

Contingency, Metaphysical Error, and Modal Truth by Convention

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I. INTRODUCTION

Modal conventionalism is the view that our linguistic conventions ground, and explain, the necessity of necessary truths. Various accounts of how conventions manage to do this have been defended.¹ All such forms of conventionalism are threatened by the objection that convention is simply incapable of grounding necessity as convention is itself contingent. Given that our conventions might have been different, or might not have existed at all, whereas necessary truths could not have failed to be true, our conventions cannot account for necessary truth.²

One reply to the “contingency objection” is that it conflates the idea that convention grounds the *truth* of necessary truths with the idea that convention grounds their *modal* status. It is argued that our conventions can explain why necessary truths are *necessary* even if they cannot ground the *truth* of such claims.³ One cost of this position (granting its coherence) is that it violates the (S4) modal principle that necessary propositions are *necessarily* necessary.⁴ Thus if one holds that the necessity of the proposition that $2+2=4$ depends on our conventions—and that our conventions might have been different—then it seems one must allow that it is possible that there be a situation (in which our conventions are relevantly different) in which the proposition $2+2=4$ would *not* have been necessary, though it would have been *true*.

The conventionalist may insist this is not too high a cost; at least, he may point out, it involves no contradiction. Alan Sidelle has recently argued that this reply is inadequate.⁵ In his view, the conventionalist ultimately cannot deny S4 without denying the genuine necessity of what is necessary.⁶ I agree. But Sidelle thinks the reply is unnecessary. In his view, conventionalism can be successfully defended against the contingency objection without denying S4. Here I disagree.

In this paper I argue that the conventionalist account of modal truth proposed by Sidelle fails to overcome the contingency objection.⁷ In the next section, I argue

that his defense of modal conventionalism fails to establish that our conventions are capable of grounding necessary truth. I then argue that, even supposing *he has* shown this, Sidelle's defense of conventionalism actually does little to recommend the view over its rival (realist) accounts.

II. SIDELLE'S ARGUMENT FOR CONVENTIONALISM

Sidelle's defense of conventionalism against the contingency objection relies on what I will call the "metaphysical infallibility argument" ("MIA").⁸ The MIA is based on the idea that the linguistic conventions governing our use of natural kind terms such as "water" are arbitrary in the way that conventions in general are arbitrary: alternate conventions would have served our practical interests just as well, and—crucially—would have entailed no real gain or loss, in terms of our understanding of reality. According to the MIA, we could have adopted a different set of semantic conventions, and we would have then generated different truth values for the very same counterfactual and modal sentences as we actually use,⁹ and in doing so we would not have been making any sort of "metaphysical mistake" (we would not have been mistaken about any real feature of the world). Moreover, the argument runs, the fact that we would not have made such a mistake is to be explained either by metaphysical *universalism*, according to which, for any set of conventions we might have adopted, there would have been a real object or property to which those conventions determined reference; or by *conventionalism*, according to which our conventions determine the essence of whatever it is we refer to. Conventionalism, according to MIA, is the better (i.e., simpler, more elegant, more parsimonious) explanation. Conventionalism is, therefore, the correct view.

The idea that I take to be central in Sidelle's argument is that alternate conventions *would entail no metaphysical mistake*. Here is a crucial passage:

The obvious, relevant alternative to our convention for "water" (or at least, one of them) is one where, on the basis of pretty much the same experience interacting with lakes and rain, and the introduction of the sound "water" (or "ma-yim" or "a-gua"), we let the application of the term be governed by sameness of what has been called "superficial" qualities—clear, drinkable, pretty tasteless, etc—so that the XYZ on twin earth, or in merely possible twin earths, would fall within the extension of "water." ... Now ... we cannot see this situation as one in which there would be water lacking hydrogen, nor is there any reason to treat it as one in which water would not essentially contain hydrogen. It is one, rather, in which the sentences "water does not need hydrogen" and "there is water which lacks hydrogen" ... would be true, but again, we cannot translate these sentences by their English homophonic equivalents.... And as we imagine such people ... choosing to describe XYZ as "water," it seems clear (clear to me, anyway) that they are not making a mistake—at any rate, they are not making a metaphysical mistake.¹⁰

Now I take it that, as Sidelle understands the notion, to make a *metaphysical* mistake is not simply to hold a *false* belief about some aspect(s) of the mind-independent

world. It is, rather, to misrepresent, or represent inadequately, the structure of the mind-independent world, whether by holding a false belief about such structure, or by failing to grasp certain important truths about such structure. To see more clearly why Sidelle thinks no such error is entailed by relevant variations in convention, let w_1 be a world where speakers let “water” be governed by “superficial” properties (clear, drinkable, etc.).¹¹ Let $w_@$ be the actual world where “water” is governed by the “deep” properties of chemical composition. And let w_1 be a world differing from $w_@$ just in terms of the linguistic conventions of their inhabitants. In particular:

(P) Possibly, water lacks hydrogen

is true when uttered in w_1 , and false when uttered in $w_@$.

