An Account of Subjunctive or Metaphysical Necessity

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17/02/2013

This is an outline of an account of the notion of subjunctive or metaphysical necessity, a notion made salient by Kripke in his great work *Naming and Necessity*. The account will be developed at length in a book to be called *Necessity and Propositions*. This outline will be sketchy and dogmatic, presupposing familiarity with the issues discussed. It should be able to convey some of my main ideas, which may be suggestive and interesting to people thinking about these issues.

A proposition is necessary iff it is implied by (or is itself) a proposition which is both inherently counterfactually invariant and true.

The '(or is itself)' may be omitted on the grounds that propositions imply themselves, but having it there makes for greater perspicuity.

In section 1 I will briefly explain the notion of inherent counterfactual invariance. In section 2 I will explain why necessity is closed under implication. In section 3 will I give a brief exposition of my conception of propositions and naming (for now: a proposition is a propositional sign together with its meaning, where meaning involves both internal and external factors). In section 4 I will give a brief discussion of how conceptual connections and other concept-formations can underlie counterfactual invariance and other attributes of logical interest. I will finish in section 5 with some methodological remarks about the indefiniteness of key notions in the account.

Before section 1, three preliminary remarks on the nature of the account:

(1) The account as outlined here deals with the notion of necessity as an attribute of propositions, and may straightforwardly be extended to the operatorial form 'It is necessary that ….', provided what goes in the blank is a closed sentence (i.e. without free variables). Other subjunctive or metaphysical modal concepts, such as possibility, impossibility and contingency, can be defined in terms of necessity (and negation) in the usual way. The relation of the account to questions of *de re* modality and quantification into modal contexts will be discussed in the book, but not here.

(2) The account makes no special claim about what makes necessary propositions *true* – it concerns only what makes them necessary, and what makes them necessary is not supposed to be their being made true in any particular way. (Contrast the doctrine that a proposition is necessary iff it is analytic, i.e. true in virtue of meaning.)

As a result, we can follow Kripke in allowing different necessary propositions to have

different epistemological statuses – some are *a priori*, others *a posteriori*, empirical.

In contemporary philosophy one often hears loose talk to the effect that Kripke and others showed that any attempt to 'locate necessity in language and thought' (or some relevantly similar phrase) will not work. But really this only applies to accounts which aim to explain necessity by means of a special kind of truthmaking, where the truthmakers are internal features of language or thought.

(3) I am attempting to give a non-circular account of the notion of subjunctive necessity as it applies to propositions, but I am making no attempt to reduce modal concepts in general to non-modal concepts. The notion of 'counterfactual invariance' used in the account is explained in terms of our systems for describing scenarios, and makes general reference to the counterfactual scenario descriptions permitted by such a system. That is, not just the counterfactual scenario descriptions which the system is actually used to produce during its career, but also descriptions it *can* produce but never does.

This sort of modal conception is of the same kind as our conception of the possible configurations of a mechanical apparatus.

The point of view taken here is that the notion of subjunctive necessity as it applies to propositions is just one notion among many which involve modality – it is *not* reckoned as 'the fundamental modal concept'. The point of studying it would be better conveyed by calling it: a concept of interest in the logico-philosophical study of language and thought.

1. The notion of inherent counterfactual invariance

In our system of language and thought, we have a technique for describing how things might be, and a technique for describing alternative ways things could have been. The latter I call our 'technique for describing counterfactual scenarios', and I call the descriptions produced using it 'counterfactual scenario descriptions'.

(To see that there are two different techniques here, consider that I cannot truly say that the room I am sitting in now could be bigger than it actually is, but that I can truly say that the room I am sitting in now could have been bigger than it actually is.)

Certain propositions are such that, if we believe them, we use them but not their negations in our counterfactual scenario descriptions. These I call 'inherently counterfactually invariant'.

Now consider the true ones of those, and consider the class of propositions implied by these true ones (which, since propositions imply themselves, will themselves be members of the class). My proposal is that the last considered class is the class of necessary truths.

Now to explain what I mean by 'inherently' in 'inherently counterfactually invariant'.

There are propositions which are counterfactually invariant on some ways of believing them, but not on others. For example: 'Either I have three chairs, or Hesperus is Phosphorus'. If I believe that Hesperus is not Phosphorus, but believe this disjunction because I believe that I have three chairs, then I will be prepared to produce counterfactual scenario descriptions involving its negation, since I allow the proposition 'I have three chairs' to vary and disbelieve the other disjunct. If, however, I believe that Hesperus is Phosphorus, then I will not let the disjunction vary, since I don't let 'Hesperus is Phosphorus' vary.

Propositions such as this disjunction I do not call 'inherently counterfactually invariant', since there are ways of holding them true on which they are variable. Propositions such as 'Hesperus is Phosphorus', or '2 + 2 = 4', or 'Bachelors are unmarried', on the other hand, are inherently counterfactually invariant.

