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Kantian Modality *vis-à-vis* Neo-Aristotelian Modality

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ABSTRACT

The paper discusses Jessica Leech's Modal Transcendentalism. In particular, it engages critically with the claim that her Objective Necessity, of Kantian inspiration, in being the strictest real necessity, earns the title of Metaphysical Necessity. I argue that a Neo-Aristotelian Modality better deserves that title, but that this discussion is ultimately a distraction, with the danger of making us see these two modalities as competitors of one another. They are not, and the theoretical benefits afforded by endorsing them both are to be explored.



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1. The building blocks of modal transcendentalism

Leech's *Thinking of Necessity* is an excellent and timely contribution to the existing literature on the metaphysics of modality. Her Modal Transcendentalism, of Kantian inspiration, not only is a novel, well-argued account that fills a gap in the contemporary scene, but it also invites, inevitably, a much-needed reflexion on how the various – sometimes diametrically opposed – accounts of *metaphysical modality* relate to one another in so far as they all are, at least in aspiration, accounts of the same thing: metaphysical modality.

In this paper, I take up Leech's invitation. I reflect on what it is that we ought to be giving an account of when we set ourselves the task of giving an account of metaphysical modality. In doing so, I will take issue with Leech's positive proposal on the matter (§3), as well as with her specific account of metaphysical modality (§§4–5). The upshot of the discussion will be that her Kantian Modality is not in competition with Neo-Aristotelian Modalities; a type of modalities she hopes her account will replace. To get me there, I shall set the grounds for the discussion by first introducing several

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features of Leech's Modal Transcendentalism, at places applying exegesis on them (S1), to then get a better grip on her Kantian Modality with the help of a heuristics (S2).

The first feature to be introduced is the distinction between *thought* and *objective thought*, which is the distinction we arrive at by first diving into the Kantian distinction between *thought* and *cognition*, sketched here:

To cognize an object, it is required that I be able to prove its possibility ... But I can think whatever I like, as long as I do not contradict myself, i.e. as long as my concept is a possible thought, even if I cannot give any assurance whether or not there is a corresponding object somewhere within the sum total of all possibilities. But in order to ascribe objective validity to such a concept (real possibility, for the first sort of possibility was merely logical) something more is required. (Kant 1998, Bxxvi fn, as quoted in Leech 2023, 18)

Leech unpacks the difference between *thought* and *cognition* in chapter 2 and, following Kant, she distinguishes theoretically two modalities, each related to one of those mental capacities: logical modality and objective modality.¹ The relation between logical modality and thought is quite intimate and straightforward. Logical modality is characterised thus:

It is logically possible that p if and only if p does not entail a contradiction, and logically necessary that p if and only if $\neg p$ entails a contradiction. (Leech 2023, 18)

And since *thinkability* is also only constrained by absence of contradiction, logical possibility amounts to thinkability: the laws of logic are the laws of thought.²

Cognisability, on the other hand, doesn't straightforwardly correlate with objective possibility. However, by unfolding the former we easily arrive at the latter. Cognition, unlike thought, requires more than mere absence of contradiction. Cognition is *thought* further constrained by the general conditions of experience. These conditions are essential building blocks of Leech's account and we thus need to get a clear grasp on them. The general conditions of experience divide into *formal* and *material* conditions:

The forms of sensibility and the categories together comprise the *formal conditions* of experience: they provide experience with a framework of spatiotemporal physical objects, bearing properties, standing in relations, and so on. These *a priori* conditions of experience give form to the matter of experience. The *material conditions* of experience are the particular input given from sensibility, i.e. sensation. For there to be an experience there has to be both form and matter. (Leech 2023, 30–31)

¹I follow Leech's terminology and will use 'objective modality' to refer to what in Kant's quote is termed as 'real' modality ('real possibility' explicitly).

²As a disclaimer: Leech, in later chapters, makes the relation between thinkability and logical possibility somewhat less intimate than Kant's quote above suggests: for her, the laws of logic are constitutive laws of thought but, unlike what Kant's quote suggests, one *can*, on Leech's account, think contradictions. For current purposes, however, there's no harm in taking the relation to be as intimate as stated in the main text.

