

Modal Monism

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Metaphysical necessity is generally thought to be an absolute necessity. If something is metaphysically necessary, then in every possible world that object will exist. Clarke-Doane, however, argues that metaphysical necessity is not absolute necessity. This is because for any of the three epistemic grounds for modality, there are worlds where metaphysical necessities would not exist (e.g., mathematical truths). Therefore, metaphysical necessity is not absolute necessity. As a result, we should accept modal pluralism. Modal pluralism holds that no kind of modality is absolute. Rather, some modalities apply in certain contexts (i.e., possible worlds) while others do not. This brief explanation does not capture Clarke-Doane’s argument in its entirety, but I will elaborate his argument in more detail in the next section of my paper.

I will argue that given one of these epistemic grounds posited by Clarke-Doane, there is a way for metaphysical necessity to be absolute. In arguing this conclusion, I hope to provide a live alternative for those who want metaphysical necessities to be necessary in an absolute sense. This live alternative is called “modal monism.” If modal monism is not a live alternative, the implications would be significant to several domains of philosophy. To help us see the philosophical implications, Clarke-Doane

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lists several domains of philosophy that would be affected by his argument. In each domain, he provides a sample of what is generally thought to be a *metaphysically* necessary truth in the absolute sense. Here are a few examples that may be of interest:

[Ontology] There are (not) universals.

[Theology] There is (not) a God.

[Grounding] The grounding relation is (not) well-founded. (Clarke-Doane 274)

Each of these implications is suspect as to whether they are metaphysical necessities, but to better appreciate the effect of Clarke-Doane's argument, let's look at the metaphysical truth of grounding. If grounding is not an absolute necessity, then there are some worlds where the grounding relation does not hold in the presence of abstract or concrete objects. Perhaps the relation would be supervenience, causal, or some other structural relationship.

Granted, this metaphysical necessity may not seem terribly important, but others certainly are and will be explored later. So, for the small company who feel uneasy about this conclusion, I offer an alternative view of metaphysical necessity by drawing from Clarke-Doane's argument. I will argue that if one adopts a certain modal epistemic ground, they need not concede that metaphysical necessity is not absolute. This epistemic ground for modality is conceptualism. So, if one adopts conceptualism as their epistemic ground for modality, then the individual will be able to arrive at the conclusion that metaphysical necessity is absolute thereby opening the door for modal monism. My paper will go as follows: First, I will summarize Clarke-Doane's argument. Second, I will analyze conceptualism followed by analyzing the conceivability of the empty world. Third, in analyzing the empty world I look at two metaphysical features of the empty world: (i) abstracta and (ii) laws. Finally, I will conclude by briefly stating my refutation of Clarke-Doane's argument.

I. Metaphysical Necessity Is Not Absolute Necessity

In order to better understand the context of my project, I will summarize in more detail Clarke-Doane's argument against the absolute nature of metaphysical necessity. He presents three epistemological grounds, or methods, by which we determine metaphysical possibility. Clarke-Doane then challenges us to choose any epistemic ground for metaphysical possibility and demonstrates how, in each case, metaphysical

necessity is not absolute necessity. In addition to providing context for my project, I hope to charitably present his argument to provide the reader with an extremely plausible alternative to modal monism.

I will first summarize each of the three epistemic grounds for metaphysical possibility: conceptualism, counterfactualism, and the no-defeater position. First, conceptualism says that “We judge that $\Diamond P$ on the ground that we can conceive of P” (268). In more standard notation, this can be translated as $cP \rightarrow \Diamond P$, with the subscript c being ‘the conception of P’. For example, I can conceive of a world where snow is purple. Therefore, there is a possible world where snow is purple. Something fails to be metaphysically possible, in the modal sense, if we fail to conceive of P. This world would be an impossible world. For example, try to conceive of something blue and red all over. To conceive of such an object is impossible, so there is no possible world where an object is blue and red all over. As I have previously mentioned, I favor the conceptualist’s approach to metaphysical possibility.