2. The closure of necessity under implication

Why do I say 'A proposition is necessary iff it *is implied by* (or is itself) a proposition which is both inherently counterfactually invariant and true' instead of simply 'A proposition is necessary iff it is both inherently counterfactually invariant and true'?

'Hesperus is Phosphorus', a paradigm necessary proposition, is inherently counterfactually invariant: given that we believe that Hesperus is Phosphorus, we do not apply 'Hesperus is not Phosphorus' in any counterfactual scenario descriptions – i.e., we do not talk about scenarios in which 'Hesperus is distinct from Phosphorus'. It is also true. Cases like this give us no counterexamples to the simpler, closure-free account.

But consider again the proposition from the previous section, 'Either I have three chairs, or Hesperus is Phosphorus'. Since Hesperus is Phosphorus, and this is a necessary truth, this disjunction is a necessary truth also. But it is not *inherently* counterfactually invariant: it is possible to believe it is true while disbelieving 'Hesperus is Phosphorus' but believing 'I have three chairs'. A believer in this latter proposition can, the falsity of their belief aside, properly apply the negation of the disjunction in counterfactual scenario descriptions.

By contrast, my account, on which necessity is closed under implication, gives the right answer here: the disjunction in question *is* implied by a proposition which is both inherently counterfactually invariant and true, namely 'Hesperus is Phosphorus'.

3. A conception of propositions and naming

A proposition is a propositional sign together with its internal meaning – its position in the language system to which it belongs – and any external projective relations it bears to reality. (I say 'projective relations' rather than 'referential relations' because, e.g., 'John' used here and on Twin Earth may both fail to refer, and so be alike as regards referential relations, they as it were aim at different places, that is, they bear different external

projective relations to reality.)

The internal meaning of a name is an individual concept. Individual concepts to not determine their referents, as Frege said his senses did, nor can they be analysed or given by means of definite descriptions or clusters thereof. In this way, the notion of individual concepts is invulnerable to Kripke's arguments against descriptivism.

Despite using the term 'internal meaning' here, I am open to the view that in *semantics* as the study of public meanings in language, or that which one must have implicit knowledge of in order to master a bit of language, there is nothing to assign to a name except a referent, if it has one. This form of Millianism is not inconsistent with my view, as I don't mind if someone says that what I call 'internal meanings' are pragmatic features of language, or even that they are not properly called meanings at all. All I require is the plausible idea that, when we use proper names, we use them in a system of language – they play a role in this system. This role may be something more specific than a public meaning. It must be noted, however, that the identity of a proposition, as I use the concept 'proposition', will in that case depend on more than the *semantics* (in this minimal sense of 'semantics') of its components.

The idea that individual concepts do not determine their referents is a form of semantic externalism. We can think of concepts as casting nets: what, if anything, is caught in the net depends partly on its internal constitution, but also on where it is cast.

Individual concepts are something like systematic uses of names, although not every individual concept needs to have a name attached to it. Individual concepts are concepts of particular objects, so names are rigid designators. In every counterfactual scenario description where the name is used with some given internal meaning, i.e. in connection with some particular individual concept, any extension it has will always be reckoned as one and the same individual, since individual concepts are concepts of particular individuals. This is perfectly compatible with the fact that the same concept in different environments can have a different extension – to think otherwise would be to conflate environments or contexts of use with counterfactual scenarios.

The solution to Frege's puzzle, then, is that 'Hesperus is Hesperus' and 'Hesperus is Phosphorus' are different propositions with different internal meanings. 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' are tied to different individual concepts. If they are connected, the connection, while it will be counterfactually invariant, will be empirically defeasible. Hence 'Hesperus is Phosphorus' is *a posteriori*, while 'Hesperus is Hesperus' is *a priori*.

Internal meanings can be carved up at different granularities for different purposes. Our notions of meaning, of a proposition, of a concept, etc., are ways of sorting symbol-uses into bundles based on their systematic features. In this lies the key to the solution of Kripke's puzzle about belief, and many other difficulties in analytic philosophy.

Kripke explicitly says that the 'believes that' locution used in expressing his puzzle is to be taken as specifying a belief content. For us, this is something like the internal meaning of a proposition together with any external projective relations it bears to reality.

When we feel the pull of saying, based on the part Pierre's story where he is in France, that he believes that London is pretty, we are operating at a certain granularity, at which his 'Londres est jolie' is counted as having the same meaning as our 'London is pretty'. Then when he comes to London and forms an unconnected individual concept of it tied to the word 'London', it becomes expedient to move to a finer granularity, at which 'Londres est jolie' and 'London is pretty' as used by Pierre have different meanings (instead of having importantly different instances of a single meaning, as we would have to say if forced to stay at the courser granularity, where we would have to mark the difference in some way other than a straightforward meaning-distinction).

Pierre's beliefs 'Londres est jolie' and 'London is not pretty' are internally consistent, but holding fixed their external projective relations, they could not both be true. This property, which could be called external inconsistency, cannot (in general) be discovered *a priori*, and so Pierre is not guilty of any failure of rationality here.

