and are not analytic (and are not usually expected to do or be so) with respect to many other philosophical concepts. The analysis of knowledge in epistemology does not deliver, by itself, any uncontroversial instance of knowledge. The logical or semantic analysis of truth does not deliver, by itself, any uncontroversial truth (with the obvious exception of those truths that are part of the analysis itself, if it is a good analysis). The metaphysical analysis of properties does not deliver, by itself, any uncontroversial example of property. Nonetheless, in any philosophical discussion of knowledge, truth and properties, some examples are set forth. In many cases, they are mere heuristic tools for presenting a certain theory of knowledge, truth or properties. If we discovered (in contrast with a common example in philosophical discussions about truth) that snow is not really white, no aspect of any theory of truth by Alfred Tarski or Saul Kripke would thereby be refuted. The examples are not part of the theories, and even less are they analytic offsprings of the theories.

The case of metaphysical necessity is not different and should not be treated differently. The examples are not part of the theories of metaphysical necessity that I investigate. Perplexities and objections about the examples do not immediately or easily translate into perplexities and objections about the theories. I emphasise this point because any example of metaphysical modality will likely raise perplexities and objections. To anticipate some examples I will resort to throughout this paper, many readers will likely disagree with the claim that every human being is such that it is metaphysically necessary that he or she is human; or with the claim that it is metaphysically necessary that if a first entity is part of a second entity and this second one is part of a third, then the first is part of the third. Some examples of metaphysical non-necessity are arguably less controversial (for example, nobody doubts that it is not metaphysically necessary to abide by the speed limit in the highways). In any case, the vast disagreements about the positive examples of metaphysical necessity do not by themselves force or entitle the readers to reject the characterisations of metaphysical modality that shall be illustrated by these examples.

1 Analogously, in epistemology it is not controversial that I do not know that 3 is identical to 4 and in the metaphysics of properties it is not controversial that the laptop I am using is not a property: also on this terrain the case of metaphysical modality is not different.
The disagreements about the examples are mostly beside the point. Mostly (and not always), because an ontological concern remains relevant, namely the concern that nothing at all performs the roles attributed to metaphysical modality by different conceptions of it discussed in the paper. However, this is not the topic of this paper. I do not address or refute the corresponding kind of global scepticism about the extension of metaphysical modality, according to which it may be a legitimate, adequately characterisable concept, but nothing falls under it.

Another premiss is that some features of metaphysical modality are not controversial, and I focus only on the controversial features. The uncontroversial features of metaphysical modality are uncontroversial in the literal sense that—as far as I know—nobody in the literature contested them; there is widespread consensus that, if a modality lack these features, then there is no good reason to label it as “metaphysical”, no matter which among the various ways of interpreting this qualification of metaphysicality is chosen. These uncontroversial features are not sufficient to identify metaphysical modality, but put some constraints on its identification. It is for example uncontroversial that metaphysical modality is not deontic. In Daniel Nolan’s example (2011, pp. 315–316), I am permitted by law and morality to make my table in the form of a square circle, but this is no indication that this action is metaphysically possible. It is also uncontroversial that metaphysical modality is not epistemic; it is not a matter of what can or must be the case given what a certain subject knows or what is knowable in general.

Metaphysical modality is uncontroversially alethic. This means that both of the following principles hold true (□_{met} and ♦_{met} express metaphysical necessity and possibility):

- □_{met} p → p
- p → ♦_{met} p

It is also uncontroversial that metaphysical necessities, possibilities or impossibilities do not depend on markedly local and specific hypotheses. If I block my bedroom door with a heavy wardrobe, burglars cannot pass through that doorway; but this impossibility is not metaphysical because it depends on various, rather specific circumstances (such as my having moved the wardrobe there and the burglar’s lack of superior physical strength). Metaphysics is expected to be a distinctively general discipline, and marked locality or specificity is thus incompatible with metaphysicality.

Soon after the attention is restricted to alethic, not exceedingly local or specific modalities, the controversies begin, inasmuch as there are other widely discussed varieties of modality, such as nomic and logical modality, which are alethic, and neither highly local nor specific. Many philosophers expect metaphysical modality to collapse with one of these other alethic modalities, while others think that it is distinct from these other alethic modalities.

On a personal note, it is not by chance that I have chosen this specific topic for an essay in honour of Massimo Mugnai. Indeed, Massimo, Sergio Bernini, I and several other friends have discussed about possible worlds, metaphysical modality and many other related topics during hardly countable, challenging, chaotic and often funny
seminars (locally known as *seminari del martedì*) organised by Massimo at the Scuola Normale Superiore in Pisa from 2009 to 2016.\(^2\) For me, these seminars have been invaluable sources of intellectual stimuli, and are still active in my mind as repertoires of philosophical ideas and fond memories. During the seminars, Massimo and Sergio were always sceptical of *both* metaphysical necessity and possible worlds; in general, their role in the seminars was to be sceptical of any theory under discussion, and in particular, when these theories belonged to metaphysics. In contrast, my usual role was to act as the *defence attorney* for contemporary metaphysics. In this paper, as regards metaphysical modality, I partially play my role, by concluding (in §6) that there are some good reasons to discuss metaphysical modality in philosophy despite many difficulties and ambivalences affecting the concept. Regarding possible worlds, I somewhat begrudgingly concede to Massimo (in §5) that they are not really useful for the specific purpose of understanding what metaphysical modality is.

2 Metaphysical Modality as Absolute Modality

According to the absolutist conception, metaphysical modality is absolute modality. This approach has been recently articulated and defended by Timothy Williamson (see in particular Williamson, 2016). The underlying idea is that when modal problems emerge in everyday life or in specific disciplinary contexts, we tend to countenance only some possibilities, due to the specificity of our interests and of the context; correspondingly, we tend to countenance, besides *absolute* necessities, also more specific necessities, which again depend on our interests or on the context. Some of these interests and contexts are quite important; in some cases, we want to ask what can and must happen under the presupposition that reality is governed by the scientific laws that actually govern it. In such a context, we are uninterested in dwelling on the hypothesis that scientific laws are violated, or different. In these cases, we resort to nomic modality.

In philosophy we are often more radical and want to prescind from specificities and contexts. This occurs in particular in metaphysics; how often it happens in metaphysics depends on how metaphysics is construed. For example, according to the influential scientistic conception of metaphysics emphatically advocated by Ladyman et al. (2007) (see also the essays in Ross et al., 2015), metaphysics has the exclusive purpose of unifying the scientific image of the world and therefore should not prescind at all from scientific laws. In contrast, when metaphysics is perceived as the investigation of an unconstrained field of possibilities (see Lowe, 2001 for a contemporary manifesto of this traditional view of metaphysics), we tend to be maximally liberal in admitting far-fetched possibilities and maximally careful in selecting necessities that are really absolute.