Sidelle’s point is *not* that if we were to start using the term “water” as *they* (speakers of w_1) use it we would be making no mistake at all. Clearly, we would be flouting our own linguistic conventions.¹² His point is rather that it would not be a *metaphysical* error to revise our usage of the term in this way. The new use of “water” would entail no real gain or loss in terms of our grasp of the structure of reality—even if certain truths expressed with the term, that were necessary on the old usage, would now be contingent.

I suggest we grant that if this claim is correct, then modal truths expressed with “water” (whether in $w_@$ or in w_1) are grounded in linguistic convention. If there is no metaphysical mistake in our using the term “water” to refer to a hydrogenless stuff, then, I take it, it is not the *ontological* status of whatever we end up referring to with “water” that makes “water contains hydrogen” necessarily true. It would seem reasonable, then, to think this is somehow the work of convention.

The question is whether the possibility of w_1 ¹³ supports the claim that there is no such metaphysical mistake. Arguably, it would do so *only if* there were (at least) some important shared aspect(s) of meaning between “water” in w_1 and “water” in $w_@$.¹⁴ Otherwise, if inhabitants of w_1 simply employ a different term here—one whose meaning is not related in any important way to the meaning of our term “water”—then we should allow that if we were to use “water” as it is used in w_1 this may be a *metaphysical* mistake and not merely a linguistic one. That is, it would be perfectly coherent—and plausible, as far as the difference in truth-value between P in $w_@$ and P in w_1 goes—to hold that to use “water” in $w_@$ as it is used in w_1 would be to misrepresent the fundamental nature of the mind-independent world. For if “water” in w_1 has a *different meaning* from that of “water” in $w_@$, then P will express *different propositions*, as uttered in w_1 and $w_@$. The difference in truth value of these propositions is, presumably, explained by a difference in truth conditions, a difference that is itself naturally accounted for in terms of a difference in worldly facts or states of affairs. And errors concerning such facts or states of affairs may be fundamental.¹⁵

The fact that speakers of w_1 would *speak just as truly* with their term as we do with ours thus provides no support for conventionalism. The fact that speakers in w_1 may speak truly with *their* use of “water” does not gainsay the claim that were *we* to so use the term we would be making a mistake, and a metaphysical one at that. (Indeed, why should facts about how members of some possible linguistic community correctly use

some term, T, have any bearing at all on the status of modal truths actually expressed with a *distinct* term, T*? Surely, it is possible for there to be a linguistic community which (correctly) uses “donkey” to refer to a certain species of reptile; but this does not suggest that the necessity of “donkeys are mammals” is merely conventional.¹⁶)

It is plausible, of course, that “water” as used by speakers of w_1 is *not* the very same term that we actually use, precisely because “water” as used on w_1 is governed by different conventions from those governing *our* term “water”. Moreover, it is not clear that there is any important shared meaning between the terms. (More on this below.) On the other hand, if we suppose that “water” _{w_1} is the very same term that we employ despite being governed by slightly different conventions, then the case as described is not clearly coherent. If speakers of w_1 are using the same term, then it is not at all clear how they could *avoid* error (even if such error is not metaphysical but merely linguistic). For if they employ the very same term as we do, then, presumably, the conceptual practice underlying its use is the same as ours. And this strongly suggests it is governed by the very same linguistic conventions—conventions that determine the correct application of the term.