Second, counterfactualism says, “That it is not the case that had it been that P, then a contradiction would have obtained” (269). In standard notation, this translates to $\sim(P \Box \rightarrow \perp)$. Put simply, if a contradiction does not obtain in a possible world, the world is possible. For example, if there is a possible world where you wear a grey shirt, then we can judge that it is not the case that if you are in the world where you wear a grey shirt, then fire is hot and not hot. An impossible world would be a world where it is in fact the case that a contradiction obtains in the possible world.

Third, the no-defeater position. This epistemic ground says that if there is no defeater then $\Diamond P$. A defeater is essentially any concept or law that may prevent a possibility. Clarke-Doane uses the Necessity of Identity as an example of a defeater to a metaphysical impossibility. The example goes as follows: we cannot say that it is possible that Hesperus is not identical to Phosphorus: $\Diamond(\text{Hesperus} \neq \text{Phosphorus})$. This claim is not metaphysically possible because of the Necessity of Identity. Hesperus and Phosphorus refer to the same celestial body, so within our frame of reference, it is impossible for the two names to not be identical bodies. Even if they appear at different times of the day, we can rigidly designate the celestial body and maintain that Hesperus = Phosphorus. The Necessity of Identity is the defeater for the claim that Hesperus is not identical to Phosphorus (269).

Now that each epistemic ground has been defined and analyzed, we can move to the second part of Clarke-Doane’s argument—no matter which epistemic ground you choose, metaphysical necessity is not absolute necessity. Clarke-Doane uses mathematical truths as his example of a metaphysical necessity not being absolute. In showing that necessary

mathematical truths are not necessary in an absolute sense, Clarke-Doane challenges what most philosophers would consider to be metaphysically absolute, thereby rocking the metaphysical world.

Before progressing further into his argument, we need to understand what Clarke-Doane means by ‘absolute necessity.’ This will best be accomplished by an analogous example. Absolute necessity is analogous to the absolute set in mathematics, or the all-inclusive set (267). Absolute necessity, then, would be an all-inclusive necessity (e.g., natural, deontic, epistemic, metaphysical, etc.) But Clarke-Doane refutes this analogy because, whichever modal epistemic grounds you prefer, when we consider metaphysical possibility, we will find that no metaphysical necessity is absolute.

Mathematical truths, such as “ $2+2=4$,” are generally accepted as metaphysically necessities. Mathematical truths are considered metaphysically necessary because these truths must exist in every possible world. Go ahead, try and think of a world where “ $2+2=4$ ” is not metaphysically true. Now that we have our commonly accepted metaphysical necessity, let’s take conceptualism as our epistemic ground, since this view will be the focus of my argument. According to Russell, “it seems possible to conceive of a world without anything” (270). If we can conceive of a world where there are no entities, i.e. the empty world, then the mathematical truths would differ in truth-value. In other words, the truth “ $2+2=4$ ” would not be true because there are no numbers, sets, functions, etc.

Furthermore, the empty world would result in all existentially quantified statements being false and all universally quantified statements would be vacuously true (270). Clarke-Doane concludes that just as we assert that some paradigmatic metaphysical possibilities are possible, we can, with equal certainty, assert that there are paradigmatic metaphysical impossibilities, such as a world without any entities (272). Therefore, although mathematical truths may be a necessity within metaphysical modality, these mathematical truths are not necessary in an absolute sense. This conclusion shows that metaphysical necessity is an insufficient kind of modality to be considered the absolute necessity. In fact, no kind of necessity is sufficient to be absolute in scope. Hence, we should adopt modal pluralism.