\(^2\) Among the participants to the *seminari del martedì*, besides Massimo and Sergio, I am, in particular, grateful to Andrea Borghini, Giulia Felappi, Gabriele Galluzzo, Lorenzo Azzano, Francesca Poggiolesi, Stefano Di Bella and Andrea Strollo.
According to Williamson, metaphysical modality \textit{qua} absolute modality is simply a special case of a broad range of objective (\textit{i.e.}, alethic, non-deontic, non-epistemic) modalities. It is the extreme, \textit{catch-all} case, in the following sense: a proposition is metaphysically possible “if and only if it has at least one sort of objective possibility” Williamson (2016, p. 455), while a proposition is metaphysically necessary if and only if it has every sort of objective necessity.

This absolutist conception of metaphysical modality makes scepticism about metaphysical modality collapse into the overall scepticism about objective modality. There is no good reason to be sceptical of \textit{only} metaphysical modality. Given the other notions of objective modality, metaphysical modality is simply their extreme case, definable through a disjunction or a particular quantification in the case of possibility and through a conjunction or a universal quantification in the case of necessity. Thus, we may argue for scepticism about modality on an epistemological basis by expressing concerns about whether and how we manage to know if something is possible if it is not actual, but these concerns and the ensuing sceptical challenge are in no way specific to the extreme, catch-all variety of objective modality (\textit{i.e.}, metaphysical modality).

Moreover, suppose that we contend that nomic modality (the kind of objective modality that does not allow any possibility in contrast to scientific laws, and for which scientific laws are necessary themselves) is adequately characterised and that there are no more comprehensive set of possibilities and narrower set of necessities. Given the absolutist conception of metaphysical modality, our contention is \textit{not} a form of scepticism towards metaphysical modality. Instead, our contention can be expressed by saying that metaphysical modality is nomic modality, and therefore as adequately characterised as nomic modality is. Any further resistance specifically towards metaphysical modality risks being a mere matter of labels, and in particular the upshot of a distaste for the “metaphysical” label; but then, we should not have accepted to use “metaphysical modality” as equivalent to “absolute objective modality”, as the absolutist conception suggests. Once we have made this terminological choice and claim that nomic modality is absolute objective modality, we are unentitled to be sceptical specifically of metaphysical modality.

The same occurs if we think that logical modality is absolute/metaphysical modality. Let us suppose that logical modality is adequately characterised, e.g. by claiming that a proposition \( p \) is logically possible if and only if \( p \) does not entail any contradiction; and that \( p \) is logically necessary if and only if \( \neg p \) entails a contradiction.\(^3\) Given this supposition, we are not entitled to be sceptical about metaphysical/absolute modality, which ends up being as adequately characterised and as legitimate as logical modality is: the above characterisation, if it is suitable for

\(^3\) This characterization ends up being circular if \textit{entailment} and/or \textit{contradiction} are in their turn characterised in terms of logical modality. This circularity is avoided if entailment and contradiction are differently characterized (for example if entailment is characterised with respect to a specific logical system and contradictions are characterised syntactically as sentences of the form \( p \land \neg p \)). The focus of this paper is on metaphysical modality and for this reason I lay this problem aside in what follows.
logical modality, is suitable for metaphysical/absolute modality too, given that logical modality is absolute modality. Thus, the absolutist conception has an edge in the dialectics with the sceptical about metaphysical modality, inasmuch as this scepticism collapses into the scepticism about objective modality in general. On the other hand, absolutism does not confer any kind of unity to metaphysical modality. It does not pinpoint any unitary, substantial feature of metaphysical modality and is utterly silent regarding the sources or grounds of metaphysical modality. It passes the buck to all the varieties of objective modality, of which some (e.g., nomic modality) are in turn plagued by their own philosophical problems. In the absence of a substantial common element, the doubt might arise that metaphysical modality is not really unitary and is therefore a disjunctive and gerrymandered concept, perhaps on a par with being a camel or a rhododendron.

We might hope to attain a more unitary and explicative characterisation of metaphysical modality by reflecting on what absoluteness is. Generally, absoluteness is the lack of relativity. Bob Hale (most explicitly in Hale, 2012) has proposed to construe metaphysical necessity qua absolute necessity as the lack of relativity with respect to counterfactual hypotheses, i.e. as counterfactual inevitability. What would happen in any case, no matter what counterfactual hypothesis we consider, is metaphysically necessary. We could even define metaphysical necessity through a quantification in sentential position on counterfactual hypotheses, as follows (> is the connective for counterfactual conditionals; let us assume that the values of the quantified variable q are propositions):

\[ \square_{\text{met}} p \equiv_{\text{def}} \forall q (q > p) \]  

(Metaphysical Necessity)

As in all the other characterisations of metaphysical modality, once metaphysical necessity is defined, metaphysical possibility can be easily defined in terms of it, as follows:

\[ \Diamond_{\text{met}} p \equiv_{\text{def}} \neg \square_{\text{met}} \neg p \]  

(Metaphysical Possibility)

Metaphysical modality is not reduced to something else by these definitions. First, counterfactuality is by itself a modal notion—what variety of modality? Since the definitiendum is metaphysical modality, there are good reasons to expect the modality in the definiens to be metaphysical as well. Second, a presupposition of the adequacy of this definition is that, for metaphysically impossible propositions that are values of q, the resulting counterfactual conditional is a counterpossible conditional and is, as a consequence, trivially true. This means that the only values of q that really matter are the possible propositions, but again, the possibilities at stake are plausibly

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4 In recent years, the claim that every counterpossible conditional is trivially true has been contested for a variety of reasons. See Berto et al. (2018) for a version of antitrivialism about counterpossibles and Williamson (2018) for a compelling defense of trivialism. Since the debate is not directly relevant for the characterisation of metaphysical modality, I simply assume Williamson’s trivialism about counterpossibles in this paper.
metaphysical/absolute possibilities, so that the limits of the counterfactual scenarios
in terms of which counterfactual inevitability is characterised end up presupposing
a characterisation of metaphysical/absolute possibility.

This kind of irreducibility of metaphysical modality is perhaps unsurprising, given
that it is generally very difficult to reduce modal notions to non-modal ones. However,
irreducibility here provides evidence that this definition in terms of counterfactual
inevitability will unlikely deliver the kind of unity of metaphysical modality that
we have been looking for. The domain of the values of \( q \) is allowed to be highly
heterogeneous, and the resulting domain of metaphysical necessities and possibilities
is allowed to be no less heterogeneous.

To recap, metaphysical modality as absolute objective modality is easily characteris-
able in terms of other varieties of objective modality. Given these other varieties
of objective modality, there is no specific reason to be sceptical only of meta-
physical/absolute modality. This simple characterisation of metaphysical modality does
not establish whether metaphysical modality collapses into a specifically and unit-
edly characterised objective modality, such as nomic or logical modality. Metaphys-
ical/absolute modality can also be analysed by focusing on its non-relativity, which
can be construed as counterfactual inevitability. This kind of superficial unification
is compatible with a high degree of internal variety among different instances of
metaphysical/absolute modality.

3 McFetridge’s Thesis and the Sources of Modality

It is interesting to investigate more in depth how and why the absolutist conception
of metaphysical modality fails to confer any unity to it and is in particular blind
to the various sources of absolute/metaphysical modality. The blindness—a pivotal
difference with respect to the essentialist conception, as we are going to see in
§4—is already rather evident in the Williamsonian characterisation of metaphysical
necessity: \( p \) is metaphysically necessary if and only if \( p \) is necessary for every variety
of objective necessity. The varieties of objective necessity are allowed to be highly
heterogeneous (for example, nomic modality is quite different from logical modality)
and, thus, no real, unitary source of metaphysical modality is identified.

