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On Knowing What is Necessary: Three Limitations of Peacocke's Account

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I

Chapter 4 of *Being Known* outlines an integrated metaphysics and epistemology for the metaphysical—absolute—notions of necessity and possibility. The leading idea is to view the modal status of a proposition as the deliverance of a set of fundamental *Principles of Possibility*, and our ability to recognise modal status as issuing from an implicit knowledge of these principles. Peacocke aims at a middle way between the extremes of Lewis-style realism about modality and the various—conventionalist, expressivist, Wittgensteinian—forms of non-cognitivism that were prominent in the last century. An attraction of his account is its unified treatment both of a priori logical—more generally, conceptual—necessity and possibility and of a posteriori necessities of essence, identity, origin and constitution, etc. The treatment is ambitious and rich in invention and original detail, but Peacocke professes himself (p. 191)[1] more wedded to the general approach than to the particular development. I shall correspondingly confine my remarks, more or less, to the general approach.

Here is the briefest sketch of it. The Principles of Possibility govern the notion of an *admissible assignment* of semantic values to the ingredient concepts in a (set of) proposition(s). Foremost among them, the *Modal Extension Principle* (MEP) determines that an assignment is admissible only if each concept is allotted a semantic value which results from applying the same rule as determines its actual semantic value. An assignment to *bachelor*, for instance, respects the MEP only if it provides that concept with an extension determined as the intersection of those it provides for *unmarried* and *man*, while an assignment to a *de jure* rigid concept, like *Christopher Peacocke*, respects the constraint only if it provides that concept with its actual semantic value. Next come a battery of *Constitutive Principles*

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[1]   All references are to Ch. 4 of *Being Known*.

designed to ensure that admissible assignments respect as many varieties of necessities of essence as sound reflection may disclose; for example, if it is an essential characteristic of human beings to be the offspring of their actual parents, then no assignment is admissible which counts *Crispin Wright exists* as true but *Crispin Wright is the offspring of Geoffrey and Jean* as false. The remaining Principle of Possibility is what Peacocke terms the *Principle of Constrained Recombination*. It affirms that any assignment which is not barred by the other Principles thereby counts as admissible—in other words, that it is to *suffice* for an assignment's admissibility that it fail none of the necessary conditions encoded in the other Principles. Finally, two *Characterisations* effect the needed connections between the notion of an admissible assignment and the targeted modal notions:

> A proposition is (metaphysically) *possible* if and only if it holds true under some admissible assignment,

> A proposition is (metaphysically) *necessary* if and only if it holds true under every admissible assignment.

The Principles of Possibility and the two Characterisations together encompass Peacocke's account of the constitution of a proposition's modal status. What makes it correct to say that the proposition: *that there is a 500-floor skyscraper*, depicts a possibility is not the existence of a genuine material 500-floor skyscraper spatially unrelated to any actual object(!), nor our successfully attempting a certain feat of imagination, nor certain appropriate conventions' being in force,[2] but the existence of an admissible assignment to its ingredient concepts under which it holds true. The needed integration with the epistemology of modality is then effected, as remarked, by crediting ordinary modal thought and understanding with an implicit knowledge of the very principles which feature in the constitutive account. Peacocke writes:

...when we evaluate modal claims in our ordinary modal thought and reasoning, we draw on our implicit grasp of the body of information stated in the Principles of Possibility, understood as including the Characterisations of Possibility and Necessity....to understand the metaphysical modalities is to have tacit knowledge of the above Principles of Possibility, and to draw on that knowledge in one's evaluation of modal sentences and thoughts. (p.150)

II

We may finesse any misgivings—well conceived or not—about Peacocke's reliance upon the idea of implicit knowledge by restricting attention to the situation of an imaginary thinker who has *fully explicitly and self-consciously* at her disposal the resources which Peacocke provides—such a

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[2]   Cf. p. 119.

thinker, after all, can hardly be in any way hobbled by comparison with a merely implicitly-knowing counterpart. So imagine someone kitted out with the MEP, with all the Constitutive Principles that we might clearheadedly come to regard as compelling, and apprised of the Principle of Constrained Recombination and the two Characterisations. Let this thinker be as powerful and efficient a reasoner as we could wish. Is she thereby in position to ratify anything which, and only what, we might lucidly want to regard as meta-physically necessary or possible respectively, and would the manner of her doing so qualify as appropriately robustly cognitive?

