

## 9 *In defence of the Conventional Wisdom*

CRISPIN WRIGHT

My concern is with Lewy's arguments against a conventionalist conception of logical necessity (1976).<sup>1</sup> I first became familiar with these arguments, or ancestors of them, when I attended Lewy's 'Philosophical Analysis' lectures as a student of Moral Sciences at Cambridge in 1963. Then, they seemed to me devastating. It is with mixed feelings that I find that this is no longer my response to them: it is good, if it is true, that some form of conventionalism may be defensible – but I should have liked my first teacher of philosophy, to whom my debt is so great, to be, as he always seemed in tutorials, conclusively correct.

### I

Lewy's arguments revolve around three propositions discussed by John Wisdom (1938),<sup>2</sup> which he formulates, somewhat differently from Wisdom, as

- (1) 'Vixen' means the same as 'female fox'
- (2) 'Vixen' means female fox
- (3) The concept of being a vixen is identical with the concept of being a female fox

Wisdom's claim was that (1)–(3), while they might serve different purposes in context, nevertheless make the same 'factual claims'. Apparently, then, since (3) entails (whether or not it is entailed by)

- (4) Necessarily: all and only vixens are female foxes

<sup>1</sup> See especially chapter 5.

<sup>2</sup> Reprinted in Wisdom (1953).

Wisdom intended to hold that the truth of judgments attributing necessary truth to a proposition (*ascriptions of necessity*) may be constituted by conventional, metalinguistic facts. This is what Lewy denies.

Lewy's strategy is to argue that (3) neither entails nor is entailed by either (1) or (2). First thoughts suggest that this has got to be an appropriate strategy, whatever exactly 'makes the same factual claims as' is supposed to mean. But a very vague, second thought is that there may be a risk of some subtle question-begging, within the context of discussion of conventionalism, in relying on what are, if the conventionalist is right, presumably *conventionally established* entailment relations. One of the things I aim to do is to clarify what force attaches to this vague worry. For the moment, let us review Lewy's arguments.

That (3) entails neither (1) nor (2) is straightforwardly established, Lewy believes, by two reflections. First (1) and (2) are both contingent, whereas (3) is necessarily true. Hence an entailment from (3) to either (1) or (2) would involve, contraposing, the possibility of entailment from a contingent to a necessarily false proposition. Secondly, (1) and (2) both entail that 'vixen' has a meaning in English, whereas (3) entails nothing at all about English and would be true, indeed, if no such language existed.

Are these reflections conclusive? Well, it might be felt unobvious whether (1) and (2) do *entail* anything about English – there could, for example, be a language other than English which happened to contain the expressions 'vixen' and 'female fox' of which (1) and (2) happened to be true. No doubt the reply to this would be that (1) and (2) are elliptical: that the occurrences of 'means' which they contain must be understood as short for 'means in English'.<sup>3</sup> That response, however, does not allay a complementary doubt whether the truth of the proposition expressed by (3) is independent of the existence of the English language, since an argument is wanted – and Lewy gives none – that the conceptual ingredients of that proposition would so much as exist if English did not. In any case, from the point of view of a conventionalist of Wisdom's sort, the flat claim that (1) and (2)

<sup>3</sup> This particular move carries a severe risk. If the present stock of conventions for the use of expressions in English turns out, on analysis of the criteria of identity for languages, to be *constitutive* of that tongue, then (1) and (2), so disambiguated, would hold necessarily. The effect of that would be entirely to undermine Lewy's arguments, as any reader already familiar with them will immediately realise.

have consequences which (3) does not is merely question-begging: Lewy needs to present an *account* of the content of (3) which independently corroborates his claim.

The first reflection, too, may seem not quite water-tight. The natural explanation of why a (false) contingent *P* cannot entail a necessarily false *Q* is that, being contingent, *P* will be true in certain possible circumstances *C*, under which, given the rogue entailment, *Q* would also have to hold – which is absurd since necessary falsehood is exactly falsehood in all possible circumstances. But that is to presuppose that the entailment from *P* to *Q* would continue to hold under *C*; for which the most obvious supporting thesis would be the claim that when an entailment holds, it holds necessarily and so in all possible circumstances. It appears to want argument, however, that this claim is reasonable in the present context: for – so a simple-minded thought runs – if entailment relations are generated by convention, and if we might have had alternative conventions, then entailment relations could have been different too. I shall return to this (pp. 175–6).

The main battery of Lewy's arguments, however, are directed against the existence of any entailment from (1) and (2) to (3). Actually one argument only (1976: 52) is precisely so directed. The others (1976: 54–8) concern rather the existence of entailment from (1), or from (2), to

(5) There is no vixen which is not a female fox.

The justification for this shift, Lewy claims, is that Wisdom confuses 'higher order necessary propositions' – ascriptions of necessity, modal propositions generally, and propositions like (3), offering analyses of concepts and so entailing propositions of the former sort – with 'first order necessary propositions' like (5) (1976: 53). Hence, in order to refute Wisdom, it is necessary to show that neither type of necessary proposition is rendered true by linguistic convention. (In regarding modal propositions generally as, if true, necessarily true, Lewy intends to be endorsing the adequacy of C. I. Lewis' system S5.) Actually it is plausible that, whether or not Wisdom was confused about the matter, what the conventionalist *ought* to be advancing is a thesis about the meanings of the modal operators in the first instance; and that what he has to say will therefore bear only consequentially on 'first-order' necessary propositions. But Lewy's giving so much attention to

the relations of (1) and (2) with (5) is, as he is well aware, amply justified by the reflection that to show that (5) is not entailed by (1), or by (2), is to show the same about (3). Hence Lewy's strategy seems perfectly adapted both to address Wisdom's equivocal formulations and to confront a more sharply defined conventionalism concerning the meanings of sentences whose principal operator is modal.

Consider first the relation between (1) and (3). How can Lewy show that it is not *in virtue of* the truth of (1) that (3) holds – that, in Wisdom's terms, the 'factual claims' effected by the two are different? The evident difficulty is that (3) and (5) are – presumably – necessarily true and are hence *strictly implied*, in the sense of C. I. Lewis, by any proposition whatever. So Lewy needs to explain a relation narrower than strict implication whose obtaining between (1) and (3), say, justifies saying that they make the same 'factual claims', that (3) holds true *because* (1) does.