This blindness with respect to the sources of modality is a potential source of
confusion also as regards the other forms of objective modalities. Thus, let us suppose
that you think that nomic modality is absolute/metaphysical modality and that, as
a consequence, scientific laws are absolutely/metaphysically necessary. Given the
above characterization of metaphysical necessity, it follows that scientific laws are
necessary for any variety of objective modality. Thus, scientific laws are, for example,
logically necessary. This is in a sense to be expected: you contend that scientific
laws are absolutely/metaphysically necessary and so you coherently deny that any
other kind of objective modality disclose further possibilities; if another kind of
objective modality were to disclose further possibilities, nomic modality would not
be absolute/metaphysical.
Nonetheless, any pressure to thereby, implausibly, conclude that the negation of every scientific law entails a contradiction—in coherence with the characterisation of logical necessity we assumed in §2—should be resisted. The negation of—say—Coulomb’s Law (according to which the magnitude of the electrostatic force of attraction or repulsion between two point charges is directly proportional to the product of the magnitudes of charges and inversely proportional to the square of the distance between them) does not entail any contradiction. This simply means that the source of this instance of metaphysical modality is not in logic: it is in science. Coulomb’s Law, if it is taken to be absolutely/metaphysically necessary, is necessary for any variant of objective necessity, and so is both nomically and logically necessary; but this claim does not pinpoint in any way the source of its necessity. This source is connected with its being nomically necessary and not with its being logically necessary, but the absolutist conception of metaphysical necessity does not identify in any way the source of its necessity.

Analogously, suppose that you endorse the claim that logical necessity is absolute necessity. It is logically necessary that if Cristiano Ronaldo (CR henceforth) is a football player, then CR is a football player; indeed, the negation of this logical necessity entails a contradiction, namely that CR is a football player and CR is not a football player. Thus, it is also absolutely/metaphysically necessary that if CR is a football player, then CR is a football player. Given the Williamsonian understanding of absolute/metaphysical modality, it follows that it is also nomically necessary that if CR is a football player, then CR is a football player. This is in a sense to be expected: you contend that logical necessity is absolute/metaphysical necessity, and so you coherently deny that any other kind of objective modality discloses further possibilities; if another kind of objective modality were to disclose further possibilities, logical modality would not be absolute/metaphysical. However, this should not lead us astray about the source of the instance of metaphysical necessity at stake: it is not a law in any natural science that if CR is a football player, then CR is a football player. The source of this instance of metaphysical modality lies in logic, and the absolutist conception of metaphysical modality is blind to this source.

It is also interesting to make explicit the significance of the so-called McFetridge’s Thesis (presented in McFetridge, 1990 and later systematised in Hale, 1996) with respect to this limit of absolutism. According to McFetridge’s Thesis, the kind of logical necessity that characterises valid inferences (i.e., the sense in which the premises of a valid inference necessitate its conclusion) is such that no other kind of necessity is stronger: if McFetridge’s Thesis is accepted, logical necessity is absolute, metaphysical necessity. More precisely, McFetridge’s thesis states that, if the conditional corresponding to a valid inference (i.e., a conditional whose antecedent is the conjunction of the premises of the inference and whose consequent is the conclusion of the inference) is logically necessary, then there is no other, wider sense where it is possible that its antecedent is true and the consequent is false.

McFetridge’s Thesis can be proven from the following, seemingly weak and reasonable assumptions (□_{log} is an operator of logical necessity and ◇ is an arbitrary operator of possibility):
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- (A1) If $\Box_{\text{log}}(p \to q)$, then $\Box_{\text{log}}((p \land r) \to q)$; and if $\Box_{\text{log}}(p \to q)$, then $\Box_{\text{log}}((r \land p) \to q)$

- (A2) $\Box_{\text{log}}(p \to p)$

- (A3) If $\Box_{\text{log}}(p \to q)$ and $\Box_{\text{log}}(p \to r)$, then $\Box_{\text{log}}(p \to (q \land r))$

- (A4) If $\lozenge p$ and $\Box_{\text{log}}(p \to q)$, then $\lozenge q$

- (A5) $\neg \lozenge (p \land \neg p)$

By keeping in mind that, when $\Box_{\text{log}}$ is prefixed to a conditional, the conditional corresponds to a valid inference, let us briefly see why (A1–A5) are weak and reasonable. (A1) expresses the principle that a valid inference cannot be disrupted by strengthening its premiss; (A1) is scarcely controversial, except in the context of relevant logic.5 (A2) expresses the reflexivity of valid inference. (A3) corresponds to the contention that if two conclusions can be validly inferred from certain premisses, their conjunction can also be validly inferred from those premisses. (A4) claims that any kind of objective possibility is transmitted through valid inferences (i.e., if the premisses of a valid inference are possible, its conclusion is possible too). (A5) states that for no reasonable candidate to the role of objective possibility, is a contradiction possible.

Given these premisses, it is possible to run the following argument, which proceeds from the assumption that a conditional is logically necessary to the conclusion that it is not possible (for any objective sense of possibility) that the antecedent is true and the conclusion is false:

1. $\Box_{\text{log}}(p \to q)$ (Assumption)
2. $\lozenge (p \land \neg q)$ (Assumption for Reductio)
3. $\Box_{\text{log}}((p \land \neg q) \to q)$ (1., A1)
4. $\Box_{\text{log}}(\neg q \to \neg q)$ (A2)
5. $\Box_{\text{log}}((p \land \neg q) \to \neg q)$ (4., A1)
6. $\Box_{\text{log}}((p \land \neg q) \to (q \land \neg q))$ (3., 5., A3)
7. $\lozenge (q \land \neg q)$ (2., 6., A4)
8. $\neg \lozenge (q \land \neg q)$ (A5)
9. $\neg \lozenge (p \land \neg q)$ (2., 7., 8., Reductio)

McFetridge’s Thesis is a rather solid result, and the attempts to block the above argument go through relatively narrow paths, that are in need of an independent motivation: the adoption of relevant logic, thereby rejecting (A1); the adoption of a non-classical logic in which the reductio is not valid; or perhaps the rejection of (A4). This is not the topic of this paper: we are neither defending nor attacking the view that logical modality is absolute modality and the arguments in its support, but only discussing the proper understanding of this view when it is conjoined with an absolutist, Williamsonian conception of metaphysical modality.

What does McFetridge’s Thesis show, if it is accepted, as far as absolute, metaphysical modality is concerned? McFetridge’s Thesis shows that no modality is

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5 (A1) has two parts, inasmuch as it does not matter whether the additional premiss is postpended (first part) or prepended (second part) in the conjunction with the original premisses (the conjunction is the antecedent of the conditional).
more absolute than logical modality in the following sense: no new possibility that is foreclosed by logical necessity is then disclosed by another kind of objective modality; there is no more relaxed sense of possibility in which logical impossibilities are possible. Every instance of logical necessity is thus absolutely necessary. Let us now bring to the table the absolutist conception of metaphysical modality: absolute/metaphysical necessity is the conjunction of every objective necessity, including logical necessity; thus, every instance of absolute/metaphysical necessity is an instance of logical necessity. This means that, given McFetridge’s Thesis and the absolutist conception, logical necessity and absolute/metaphysical necessity end up extensionally coinciding. As we have seen in §2, this does not translate into scepticism with respect to absolute/metaphysical modality. In contrast, we end up identifying absolute/metaphysical modality with an arguably rather well-defined modality (logical modality).

