

Some Comments on Susana Badiola's "Necessity and the *A priori*: a Traditional Link Revisited"

Saul Kripke's defense of the necessary a posteriori changed the landscape of these discussions fundamentally. In very general terms, *Naming and Necessity* has been understood by many of us to allow for a principled distinction between metaphysics and epistemology; a distinction between the study of the world itself and the study of how we come to know the world. Kripke's arguments undermine a broadly Kantian approach to philosophy according to which, we are unable to know the world apart from our experiential or epistemic apparatus. According to Kant, knowledge of necessity could not be derived from experience. Against Kant, Kripke points out that there are necessary truths which can only be known a posteriori, e.g. "water = H₂O"

While acknowledging the difference between necessity in the epistemic and metaphysical senses, Professor Badiola claims that all necessity has its source in language. She turns to a discussion of Kant and Strawson to support this view. As she notes, according to Kant, the *a priori* is linked to necessity and to the intelligibility of possible experience. This connection is the subject of her paper. She points out how Strawson develops this idea by trying, for example in *Individuals* to carve out the space of possibly intelligible experiences as a guide to the business of metaphysics. She points out that Strawson's approach has a Kantian flavor. He presents it as a scheme-dependant ontology, meaning that the philosopher's task is to uncover the ontological categories presupposed by the conceptual scheme in question. Our ordinary way of talking and thinking serve as the target for his analysis. Thus, like the ordinary language philosophers, Strawson rests the authority of his claims on the authority of everyday experience, language, and thought.

The Strawsonian project of descriptive metaphysics shares important characteristics in common with ordinary language philosophy but it also shares in the realism of the early Russell and Moore. This realism (at least with respect to necessity) is likely to be the point where Professor Badiola parts ways with Strawson. It strikes me that Professor Badiola's attempt to see necessity as a matter of language alone runs counter to, for example, Strawson's defense (together with Grice) of our commonsense grasp of analyticity (and by extension necessity) against Quinean skepticism.

One point of concern which may be helpful to discuss here is raised by the following passage from Professor Badiola's paper, where she writes:

"Presumably the limits of what can be conceived are given by the character of the traits themselves, and not by the limitations of the subject who does the thinking. In other words, it is not that I lack imagination to conceive of a different world, but that there is a point at which those possible worlds would cease to be coherent, i.e., intelligible."

The relationship between conceivability and possibility/necessity is worth further reflection. Conceivability may well be a philosophical guide to the possible (as long as the philosopher remains in the armchair). And it strikes me that Professor Badiola, should be happy to acknowledge, that the limit of our power to conceive is relevant to the kind of guidance that conceivability can provide. So, for example, there is a clear difference between what is conceivable for ordinary finite agents and for an omniscient agent. However, even among agents with finite knowledge, we can distinguish between levels of inferential capacity and levels of access to information. While none of us has all the facts or is logically omniscient, we seem to differ widely with respect to our power to see implications and to analyze concepts. In general terms it seems unlikely that we share an equal level of power to conceive.

But the issues are deeper. If, for example I insist that I can conceive philosophical zombies coherently or without contradiction, can I be certain that I am merely saying that such beings exist, in the same way I could say that I can kick a regular seven sided polyhedron around the backyard? Do I have to know about geometry before I can trust my powers to conceive polyhedrons? Does David Chalmers need to know about neuroscience before conceiving of his zombie twin?

There are other problems with using conceivability as a guide to possibility. As with my impossible polyhedron or my zombie twin, I can imagine scenarios or stories where impossible objects play some role. Graham Priest's beautiful paper about Sylvan's box reminds us that conceivability is not only a guide to possibility, but also to impossible possible worlds.

Even if we see conceivability as a guide to possibility, it is only a guide to a restricted kind of possibility or necessity. More significantly for the argument of Professor Badiola's paper is the relevance of distinguishing different types of necessity. Early on in the paper she acknowledges the distinction between epistemic and metaphysical necessity but she later claims that:

"The source of necessity is not reality but language. And the cluster of concepts associated with necessity (intelligibility, language games...) seems to have just as little ontological weight."

It might be that there is some kind of necessity which results from the structure of our language, certain kinds of moves in the language game are permitted and others are forbidden. But notice that grammatical errors, in all their glorious erroneousness, are *possible*. The fact that there are right and wrong uses of language indicates that we can distinguish possible grammatical errors from impossible sentences. It is an error in the game of chess to move the pawn three spaces forward. It is impossible in the game of chess to both win and not play. There are grammatically incorrect sentences of Flemish, but there are also sentences which cannot be uttered: Sentences which are metaphysically impossible (those, for example which are not identical with themselves) and sentences which are merely nomologically impossible (sentences that require the lips to move at speeds faster than light speed) etc. It is difficult to make real sense of the idea of language or a language game as a source for necessity in any general sense. Given that we can distinguish errors in the language from impossible moves in the language, we can conclude that while grammar and meaning might be a source of a certain kind of necessity, it is unlikely to be the source of, for example, logical, nomological, metaphysical, and I would argue even mathematical forms of necessity. I doubt that we can even make a strong case that language is a source of conceptual necessity.

It was common in the twentieth century for philosophers to claim that modal judgments simply depend on our ways of talking; our conventional definitions for terms. Bachelors are unmarried males, for example, because we say they are... water is H₂O because we say so. However, since there are modal facts about meanings and language, modality is not likely to be grounded (or have its source) in meaning or language. For example, it's not possible for a man to be married and correctly described as a bachelor. Correct use of a language implies possible uses that are incorrect. The very idea of correct and incorrect, presupposes modal concepts that are independent of the rules of the game in question.

In conclusion, there is a Strawsonian sense in which our grasp of topics like necessity outruns our language. Consider, to use E.J. Lowe's example, the sense in which we can understand the fact that it is possible for a human to run a mile in under 4 minutes. Notice that this possibility itself, and even, I'd argue, our understanding of it, doesn't depend on the conventional meanings of 'mile' 'minute', or 'run'.

Lowe, E. J. (2006) *The Four-Category Ontology: A Metaphysical Foundation for Natural Science* Oxford: Oxford University Press

Priest, Graham (1997), *Sylvan's Box: A Short Story and Ten Morals*. Source: *Notre Dame J. Formal Logic* Volume 38, Number 4 573-582.

Strawson P.F. (1959) *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*, Methuen, London