To flesh this out a bit, the forms of sensibility are *space* and *time*, while the categories are pure concepts classed into four different groups on the basis of: quantity (e.g. *unity*, *plurality*), quality (e.g. *reality*, *negation*), relation (e.g. *causality*) and modality (*possibility*, *necessity*, *existence*). In any experience or representation, the understanding must apply at least one category from each of these four groups. Doing so results in the synthesis of the (raw) manifold of sensory data into an *object of experience*. This synthesised object of experience is a *cognised* object.

Cognition, thus, requires sensory inputs and, because of this, *cognisability* is – we should understand – narrower than *objective possibility*. Indeed, *objective possibility* is, in scope, in between *thinkability* and *cognisability* in that it includes (as constraints) the formal conditions of experience, but not the material ones:³

Whatever agrees with the formal conditions of experience (in accordance with intuitions and concepts) is possible. (Kant 1998, A218/B265; as quoted in Leech 2023, 41)

On this basis, the notion that is as intimately related to objective possibility as thinkability is to logical possibility is, we should take it, that of *objective thinkability*. As it will emerge in the following paragraphs, the distinction between *thought* and *objective thought* that we have just arrived at is central to Leech's Modal Transcendentalism.

I will elaborate on the centrality of this distinction by summarising two further features of Leech's account that we need to have at hand before we get a better grip on Leech's Kantian Modality.

First, it is by means of this distinction – between *thought* and *objective thought* – that Leech provides her preferred answer to the Problem of Reality: 'the puzzle [of] how the mind is particularly suited to genuinely represent the world, and how the world is particularly suited to being represented by the mind' (2023, 102). In a nutshell, thought that doesn't conform to the formal conditions of experience might be meaningful, but it is not about the world; it is not *objective* thought. It is by means of *objective thought* that creatures like us represent reality. The formal conditions of experience, which, as per the above, are *a priori* conditions, all constitute *epistemic* conditions which, at once, provide the objects *about which we can think*

³I'm no expert in Kant, and my speaking of both *cognisability* and *objective possibility* should not be understood as motivated by my reception of Kant or Leech's Kant. Rather it is a terminological choice that allows me to express what (as per the main text) I take to be a real distinction. On this choice, the scope of (actual) cognisability is restricted by the actual configuration of the world (how space-time is *actually* filled in). A different state of the world would render a different scope of 'cognisability' as applied from that state. *Possible* cognisability, on the other hand, is arguably coextensive with *objective possibility*. The next section in the main text should clarify this further. Also, the distinction between the two notions of knowability – knowability_o and knowability_w – that I distinguished in (Roca-Royes 2024) parallel the current distinction between cognisability and objective possibility.

and also determine which thoughts are about reality; that is, which thoughts are about *this thinkable reality*:

The guiding idea, then, is to favour a conception of reality that already builds in intentional and epistemological considerations. The very notion of what it is to be part of reality, or an object (broadly understood), must include the possibility of our being able to think about it. (Leech 2023, 103–104)

Second, once we have the laws of logic characterised as the laws of thought, and *objective* thought as further constrained by the *formal* conditions of experience (which Leech aptly refers to as ‘conditions of *objectivity*’) Leech endorses the following characterisation of objective modality as a relative modality (Leech 2023, 106):

Objective \Box It is objective-necessary that p iff $\exists\phi(O\phi \wedge \Box(\phi \rightarrow p))$

Objective \Diamond^* It is objective-possible that p iff $\exists\phi O\phi \wedge \forall\psi(O\psi \rightarrow \neg\Box(\psi \rightarrow \neg p))$.

That is, something is objectively necessary iff the (non-empty) conditions of objectivity require its truth, and something is objectively possible iff the (non-empty) conditions of objectivity don’t require its falsity.