However, McFetridge’s Thesis does not show that the source of every metaphysical necessity is logic; it does not show that any negation of a metaphysical necessity entails a contradiction. Every metaphysical necessity is logically necessary (in the sense that no other modality can disclose further possibilities), but—as it happens in general, when an absolutist conception of metaphysical modality is at play—no information is given about the source of various instances of metaphysical modalities: for some of them the source is arguably logic (as is the case for the necessity that if CR is a football player, then CR is a football player), but in other cases, as far as McFetridge’s Thesis is concerned, the source could lie elsewhere.

The transitivity of parthood may be an absolute/metaphysical necessity even if no contradiction follows from the hypothesis that three entities are such that the first is part of the second, the second is part of the third, but the first is not part of the third. It may be absolutely/metaphysically impossible that a certain sound lacks any volume, even if no contradiction follows from the hypothesis of a volumeless sound, and it may be absolutely/metaphysically impossible that a human being becomes a cabbage even if no contradiction follows from this hypothesis. The absolutist conception is blind to the sources of metaphysical modality; and this blindness persists even when the absolutist conception is conjoined with the claim that metaphysical modality coincides with a specific kind of objective modality (such as logical modality, in the case of McFetridge’s Thesis).

4 Metaphysical Modality as Essential Modality

I cannot go across the Tevere River in Rome by swimming. This impossibility is highly contingent; it depends on the fact that I am a poor swimmer and that the Tevere is a relatively large river, not a narrow and slow stream. It is definitely wrong to deem this impossibility metaphysical, precisely because it depends on circumstances and features of reality that are in turn contingent. Moreover, I cannot go from Lisbon through the Atlantic Ocean and reach New York in this way. This latter impossibility is prima facie rather solid and quite independent of my physical peculiarities. It is
difficult to establish whether or not the impossibility is absolute. Perhaps the fact that I lack Herculean capacities, which would enable me to swim for 5,419 km (the distance from Lisbon to New York) is not in any sense contingent because it is rooted in what I am—in the fact that I am a human being and that human beings’ strength and dimensions cannot in any case reach the required high levels. Moreover, the ocean’s wideness and dangerousness are perhaps not contingent; there surely can be narrow and quiet watery basins, but arguably an ocean cannot be such.

If you think that the impossibility that I would cross the ocean by swimming is absolute, you may want to root it in my essence and/or in that of the ocean. You are not forced to do so. I will not discuss any argument for the specific claims that human beings and oceans have essences and that these essences are precisely connected with the features at stake in the above example.

The understanding of essences and of their role in grounding metaphysical modalities could be more minimal; for example, you can claim that it is impossible for me to be two or more entities, instead of merely one, and root this impossibility in my essence (a similar impossibility would plausibly hold for any individual and be rooted in its essence). A minimal example such as this about numerical oneness is also enough to appreciate the ensuing characterisation of metaphysical modality as rooted in essences. What is metaphysically necessary is rooted in some essences.

The literature about this understanding of metaphysical necessity (see, e.g., Fine, 1994; Hale, 1996) often discusses the problem of whether the grounds should be a single essence, various essences or the totality of the essences of all the entities. This debate is important if you are after a characterisation of essential modality, inasmuch as essential modality is plausibly specific to a certain entity or entities. What is essential for me (such as being human or lacking Herculean capacities) is not essential for the ocean; for this reason, in the attempts to formalise essential modality (see in particular Fine, 1995), the modal operators usually have an index for an entity (and these indices can be chained, thereby obtaining indices for multiple entities), by whose essence a certain instance of essential necessity is grounded.

However, metaphysical necessity—even in this second understanding of it, according to which it is grounded by essences—is not analogously perspectival. It matters that metaphysical necessity has a certain general source, namely the essences. However, it does not matter what entity or how many entities are the specific sources of an instance of metaphysical necessity. Some metaphysical necessities (such as: the fact that I am not identical to Jason Momoa) can be collectively grounded by more than one essence (such as: my essence and Jason Momoa’s). In the technical terms of contemporary theories of metaphysical grounding, both essences partially ground this metaphysical necessity; neither of them individually, totally grounds it, but they collectively do so (see, e.g., Fine, 2012; Raven, 2015; Rosen, 2010).

How general can an account of metaphysical modality as grounded by essences be? It may be suspected that such an account can only cover de re modalities and is constitutively unfit for de dicto modalities. The account prima facie seems more apt to capture what every human being possibly and necessarily does or is than what possibly and necessarily every human being does or is. It can aspire to capture the
The gist of the problem is clear in these last two instances of typically *de dicto* modal claims—the essences of vixens and humans do not seem to play any role in these modal claims. In the former case, the fact that every vixen is female is the outcome of the definition of the word “vixen” or of the corresponding concept, and it is by virtue of this definition that this fact necessarily holds. In the latter case, it is a logical truth that every human being is human. Logical truths are typically formal or topic neutral. Thus, no specificity of human beings or of the meaning of “human” plays a role in this necessity; logic here is the only source of necessity.

The cases of the vixen and of the *de dicto* claim that necessarily every human being is human might seem extraneous to metaphysics. They involve a kind of necessity that abides by the minimal, uncontroversial constraints discussed in §1 (necessity is here neither deontic nor epistemic, but alethic, and is not the outcome of markedly local or specific circumstances). Nonetheless, they do not belong to metaphysics, and this is especially clear in the light of an essentialist conception of metaphysics. The essentialist conception of metaphysical modality as grounded by essences corresponds to the traditional view of metaphysics as the study of essences. Metaphysics would be the general investigation of the essences, natures or identities (these three labels tend to be interchangeable in the context of contemporary essentialism) of entities. It might be said that conceptual/analytic truths (*e.g.*, about vixens) and logical truths are necessary, perhaps absolutely so, but are not studied by metaphysics. We are delving into an understanding of metaphysical modality (the essentialist conception) that (in contrast to the absolutist conception, as discussed in §2) does not equate metaphysical modality with absolute modality. Thus, it is coherent and to be expected that conceptual/analytic truths and logical truths are not classified as metaphysical necessities by the essentialist conception, because they do not belong to metaphysics, and thus are not metaphysical.