II. Metaphysical Necessity Can Be Absolute Necessity

In contrast to Clark Doane’s argument, I argue that under conceptualism, there are metaphysically necessary truths that are necessary in the absolute sense. My argument will go as follows: First, I will clarify

what is “well-informed conceptualism.” This will provide us with the epistemic tool by which we can analyze the empty world. Second, I will explore possible metaphysical accounts of the empty world and ultimately conclude that under a well-informed conceptualism there must be some abstracta (i.e. abstract objects, non-natural facts, propositions, etc.) in the empty world. These abstracta are metaphysical necessities, thereby showing that metaphysical necessity is absolute. Third, I will introduce the concept of laws and their role in accounting for the metaphysical existence of these abstracta. I will conclude by positing the Instantiation Argument to show how we can be confident there are abstracta in the empty world. Ultimately the view I am arguing for is modal monism, since I argue there is one modality that is absolute.

III. Conceptualism

I begin with conceptualism. Clarke-Doane argues that “If we judge the P is possible in some real sense . . . , then we ought to judge that paradigmatic metaphysical impossibilities are possible in some real sense as well” (270). Not only are we able to conceive of possibilities, but of some impossibilities as well. It seems correct that we can conceive of some impossibilities with other kinds of modality. For example, in a natural modality, we can conceive of a world where we can travel faster than the speed of light. Though those speeds are impossible for our world, there is conceivably a possible world where such speeds would be possible.

Clarke-Doane argues that an empty world is conceivable, but under a specific kind of conceptualism this world is a metaphysical impossibility. There is an initial aversion to the assertion that the conceivability of an empty world is possible. Furthermore, he has no account as to what the metaphysical nature of the empty world would be. But before addressing the nature of the empty world, I will flesh out a more fine-grained account of conceptualism.

I will draw primarily from Rosen’s “The Limits of Contingency” to bring forth two types of conceivability: informed conceivability and uninformed conceivability. First, informed conceivability can conceive of possibilities according to the best available understanding of the nature of things (22). An example of this would be those in physics who had a conception about space and time before Albert Einstein. Newton had given a very plausible theory, so there was no other possible conception of space and time to be had in physics. Their conceptions were well-informed until Einstein came along with his theory of general relativity and soiled the Newtonian conception of space and time. Now we have a different

conception and can make more informed conceptions. Oddly, physicists from the pre-Einstein and post-Einstein eras both had informed conceptions of time and space. Both conceptions were informed because both groups had the best available understanding of the nature of space and time. Understanding informed conceivability will be important to my argument because it provides the most plausible conception of the empty world and challenges Clarke-Doane's conception.

Informed conceivability could seem problematic because it allows for conflicting conceptions. I'm not convinced this conflict is problematic for two related reasons: (i) though conceptions can be conflicting, they are not contradictory in a strict sense, and (ii) informed conceivability has flexibility between competing conceptions because we acquire new or better information.

We have already looked at an example for informed conceivability, so consider the following example of what is *not* informed conceivability. A minority of individuals currently conceive the Earth as flat. The flat-Earth concept conflicts with the majority's conception that the Earth is round, but the flat-Earthers believe they have a well-informed conception. However, the flat-Earther does not have a well-informed conception. Rosen argues that informed conceivability becomes well-informed conceivability as we better understand the holistic nature of whatever object or world we are conceiving (23). Well-informed conceivability comes from gaining an understanding of necessary truths *a posteriori*. The flat-Earthers would have a well-informed conception once they did some sophisticated experiments that would confirm the Earth's roundness.

The other type of conception is uninformed conceivability. Uninformed conceivability is the capacity to conceive of objects without understanding their nature or relevance. As such there are almost no limits to possibilities. For example, you can conceive a world where there is a puppy with five thousand heads, a unicorn that burps rainbows, and a lion that can play a banjo. These examples are silly, but there are some advantages to this type of conception. One reason is that there is no ambiguity about what it means to be "well-informed." Another related reason is that there should be skepticism about whether we can really have adequate knowledge about the nature of any object. As a result, this branch of conceptualism may be a more comfortable alternative to informed conceivability. Which type of conception will affect the plausibility of my argument, so this is important to keep in mind throughout the rest of the paper. For this paper, I will favor informed conceptualism. This is primarily because uninformed conceivability has no constraints. Presumably, under uninformed conceivability there is a possible world where "torturing babies for fun is a moral good" is true. As such, we

should prefer informed conceivability because it has the proper constraints to ensure what most likely are actual possibilities.