Here is another way of seeing the difficulty for Sidelle. Suppose, as before, that P is true as uttered in w_1 and false as uttered in $w_{@}$, where there is no qualitative difference between these worlds. But now suppose this is so even though “water” _{w_1} and “water” _{$w_{@}$} have the very same meaning. In this case, we would have clear grounds for the view that the truth of P (not-P) is not due to mind-independent facts about the world. We *may* have support, then, for conventionalism. (Though this is not clear, since, if the terms have the same meaning, it is not clear how they might nevertheless be governed by different conventions.) However, if the terms have different meanings, the difference in truth value of P as uttered in w_1 , and as uttered in $w_{@}$, may well be due to mind-independent facts about these worlds. Since such a difference in truth values can easily be explained by appeal to extra-linguistic truth conditions, the possibility of such a difference in truth values provides no support for conventionalism.¹⁷

III. METAPHYSICAL ERROR AND METAPHYSICAL APTNESS

Distinguish metaphysical error from what might be called *worldly error*. A judgment (utterance, or otherwise) involves worldly error if it misrepresents some feature of the mind-independent world. A judgment might then involve worldly error even if it involves no metaphysical error. (In such a case, let’s say that the judgment involves *mere* worldly error.) A metaphysical error is a certain kind of worldly error: error about the *fundamental nature* of mind-independent reality. A judgment that involves metaphysical error may then involve no mere worldly error. Suppose, then, that a certain variation in linguistic conventions entails no mere worldly error. It may nevertheless involve metaphysical error. In this case, lack of mere worldly error is explained neither by conventionalism nor by universalism. Thus, one might argue that it is possible that “water contains hydrogen” express a real necessity even if there is no mere worldly error in asserting “water might lack hydrogen,” and even if the fact that there is no such error is not due to the truth of universalism. That is, in using “water” to refer to anything that has the “superficial” properties of water, we may represent the

world accurately even if there is some important feature of the world that we thereby fail to grasp.

This thought might be developed further by appeal to the notions of naturalness and “reference magnetism.”¹⁸ These notions can help account for certain propositions being more “metaphysically apt” than others, that is, for their carving nature at the joints. For instance, it might be argued that our actual use of “water” determines (together with certain features of the world) that it represents a certain natural property—a property that exists even in the counterfactual situation where our use of a superficially similar term, such as “water”_{w1}, determines that *it* represents some other property, natural or unnatural. Given such considerations, the realist need not allow that on *any* legitimate use “water” would succeed in representing a *natural* property—even if she allows that on any legitimate usage of the term there will be *some* property represented (and certain modal sentences involving the term that are true, and others that are false).¹⁹

Sidelle appears to concede that such an account is available. But he argues that all the conventionalist needs is that convention suffices, in at least some cases, to generate modal truths.²⁰ It is not clear what Sidelle has in mind here. His thought seems to be that if we allow, for instance, that actual usage of the term “water” determines that it represents a certain property *because* the conventions governing our use of the term *select* the individuating features of what the term refers to, then here we have at least one case where convention explains essence. (We could have used the term differently, but provided we actually use it in *this* way the essence of water is....) But it is a mistake to think that if our conventions can explain essence in the (weak) sense that they can determine which properties we represent, then our conventions are capable of *generating* essences and the modal truths derived from them.

Sidelle suggests that the conventionalist account of essence has an important advantage over the realist account: it posits no mind-independent objects and essences. Whereas the realist needs both conventions and mind-independent properties and objects, the conventionalist accounts for both the meanings of our words and the objects and properties they represent, in terms of convention. But, as I think considerations of metaphysical aptness suggest, even if we grant that convention *can* generate essence and modal truth in the way Sidelle suggests, this account of essence has no clear advantage over the realist account. One could just as well argue that the realist has the upper hand as our conventions have a simpler job to do on his account. Following Sidelle, our conventions merely explain why our words represent as they do; however, for the realist essences represent that which is determined by a mind-independent world. In either case, there is a certain amount of explanatory work to be done in order to account for the capacity of our words to represent things and express modal truths. The difference between the realist and conventionalist concerns how much of that work is done by our conventions and how much is done by the mind-independent world. A theory of modal truth is not clearly simpler as it places more of the explanatory burden on the side of convention.

So, even if there is no way of going wrong with respect to alternate conventions for the use of “water,”²¹ it may be that not all such uses are equally metaphysically apt: some may be better suited than others for limning the objective structure of the world—better at carving nature at the joints.²² The MIA fails to establish that convention can

ground essence, then, since the view that essence is real/nonconventional is perfectly compatible with the view that we have the limited sort of “infallibility” with respect to terms like “water” that the MIA suggests we have. In particular, we can, by appealing to metaphysical aptness, explain why uttering P in $w_{@}$ may involve a metaphysical error (even if it involves no worldly error). The conventionalist cannot simply assume that aptness plays no role, in general, in accounting for the possibility of such error (that would be to beg the question against the realist), so she cannot simply assume there is no such error in this case.