While some instances of *de dicto* modality (*e.g.*, those above) plausibly do not belong to metaphysics as a discipline, some other instances do. Among the cited examples, the transitivity of parthood is a good candidate for the role of a necessary metaphysical principle, and its necessity is clearly *de dicto*, as the syntactic form of the following formulation shows (P expresses parthood):

\[ \square (\forall x \forall y \forall z (x \ P y \land y \ P z \rightarrow x \ P z)) \]

The case of the transitivity of parthood is not special at all. When we say that grounding is an asymmetrical relation and that mental properties supervene on physical properties (and in general when we set forth supervenience claims), we use *de dicto* modalities within metaphysics. If metaphysical modality needs to mirror the subject matter of metaphysics, then the claim that every *de dicto* modality is correctly classified as non-metaphysical because it does not belong to the subject matter of metaphysics is simply false, and the restriction of metaphysical modalities to *de re* modalities is an inadvisable step.
Thus, some *de dicto* modal truths patently belong to the subject matter of metaphysics, while other *de dicto* modal truths—such as those that are in some way conceptual/analytic or logical—*prima facie* might be deemed *absolute but not metaphysical*, because they do not belong to the subject matter of metaphysics. Overall, the essentialist conception of metaphysical modality is confronted with a *prima facie* mismatch between the domain of metaphysical modal truths and the domain of modal truths that are plausibly grounded by essences. Moreover, it seems that the domain of modalities that are metaphysical but not *prima facie* grounded by essences (e.g., the necessary transitivity of parthood) is in continuity—within the domain of *de dicto* modalities—with that of other modal truths that do not belong to metaphysics at all (e.g., the necessity that every vixen is female).

In front of this *prima facie* mismatch, the defender of the essentialist account of metaphysical necessity can proceed in two broad ways: either by *widening the domain of essences and essence bearers* or by narrowing the domain of application of its essentialist account of metaphysical necessity. In the concluding section (§ 6) I tentatively explore the latter approach. In contrast, the former approach prevails in the contemporary essentialist literature (see both Fine, 1994; Hale, 2012). Let us then find out what this former approach of widening the domain of essences and essence bearers contends and what main difficulties it encounters.

Not even the staunchest supporter of essentialism thinks that there are some *pieces of concrete reality* whose essences account for the necessity of “every vixen is a female fox” or “every human being is human”. In particular, everybody agrees that the essences of vixens and humans play no role in these necessities. Fine and Hale (here, I disregard many matters of detail about which they disagree) think that there are other, non-concrete entities whose essences explain or ground these metaphysical necessities.

In particular, they are happy to concede that there is nothing wrong in saying that the necessity about a vixen is analytic or conceptual (inasmuch as it relates to the definition of the concept *vixen* or of the corresponding predicate “vixen”); and that the necessity about human beings is logical (inasmuch as it is logically true).

However, in both cases, Fine and Hale think that the essences of some entities are involved and that it is thus correct to classify analytic or conceptual necessities and logical necessities as metaphysical necessities, given the understanding of metaphysical modality as grounded by essences. These are the essences of *meanings* or of *concepts* in the case of analytic or conceptual necessities and the essences of *logical objects* in the case of logical necessities.

This approach is ontologically burdensome. Concepts and meanings are problematic entities, whose characterisation is in turn the subject of many controversies. It is also doubtful, for reasons stemming from Quine (1951)’s notorious criticism of the synthetic/analytic distinction (see Rey, 2018 for an introduction to the current debate), that there is a domain of necessary truths that are grounded by meanings or concepts. Logical objects are even more troublesome, and less often discussed in recent philosophy. For this reason it is useful to dwell on logical objects.

Fine’s and Hale’s ideas about logical objects and their essences are in direct contrast with Wittgenstein’s notorious thesis in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*
that there are no logical objects (sect. 4.442); and in tension with the widely accepted contention that only non-logical terms stand for components of reality, while logical terms only express the ways in which the conditions of satisfaction or truth of complex formulas or sentences depend on those of the simpler formulas or sentences within them. In contrast, the idea that essentialists aim to defend here is that the various logical terms (connectives and quantifiers in particular) in some way correspond to entities. For example, conjunction as a logical connective would in some way correspond to conjunction$_{obj}$, a logical object. The essence of conjunction$_{obj}$ would ground the logical necessities involving conjunction, either totally or partially (partially if other logical objects are involved). Thus, consider the kind of necessity that is usually attributed to a valid logical inference, such as the following:

\[ \frac{p \land q}{p} \]

The metalogical claim that \( p \) follows from \( p \land q \) is metophysically necessary (logical necessity being a subspecies of metaphysical necessity), and would be fully grounded by the essence of conjunction$_{obj}$. In the case of non-metalogical, logical truths in the object language, the essences of various logical objects would collectively ground their metaphysical necessity. This would also be the case for “every human being is human”, whose necessity would be presumably grounded by the essences of something like universal quantifier$_{obj}$ and if-then$_{obj}$ (the standard formalisation in first-order logic of “every human being is human” being: \( \forall x(Hx \rightarrow Hx) \)).

Many problems affect this approach, which has never been developed in any detail, despite being advocated by some essentialists as a way to obtain a unitary account of metaphysical modality. Here are two potential concerns, which have not been so far adequately addressed:

1. The standard semantic analysis of logical language does not countenance these logical objects as referents (or as any other kind of semantic meaning) of logical expressions. Logical expressions are usually not expected to refer to anything at all. Their meanings are usually characterised by a clause in the recursive conditions of satisfaction or truth for a certain language. Thus, the essentialist either ends up relying on logical objects that lack any role in semantics; or is committed to adopt a non-standard semantic analysis of logical language, in which logical objects play a role.\(^6\)

2. It is unclear to which degree of granularity we should distinguish different metaphysical necessities, which are grounded by the essences of different logical objects. As is customary in the theory of grounding, the distinctions to be drawn

\(^6\)In the categorial grammars for natural languages à la Cresswell and Montague, connectives belong to categories and can be expected to semantically correspond to certain entities (usually functions). Also the attempt of Quine (1960) to devise a logical language in which connectives are systematically replaced by predicates might be revitalized for this purpose. The works in categorial grammar are usually scarcely explicit about the ontological import of categories, and to put Quine’s proposal at the service of essentialism might seem sacrilegious. Thus, at least as far as I know, the attribution of essences to the objects at stake has never been investigated in the literature.
have to be hyperintensional; otherwise all logical truths risk collapsing into a
single necessity to be grounded. It is difficult to know where to stop when
drawing hyperintensional distinctions. Should we take the standard formalisa-
tion of a certain truth as a reliable guide in identifying the logical objects whose
essences would ground its metaphysical necessity?

These unsolved problems are sufficient to motivate scepticism about this ambitious
version of essentialism, which seeks grounding essences also for the most recalcitrant
instances of absolute modality. In §6, I shall again turn to the more modest variant
of the essentialist approach to metaphysical modality, which narrows the domain of
application of essentialism and is content with accounting only for some instances
of absolute modality. It is now time to ask whether some progress in the analysis
of metaphysical modality can be made by means of the most successful tool for the
semantic analysis of modal logic, namely possible worlds.

5 Possible Worlds and Metaphysical Modality

As discussed in §2, the absolutist conception of metaphysical modality corresponds to
the idea that in metaphysics we are not interested in any restricted or local truth. Inasmuch as we are metaphysicians, we are—so to speak—maximally liberal in consider-
ing remote, unlikely hypotheses. In the attempt to make the absolutist conception
explicit and precise, this lack of restriction can be construed in various ways, and
we have considered one: Hale’s analysis of absoluteness in terms of counterfactual
inevitability. Given the analysis of modal notions in terms of possible worlds, there
is another obvious way of construing absoluteness. We have at our disposal the set
of all possible worlds (the pluriverse). We can consider either a proper subset of it
or the whole set; if we consider the former, then we exclude some scenarios and are
not as liberal as metaphysicians should be.