It is from this characterisation of objective modality that Leech’s metaphysical account of *metaphysical modality* builds. The thesis she arrives at is unambiguous: ‘Objective Necessity is Metaphysical Necessity’. And the argumentative path is neat (2023, 132):

- (1) Objective Necessity is a *real* (i.e. worldly) necessity.
- (2) Objective Necessity is the strictest *real* necessity
(By its nature)
- (3) Metaphysical Necessity is the strictest *real* necessity (As a matter of concept)
- (4) Objective Necessity earns the title of Metaphysical Necessity

With this thesis, Leech achieves the goal that motivates the whole project in the first place: that of finding *the right place* for metaphysical modality; namely, a place somewhere in between the hard-core, mind-independent realism of the neo-Aristotelian and the too-watered-down anti-realism of the conventionalist. (Leech 2023, 3)

In what follows, I shall argue, against this thesis, however, that Objective Necessity is not of the right lexicon to bear the title of Metaphysical Necessity. It might still be however, as it will emerge in the discussion, that Objective Modality *ought* to be – as a surrogate – the one with which to satiate our epistemological appetite, rendering it a modality we should all be interested in, and not in competition with Metaphysical Modality. Before making my case for this (from §3 on), let us get a better grip on Leech’s objective modality itself.

2. Leech's objective modality: a *de dicto* plenitudinous modality

At several places in the book Leech stresses that the conditions of objectivity – to recall: akin to Kant's *formal* conditions of experience – are general rather than individuating. She directly argues for this in chapter 8, and the following passage is worth quoting in full for my purposes:

Given the role that conditions on objectivity are intended to play, it is greatly implausible that they would concern particular individuals. For that would imply that the existence of those particular individuals, or facts about them, are necessary conditions on objective thought. But what individuals could they be? They would need to be individuals written into the very fabric of objective thought. The notion of conditions on objectivity concerns what reality, and our representations of reality, must be like in order for the latter to be about the former. There is nothing to suggest that this must involve the existence of some particular things rather than others, beyond constraints on what those things must be like.

If some conditions on objectivity turn out to concern generic claims about individuals, e.g. that something of such-and-such type must exist, this does not introduce particular individuals in a problematic way. For example, suppose that if everything is spatiotemporal, then spacetime must exist, such that it is a condition on objectivity that spacetime exists. The plausible reading of this is not that the very spacetime we live in, this one, must exist, i.e. that it is a condition on objectivity that $\exists x(x = s)$, where 's' rigidly designates actual spacetime. There's no clear reason why this spacetime should exist, beyond the claim that some spacetime or other, perhaps very much like this one, must exist. That is, the plausible reading here is that it is a condition on objectivity that $\exists xSx$, where 'Sx' means 'x is (a) spacetime'. (Leech 2023, 172–173).

Reflection on the building blocks of the account as summarised in section 1 suggests that the conditions on objectivity are indeed general. The lengthy quote here offers precisely the kind of reflection to this effect. And as Leech notes in this regard, this means that objective modality is (primarily) *de dicto*.

It is a modality that, with my contemporary eyes, I cannot but liken to Lewis's combinatorial modality, as rendered by his plenitudinous plurality of worlds *before* he applied counterpart theory on it, and which is also, for obvious reasons and borrowing Wang's phrase (2015), a *de dicto first* modality. Remove proper names (or singular concepts) and any other means of rigid designation from our linguistic (or conceptual) repertoire. Lewis' worlds delimit the possible ways a spatio-temporal unit can be filled in, much like the Kantian 'sum total of all [real] possibilities' delimit the space of *objective thought*.

To ease the expression of my thoughts, I shall use Lewis' plurality as a heuristic for objective modality. Each Lewisian world is a *possible* arrangement of a space–time unit, ready to provide sensible intuitions to cognisers. The actual world is one of them: the one that provides the actual sensible intuitions that

we then – by means of the categories along with empirical concepts – synthesise into (actually) cognised objects.

Despite the fact that we can only intuit what the *actual* space–time arrangement offers to us (for obvious reasons), our imagination allows us to travel across the different possible arrangements. And the same synthesising capacities that we use to cognise (actual) objects – again involving both the categories and empirical concepts – renders, by means of this travelling, not cognised objects this time (because the *material* conditions aren't met) but rather *possible (or would-be) objects of experience*.