Take the best case for Peacocke's purposes. Suppose that the apprehen-sion, in a fashion explicitly conditioned by the materials provided by his account, that all, or some, admissible assignments count a particular proposition P as true can indeed rank as fully cognitive and objective.[3] So *truth under all admissible assignments*, and *truth under some admissible assignment* are (sometimes) recognisable, objective matters. Whether we can draw the same conclusion about *necessity* and *possibility* then depends upon the status of Peacocke's constitutive analysis, as embodied in the two Charac-terisations. But how is that to be assessed?

Peacocke remarks at one point[4] on his belated realisation that the MEP "operates recursively"—and hence may be used to address the question of the necessity of the very ingredients, itself included, in the principle-based account. Certainly these principles had better *be* necessary if they are to play the constitutive role which Peacocke requires (necessities cannot be founded on contingencies.) But of course it's one thing for the account to allow of reflexive application in such a way as to deliver the result that its ingredient principles are themselves true under all admissible assignments, and another—which cannot just be assumed to be the same thing—for those prin-ciples to rank as metaphysically necessary.

There's the rub: Peacocke's Characterisation of necessity needs to be known to be necessarily correct—and necessarily correct not merely as the definition of a new term of art (we might say: "Peacocke-necessary") but as a substantial constitutive account of the prior notion of metaphysical necessity. Yet the necessity—contrast: the "Peacocke-necessity"—of the Characterisa-tion cannot in principle be delivered by Peacocke's account unless we presup-pose it. Without that presupposition we only get conclusions about "Peacocke-necessity".

Someone might think the issue could be addressed as follows. Metaphysi-cal necessity is truth in all possible worlds. So (cashing the metaphor) to regard a proposition as necessary is to hold that it may safely be assumed as

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3   —under whatever is the best characterisation of those notions for the purposes of the present debate.
4   Pp. 151-52.

an auxiliary premise, or rule, when reasoning about any arbitrary counterfactual—more generally, hypothetical—set of circumstances. (It is this attitude—which may itself be quite tentative—and not some superlative degree of certainty or 'entrenchment' which is the distinctive manifestation of acceptance of a proposition as necessary.[5]) Peacocke's Characterisation of necessity could therefore be vindicated if the knowledge that a proposition holds true under every admissible assignment of appropriate types of semantic value to its ingredient concepts would indeed rationally suffice for taking that proposition to be safe when reasoning under other arbitrary hypotheses. The needed connection would be made if it could be shown that to take a set of possibly counterfactual hypotheses as the assumptions for a piece of reasoning is tantamount to effecting a (partial) assignment, in Peacocke's special sense, to their ingredient concepts. In that case, the Characterisation would have been appropriately linked with the intuitive understanding of metaphysical necessity.

What is at issue, however, is not the correctness (hence necessity) of the Characterisation, but whether a recognition of its necessity can be accommodated within the framework of Peacocke's account. Let it be that the connection between truth under all admissible assignments and safety as an auxiliary in arbitrary hypothetical reasoning is itself a connection of necessity. While Peacocke's materials may—let's suppose—provide for an account of how a statement of that connection might itself be recognised to be true under all admissible assignments, and so "Peacocke-necessary", that will suffice for the purpose only if we have already apprehended that "Peacocke-necessity", as defined by the Characterisation, captures metaphysical necessity. But that apprehension would seem to lie—necessarily!—beyond the reach of Peacocke's account.

This problem is structural: it arises with the very acceptance that metaphysical necessity presents an integration challenge. Accepting that challenge is accepting that we need to integrate a satisfactory account of the constitution of necessity with a satisfactory account of its epistemology—that the satisfactoriness of either account depends on the satisfactoriness of the other. The aim seems both laudable and unquestionable. But what we have seen is that in the case of the metaphysical modalities the challenge cannot be met, at least in full generality. For the first account must find some property, Φ-ness, which may plausibly be regarded as constitutive of necessity and the second account must then offer a plausible explanation of our ability to recognise instantiations of Φ-ness in general. That is exactly the—unavoidable—shape of what Peacocke proposes. But whatever is proposed is worthless unless its constitutive part—the characterisation of

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5   Confusion about this haunts both Quine's "Two Dogmas" and much of Wittgenstein's later writings on mathematics. Peacocke, however, is clear on the point—see. p. 173.

necessity as Φ-ness—is itself necessary, and recognised to be so. We seek, after all, something which we can certify as an account of what it is to recognise necessity *per se*, and not merely the instantiations of some property at best contingently coextensive with it. Recognition, however, of the mere Φ-ness of the constitutive characterisation falls short of what we need unless we already know that Φ-ness captures the essence of necessity. Yet an epistemology of Φ-ness is all that the account provides. The success of the account thus depends upon our recognition of a necessity which it cannot itself explain.