Thus, if I say that I cannot cross the Tevere River by swimming, I disregard many
possible worlds at which my physical strength is greater than at the actual world,
or the river’s width or impetus is less. The restrictions usually pertain to minimum
levels of similarity to the actual world under a certain respect, where the respect and
the metrics of similarity are allowed to vary from case to case.

What does it mean in this context to consider all possible worlds (if the modality
is metaphysical) and to consider only some of them (if it is not metaphysical)? It
means—respectively—not to restrict and to restrict some quantifiers. These quant-
tifiers can belong either to the metalanguage or to the object language, according
to the specific variant of the theory of possible worlds that we resort to. In the
standard, Kripkean semantics for modal languages (see, e.g., Kripke, 1963), the
truth conditions for modal sentences in the metalanguage include quantifiers over
possible worlds (regardless of whether these sentences are de re or de dicto). In
David Lewis’ counterpart theory (Lewis, 1968), the quantifiers at stake are in the
object language and replace modal operators. If the modality is de dicto, then there
are quantifiers over possible worlds, which can be either unrestricted or restricted.

If the modality is *de re*, then there are quantifiers over possible individuals, which
are parts of possible worlds (the so-called counterparts of the actual individual to
which the *de re* modality is attributed). In this case as well, the quantification over
counterparts can be either unrestricted or restricted. In all these cases, the modality
at stake would be metaphysical if and only if the quantifiers are unrestricted.

To assess the possible worlds’ contribution to the analysis of metaphysical
modality, it is instructive to compare the analysis of absolute/metaphysical modality
in terms of possible worlds, on the one hand, with its analysis in terms of counterfac-
tual inevitability (as discussed at the end of §2), on the other hand. For the purposes
of this comparison, let us adopt the standard Lewis-Stalnaker semantic analysis of
counterfactual conditionals as variably strict (Lewis, 1973; Stalnaker, 1968) in a
simplified version that is sufficient here: a counterfactual conditional $p > q$ is true if
and only if the consequent $q$ is true at all the worlds at which the antecedent $p$ is true
which are similar at least to a certain degree and under a certain respect of similarity
to the actual world. The full determination of the truth conditions of a counterfactual
conditional therefore requires the specification of a minimum degree and of a respect
of similarity. The expectation is that the context in which a counterfactual conditional
is uttered can help determine the minimum degree and the respect.

According to the analysis of metaphysical necessity as counterfactual inevitability
(as discussed at the end of §2), $p$ is metaphysically necessary if and only if, for every
$q$, $q > p$ is true. For each of the counterfactual conditionals obtained by replacing
the variable $q$ with a certain sentence, the Lewis-Stalnaker analysis can be applied
by specifying a minimum degree and a respect of similarity or a context that in
turn determines a minimum degree and a respect of similarity. In the analysis of
metaphysical necessity, we have a universal quantification in sentential position on
the antecedents of the counterfactuals, and thus no limits on the variation of the
antecedents. On the other hand, the context is provided once and for all for the
single claim of necessity whose absoluteness/metaphysicality has to be assessed.
This means that the minimum degree and the respect of similarity are also determined
once and for all by the context of the claim of necessity (they do not vary for the
different values of the variable $q$). The context is presumably *metaphysics itself* (or
more locally, a paper, a book, a seminar or a conversation on metaphysics), such
that we are liberal in admitting similarities and we strive to be neutral as regards the
respect of similarity, by privileging the sharing of some properties over the sharing
of others only if these properties are privileged from a metaphysical viewpoint (e.g.,
inasmuch as they are natural or fundamental properties).

Given this interpretation of the counterfactuals at stake, at the end of the day, are
counterfactual inevitability and truth at all possible worlds equivalent to each other?
Clearly, truth at all possible worlds entails counterfactual inevitability: if $p$ is true at
all possible worlds, then, given any $q$, $p$ is true at all the worlds at which $q$ is true, no
matter how similar and under which respect these worlds are to the actual world. In
the opposite direction, there are good reasons to deny that counterfactual inevitability
tenants truth at all possible worlds; that is, to deny that if for every $q$ $p$ is true at all
the possible worlds at which $q$ is true and which are similar to the actual world to a
liberal degree under a metaphysically neutral respect, then $p$ is true at every possible world.

The temptation might arise to argue in favour of this latter entailment from counterfactual inevitability to truth at all possible worlds based on the remark that in the metaphysical context, the minimum degree of similarity can be extremely low, thereby including the sharing of any property, including trivial properties such as \textit{being one} or \textit{being an individual}. Thus, the requirement that, in order for the counterfactual conditional to be true, the consequent has to be true at all \textit{adequately similar} possible worlds at which the antecedent is true would be reduced to the requirement that the consequent is true at all the possible worlds at which the antecedent is true, because any similarity would be enough and any couple of worlds share properties, such as \textit{being one} or even \textit{being a world}. In counterfactual inevitability (\textit{for every $q$, $q > p$ is true}) the position of the antecedent is universally quantified. It would turn out that if $p$ is counterfactually inevitable, then $p$ is true at all the possible worlds at which at least a value of $q$ is true. For any world at least a value of $q$ (\textit{i.e.}, at least a proposition) is presumably true at it. Thus—it might be tempting to conclude—if $p$ is counterfactually inevitable, then $p$ is true at all possible worlds.

However, this line of argument in favour of the entailment from counterfactual inevitability to truth at all possible worlds should be resisted. Even in metaphysical contexts, it is not the case that any similarity with the actual world is sufficient to be in the domain of worlds, among those at which the antecedent of the counterfactual is true, which matter for the truth conditions of the counterfactual conditional. A major methodological component of metaphysics (and of many other subfields of philosophy) is constituted by \textit{thought experiments}. In two famous thought experiments, we imagine for example that two indistinguishable spheres are at a one-meter distance from each other (as in Black, 1952); or that the wood planks constituting a ship are replaced one by one (as in the literature about the ship of Theseus).

As Williamson (2007, ch. 6) has convincingly shown, assessing a thought experiment in metaphysics (and in philosophy in general) is tantamount to assessing a counterfactual conditional: the antecedent is a description of the scenario that we are asked to imagine, while the consequent is a claim of philosophical interest. In assessing the counterfactual, we evaluate whether the claim of philosophical interest would be true or false, if the counterfactual scenario were the case. There is nothing trivial in this evaluation. \textit{We should not be too} liberal in selecting, among the possible worlds at which the antecedent is true, those at which the consequent has to be true, in order for the counterfactual conditional to be true. We should only focus on those possible worlds that are significantly and substantially similar to the actual world. It is true that in metaphysics we should be \textit{somewhat} liberal about the degree of similarity and neutral about the respects of similarity, but this does not mean that \textit{anything goes}.

