

A Minimalist View of Necessity

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Necessity has been a nagging problem in the philosophy of language and philosophical logic through the first half of the 20th century. On the one hand, it is hard to make sense of necessity from the naturalistic, empirical, non-metaphysical perspective of Wittgenstein, Carnap, the Vienna Circle, and many others. On the other hand, logical truths seem to be necessary, after all. Moreover, C. I. Lewis and others developed modal logic, which seems important for understanding, not only our talk about necessity, but also propositional attitudes and other structures that seem to involve operators on embedded sentences.

Quine distinguished between *essentialism* and *analyticity* (*From A Logical Point of View*). The former is a metaphysical position that seems to be needed for a full-blown modal logic, but would be unattractive to any empiricist or naturalist. The latter is an attempt to have necessity without metaphysics, based simply on the theory of meaning. It is this last-ditch attempt to explain necessity in terms of meaning that is destroyed in “Two Dogmas of Empiricism”

It seems, however, that Quine’s was a pyrrhic victory. The notion of necessity was not actually abandoned. Quine’s claim that quantified modal logic requires Aristotelian essentialism was undermined by Føllesdal’s genuine singular terms and by Kripke’s rigid designators. And modal logic, understood in terms of possible worlds, seems to have overcome most of Quine’s suspicions. Possible worlds are ubiquitous, not only in the philosophy of language and the philosophy of logic, but in virtually all branches of philosophy. Necessity and possibility have gone from untenable bits of metaphysics to clear concepts in terms of which most of everything else is to be understood.

There are a number of concepts of possible worlds, and although some of the applications of possible world semantics are largely independent of metaphysics, not all are. Kripke claimed that the “distant planets” picture of possible worlds was a mistake. I agree. The extreme version of this view is David Lewis’s notion of possible worlds as concrete entities. This view is, I argue, a result of Quine’s rejection of Aristotelian essentialism and the resulting distrust of modality and of intensional entities in general. But this mistrust is unfounded, if we are willing to accept the existence of genuine or rigid singular terms (à la Føllesdal or Kripke) and a moderate form of essentialism.

I take possible worlds to be abstract entities, akin to those postulated in science to help us clarify and understand the world: formal tools, not explanatory ones. Further, I argue that propositions are abstract entities used to encode conditions on objects and properties: truth-conditions (for

utterances) satisfaction-conditions (for desires), etc. This minimalist view on possible worlds and propositions meets the principle of parsimony, it provides a robust view of necessity, of the content (“subject matter”) of utterances and mental states, and it is immune to Quine’s claims.