All this, still, is to be understood in a purely *de dicto* manner. In agreement with Leech, we can take the concepts of (Kantian) understanding (both the pure ones and the empirical ones), to be 'by nature general'. As she says, even when a given concept might be so determinate that only one entity satisfies it, the concept is a general one; for example, 'even a completely determinate conceptual description of a drop of water might pick out more than one individual thing. Intuitions [the satisfaction of material conditions of experience] are required for individuation. See (A263–4/B319–20)' (Leech 2023, 30 fn.).

Let me flesh this out with a couple of examples. Certain possible experiences (whether actual or imagined) will be understood as *there being a tree by the house*, others will be understood (borrowing from Leech's examples) as *the cat is on the mat*, and yet others, as *the cat caused the mouse to run away*. These can be described, using a metaphor, as the process of, on the one hand, cutting the space–time structure into *portions* (object-units) – a tree, a cat, a mat, a mouse – and, on the other, drawing relations between *them* – e.g. causation.

The role of the categories and of the empirical concepts here is important. They come, for instance, with a pre-loaded understanding of what is to count as *one* portion. And which empirical concepts we think with largely determines, therefore, the outputs – including the portions – of our acts of understanding. As Lewis wrote about his plenitude reflecting on a free-floating head-shaped entity that uttered language-like sounds: 'Perhaps you would not wish to call that thing a 'head', or you would not wish to call what it does 'talking'' (Lewis 1986, 88). Whether we would count that as a head, for instance, will depend on whether our concept of *head* requires a (rest of a) body to have been naturally attached to it at some point.

Now, it is not fully clear to me how much contingency – or even arbitrariness – there is, according to Leech, in what the empirical elements of our conceptual repertoire are. Is it, for instance, contingent that we have one concept of *head* rather the other? Is it, similarly, contingent that we have (our) concept *table* rather than, say, *table**, where a *table** would be a piece of furniture much like a table with the difference that a *table** cannot survive being painted? I shall take it however that the empirical nature of such concepts brings with it at least some degree of contingency (*even*, that is, when

keeping constant the forms of sensibility – space and time – and the actual material arrangement of the space–time unit). Again, all of this is still at a strictly general (*de dicto*) level.

Irrespective of the degree of contingency or arbitrariness, what should be clear is that the concepts that *are* the elements of our conceptual network determine the *size* of the objects that are the possible referents of our thoughts. Concepts (along with the categories), after all, do the cutting, thus determining what are possible objects of experience for *us*, possessors of *those* concepts. They determine their size quite literally, and on all three relevant levels: spatially, temporally, and modally (their modal profile). If our conceptual network included *table** rather than *table*, the table-shaped entities that would be objects of experience for us would *typically* have a much smaller modal profile than tables do; and by the same token, they would typically last a lot less, in any given world, than many tables do. For instance, no originally red *table** would have a green part, modal or temporal. For, any act of painting the surface of a wooden, table-shaped entity would amount to a *table** popping out of existence and another object (another *table**, if the concept so allows it) popping into existence, caused to exist by the act of painting. Graphically, [Figure 1](#) picks out the table with a solid line and the (would be) *table** with the dotted line:

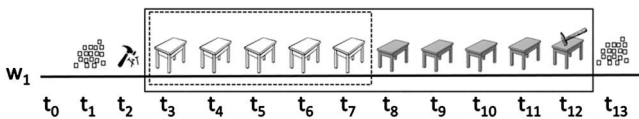


Figure 1. Tables vs. Tables*, temporal.

Adding the modal dimension in, we get this:

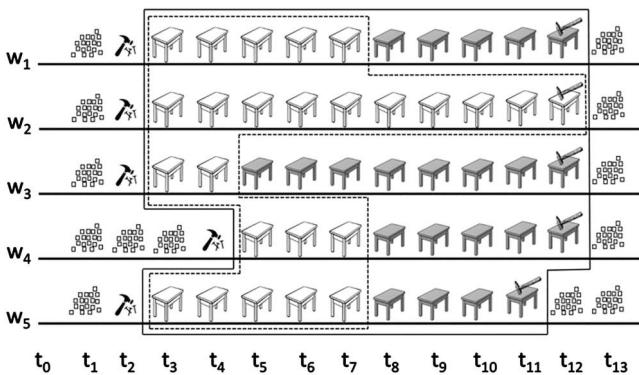


Figure 2. Tables vs. Tables*, modal.