Inasmuch as it is false that anything goes, counterfactual inevitability does not entail truth at all possible worlds and the conception of metaphysical necessity as counterfactual inevitability does not collapse into the conception of metaphysical necessity as truth at all possible worlds. The former conception has the limits that
I have already underlined in §2 and is particularly unable to confer any unity to metaphysical modality.

The different and stronger conception of metaphysical necessity as truth at all possible worlds does not fare better than counterfactual inevitability from this viewpoint; it is not clear at all what kind of unity it may confer to metaphysical modality. Another serious, connected defect is that the limits of the domain of possible worlds are not independently settled. Which kind of limit does the attribute “possible” in “possible world” express? It risks expressing the fact that at all possible worlds all the absolute/metaphysical necessities hold true, and that at no possible world does any absolute/metaphysical impossibility hold true. If the purpose is to draw the limits of the entire domain of possible worlds, surely the only kind of modality that can turn out useful is the absolute one. If this were the case, the conception of absolute/metaphysical necessity as truth at all possible worlds would not be explicative at all. First, this conception does not pinpoint any unitary source of metaphysical modality; second, at the end of the day, it presupposes metaphysical modality.

The only hope for avoiding this outcome is the adoption of a reductive theory of possible worlds, which characterises possible worlds in a non-modal way. In David Lewis’ modal realism (Lewis, 1986), possible worlds are giant individuals, which are characterised by being closed under relations of spatio-temporal distance. This characterisation of possible worlds does not presuppose metaphysical modality. Nonetheless, even if you shoulder modal realism’s heavy ontological costs, you obtain no unitary account of absolute/metaphysical modality. From this viewpoint it is unsurprising that Lewis—as far as I know—never employed the phrase “metaphysical modality” in presenting his own theories, neither in On the Plurality of Worlds nor in any of his other works. A radical reductionist about modality, Lewis thought that any modal claim should be paraphrased away, in favour of quantifications over worlds (in the case of de dicto modalities) or parts of worlds (in the case of de re modalities). For him, absolute necessity and possibility can be reduced to quantification over worlds and their parts, where worlds are characterised non-modally. Absolute modality has no special source, and is not even especially bound to metaphysics as a discipline.

Lewis was au fond sceptical of modalities; according to him, modalities can be treated in an acceptable way only by replacing them with non-modal notions. As shown in §2 and convincingly argued in Williamson (2016, §2), the main reasons to be sceptical of metaphysical modality are also reasons to be sceptical of objective modalities in general. Thus, inasmuch as Lewis was sceptical of modalities in general, it is unsurprising that he had no real use for the concept of metaphysical modality. We can interpret metaphysical modality in terms of Lewis’ modal realism. In this way, if we are willing to shoulder the ontological costs of modal realism, we obtain a real, non-circular explanation of metaphysical necessity in terms of what occurs at a totality of certain individuals, with certain well-defined features (namely,

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7 Perhaps because you think that its explanatory benefits outbalance the costs, in coherence with Lewis’ typical cost-benefit approach to philosophy. See Nolan (2015) on this matter.
8 See for example Beebee and MacBride (2015) on this point.
Metaphysical modality, without possible worlds

closure under spatio-temporal distance). However, once we have made this move, metaphysical necessity no longer has any role to play.

Moreover, it should be observed that Lewis’ reductionism about modality is notoriously silent about all the necessities that do not concern spatio-temporal entities. Presumably, logical truths and mathematical truths hold true at all possible worlds, that is, at all spatio-temporal closed individuals. However, how does modal realism explain these logical and mathematical necessities? Numbers or sets are not parts of possible worlds, inasmuch as any part of a possible world is at some spatio-temporal distance from all other parts of that world, and numbers and sets do not plausibly participate in any relation of spatio-temporal distance. Thus, the absolute necessity of logical and mathematical truths is only assumed (and not explained) by Lewis’ modal realism.

Lewis was also a radical Humean, and consequently—pace some exegetical controversies about this (see for example Buras, 2006; Nencha 2017; Paul, 2006)—an adversary of necessary connections and essences. This means that on the one hand, logical and mathematical necessities are simply assumed to hold true at all possible worlds, without any real explanation. On the other hand, it is unclear how many other absolute necessities modal realism admits and accounts for. For a Humean, does anything hold true at all possible worlds and (in contrast to logical and mathematical truths) really relate to how possible worlds are, according to modal realism? Not many interesting examples come to mind, again confirming Lewis’ coherence in his own overall approach in refraining from speaking of metaphysical necessity.

Arguably, some instances of metaphysical necessity are consequences of the tenets of modal realism itself. For example, inasmuch as possible worlds are spatio-temporal closed individuals, there is no empty world at which nothing exists (see Lewis, 1986, pp. 73–74); consequently, it is true at all possible worlds that at least one entity exists. Thus, it is absolutely necessary that at least one entity exists. However, the resulting conception of absolute/metaphysical modality ends up being quite disappointing, given that a) it fails to explain the absolute necessity of logical and mathematical truths and b) it only works for some instances of metaphysical necessities that are the outcomes of modal realism itself.

This overall picture suggests that modal realism offers no real benefit for the purpose of explicating absolute/metaphysical modality, coherent with the fact that it is a tool to get rid of modality in general, by analysing it in non-modal terms. Thus, we are back to the other, non-reductive theories of possible worlds, which have no ambition to get rid of modality (as well as metaphysical modality), inasmuch as the same notion of possible world is for them intrinsically and unavoidably modal. However, this also means that possible worlds are those where absolute/metaphysical necessities hold true and where absolute/metaphysical impossibilities do not hold true.

It is therefore doubtful that any explanatory analysis is obtained, and even more doubtful that we obtain any explanation of what metaphysical modality is. Possible worlds can be perhaps expected to be in a sense explanatory with respect to various concepts of modalities (including metaphysical modality) and in particular to their
logic, if accessibility relations are countenanced. There is a well-known correspondence between the formal features of the accessibility relation and the axioms of modal logic; thus, many theorists of possible worlds would argue that the formal features of the accessibility relation among worlds for a certain variety of modality explain the fact that a certain axiom holds for this variety of modality.

The attribution of this kind of explanatory duty to possible worlds is also controversial, but we do not need to enter these controversies. Non-reductive theories of possible worlds may be useful to represent or even explain the logic of metaphysical modality, but, inasmuch as metaphysical modality is truth at every possible world, they are unhelpful in drawing the limit between what is metaphysically possible and what is not. This is especially clear if impossible worlds are countenanced. It is beyond this paper’s scope to assess the merits and the difficulties of the doctrine of impossible worlds. However, it should be noted that if there are good reasons to think that impossible worlds also exist, then again the limit between possible and impossible worlds risks consisting in the fact that possible worlds respect absolute/metaphysical necessities, while impossible worlds are such that at each of them at least one absolute/metaphysical necessity is false. Again, this means that this limit is assumed and not analysed or explained by non-reductive theories of possible worlds. This holds true even independently of any commitment to impossible worlds, which only highlight the problem of delimiting the domain of possible worlds, inasmuch as—if impossible worlds also exist—there are other worlds from which the possible ones have to be distinguished.