His proposal is that we should require a strict implication from (1) to (3) to be *formal*: more specifically, Wisdom, Lewy proposes, is right about the relation between (1) and (3) only if (a) (1) strictly implies (3), and (b) any proposition of the same form as (1) strictly implies the corresponding proposition of the form of (3).

When both these conditions are met for a pair of propositions, Lewy characterises the relation between them as that the first *justifies* the second; his proposal is accordingly that what Wisdom requires is that (1) and (2) each *justifies* (3).<sup>4</sup>

Let us defer discussion of the merits of this proposal in order speedily to review how Lewy puts it to work. Clearly (1) justifies (3) only if

(1') 'Vixen' means the same as 'male fox'

strictly implies

(3') The concept of being a vixen is identical with the concept of being a male fox.

But (3') strictly implies

(4') Necessarily: all and only vixens are male foxes.

<sup>4</sup> Lewy gives no general account of justification in chapter 5, illustrating his intentions only by stipulations specifically related to (1)–(3). The general account eventually offered in chapter 8 diverges importantly from the proposal which I have just attributed to Lewy in the text; an explanation of this divergence will be offered in section II below.

Given, then, that any proposition of the form 'necessarily: . . .' is, if true, necessarily true and, if false, necessarily false, and that a contingent proposition cannot strictly imply a necessarily false one, it follows that (3') is also necessarily false and is therefore not strictly implied by (1'), which is contingent. Hence (1) does not justify (3). And an exactly parallel argument would serve to establish that (2) does not justify (3).

Two points are noteworthy. First, Lewy's play with (4') and the principle of the necessity of modal propositions generally is at this point inessential, since, Wisdom's concern having been, *inter alia*, to clarify the nature of necessity, he would presumably have been quite content to grant the necessary truth of (3), and the necessary falsehood of (3') without further ado. Secondly, that there can be no *strict implication* from a contingent proposition to a necessarily false one is – notwithstanding the reservation above about the corresponding claim concerning entailment – compelling. For since '*P* strictly implies *Q*' is defined as the necessitation of ' $P \supset Q$ ', that is of ' $\neg PVQ$ ', it follows – at least for those who do not share the qualms of the 'Relevantists' about disjunctive syllogism – that when *Q* is necessarily false, the strict implication of *Q* by *P* will require the necessary falsehood of *P* also. Hence someone who wished to hold that this is not a feature of entailment proper would be committed to denying, what is usually accepted by everyone, that if strict implication and entailment do not coincide, the latter is at least a proper sub-relation of the former. In fact it is clear that more would have to be denied, *viz.* that the entailment of *Q* by *P* involves the necessitation of the ordinary conditional 'if *P* then *Q*' (whatever that is). Otherwise that conditional will hold true in the counterfactual circumstances in which the contingently false *P* holds true – and then *Q* will have to hold as well, contrary to the hypothesis of its necessary falsehood. To sever that connection between entailment and the ordinary conditional, however, is, I think, to sever one's grip on the 'intuitive' notion of entailment altogether.

What then of the earlier 'simple-minded thought'? Two points are worth emphasis. First, the contingency, if they are contingent, of the 'conventions' which we employ, does not immediately force us, if it is indeed coherent to try, to consider as lying within the scope of the 'possibility' operator states of affairs in which different conventions are used; rather we may, perhaps ought to,

allow our *actual* conventions to determine the extent of the logically possible. If we do, there will be no question of entailment relations which hold in the actual world failing under the hypothesis that some proposition contingently false in the actual world is true. (More of this when we discuss reiterated modalities in section III.) Secondly, and more straightforwardly, there is, in any case, no evident reason why a world in which the contingently false *P* held true would *have* to be a world in which the putative *actual* entailment from *P* to a necessarily false *Q* ceased to obtain; on the contrary, the contingency of *P* presumably involves exactly the possibility of its truth *within* the existing conventions for possibility, when, *a fortiori*, all actual entailment relations will continue to hold. For this reason, if for no other, the 'simple-minded thought' was beside the point. I conclude that Lewy has indeed shown both that (3) entails neither (1) nor (2), and that neither (1) nor (2) justifies (3).

Lewy proceeds to apply the notion of *justification* to the question of whether (1) or (2) may be viewed as making the same 'factual claims' as (5), constructing no less than five 'proofs' that (1') does not strictly imply

(5') There is no vixen which is not a male fox,

each of which exploits only the contingency of (1') and so may easily be adapted into a proof that (2') does not strictly imply (5'). Only completely uncontroversial properties of strict implication are involved in these various proofs. In particular no higher-order premisses about the modal status of modal propositions are involved. Since justification is clearly a transitive relation,<sup>5</sup> and the necessitation of *P* will invariably justify *P*, it follows that neither (1) nor (2) justifies either (4), or its consequence, the necessitation of (5). The interested reader should refer to the details of Lewy's chapter.

## II

Will Lewy's arguments generalise? The goal of an appropriate generalisation would be the conclusion that, no matter what true

<sup>5</sup> For if every proposition of the form, '...', strictly implies a corresponding proposition of the form '---'; and every proposition of the form, '---', strictly implies a corresponding proposition of the form, '---', then, by transitivity of strict implication, every proposition of the form, '...', strictly implies a corresponding proposition of the form, '---'.

statement of the form 'necessarily *P*' we take, it will neither entail nor be justified by any proposition(s) which, mentioning expressions occurring in *P*, describe conventionally assigned aspects of their use. At first sight – and with an assumption – the generalisation looks straightforward. On the one hand, neither *P* nor, assuming that necessary propositions hold necessarily (the assumption in question), 'necessarily *P*' will entail any such metalinguistic propositions which, since they state conventions, are presumably contingent. On the other hand, no such proposition(s) can justify *P*, nor, *a fortiori*, 'necessarily *P*', since under appropriate substitutions *P* will be transformed into a necessarily false proposition while the resulting metalinguistic propositions will remain contingent. So Lewy's strategy of argument might well be thought to indicate a global independence of modal propositions from linguistic conventions; the only question would be whether some interesting form of conventionalism could survive the particular form of independence – no entailment one way, no justification the other – involved.

That question sub-divides into two. There is the question of whether justification provides a satisfactory account of Wisdom's intuitive 'makes the same factual claims as', that is, whether when *P* justifies *Q*, circumstances conferring truth on *P* may properly be regarded as constituting the truth of *Q*. And there is the question of whether, if the answer to the first question is affirmative, conventionalism about necessity has to be, in the manner endorsed by Wisdom, a (broadly speaking) reductive thesis about necessary statements and explicit metalinguistic conventions. About the latter I shall have only a few, very cursory things to say, largely at the end of the paper. The best approach to the former will be, as it turns out, to take a harder look at the prospects of generalising Lewy's argument.