IV. Conceivability of the Empty World

Recall Clarke-Doane says that if we can conceive of P , then P is metaphysically possible. He concludes that we can conceive of a world without anything. I will refer to this “world without anything” as “the empty world.” Some may be averse to the conceivability of an empty world where there are no concrete (physical) objects. Such aversions are warranted. For example, when I tell you to think of nothing, what are you thinking of, i.e. your conception? Probably some sort of black void. But isn’t there space? Or the color black? Conceiving this concrete-object-empty world is a hard pill to swallow (especially since there is no pill). However, the empty world without concrete entities may be a case where its possibility is only impossible from our limited understanding. Truthfully, I have no idea what to make of a concrete-object-empty world, but I believe it is reasonable to grant the possibility of this type of empty world.

Using the two types of conceivability from earlier, we will look at their relevance to the conceivability of the empty world. First, the uninformed conceivability. Clarke-Doane’s articulation of conceptualism seems to reflect this type of conceivability. He is extremely permissive about metaphysical possibilities, so it is not surprising that the metaphysical possibility of the empty world fits the epistemic ground of conceptualism. But it is important to note that this is an uninformed conception of the empty world. This type of conception dismisses a robust analysis of the metaphysical nature of the empty world. I think this dismissal is an error because he relies heavily on the conception of the empty world to promote modal pluralism.

Second, there is informed conceivability. The informed conception of the empty world will reveal that while there may be no concrete objects, there must be abstracta. First, the informed conceiver can grant a concrete-object-empty world via the subtraction argument. The subtraction argument uses the following thought experiment to understand how a world with no concrete entities is possible: Imagine a world with two objects, delete one, now you have one object. Now delete the last object, and “Bob is your uncle,” you have achieved a world with no concrete entities. So while the natural possibility of a concrete-object-empty world may have seemed impossible, metaphysical possibility allows for this type of empty.

Second, in the informed conception of the empty world, I would argue there are several abstract objects, facts, or propositions. If there are some abstracta, then there are some metaphysical necessities that would be

absolute. These metaphysical necessities would be absolute because they cannot simply be subtracted from the empty world, they must exist always, i.e., absolutely. The existence of abstracta will be evidenced by laws.

V. Abstracta and Laws

In this section, I will clarify the nature of abstracta and laws. While there will be no exhaustive list or rigorous analysis, I hope to provide sufficient context to understand my argument. I will begin by giving a broad definition of abstracta, followed by a few examples. Then I will define laws, explain the different kinds of laws, and show their relation to abstracta.

Abstracta are abstract objects, non-natural facts, propositions, and perhaps other things that cannot be strictly empirically observed. There are debates regarding whether abstracta are fiction, mind-dependent, or mind-independent, but these debates will not be the focus of the paper. I will take the realist's position and assume for now that abstracta really do exist as metaphysically mind-independent and epistemically (and pragmatically as will be shown in the instantiation argument) mind-dependent. Here are some examples of abstracta: essence, identity, numbers, moral facts, epistemic facts, inertia, etc. None of these are strictly observable and arguably non-natural. Now that we hopefully have a grasp on the concept of "abstracta," let's turn our attention to laws.

Much like modality, there are kinds of laws. There are natural laws, metaphysical laws, normative laws, logical laws, and plausibly many others. There will be some who reject the metaphysical status of these laws (e.g. normative laws), but for my argument, there only needs to be a commitment to at least one kind of law. The kind of law has some effect on the objects to which it is relevant. An easy example would be the law of gravity. This is a natural law that requires physical objects. The actual world, our world, has gravity in part because it is a physical object. The relation between objects and laws is complex and cannot be expounded upon at this moment, but there does appear to be some sort of plausible relationship. I will use a few other examples in my instantiation argument that may help to accept this appearance.