As represented, the modal profile of the *table* spans all over the table-shaped drawings in Figure 2. That is, taking w_1 to be the actual world, the possibilities for such an object of experience, *a table*, include that it could have failed to be painted at all but still been destroyed at the same time (w_2), it could have been painted earlier and still destroyed at the same time (w_3), it could have been made a bit later (w_4), and it could have been destroyed earlier (w_5), among several others. By contrast, the modal profile of the *table** is smaller, as delimited again by the dotted lines, because *tables** don't survive being painted.

The Lewisian heuristic is not perfect, because it might suggest too much of a mind-independent flavour for space and time than a Kantian would like. But it's still modestly useful in order to help us isolate the (passive) role that the forms of intuition – space and time – play in our synthesising, from the (more active) role played by the categories along with the empirical concepts we (happen to) think with. With this caution in mind, the current picture of Leech's Kantian, *objective modality* is that of a combinatorial plenitude of space–time arrangements such that, for each of them, were it actual, it would provide the readily synthesisable intuitions which we thereby 'cut into portions' with, arguably, some degree of contingency. Whether actual or not, when we reason *counterfactually* constrained by our faculties in the same manner, we're understanding the elements of this plenitude by means of *objective thought*, thereby travelling the space of *objective possibility*.

3. 'The strictest real necessity'

With a sufficient grip on Leech's Kantian modality in place, in this section I shall critically engage with premises 2 and 3 above; the central ones in Leech's path to identifying her objective necessity with metaphysical necessity.

Let me start with a preliminary, uncritical comment on premise 1; to recall, the thesis that Objective Necessity is a *real* (i.e. worldly) necessity. I won't take issue with this premise. In Leech's broad sense of 'real', we can readily grant that Objective Necessity is real. Briefly: Leech's sense of 'real' captures a family of modalities that not only are *about the world* but also '[have] their source in something to do with the world'.⁴ As indicated above, Leech characterises Objective Necessity as a relative necessity:

⁴Rosen – Leech's starting point – characterises metaphysical necessity as the strictest, real necessity. She then unpacks 'real' as '*alethic* (if it is metaphysically necessary that p, then p), *non-epistemic*, and [...] 'substantive'.' (Leech 2023, 141). Of these three aspects, *alethic* and *non-epistemic* guarantee that a real necessity is *about the world* (that is, *about truths about the world*). The third one – *substantive* – is central for Leech, as this is the aspect that would allow us to distinguish metaphysical modality from other alethic, non-epistemic modalities such as logical or conceptual. This leads Leech to seeing 'the target notion of *real modality* [a]s a notion of a modality that *has its source in something to do with the world*.'

Objective \square It is objective-necessary that p iff $\exists\phi(O\phi \wedge \square(\phi \rightarrow p))$

And it seems correct to say that this necessity (this modality, for that matter) is, indeed, real in that sense. First, it is trivially *about the world*: objective necessities are true *of* the world (objective possibilities are possibilities for the world). Second, the conditions on objectivity – i.e. *the source* of objective necessity – have, also rather trivially, *something to do with the world*: blatantly, they are the minimum set of constraints a thought ought to conform to for it to be a representation by the mind of the world.

Now, driven by neutrality aspirations that she takes as a desideratum, Leech is very flexible as to what the ‘something’ in ‘something to do with the world’ might be.⁵

I’m deliberately leaving ‘something to do with the world’ fairly open, because it is there that the scope for substantive metaphysical disagreement opens up. [...] Is it the essential natures of things in the world? Their dispositional properties? Or something else? Not all options need be realist. Perhaps the source is the conceptual scheme through which we are able to experience the world. Perhaps it has its source in semantic norms governing language used to talk about the world. (Leech 2023, 143)

Let me now anticipate what, on the basis of this uncritical comment, will come out of my critical discussion of premises 2 and 3. While Leech is flexible about the ‘something’, she operates with *one* specific notion of ‘the world’ – her Kantian one – and this is what the discussion in this section is about to reveal problematic. To anticipate: Leech’s theoretical world has expelled the neo-Aristotelians from the discussion table, against her own neutrality aspirations.