One seemingly immediate obstacle is the explicit play with the principle: if *P* is necessary, then it is necessary that *P* is necessary (the *S4* principle), which the generalisation involves. Once again, in the context of a discussion of conventionalism, is there not more than a *souçon* of question-begging about recourse to such a principle? After all, if convention begets necessity, *necessary* necessity would have to be the offspring, so it seems, of *necessary* convention. And what could that mean? However, Lewy devotes a section of his chapter to argument for the *S4* principle (1976:

58–64); accordingly the question of whether its role in his arguments, and in the suggested generalisation, is question-begging, is best deferred till we review the case he makes for the principle in section III.

A more serious obstacle to generalisation of Lewy's argument is that it simply isn't true that no contingent, metalinguistic proposition(s) of the appropriate type can justify a necessarily true one. We need at this point to be more specific about the notion of sameness of *form* used in characterising Lewy's proposal earlier. But now we encounter a certain awkwardness. What Lewy actually says in the substantive discussion of Wisdom in chapter 5 is that he will count, for example, (1) as justifying (3) just in case any proposition of the form: '---' means the same as '...', strictly implies the corresponding proposition of the form: the concept of being a --- is identical with the concept of being a ..., where the dashes and dots are to be respectively replaced by the same word/expression. However, when he comes to attempt a generalisation of the notion of justification in chapter 8 (1976: 99–101), Lewy offers: *P* justifies *Q* if and only if *P* strictly implies *Q* and only logical or semantical expressions occur essentially in sentences which express the propositions *P* and *Q* respectively. The notion of 'essential' occurrence to which Lewy is here appealing is that of Quine (1966: 73ff): roughly, a particular sub-sentential expression occurs *essentially* in a given sentence just in case its uniform replacement in that sentence by occurrences of another sub-sentential expression of appropriate type is liable to change the truth-value of the sentence. Now, the evident effect of Lewy's generalisation is that unless we are concerned with expressions of convention in which only logical or semantical expressions occur essentially, and with sentences expressing necessary propositions, or ascriptions of necessity, in which only logical or semantical expressions occur essentially, there is no question of justification obtaining. And none of the original (1)–(3) passes this test. Accordingly this generalisation cannot have been what Lewy had in mind when he found it appropriate to argue *in detail* that neither (1), nor (2) justifies (3). So far as I can see, the generalisation which subserves the discussion of chapter 5 is rather that given by clauses (a) and (b) above, where sameness of form is characterised as follows:

*Q* is of the same form as *P* just in case *Q* may be arrived at from *P* by uniform substitution for non-logical and non-semantical vocabulary occurring in *P*,

where semantical vocabulary is understood to include such expressions as 'means', 'means the same as', 'the concept of being a', etc., and uniform substitution is required to involve, in addition to the usual understanding of it, substitution of the same expression for both used *and* mentioned occurrences of an expression. At any rate, this account so perfectly fits the substance of Lewy's discussion that there is no reason to hesitate to proceed in terms of it.

What is clear is that if a contingent *P* is to justify a necessarily true *Q*, and that if the latter coincides in form with a necessarily false *R*, then the same substitution which transforms *Q* into *R* had better transform *P* into a necessary falsehood; alternatively, if the question was of justification of *Q* by a set of conventions,  $P_1 \dots P_n$ , then the relevant substitutions in the latter had better supply the materials for a necessarily false conjunction. But that is not a difficult situation to contrive. Consider for example

- (6) All and only objects characterised by 'vixen' are characterised by 'female fox'
- (7) All and only vixens are characterised by 'vixen'
- (8) All and only female foxes are characterised by 'female fox'
- (9) All and only vixens are female foxes.

Clearly {(6)–(8)} strictly implies (9). Further, each of {(6)–(8)} is contingent (if (1) and (2) are) and may, with whatever propriety the description is applied to (1) and (2), be regarded as expressive of linguistic convention. For its part, (9) is necessarily true. The substitution of 'male fox' for 'female fox' in all occurrences of the latter (both used and mentioned) in (6)–(9) is form-preserving in the sense proposed, and transforms both (9) and the conjunction of {(6)–(8)} into necessary falsehoods, so that the strict implication survives the substitution. Indeed, the strict implication is always going to survive such a substitution, since the pattern of inference is valid purely formally. So we are empowered to conclude that a necessary truth may after all be justified by a contingency (a conjunction of contingencies). More to the point in the present context, the contingent truth in question may conjoin nothing but propositions each of which may plausibly be regarded as

expressive of a conventional feature of English whose suspension may easily be envisaged.

How ought a proponent of Lewy to respond to this example? It is true, of course, that there is no suggestion of a converse entailment of  $\{(6)-(8)\}$  by (9). But there cannot be a decisive anti-conventionalist point to be made out of that or Lewy's chapter should have been very much briefer and need have included no discussion of putative truth-conferring relations *from* convention *to* necessity. A better response would be that the obtaining of justification between certain conventionally true propositions and a necessarily true one is only required, by Lewy's strategy of argument, to be a *necessary* condition for the appropriateness of a conventionalist view of the latter's necessity. Wisdom's choices, (1) and (2), fail this necessary condition in connection with (3). However, that  $\{(6)-(8)\}$  meet the condition with respect to (9) is no evident ground for the conclusion that the truth of (9) is conventional: that conclusion would require a corresponding *sufficiency* condition – and no argument has been given for thinking that justification sustains such a condition.