VI. The Instantiation Argument

The purpose of the instantiation argument is to act as a sort of evidence that there are some abstract entities in the empty world that would be metaphysical necessities. The importance of discovering these metaphysical entities within the empty world is that if they are there, the

metaphysical necessities would be absolute, as opposed to Clarke-Doane's view. The instantiation argument goes as follows:

Epistemological:

1. We can assume there are abstracta if we add certain objects into the empty world.
2. Once an object is added to the empty world, the laws make it so that the abstracta is instantiated and there is a relation with the other object.
3. Therefore, we can conclude that there are abstracta.

Metaphysical:

1. There are some abstracta in the empty world.
2. If there are these abstracta, then they are metaphysical (or absolute) necessities because there is no possible world in which there would not be these abstracta
3. Therefore, abstracta are metaphysical (or absolute) necessities because there is no possible world where they would not exist.

There are two parts to this argument: the epistemological and the metaphysical. The epistemological portion of the overall argument convinces us that if we were to have a well-informed conception of the empty world, we would accept the existence of some abstracta. We can show this antecedent commitment by adding objects to the empty world and thinking how the laws make it so that the abstracta becomes instantiated in some sense. For example, a moral realist might argue that there are moral facts (i.e., abstracta) that are metaphysically necessary in the absolute sense. Clarke-Doane would point to the empty world and say that no moral fact is an absolute necessity. But, if we granted Clarke-Doane's empty world and then added two persons, suddenly there would be laws that make it so certain abstracta are instantiated (i.e., they were present in the empty world, but in a sort of inactive state). Let's say the moral fact "punching someone in the face for no reason is wrong" is instantiated. Although in the empty world this moral fact was epistemically irrelevant, that does not

mean it was metaphysically absent because now that there are persons, clearly this moral fact would be a necessity.

Recall the example of gravity. Simply add one object with mass in the empty world and then all the sudden, there is gravity. Again, although in the empty world this abstract object was not active, that does not mean it was metaphysically absent. As we add things to the empty world, there are abstracta that are instantiated in virtue of some other facts and the laws relevant to the objects. This is problematic for Clarke-Doane's argument because these abstracta arguably came from somewhere once these objects were instantiated. As a result, the empty world is not actually empty; it is full of abstracta. Returning to the moral fact case, there would be no world in which there are persons where punching people in the face for no reason would be permissible. This moral fact is an absolute metaphysical necessity because even though there could be a world where there are no persons, this does not automatically delete the abstracta related to moral facts.

The adding of objects to the empty world reveals that there are abstracta that came from somewhere. Perhaps this is some type of Platonic heaven. If so, there may be a worry that these non-natural objects are ontologically and metaphysically bizarre. Maybe so, but I think the burden of proof falls onto the anti-realists' shoulders in this battle of modality. For the anti-realist must show how we can conceive of a possible world where the abstracta do not supervene, or ground, the natural facts. For example, could there be a world in which there are persons and killing innocent people for fun is morally permissible? I think our well-informed conception would argue that this cannot be the case.

VII. Conclusion

Clarke-Doane argues that under any of the three epistemic grounds for metaphysical possibility you are guaranteed to discover that metaphysical necessity is not necessary in the absolute sense because of the empty world. However, I argue that if one adopts a well-informed conceptualism as their epistemic ground for modality, then modal monism is true. In other words, there are some metaphysical necessities that are necessary in the absolute sense. I discussed the possible metaphysical accounts of the empty world and ultimately concluded that, under well-informed conceptualism, there must be some abstracta in the empty world. The Instantiation Argument shows how certain objects and laws account for the metaphysical existence of these abstracta. These abstracta are metaphysical necessities and are absolute because there is no world such that uninstantiated abstracta do not still hold true metaphysically. Hence, modal monism is a live alternative.

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