4. Types of conceptual connection (and other concept-formations)

It is obvious that propositions are not given their inherent-counterfactual-variance statuses as it were one by one; for example, it seems like 'If John (exists and) is a cat, then John is an animal' and 'All cats are animals' owe their inherent counterfactual invariance to the very same features of our language/thought system. We can describe the relevent feature for these two cases by saying that there is a counterfactually invariant, empirically defeasible conceptual connection between the 'cat' concept involed in these propositions, and the 'animal' concept.

This leads to the recognition of three other kinds of connections between concepts (and, more generally, other concept-formations).

(1) Counterfactually invariant, empirically indefeasible connections, such as that between 'bachelor' and 'unmarried'.

(2) Counterfactually variable, empirically defeasible connections, such as that between 'human' and 'dying before the age of 150'.

(3) Counterfactually variable, empirically indefeasible connections, such as that between 'Jack the ripper' and 'murderer'. (The name 'Jack the Ripper' was stipulated to refer to whoever committed a series of murders.)

Examples of the necessary *a posteriori* have their special status in virtue of concept-formations which are empirically defeasible but counterfactually invariant, and contingent

a priori propositions have their special status in virtue of empirically indefeasible but counterfactually variable ones.

5. Methodological remarks about indefiniteness

Indefiniteness comes into our notion of subjunctive necessity and its ingredients at several points. I will mention some of the most salient.

There is indefiniteness in the extent of the concept 'proposition' and the concept 'propositional sign'. The Tractarian idea of the essence of propositionality, or the general form of a proposition, is a chimera. This insight is developed in the *Investigations* in section 92, sections 105 – 108, section 114 and surrounding passages.

There is indefiniteness in the concept of 'counterfactual invariance': some things which are definitely propositions may be such that there is nothing to say whether they are counterfactually invariant or not – i.e. borderline cases.

There is indefiniteness in the individuation of propositions and proposition-meanings: two things which are both propositions may be such that there is nothing to say whether they are the same proposition or not, and two different propositions (different propositional signs in use) may be such that there is nothing to say whether they mean the same or not. (The fact that we individuate propositions, proposition-meanings (or belief-contents), concepts etc. at different granularities is one thing, but the idea of granularity is not supposed to explain away all indefiniteness in the individuation of these things.)

The attitude taken here to borderline or unclear cases of counterfactual invariance contrasts sharply with a lot of what Kripke says in *Naming and Necessity*. The idea that we might have intuitions, for example, to the effect that 'Queen Elizabeth II was born of Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon and King George VI' is a necessary truth, rather than a contingent one, is something I think we should be very wary of.

It is one thing to say that intuition is required to see that '2 + 2 = 4' is necessary, 'I have a hat' contingent. But the 'intuiting' in these clear, paradigm cases has a different character: we proceed quite surely, insofar as we understand the question at all. With cases like that of the Queen, it is rather as if we were straining to make out something very faint, hearkening or trying to be receptive to something. And the nature of what we are intuiting about is left mysterious.

My view is that unclear, arguable cases such as that of the Queen lie in a region, or regions, in which the necessary/contingent distinction is quite pointless - when describing such cases, it is not going to be important to say whether they are necessary or contingent. The whole point of the distinction lies in its application to clear cases.

Compare: some people are indoors, some people are not. This distinction obviously has a

point. But in a case where someone is on a fairly enclosed veranda, or standing in their front doorway, it is pointless to bang on about whether they are indoors or not. 'Intuition' is obviously beside the point as well.

(There is an objection which could be raised about this, connected with the idea of *de re* modality. Above, I have been discussing the Queen case as though the issue were about the modal status of some *proposition*, such as 'Queen Elizabeth II was born of Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon and King George VI'. This construal may be resisted, on grounds something like these: Kripke is discussing the question of whether the Queen, that very woman, was necessarily born of Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon and King Georve VI or not. This is not, on the face of it, a question about the status of some proposition, or anything to do with language or concepts. And so I cannot construe this issue as being about a proposition in the way I have been, at least not without further ado. This will be dealt with in the book.)

I will conclude this section, and with it this outline, with two analogies from Wittgenstein which are helpful in connection with this theme of indefiniteness:

> The use of the words 'proposition', 'language', etc. has the haziness of the normal use of concept-words in our language. To think this makes them unusable, or ill-adapted to their purpose, would be like wanting to say 'the warmth this stove gives is no use, because you can't feel where it begins and where it ends'.

from *Philosophical Grammar*, Part 1. p. 120.

> It is essential to logic to draw boundaries, but no such boundaries are drawn in the language we speak. But this doesn’t mean that logic represents language incorrectly, or that it represents an ideal language. Its task is to portray a colourful, blurred reality as a pen-and-ink drawing.

from *The Big Typescript*, p. 144.