One thing that makes this response possible is that Lewy himself says virtually nothing to explain why he thinks that a convention, or set of conventions, justifying a necessary proposition, or an ascription of necessity, is a satisfactory explication of what the conventionalists had in mind when they spoke of identity of 'factual claims', or of necessary propositions 'owing their truth to' or 'being based on' linguistic conventions. (For the cynical reader, indeed, perhaps the most striking feature of justification would be its well-adaptedness to the task of construing Wisdom's specific assertions so as to render them most easily confounded.) Nevertheless there is some point to the response. If the truth of (9) were actually constituted by the obtaining of the three conventions  $\{(6)-(8)\}$ , then – notwithstanding the fact that, since (9) does not entail  $\{(6)-(8)\}$ , it could be true when they were not – the suspension of any of those conventions could be expected *ceteris paribus* to undermine the truth of (9). A rough parallel: if what in fact entitles me to a tax rebate is the occurrence of an error in the calculation of my mortgage repayment, then – notwithstanding the fact that I could be entitled to a tax rebate for quite other reasons – the supposition that there has been no error will *ceteris paribus* enjoy the supposition that I am no longer entitled to the

rebate. In general terms, the point is this: whatever exact account it might be appropriate to offer in a particular case of what it is for Q to 'owe its truth' to the truth of P, or for P to 'constitute' the truth of Q, it will be, plausibly, a necessary condition on such a relation obtaining that, as it were, the smallest adjustments sufficing to undermine the truth of P will suffice to undermine the truth of Q also. For if that were not so, the truth of Q would be otherwise determined, and so scarcely constituted by, or owing to, that of P. Vague as this idea may be, it seems plain that the situation is quite otherwise with  $\{(6)-(8)\}$  and (9). For envisage the requisite 'smallest' adjustment: suppose that two but only two of  $\{(6)-(8)\}$  enjoy the status of conventions for English, and that matters otherwise differ *only* in ways consequential upon this difference. The result is that so far from describing a world in which (9) ceases to hold, we have a world, rather, in which either the third convention is complied with, though not specifically acknowledged, or a world in which the conventions for the use of 'vixen' and 'female fox' are inconsistent. If, for instance, (7) and (8) were accepted, the situation would not be that the truth, *a fortiori* the necessity, of (9) would then wait on our acceptance of (6). Rather, the necessity of (9) would then ordain our acceptance of (6) – and that shows that the truth of (9) is in no way constituted by the truth of  $\{(6)-(8)\}$ .

Lewy takes it that Wisdom's claim that necessary propositions/ascriptions of necessity are, in effect, tantamount to linguistic conventions, asserts a coincidence in truth-conditions between such propositions and explicit statements of linguistic convention. Hence the strategy of his counter-argument: to show that there is no such coincidence in truth-conditions, because propositions in the two classes are mutually independent. A quite different interpretation of Wisdom, maybe in better keeping with the Wittgensteinian pedigree of his ideas, would be that the traditional notion of logical necessity is a *confusion* erected upon a misunderstanding of the role of what we mistakenly regard as necessarily true propositions – roughly, their role as *rules of description*. Whatever merit this thought may have, it can at least be said on its behalf that articulation of a rule for the use of certain expressions need not involve *mention* of those expressions; definitions given by *using* the defined expressions – most typically, ostensive definitions – are actually standard form, indeed it is hard

to imagine any other use for a sentence like 'A vixen is a female fox'. At any rate, if this was Wisdom's intention, then Lewy's whole discussion rests upon a misunderstanding: he faces an opponent whose project is not to account for what makes it true that a proposition is necessary, but to dismantle a faulty construction which we have placed on a large class of propositions.

That is one form of conventionalism which might be offered in response to our earlier question whether varieties exist which could survive the success of Lewy's manoeuvres. That Lewy himself considers no such interpretation of Wisdom inevitably somewhat qualifies the force of his discussion. But there may seem another reason for discontent with the way things have so far gone, even if we suppose Lewy's discussion is perfectly faithful to Wisdom's general intention. We have seen that the notion of justification will not subserve Lewy's independence claim in general, that it is possible for a set of propositions of the sort which Lewy seems willing to count as linguistic conventions to justify a necessary proposition. What seems to have emerged above, however, is that Lewy is right in spirit, if not in detail. No convention, or set of conventions, for the use of expressions in the formulation of a necessary proposition *P* can constitute the truth of *P* provided that relation is taken to involve – as seems intuitively compelling – that the truth of *P* could be undermined by waiver of those conventions. The dissatisfaction comes with the realisation that this is really a terribly simple thought: we trounce the conventionalist because we have lumbered him with what appears to be the hopelessly ill-considered claim that the truth of a necessary proposition – a proposition which is to hold true in all thinkable circumstances – can be constituted by a state of affairs – the currency of certain linguistic conventions – which might not have obtained. No need then for argument of the degree of sophistication which Lewy develops to knock the conventionalist down: on the assumption that the conventionalist is a respecter of the intuitive notion of necessity, we simply confront him with the thought that the intuitive notion has it that a *necessary* proposition would have to hold true in any possible circumstances, including circumstances in which standard conventions for the use of expressions featuring in its formulation had lapsed. Can it really be correct that Lewy's Wisdom – henceforth the *reductive conventionalist* – must cave in so easily?

I don't think so. However, the simple objection doesn't touch on reductive conventionalism with respect to ascriptions of necessity in general unless the S4 principle holds;<sup>6</sup> for only then can we confront the contingency of our conventions with the necessity of propositions of the form 'necessarily *P*', in the requisite manner. Accordingly I shall devote the next section to a review of arguments for the S4 principle, and to consideration of the reductive conventionalist's best response to them.

### III

It's worth emphasising how apparently powerful is the extended objection which the S4 principle enables us to make out of the simple objection. The power lies in tolerance by the extended objection of very various conventionalist formulations. The promise is of a generalised 'Conventionalistic Fallacy', appropriately enough, in view of the very Moorean character of Lewy's methodology and concerns. But there is an important contrast with the Naturalistic Fallacy argument. Moore's arguments establish at most that there is no interesting analytically reductive relationship between moral statements and naturalistic ones (however exactly the latter class should be demarcated). If he is right, naturalistic concepts cannot form a sufficient basis for the *analysis* of moral judgments. But a form of naturalism which can make out some *other* sort of truth-conferring relationship by the natural on the moral is outside the remit of Moore's considerations. In particular, the claim that the truth of moral judgments *supervenes* upon certain natural facts – meaning by that that sufficient change in the latter is necessarily apt to generate changes in the former, *and* that change in the former necessitates change in the latter, where these necessities are both conceptual – is quite consistent with Moore's having been right about the analytic isolation, so to

<sup>6</sup> Exception: the objection bears directly, it would seem, on any ascription of necessity entailed by a proposition, like (3), which is free of modal vocabulary but whose necessity the conventionalist may be presumed to grant. For if, as conceded to Lewy above, a necessarily false proposition cannot be entailed by a contingently false one, then – assuming that entailment is contrapositive, and that the negation of a necessarily false/contingently false proposition is respectively necessarily true/contingently true – it follows that a necessary proposition cannot entail a contingent one. Notice, though, that in order to infer that anything entailed by a necessary proposition is itself necessary, we now need the lemma that every true proposition is determinately either necessary or contingent. And there is some question whether that lemma will be acceptable to conventionalism; see below, pp. 185–6.

