

Agentive Modals and Agentive Modality: A Cautionary Tale

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Abstract: In this paper, we consider recent attempts to account for the metaphysics of agentive modality in terms of conditional statements. We argue that there are reasons to be pessimistic about gleaning a metaphysics of agency from a conditional semantics for agentive modals like “S can ϕ ” or “S cannot but ψ ”.

Views of the sort under discussion have an important pedigree in philosophy starting with the classical conditional analysis of free will, according to which an agent is able to do otherwise than they in fact do if, and only if, had they wanted (or chosen) to do otherwise, then they would have (Moore 1912, Ayer 1956). This classical analysis faces well-known problems; most pressingly, it fails to capture the true extension of agentive modal claims (Lehrer 1968). For instance, an agent who has a severe phobia of the color red is not able to eat a red piece of candy even though it is true that, had they wanted or chosen to do so, they would have. It’s just that, if they had wanted or chosen to, then they would not have had the phobia.

We consider two recent versions of the strategy that appeals to a conditional semantics of agentive modals to get some traction on the metaphysics of agentive modality. First, we consider Mandelkern, Schulteis, and Boylan’s (2017) semantics, an updated version of the classical view that they call the Act-Conditional Analysis (“ACA”). We also consider David Lewis’s (2020) posthumous compatibilist analysis of abilities in terms of the absence of obstacles to action, which we term the Obstacle-Free Analysis (“OFA”). The former is specifically billed as a semantics for agentive modal claims in natural language, whereas the latter is explicitly a metaphysician’s analysis of abilities. It is important to note that we are not pessimistic about any semantics specifically, but rather the methodology. In particular, one shouldn’t try to settle the metaphysics of agentive modality by way of a conditional semantics of agentive modals.

We suggest that although the ACA and OFA are significant improvements on the classical conditional analysis, they face counterexamples of two sorts, depending on whether the conditionals are construed subjectively—their truth depending on mental states of the agent, or perhaps what is within the agent’s deliberative reach—or objectively—their truth depending on all the relevant facts, whether or not those facts are beyond the agent’s ken. Our diagnosis of the counterexamples is that both the ACA and the OFA sin in taking some *basic* agentive modality for granted. In particular, the abilities to perform basic actions, or “basic abilities”, feature as a primitive in these theories. Here is where the semantic and metaphysical projects most clearly are at odds; while it is perfectly acceptable for a semantics of agentive modal claims to take some modality for granted in getting the extension of action claims correct, a metaphysical explanation of agentive modality cannot, at least not in the way that these conditional approaches to agentive modality do.

Because the classical conditional analyses of abilities had this problem just as much as do their contemporary metaphysical cousins, dispositional analyses of abilities (Fara 2008, Vihvelin 2013), we conclude by a pessimistic induction that (probably) no conditional approach to agentic modality will succeed.

This leaves open a strange and potentially disturbing consequence of our argument. Namely, the semantics and metaphysics of agentic modality may come apart at the seams. We briefly consider the merits of Vetter's (2013) view, one which leans into that consequence at the cost of robust anti-reductionism about agentic modality. Her semantics starts from the idea that agentic abilities—basic abilities among them—explain the truth of agentic modal claims. Unfortunately, this way of connecting the semantics and the metaphysics of agentic modality is antithetical to the longstanding enterprise of gleaning, more or less reductively, a metaphysics of agentic modals from its best semantics.

References

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