Thus, on one hand, non-reductive theories of possible worlds do not explain what absolute/metaphysical modality—and in particular the limit between what is metaphysically possible and what is not such—consists in. On the other hand, in the main reductive theory of possible worlds (namely, Lewis’ modal realism), many absolute necessities (e.g., logical and mathematical necessities) are not really accounted for, and there are few and rather uninteresting other ones. Consequently, there are good reasons to think that the theories of possible worlds (both non-reductive and reductive ones) are not really helpful in characterising metaphysical modality. They do not bring any advantage over the conception of absolute/metaphysical necessity as counterfactual inevitability, and this conception is in turn already lacking, inasmuch as it does not confer any kind of unity to absolute/metaphysical necessity.

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10 In the literature about impossible worlds, there are several controversial attempts to draw the distinction between possible and impossible worlds, usually focused on logical possibility and not on metaphysical possibility. See Berto and Jago (2019, §1.4).
6 Conclusion: Terminological Issues

As seen in §2, the conception of metaphysical modality as absolute modality has an advantage regarding the dialectics with the modal sceptic, inasmuch as there is no specific reason to be sceptical of absolute objective modality. Perhaps there are good reasons to be sceptical of objective modalities in general (but these reasons are beyond the purpose of this paper). Nonetheless, once we have admitted some objective modalities in general, absolute/metaphysical modality can be easily characterised on the basis of them. However, the absolutist conception of metaphysical modality does not confer any unity to it, as it is especially evident once absoluteness is analysed in terms of counterfactual inevitability.

The general problem of the absolutist conception seems to be its blindness to the sources or grounds of metaphysical modality. As seen in §4, the conception of metaphysical modality as modality grounded by essences directly addresses this problem, precisely because essences are pinpointed as the grounds at stake. We can doubt the existence of essences (and the general defence of essentialism is also beyond the purpose of this paper), but if they exist, they are excellent candidates for the role of grounds for absolute modalities.

However, we have found that for conceptual/analytic and logical modalities the idea that they are grounded by essences leads us to problematic commitments. In general, essences seem unfit to ground de dicto modalities. In some cases (e.g., for logical necessities) and in open contrast with the absolutist conception, the essentialist might concede that they are absolute, but not metaphysical. The essentialist might try to enforce the typical essentialist metametaphysical stance, according to which metaphysics is the study of essences, so that where essences are not involved, the attribute “metaphysical” is misapplied. Once this position is assumed, the essentialist account of metaphysical modality cannot fail, inasmuch as any instance of necessity where essences are not involved becomes ipso facto non-metaphysical, precisely because essences are not involved.

This move risks being crafty and unconvincing on the part of the essentialist; metaphysics is a really practised discipline, with a long historical pedigree. Nobody is allowed to decide out of the blue which doctrines or notions deserve to be called “metaphysical”. Deciding it out of the blue is an especially deviant methodology if the purpose is to show that a certain conception of metaphysical x (in our case, metaphysical modality) is preferable to other rival conceptions of metaphysical x. The essentialist is dialectically not allowed to rule out all the counterexamples to her own conception of metaphysical modality by simply affirming that these counterexamples do not belong to metaphysics in the light of her own essentialist metametaphysics (to which the adversaries will unlikely subscribe—and in any case, are not forced to do so).

There seems to be no way to reconcile how absolutists and essentialists construe metaphysical modality. Here, I can do no more than try to assess who, between the two parties, is more entitled to speak about metaphysical modality or more precisely,
to use the corresponding lexicon, that is, expressions in the vicinity of “it is metaphysically necessary that” and “it is metaphysically possible that”. This assessment applies a quite simple rule of thumb, which I think to be widely applicable: a philosophically disputed term, i.e. a term that is employed by two or more philosophical parties in distinct and irreconcilable ways, is more appropriately used by that party (or those parties) that has (have) no adequate and already established alternative term for the same concept. The other parties can be content with the alternative terms, and avoid using the disputed ones: this will prevent confusions and (in the specific case) the misleading illusion that a single concept of metaphysical modality is discussed in the debate.

As far as absolutists are concerned, their jargon has two equivalent, denominations for modality: “absolute” and “metaphysical”. The adjective “absolute” adequately serves the purpose of expressing the notion at stake and is free of specific and potentially distracting connotations that—in contrast—the adjective “metaphysical” unavoidably carries. The existence of multiple labels for the same concept is a waste of linguistic resources. This waste is not innocuous, precisely inasmuch as one of the labels (“metaphysical”) has diverging and potentially misleading connotations.

More specifically, it is methodologically inadvisable to use “metaphysical” for conceptual/analytic, logical and mathematical necessities and possibilities, unless we accept a commitment to an underlying, substantial doctrine that motivates this lexical choice. If we want to underline their absoluteness, we can call them “absolute”. If we want to emphasise their sources, we cannot prescind from a theory about their sources. If we accept a commitment to analyticity as a source of necessity, those necessities that are so originated can be called “analytic”. If we think that mathematics is an autonomous source of necessities, the ensuing necessities can be called “mathematical”.

The usage of “metaphysical” for necessities and possibilities on the part of the essentialist is arguably more justifiable from the viewpoint of the rule of thumb for philosophically disputed terms I sketched above. While the absolutist has “absolute” as an alternative at her disposal, “essential” is not a good replacement for what the essentialist wants to express with “metaphysical”. As shown in §4, since essentiality is always perspectival with respect to the bearers of certain essences, the essentialist needs a general term for qualifying those necessities that are grounded by some essences. There is no alternative, established label at the essentialist’s disposal. Moreover, the usage of the term is justified by the fact that the concept of essence is undeniably central in the practice and the history of metaphysics.

This does not force the essentialist to be radical and to claim that all the modalities discussed in metaphysics are ipso facto grounded by essences. The essentialist needs specific arguments for this claim, and (as shown in §4) this is rather implausible in many cases. In the case of those modalities that belong to metaphysics but are not grounded by essences (in some of our examples, the necessity of the transitivity of parthood and the necessity of supervenience claims), there is no point in insisting that they are metaphysical because they belong to metaphysics. In most cases, there is no need to clarify through a specific adjective or predicate that a certain claim (including modal claims) belongs to a particular subfield of philosophy. If this need
emerges, it can be served precisely by the predicate “to belong to metaphysics” and its derivatives (e.g., “belonging to metaphysics”).

This allows us to finally reserve expressions such as “metaphysical modality”, “metaphysical necessity” and “metaphysical possibility” for modalities grounded by essences. It is important to reiterate that, as I emphasised in §1, this proposal is not committed to any specific example of metaphysical necessity or possibility. Thus, the claim that “metaphysical”, when referring to modalities, is better reserved for what is grounded by essences for general reasons concerning the usage of philosophically disputed terms does not commit us to the specific essentialist claims that—say—belonging to a certain species is an essential feature of every organism or that a human being is essentially rational. These essences, if they indeed exist, would be sources of necessities. Every dog would be such that it is metaphysically necessary that it is a dog; every human being would be such that it is metaphysically necessary that he or she is rational. However, the characterisation of metaphysical modality as modality grounded by essences is not committed to any specific identification of essences.

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