speak, of moral judgments; and, if true, is quite sufficient to frustrate the non-naturalism which Moore wished to infer. But no such loophole is left open by the Conventionalistic Fallacy. In the presence of the S4 principle, supervenience of necessity upon convention would appear to be excluded by the simple reflection that no amount of change in linguistic convention can be apt to generate changes in which truths hold necessarily; and that, indeed, the very idea of *change* in the range of necessary truths is now excluded. More generally: if it is of the essence of any necessity-respecting conventionalism (contrast the alternative interpretation of Wisdom briefly canvassed above) that it will somehow construe necessity as created by *us*, then it seems very unclear how the conventionalist can avoid the admission that the facts in which the necessity of a proposition consists can be anything but contingent. After all, presumably the relevant creative acts might not have occurred. So the S4 principle is bound, it seems, to make trouble for even the most weakly reductive forms of conventionalism: forms which accept merely that a necessary condition for the truth of 'necessarily *P*' is the occurrence of some sort of human performance. At least, such trouble seems inevitable so long as the conventionalist respects the intuitive conception of necessity to the extent of allowing that a necessary proposition will hold true in any coherently conceivable state of affairs.

Lewy gives two reasons for thinking that the S4 principle holds (1976: 60–1). First, whenever it can be known at all that *P* holds necessarily, it can be known *a priori*. (He is prescinding, of course, from consideration of the putative species of necessity lionised in the writings on natural kinds of such authors as Putnam and Kripke.) Secondly, unless the necessitation of (5), say, is itself necessary, then it is presumably contingent. And hence a vixen which is not a female fox, 'though not an *actual* possibility, is a *possible* possibility. And this is absurd.' Lewy himself reposes more confidence in the second argument – which he ventures is 'conclusive' – mistrusting the epistemological character of the first. In fact, however, neither argument is decisive, and each involves large assumptions.

Let us scrutinise the second argument more carefully. How exactly does it follow, if we reject the S4 principle, that male vixens, or round squares, while not actually possible, are possibly

possible? And what ground is there for Lewy's direct conclusion that that result is absurd? Set out more explicitly, the first part of Lewy's argument will run:

- (a) It is not necessarily true that: it is necessarily true that there are no round squares
- (b) It is contingently true that: it is necessarily true that there are no round squares
- (c) It is possibly not true that: it is necessarily true that there are no round squares
- (d) It is possibly true that: it is not necessarily true that there are no round squares
- (e) It is possibly true that: it is contingently true that there are no round squares
- (f) It is possibly true that: it is possibly not true that there are no round squares
- (g) It is possibly true that: it is possibly true that there are round squares.

It is notable that the moves from (a) to (b) and from (d) to (e), presuppose that every true proposition is determinately either necessarily true or contingent. And the same presupposition, or rather its consequence, that every true proposition is determinately either necessary or not, is involved in the whole strategy of Lewy's argument; otherwise success in eliciting absurd consequences from (a) would provide no reason for deleting, as Lewy wishes, rather than doubling its initial negation. Lewy, however, provides no reason for accepting either presupposition (various things which he says of the stronger suggest that he regards it as merely obvious). And, in the context of an attempt to get an impartial view of the S4 principle, with the prospect of using it to mount an objection against conventionalism, his argument seems tendentious as a result. At any rate, to suppose that there is reason to believe in general determinacy in modal status is to suppose, since we lack any effective method for ascertaining in general what the modal status of a proposition is, that *what confers* a proposition's modal status upon it cannot be assumed to be anything which human beings must be able to get to know about. And that is in open contravention of the spirit of the conventionalist's approach, that it is *we* who – presumably self-consciously, or at

least potentially self-consciously – determine the extension of necessary truth.

Even if we pass that reservation by, however, it remains unclear for what reason Lewy simply dismisses (g) as absurd. A likely train of thought might be as follows. Any possibility represents a state of affairs which the actual world might have exemplified. Accordingly, if (g) is true, it might actually have been a possibility that there be round squares: the world might have been such that no *conceptual* objection could have been mounted against a believer in round squares. But it seems impossible to give any sort of constructive account of what such a world would be like, of what could prevent the obvious conceptual considerations from getting a grip (Wright 1980: 366). So why should we believe in any such possibility? Only that, of course, is a weaker conclusion than was sought for: we cannot elicit an argument for the *truth* of the S4 principle from the reflection that there is no reason to believe in the possible possibility of round squares; what is required is that there *is* no such possible possibility.

There is a temptation, though, to take the train of thought on a stage. The actual world, (g) implies, might have been a world in which round squares were possible. Suppose that had been so. Then, if every possibility represents a state of affairs which the actual world might have exemplified, it follows in turn that the actual world might actually have contained round squares. And that surely is absurd.

We have begged the question. We have, in effect, carried out a thought experiment in which the world is transformed through two successive possible states: first into an intermediary state alleged to be already possible, and then into a state possible relative to its intermediary predecessor. But to suppose that we might, as it were, travel with *the actual world* through two such states is just to refuse to take seriously the relativity of the second alleged possibility: it is to suppose, in effect, that any state of affairs which can be obtained by successive relatively possible transformations of the actual world is already possible *tout court*. That may seem an intuitively attractive assumption, but it is hardly an independent argument: the principle, 'if it is possible that it is possible that *P*, then it is possible that *P*', is merely an equivalent of the S4 principle (and the conception that the notion of relative possibility is, in the relevant sense, empty marks a tacit

acceptance of the Leibnizian idea of a unitary all-embracing realm of possibilities which, as we shall shortly see, is tailor-made for the S4 principle). To put matters another way: the argument fails because it discloses no reason why the conventionalist should accept the transitivity, among possible worlds, of the relation: . . . can be transformed into. . . .<sup>7</sup>

An element of question-begging is also involved in Lewy's first 'epistemological' argument, at least if that argument is unpacked along the most natural lines. The argument evidently presupposes that whatever it is possible to know *a priori* holds necessarily true.<sup>8</sup> And the plausibility of this thought is owing, presumably, to the consideration that the feasibility, at least in principle, of an act of *a priori* cognition cannot depend on any contingent features of the world; hence the truth of a proposition which it is possible so to know cannot depend upon contingencies either. However, to suppose that the feasibility, in principle, of an act of *a priori* cognition has no contingent pre-conditions is to suppose that it has no *conventional* pre-conditions, that *a priori* knowledge is in no way informed by convention. The conventionalist could hardly accept that.