IV. CONCLUSION

How does all of this bear on the contingency objection? Sidelle suggests that the MIA shows that our conventions are capable of governing “portions of reality” and not simply the use of words.²³ But Sidelle’s account does not overcome the contingency objection. Neither the MIA nor Sidelle’s elaboration of conventionalism undermines it. The MIA fails to show that there is no metaphysical error involved in employing alternate linguistic conventions. Thus, it fails to support a conventionalist account of our alleged modal “infallibility.” Moreover, Sidelle’s conception of linguistic conventions as *governing portions of possible reality* is tendentious. The fundamental question is how our conventions are capable of governing portions of possible reality given that conventions are themselves contingent. In response, Sidelle does explain why variation in conventions need not result in loss of true belief. But I have argued that this fact is not best explained by conventionalism. Moreover, supposing that conventionalism *can* explain why there is (supposing there is) no worldly error resulting from variation in conventions, this is compatible with variation in convention resulting in *metaphysical* error. Where there is such metaphysical error, there is modal truth that is not grounded in convention. Finally, supposing that convention is indeed capable of generating essence and modal truth, such an account has no clear advantage over a realist account.

NOTES

1. According to the form of conventionalism defended by Ayer (1936), all necessary truth is analytic, and our conventions ground necessity by grounding analyticity—i.e., by “simply record[ing] our determination to use symbols in a certain fashion.” According to Sidelle’s (1989) conventionalism, the relationship between analytic and necessary truth is more complex, though all necessity is ultimately based on analytic principles of individuation associated with our linguistic conventions. Sider (2011) defends a distinct form of modal conventionalism, according to which necessary truths are truths of a certain sort, where our conventions determine the relevant sort. (See Sider 2011, pp. 269-291.)

2. The assumption here appears to be that explanation implies the supervenience of the explanans on the explanandum: thus if A explains B, then differences in A would imply differences in B (or, at any rate, if A had not been the case, then neither would have B). (Cf. the “contingency horn” of Blackburn’s dilemma about necessity (Blackburn 1987).)

3. See, for instance, Wright 1985; Hale 2002.

4. Cf. Lewy 1976; note the position would also violate the S5 axiom, $\neg\Box\phi\rightarrow\Box\neg\Box\phi$.

5. See Sidelle 2009; Sidelle 1989.

6. Sidelle 2009, pp. 225-228.

7. Here I focus on Sidelle's conventionalist account as it is developed in "Conventionalism and the Contingency of Conventions." The account appears also in Sidelle 1989, though (as Sidelle notes) not in the same detail.

8. See Sidelle 2009, pp. 233-236.

9. —and, in some sense, Sidelle suggests, we still would have *meant* what we actually mean by such sentences; though it is, of course, difficult to specify the relevant sort of sameness of meaning (see below).

10. Sidelle 2009, pp. 233-234.

11. For convenience I rely on the possible-worlds idiom, though I do not intend that any claims I defend depend on the existence of possible worlds.

12. Here it might be argued that were we (collectively) to so change our use of the term we would thereby change the relevant conventions. I am supposing that even if such a change in conventions should *eventually* occur as a result of our changing how we use the term, we would, initially, anyway, be making false judgments by this new usage of the term.

13. Supposing, for the sake of argument, that w_1 is possible. If it is not, then I take it that there is *some* possible situation that will serve the conventionalist just as well.

14. For convenience, I will use "water"_{w@} and "water"_{w1} to refer to the terms that get used in $w_@$ and w_1 , respectively (whatever precisely these terms turn out to be). Note that the claim that "water"_{w1} is a *relevant alternative* to "water"_{w@} suggests that there is some important shared aspect of meaning.

15. Sidelle seems at one point to see the difficulty here, as he notes, "For the conventions in another situation to bear on the modal status of the statements here, it must be the case that what those conventions render possible (or necessary) is the same as what our conventions (according to the Conventionalist) render impossible (or contingent)." (Sidelle 2009, p. 230.) He points out, then, that one cannot argue *against* a conventionalist account of the necessity of (e.g.) "bachelors are male" by pointing to another possible situation in which "some bachelors are female" is true because "bachelor" (there) has a different meaning. But Sidelle fails to appreciate the implications of this. In particular, one cannot argue *in support of* a conventionalist account of the necessity of "water contains hydrogen" by pointing to other possible situations in which "some water lacks hydrogen" is true because "water" (there) has a different meaning. In either sort of case, one cannot draw conclusions about the actual meaning of a term such as "water" or "bachelor," or conclusions about what grounds modal truths expressed with them, from claims about how *distinct* terms might have been used.