This is the First Limitation. Notice that it flows from a peculiarity of the integration challenge concerning metaphysical necessity, viz. that the constitutive characterisation of the target property—the characterisation which any response to an integration challenge must provide—must itself be reckoned to have that property in order to carry its intended weight. Naturally, not every integration challenge even concerns a property of propositions at all, still less one which must so feature in a satisfactory response to it. But that concerning Necessity does so, and does so essentially.

III

On Peacocke's account, to recognise the necessity of a proposition is to recognise that it holds true under all admissible assignments of appropriate semantic values to its ingredient concepts. In keeping with the commonly accepted analogy between metaphysical necessity and possibility and the universal and existential quantifiers, the account thus has it that recognising necessity involves recognition of an unrestricted generality. How is that to be accomplished?

There are some relatively straightforward cases. Suppose we accept (cf. p.139) that the category of semantic values appropriate to the propositional logical constants are n-ary truth functions, and that the rule determining the actual semantic value of (the concept of) each logical constant is that the associated truth function be one which makes certain characteristic inferential principles truth-preserving. So long as that rule is adhered to, the semantic value assigned to a logical constant by an admissible assignment—one which follows the rule determining its actual semantic value—will always be the same. So, trivially, the relevant inferential principles will hold under all admissible assignments to the constant in question. They may therefore be apprehended as necessarily truth-preserving, just as they ought to be.

That's a case of necessity generated, so to say, by the invariance of the semantic values associated with key concepts under admissible assignments. Here we recognise the requisite generality—'holds true under *all* admissible assignments'—by recognising that all admissible assignments assign the same semantic value to the key concepts. Compare the old chestnut: *all*

bachelors are unmarried (p.141). Could there be an admissible assignment which renders this proposition false?—one which assigned overlapping extensions to *bachelor* and *married*? Not if the MEP is in force and the rule actually determining the extension of *bachelor* constrains it to be the intersection of the extensions of *man* and *unmarried*. So long as admissible assignments are constrained to follow this same rule, the extensions assigned to *bachelor* and *married* will never permissibly overlap. Hence we have a different kind of case: a case where, in contrast with the situation with the logical constants, the semantic values assigned to key concepts may vary under admissible assignments, but where the rules involved prescribe that where there is variation from the actual semantic value, it must take place in tandem, so to say, with variations in the values assigned to other concepts in such a way that a proposition appropriately featuring all the concepts concerned holds good under all admissible assignments.

So: that's the kind of thing that Peacocke's account lets us say. But these simple examples are a reminder that, even in logico-conceptual cases, where essence-specific Constitutive Principles are not involved, working through to the necessity (or indeed possibility) of a proposition via the machinery of the account will depend on anterior knowledge not just of the relevant Principles of Possibility and Characterisations but of additional premises detailing the rules which actually determine the semantic values of the specific concepts configured in the target proposition. A thinker has to know, for instance, that the semantic value of *conjunction* is actually fixed as that truth function which makes inferences of the patterns: P&Q $\models$ P, and P&Q $\models$ Q, always truth-preserving; and she has to know that the extension of the concept *bachelor* is actually fixed as the intersection of the concepts, *unmarried* and *man*. Truths of this kind, however, record essential features of the concepts concerned and thus will have as good a title as any to be regarded as metaphysically necessary. Moreover—and this is the crux—a thinker who is to base conclusions about necessity upon them had better *know* that they have this status if her conclusions are to be soundly drawn. For if it were open to her to think of the premise:

> (Bachelor)   The extension of *bachelor* is actually determined as the intersection of the extensions of *unmarried* and *man*

merely as contingently true—compare (adapting an old example of Quine's):

> (Cordate)   The extension of *cordate* is actually determined as that of *renate*—

there would be no justification for requiring admissible assignments to respect it; i.e., for treating it as supplying a basis for applications of the

MEP. (To constrain applications of the MEP by (Cordate) would lead to oversight of the metaphysical possibility of a creature with a heart but no kidneys.)