The standard justification for the S4 principle, beloved of introductory modal logic textbooks, is as suggested a moment ago, by appeal to the conception of Leibniz. Consider then an array of all possible worlds, including the actual world, and let necessity/possibility consist in truth in all/some possible worlds respectively. More specifically, let us have, for any world *k*

- (i) 'Nec *P*' is true in world *k* iff '*P*' is true in every world
- (ii) 'Poss *P*' is true in world *k* iff '*P*' is true in some world.

Clearly if *P* is true in every world then, by (i) 'Nec *P*' is also, holding in whatever world *k* we care to choose. But in that case 'Nec Nec *P*' likewise holds in whatever world we care to choose; and an exactly parallel thought yields that 'Nec Poss *P*' holds in whatever world we care to choose whenever *P* is true in some world.

So long as it's granted that the conception of a range of all

<sup>7</sup> No reason, that is, why, in the jargon, he should accept that the *accessibility relation* among possible worlds is transitive.

<sup>8</sup> Lewy prescinds from consideration of Kripke's suggestion that certain sorts of contingent propositions may be knowable *a priori*; see, for example, Kripke (1979: 54–7).

possible worlds, and the meaning of quantification over them, are sufficiently definite, it must be unobjectionable that these stipulations succeed both in conferring a sense upon reiterated applications of 'Nec' and in establishing a sense of that operator by which all modalities hold necessarily. No telling consideration has been presented, however, why this way of looking at necessity is especially commendable, still less inescapable. Indeed the suspicion lingers that the Leibnizian conception rather grandly begs the question against conventionalism: how can necessity consist in truth in *all* possible worlds if it's generated by conventions which might have been otherwise?

Let us try to formulate that suspicion more sharply. The Leibnizian conception has two essential ingredients: the analysis of necessity as consisting in truth in all possible worlds, and the notion of a comprehensive domain of possible worlds over which the quantifiers in the recursions for 'Nec' and 'Poss' are to range. What the complaint comes to is that, from a conventionalist point of view, these two ingredients are in tension. If there is to be a single, comprehensive domain of possible worlds, it will presumably have to include worlds in which – from the conventionalist point of view – alternative necessity-generating conventions operate; there will accordingly be no reason to suppose that *any* propositions turn out necessarily true in accordance with the recursion given for 'Nec'. In that case, to be sure, the S4 principle will still hold; but there will be no question of basing the argument of the Conventionalist Fallacy upon it, since there will be no material – no necessary propositions – to which it can be applied. Conversely, if we insist both on the recursion for 'Nec' and on having some necessary truths, the domain of possible worlds had better be restricted to those in which our *actual* necessity-generating conventions operate; for it is only in that restricted range that we can guarantee the truth of their products. But in that case the S4 principle will be established *only* for this restricted domain; as a result, it will be merely illicit to argue from the principle, so established, that necessary statements would retain the status of necessity in worlds in which different conventions operated, in the manner of the argument of the Conventionalist Fallacy.

The position at which we arrive, then, is that Lewy's two arguments for the S4 principle variously beg the question; and

that, from a conventionalist point of view, Leibnizian ideas support the principle only at the cost either of doing away with necessary truth or of restricting the application of the S4 principle to worlds governed by our actual linguistic conventions – so that the principle no longer subserves the argument of the Conventionalist Fallacy. For all that we have seen, then, a strict form of reductive conventionalism may yet be a defensible position: ascriptions of necessity, it may still be held, 'owe their truth' to, or 'make the same factual claims' as, explicit statements of linguistic convention. At least, no *refutation* of this position is so far to hand,<sup>9</sup> whether it can be attractively motivated is another matter.

#### IV

It will occur to the alert reader that the stratagem of construing necessary truth as truth in all worlds in which our present linguistic conventions operate would not merely defuse the Conventionalist Fallacy in its general form but would also deflect the original very simple objection against reductive conventionalism with respect to 'first-order' necessary propositions. For if that is how necessity is construed, then it simply no longer follows from the necessity of a proposition that it would still hold true in circumstances in which different conventions operated for the constituents in its sentential expression. The fact is, however, that the simple objection still seems right: intuitively, nothing seems more certain than that there would have been no round squares even if the words 'round' and 'square' had been assigned whatever use you please. Our ordinary conception of necessary truth is indeed that of truth in *all* possible worlds, irrespective of changes in linguistic convention. And what the simple objection seems to bring out conclusively is that this conception will not marry any form of reductive conventionalism about the truth-conditions of propositions accepted as holding necessarily. Nevertheless, there is, I think, some room for manoeuvre: a perspective on the situation may be possible whereby the reductive conventionalist may accept both the unrestrictedness of the intuitive idea of necessity and the S4 principle without damage to his position.

<sup>9</sup> But cf. the qualification in fn. 6.

The basic point is simple enough. It is, presumably, uncontroversial that, of the following pair of counterfactual conditionals,

- (10) If 'red' had meant what 'blue' now means, the sky would have been red;
- (11) If 'red' had meant what 'blue' now means, the sky would have been blue,

the first is false while the second is true.<sup>10</sup> Clearly, then, in talking of certain hypothetical states of affairs in which other linguistic conventions operate, what it may truly be said would then have been the case is determined by the conventions which we *actually* have. Not only that, but what it would *then* have been true to say is determined by the same conventions. If that is not immediately obvious, reflect on the equivalence of: 'It would have been the case that *P*' with 'It would have been true to say that *P*', and the consequent equivalence of (10) and (11) respectively with

- (12) If 'red' had meant what 'blue' now means, it would have been true to say that the sky was red;
- (13) If 'red' had meant what 'blue' now means, it would have been true to say that the sky was blue.

While it is unclear how the claim might be proved, it is thus at least strongly suggested that the following convention governs our talk of *all* hypothetical states of affairs:

- (C) What it is true to say *of* a hypothetical state of affairs, and what it is true to say would be true to say *in* a hypothetical state of affairs, is to be determined by reference to our actual linguistic conventions, even if those are not the conventions that would then obtain.