16. Cf. Yablo's (1992) remark (in his review of Sidelle 1989) that to think the possibility of correctly using 'water' for XYZ in a situation like w_1 shows that it is not (metaphysically) wrong to use 'water' in this way, is like thinking it's not (metaphysically) wrong to regard snow as inflammable—"for 'inflammable' can mean *not* inflammable and 'snow' can refer to cocaine."

17. Perhaps if there were some respect in which the meaning of "water"_{w1} was the same as that of "water"_{w@}, then facts about how "water"_{w1} is correctly applied in w_1 would have clear implications for the status of "water"-truths in $w_@$. In support of such a shared meaning between the terms, one might rely on the framework of two-dimensionalism and argue that "water"_{w1} and "water"_{w@} have the same *primary intension* (where the primary intension may be understood as a function from "worlds-considered-as-actual" to extensions—see Jackson 1988, p. 48) but different secondary intensions. But this will not work. Consider, for example, a world (call it "Orb") in which there are non-H₂O substances which share all superficial features of water/H₂O. Suppose these substances are very rare and have never in fact been observed. When considered as actual from the point of view of w_1 , Orb is such that "water"_{w1} picks out both H₂O substances *and* those rare "watery" non-H₂O substances. From the point of view of $w_@$, Orb is such that,

considered as actual, “water”_{w@} picks out all and only H₂O-substances. So, these terms differ in their primary intensions. (“water”_{w1} is (by stipulation) governed by sameness of superficial qualities, whereas “water”_{w@} is governed by “deep” qualities. The fact that there happens to be some (rare) instances of a non-H₂O substance superficially similar to water in worlds of the sort considered need not affect the extension of “water”_{w@}. (Cf. Bealer’s notion of “water” as governed by an “ordered conjunction of default categorial conditionals.” (Bealer 1987; Bealer 2002, pp. 109-110.))

On the other hand, if we suppose that “water”_{w@} and “water”_{w1} do have the same primary intension, then it is not clear they are distinct. On the most natural interpretation of the two-dimensionalist account of natural kind terms such as “water,” the secondary intensions of such terms are determined in part by their primary intensions and in part by the world as it turns out. (Thus, if the world turns out to be such that all of the stuff that is clear, odorless, and the like, is composed of H₂O, then that is what “water” necessarily refers to; if the world turns out to be such that all of the “watery” stuff is composed of XYZ, then that is what “water” necessarily refers to; and so on.) So, if the primary intensions of “water”_{w@} and “water”_{w1} are the same, then either term would, in the mouths of inhabitants of w_@, pick out all and only H₂O-stuff. It is not clear, then, that the terms are *distinct*. It is plausible that they have the same primary intension only if they do not differ in terms of the linguistic conventions underlying their use. (We might put the point in terms of the *conceptual practices* involved in the use of these terms: it seems that really there is just one practice here, situated in two different environments—that is, provided the notion of a practice is understood in terms of *manifest* image, rather than scientific image. (On the manifest image conception of practice see Thompson 2008.)) The difference between “water”_{w@} and “water”_{w1} in this case seems accounted for entirely in terms of the extra-linguistic contribution of the world—i.e., whether it turns out to be an H₂O-world, or an XYZ-world, etc. (Here I assume some familiarity with two-dimensionalism. For a helpful overview of different interpretations and applications of the 2D framework see Schroeter 2012.)

18. On the notion of reference magnetism see Sider 2011, pp. 23-33.

19. On this account, objecthood may be understood as determined in part by naturalness: that is, it is not sufficient for there being an object *o* that by certain linguistic conventions *o* is treated as an object. Hence, on this account, universalism is false.

20. Sidelle 2009, fn. 23.

21. This cannot be quite right, and it is clear that Sidelle intends a somewhat weaker claim: that there is no way of going wrong, provided our use is at least logically consistent and does not conflict with any prior true belief. Perhaps there are further conditions, but Sidelle does not say. In any case, there is supposed to be some range of equally legitimate uses of “water,” such that any use within this range is as apt to result in true belief as any other.

22. Compare Sider on the epistemic value of not merely believing truly but thinking of the world *in its terms*: “We are a partial intellectual failure if we live in configuration space or The Matrix, even if we believe truly.... [This] suggests that what we care about is truth in joint-carving terms, not just truth.” (Sider 2011, p. 63.)

23. —or, at least, he claims to have shown that this view is just as plausible as the realist alternative.

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