Can Peacocke's account accommodate this kind of presupposed knowledge? Presumably a recognition of the necessity of (Bachelor) achieved by deployment of the Principles of Possibility and Characterisations, would be unable to proceed without invoking information about the rules which actually determine the extensions of the concepts it involves. One of those concepts is *bachelor*. So to recognise the necessity of (Bachelor) in the fashion outlined by Peacocke one needs to know what rule—of necessity—actually fixes the semantic value of *bachelor*. But that is exactly what (Bachelor) itself purports to state. So the account can do no better, it seems, than to represent the epistemology of the necessity of propositions identifying the actual determinants of the extensions of particular concepts as running in a circle. It thus provides no explanation of the basic, specific items of (implicitly modal) knowledge in which, via the principles of Possibility and Characterisations, it represents knowledge of logical/conceptual modality as originating. This is a Second Limitation.

Again, we have a local instance of a more general structural difficulty. Peacocke's leading idea has it that knowledge of modal status is essentially inferential knowledge, achieved by applying the general Principles to knowledge of certain specific features of the (concepts involved in the) targeted proposition. But if these features are to be suitable as a ground for such a conclusion, then they need to be—and to be known to be—essential to the proposition in question.[6] Yet knowledge of what belongs to the essence of a proposition—so the objection claims—has to be understood as modal knowledge. The viability of a principle-based account along broadly Peacockian lines depends upon a successful challenge to that. Failing such a challenge, it is very obvious that no satisfactory general model of the epistemology of modality can represent modal knowledge as everywhere based on premisses, presumed known, that are themselves effectively modal.

IV

The examples of *all bachelors are unmarried* and the Conjunction rules are of a prima facie relatively tractable sort. A different kind of case arises when the rules which actually fix the semantic values of key ingredient concepts are both consistent with variations in those semantic values (unlike the case of

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[6] I here assume that its modal status is itself an essential feature of a proposition. That it is, of course, is the joint effect of the distinctive principles of S4 and S5, that necessary propositions are necessarily necessary and possible propositions are necessarily possible respectively. These principles are no doubt discussible. But Peacocke himself notes (p. 195) the commitment of his account to the S4 principle for the case of conceptual necessities. That is enough to underwrite the argument of the text for that range of cases.

conjunction) and explicable, or so it seems, in independence of each other (unlike the case of *bachelor, unmarried* and *male.*) A hoary such example is the proposition, *nothing is simultaneously red and green all over.* When someone acquires a grasp of the rules which actually determine the extensions of colour concepts, what they learn concerns the connection between the instantiation of these concepts and a putative instance's presentation of a distinctive kind of appearance. They do not—nor do they need to—learn explicitly that the rules for *red* and *green* so relate that a surface's qualification as an instance of the one disqualifies it as an instance for the other. Rather, the recognition of that flows from—the metaphor is irresistible—a grasp of the prior, appearance-related rules of application. Yet this 'flowing from' stubbornly resists articulation in the form of premises and consequence. What does Peacocke's account have to say about our putative recognition of the necessity of an example of this kind?

The crux is the recognition of the requisite generality: we have to recognise that the proposition holds good under *all* admissible assignments not because of the invariance of the semantic values—extensions—assigned to *red* and *green*, nor because the rules which actually determine the extensions of those concepts include one to the effect that their extension is required to be appropriately exclusive. The whole point is that no such rule is required beyond the rules which respectively fix the extensions of the concepts individually—neither of these says anything explicit about the other concept, yet there is no need for an additional rule to appropriately co-ordinate the assignment of semantic values to them. Phenomenologically, this *feels* like substantial knowledge, acquired by a process of a priori reflection in the light of one's grasp of the concepts involved, somehow articulate yet irreducible to a series of inferential steps. Moreover the phenomenon in question is absolutely commonplace: in particular, it is pervasive in the historical development of axioms for previously unsystematised branches of mathematics —Euclid's axioms for geometry,[7] for instance, and the Dedekind/Peano axioms for arithmetic—whose central concepts were initially grounded in simple applications of them. In such cases, the axioms reflectively yet not explicitly inferentially arrived at seem both necessarily true and to encode usefully systematic and general knowledge of the character of concepts that pre-dated them. Is this (ever) a genuinely cognitive process? Or is it, as Wittgenstein suggested, only partially cognitive and better assimilated to a collective movement towards the adoption of novel rules? It's hard to see that the status of this central and immensely difficult class of cases is in any way clarified by the perspective of Peacocke's framework. This is its Third Limitation.

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[7]   —prescinding from the Fifth.