Convention (C) amounts to a convention for *rigidity*, in Kripke's sense (1979: 48–9), of *meaning* (rigid *designation* is a foreseeable corollary for expressions, if there are any, whose meaning is a function of the objects which they designate). I call it a convention with no solid supporting argument but the thought that it would be extremely difficult to show it to be anything else. Perhaps

<sup>10</sup> This point is made (with a different example) in the discussion of the S4 principle in Wright (1980: 366–7). But the role of the point there is quite different. Indeed the conception of conventionalism which dominates that book is quite different from the variety espoused by Lewy's *Wisdom*; see section V below.

alternatives would be complex to operate and inconvenient but, at least on superficial inspection, our practice could have been, when talking of hypothetical circumstances in which linguistic conventions were different, to *use* the different conventions hypothesised. In that case (10) would rightly be regarded as true, and (11) as false.<sup>11</sup>

If (C) does indeed govern our discourse, and is correctly viewed as a convention, there is an important consequence for our present concerns. Simply: (C) would enjoin that any proposition whose truth is generated purely by our present conventions for the vocabulary in its sentential expression, and which involves only use, not mention, of the elements of that vocabulary, will remain assertible even under the hypothesis of a change in those conventions. Moreover, (C) will require us to say that the proposition would still be true even if the relevant conventions were different. Hence *if* it is true that it is conventions for the use of 'vixen', 'fox' and 'female', etc. which somehow constitute the truth of the proposition that (necessarily) all and only vixens are female foxes, convention (C) will require the assertibility of such propositions as:

- (14) Even if we had not had the convention that all and only objects characterised by 'vixen' are characterised by 'female fox', it would still have been (necessarily) true that all and only vixens are female foxes.

And it is exactly the acceptability of such propositions which constitutes the heart both of the simple objection and of its generalisation in the Conventionalistic Fallacy.

This consequence is, I think, something which gives some substance to the very vague feeling, voiced early in section I, that the conventionalist cannot really be engaged by arguments concerning entailment and independence. The simple objection distils the quintessence of any such argument: if necessarily true propositions are somehow tantamount to statements of convention, or if, more vaguely, necessity is somehow constituted by, or even merely not independent of, convention – whatever the right account of

<sup>11</sup> Stephen Read has called my attention to a similarity between the distinction between 'of' and 'in', used in the formation of (C), and that between 'of' and 'on' drawn by Prior (1976: 207–8); and to a parallel between the use Prior makes of his distinction between 'possibly-true' and 'possible' and the use made here of (C).

'somehow tantamount', 'somehow constituted', etc. – we are surely entitled to expect a certain *co-variance*: hypothetical variation in convention ought to be associated with hypothetical variation in necessity. And the seemingly unexceptionable character of propositions like (14) apparently confounds that expectation. The reason why these reflections are not decisive, why indeed they do amount to a subtle form of question-begging, is that the foregoing reflections put the conventionalist in a position to place the following construction upon the situation. In effect, the force of the objection depends upon our assent to propositions like (14) being something which is *rationally demanded* of us. But there is now a case for saying that the acceptability of such propositions is, rather, *itself* conventional. That we accept them as true is a consequence not of intellection that necessity and linguistic convention are independent but merely reflects the dominance of the general convention (C): *all* hypothetical states of affairs are to be described in accordance with our actual linguistic conventions. Thus the correct perspective, the conventionalist will urge, on propositions like (14) is not that they give the lie to the claim of co-variance but that they bring out how convention (C) *masks* co-variance: in its presence, the constitutive relations between convention and necessity cannot be described by means of what would otherwise be the most natural form of description, *viz.* the sort of conditionals which, like

- (15) If we had not had the convention that all and only objects characterised by 'vixen' are characterised by 'female fox', it might not have been true that all and only vixens are female foxes.

controvert propositions like (14).

There is a notable parallel here with the debate concerning the possible supervenience of value judgments upon certain very general features of human attitude and response. Suppose, if I may be forgiven a hackneyed example, that each of us fears and deplores the prospect of a frontal lobotomy, despite knowing that afterwards we should pass our days in a state of steady contentment, judging our lives most fortunate and scornful of our previous misgivings. What we *now* want to say is that the potential erased by such surgery is itself of value, and that a responsive life which journeys through highs and lows takes a

better course than one that stands still on an anaesthetic plateau; and we want to say this in the teeth of our recognition that it would no longer be our view if our lives were, in the way envisaged, of the latter sort. So it looks as though we commit ourselves to a certain *autonomy* of value, in tension with the relevant sort of supervenience claim: one form of life can be of greater value than another, even though everyone might live lives of the latter sort and judge them best. And that commitment in turn generates a commitment to explain how it is that our natural judgments and responses have the appropriate cognitive dignity. The supervenience theorist, for his part, has the task of justifying his reluctance to undergo lobotomy. More specifically, his problem is to entitle himself to such a judgment as

- (16) Even if, after lobotomy, we were all to judge our lives most excellent, and the sort of life which we were then no longer able to live most dreadful, it would still be true that life of the latter sort is of greatly superior value,

without commitment to an autonomy inconsistent with supervenience. The manoeuvre parallel to the invocation of convention (C) then comes with the suggestion that we operate with something like the convention

- (V) How it is correct to appraise a hypothetical state of affairs, and what appraisal it would be correct to offer in that state of affairs, is to be settled (may be settled?) by reference to our actual evaluative responses and attitudes, even if those are not the responses and attitudes which we would then have.<sup>12</sup>

Accordingly, the supervenience theorist may suggest, the explanation of the acceptability of a proposition like (16) is not that the supervenience thesis is false, but that convention (V) requires (allows?) rigidity of evaluative criteria and so works to mask the sort of co-variance which the claim of supervenience leads one to expect. We suffer, in consequence, no commitment to anything which it might be proper to describe as the autonomy of value by our willingness to accept such propositions.

The supervenience theorist (evaluative relativist), like Lewy's

<sup>12</sup> As Hilary Putnam might have joked: 'So we should rely on *someone else's* evaluative responses?'

Wisdom, maintains a broadly-speaking reductive claim: both are keen to deny a certain multiplicity of *genres* of states of affairs, with a view to solving, or simplifying, certain epistemological issues. And reductive theses of whatever exact formulation must, it seems, issue in some sort of co-variance claims, naturally cast in the form of the claimed truth of certain kinds of subjunctive conditional: if things in the reductive class had been/were to be different in thus and such ways, things in the reduced class could have been/be correspondingly different. What has emerged is that, at least in these two cases, the reductive thesis need not be sunk by the received unacceptability of the relevant conditionals. Another form of explanation of that unacceptability may be possible than the absence of the requisite co-variance, in terms of the presence of a dominant convention, prescribing some form of rigidity, which bids us reject the conditionals which would otherwise be adequate to express the co-variance.

So far only scant attention has been given to an aspect of Lewy's polemic in which he places great confidence: his recourse to the so-called 'translation argument' to controvert Wisdom's claims about (1)–(3) (Lewy 1976: 57–8; 64–6). It is worth considering how the reductive conventionalist may now respond to this. What Lewy's considerations about the proper translation of sentences like (1)–(3), or *mutatis mutandis*, (6)–(9) tend to suggest is that, whereas linguistic conventions are specific with respect to the vocabulary of a particular language, the necessity of propositions is *international*, as it were – and so presumably cannot be constituted by parochial facts of any sort. But the last part of that, the conventionalist ought now to reply, is a *non sequitur*. Everyone can agree – whatever they think of Lewy's tendency to talk of propositions as though they were the universal currency of conceptual exchange – that necessity is 'international' at least in the sense that its preservation supplies a constraint on correct translation. Let us suppose then, with the conventionalist, that it is conventions concerning 'round', 'square', etc. which generate the necessity that there are no round squares. Since it is necessarily true, it will be a constraint upon the translation of the latter proposition into French, say, both that the result involve an articulation of ingredient vocabulary which appropriately corresponds to 'round', 'square', etc. and that it express a necessary truth. So – still assuming the correctness of the conventionalist

view – the very feasibility of an adequate translation will depend upon the existence of appropriate conventions governing the use of the relevant French vocabulary; otherwise a suitable necessity-expressing French counterpart of the English formulation will not exist. Accordingly there is no need, in order to do justice to the 'international' character of necessary truth, to recognise any necessity which is not generated by convention.

A different point which the considerations about translation suggest is the correctness of the claim, for example, that even if English had not existed, it would still have been (necessarily) true that there are no round squares. But that particular orthodoxy is something which the conventionalist will now seek to explain by reference to convention (C); the point breaks no new ground.

If the foregoing reflections are correct, then Lewy's Wisdom can at least fight a draw – unless, of course, better moves can be conjured against him than any so far canvassed. But the obvious worry is whether the defensive strategy supplied is not a little *too* powerful. If the status assigned by orthodoxy to subjunctive conditionals of the appropriate kind is not to the point, what *is* to be the appropriate form of expression of the conventionalists' co-variance claim? – what independently checkable statements will he recognise his co-variance claim as involving? And if no such class of statements comes to hand, what can there be to be said *for* reductive conventionalism in the first place? The form of response which the conventionalist needs to make is clear: he must adduce considerations which tend to suggest that, of the two presented explanations of the acceptability of propositions like (14) – the autonomy of necessity with respect to linguistic convention, and the operation of (something close to) convention (C) – the latter is superior. His opponent, for his part, must adduce considerations which suggest the opposite. But if neither protagonist can deliver, the effect of the play with convention (C) which we have had the conventionalist make will be properly described, so it seems to me, not so much as a rebuttal of the objections against which it was directed, as an annihilation of the very content of the dispute. One conclusion is that, so far from enhancing the prospects of belief in the autonomy of necessity, Lewy's discussion, for all its clarity of focus and admirable rigour, ultimately achieves nothing to disturb the suspicion that there may be, between him and Wisdom, no substantial matter of debate.

V

Apart from a cursory acknowledgment that Wisdom may have intended an iconoclastic view, our concern has been exclusively with 'necessity-respecting' forms of reductive conventionalism. So it's worth stressing, finally, that conventionalism may retain its respect for the intuitive notion of necessary truth while ceasing to be reductive at all. The thesis on which Lewy concentrates – typically expressed during the thirties and forties as the claim that necessity is 'really verbal'<sup>13</sup> – was doubtless a product of the cross-fertilisation of the Positivists' ideas by the then contemporary teachings of Wittgenstein. Whatever its origin, it needs to be sharply distinguished from another thesis, central to Wittgenstein's later philosophy of logic and mathematics, which would also naturally be described as the claim that necessary statements are conventions, *viz.* the thesis that the acceptability of a statement *as* necessary is a matter of convention. This is not a reductive thesis: there is no suggestion that necessary propositions, or ascriptions of necessity are somehow tantamount to explicit statements of linguistic convention, nor even that their truth supervenes on that of statements of the latter sort. Rather the claim is that the (formerly) orthodox belief in the objectivity of necessary truth and in our capacity for a purely rational intellection of it, is mistaken; that a contrast needs to be drawn between the rationally constrained character of our acceptance of prototypical matters of 'hard fact' and a comparative absence of objective constraint in our arriving at judgments about which propositions hold necessarily.

On the face of it, this view seems utterly unattractive, for we *feel* no such absence of constraint – good proofs, after all, are described as *cogent*. That such reservations are not really to the point emerges when we compare Wittgenstein's claim with the corresponding claim in the theory of value that ethical, or aesthetic, judgments serve not to express real fact but to *project* aspects of our feelings and responses. Perhaps the least controversial kind of example of a type of judgment about which a projective view would be our antecedent prejudice would be judgments about what is *funny*; and that prejudice is, of course,

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Malcolm (1940). Whatever the proper interpretation of Wisdom, there is, I think, no doubt that Malcolm held the position which Lewy attacks.

quite at home with the acknowledgment that assent to such judgments may be something not given voluntarily but elicited irresistibly from us.

Why Wittgenstein held such a position about necessity, and how best it should be formulated and considered, are questions about which I have already indulged my curiosity at considerable length elsewhere.<sup>14</sup> I shall not add to that discussion now, except to record the beliefs that the issue is of fundamental philosophical importance – not least because analytical philosophers have tended to think of necessary truth as their stock-in-trade while simultaneously seeing themselves as seekers after *knowledge* – and that Wittgenstein's position admits of profoundly based and powerful support. Above all, it should be realised that cognitive realism about necessity is not the only alternative to the scepticism about the concept favoured by (Quinean) empiricism.

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<sup>14</sup> See Wright (1980: *passim*), but especially Part 3, 'Necessity', chapters XXI–XXIII; also Wright (forthcoming).