Let me start with premise 2; that Objective Necessity is the strictest real necessity. We can agree with Leech that this premise is also true, at least *internally*; i.e. by the lights of the view. Once Premise 1 has been granted, the bulk of Premise 2 is on Objective Necessity being the *strictest* among the real necessities. That it is the *strictest* real necessity means that there’s no *real* possibility, X , such that for some proposition, p , it is objectively-necessary that p but it is X -ly possible that not- p . In other words, if p is objectively-necessary, then it is *strictly* (really) impossible that not p . That is, no other *real* necessity is less constrained than objective-necessity. And that, we can grant, seems correct from within the view. I shall not scrutinise it at any length, but the rubric of the reasoning here is that the conditions of objectivity are *the minimum set of constraints* a modality ought to be constrained by if it is to be *about the world* to begin with. Remove even one condition, and you’ve lost ‘touch’ with the Objective World.

⁵So flexible that, as the quote suggests (and Leech makes clear in footnote 23, 143), there’s space to consider even Thomasson’s modal normativism as a theory of a real modality.

The problem, as I see it, is not the (internal) truth of Premise 2 but rather the conception of *the world* that its internal truth rests on, and how that conception interacts with Premise 3; in particular, with Premise 3's intended theoretical neutrality. Let me turn to it.

Premise 3 is the thesis Leech arrives at after an insightful discussion aimed to find a common ground across the diversity of – often diametrically opposed – theories that go by the label of ‘accounts of metaphysical modality’. The assumption behind this aim is that this diversity constitutes genuine (rather than verbal) disagreement. Early in that discussion, Leech (132) distinguishes two levels to the question: What is metaphysical necessity?

- (A) What is the target notion? Do we have a clear enough sense of what we're looking for, independent of a metaphysical account?
- (B) What metaphysical account should we give of that target notion?

It is in her answer to question (A) – a conceptual question – that Leech finds the common ground. This answer is her premise 3: Metaphysical necessity is, as a matter of concept, the strictest real necessity. (For completeness: Conclusion 4 is then her answer to question (B): Metaphysical necessity is Objective necessity.)

There are several virtues that Leech sees in this thesis. Saliently among them is the virtue of *metaphysical* (as well as *extensional*) neutrality (Leech 2023, 132–134). As suggested in the quote above, Leech's broad conception of what a real necessity is purposefully broad enough such that there's space to even consider Thomasson's *modal normativism* (2020) as a theory of a real modality. (Leech 2023, 143fn.)

There is, however, an internal oddity here. Despite Leech's neutrality aspirations, premise 3 is straightforwardly biased against those who at once believe in metaphysical necessity as a non-empty phenomenon, think of it as a real necessity, and yet disbelieve it to be the strictest one. For these theorists, Premise 3 can hardly count as an articulation of the notion they are thinking of when they think about metaphysical modality. Fine (2005), for reasons I fully share (Roca-Royes 2023), is the author to go to in order to find an excellently argued articulation of this view, whose bottom-line idea is that there are two alethic necessities – metaphysical and nomic – none of which is stricter than the other. The neo-Aristotelian Finean picture that witnesses this oddity will, in what follows, help me model what, as per the anticipation above, I find problematic in premises 2 and 3 taken in tandem.

To the eyes of many contemporary metaphysicians, Leech works with an amputated conception of *the world*; a conception driven (as we saw in §1) by what she thinks is required of a solution to the Problem of Reality:

The guiding idea, then, is to favour *a conception of reality* that already builds in intentional and epistemological considerations. The very notion of what it is to be part of reality, or an object (broadly understood), must include the possibility of our being able to think about it. The sceptic might (and does) retort: 'it's perfectly plausible that there could be tracts of reality that, in fact, we really can't think about, so your epistemically loaded conception of reality is hopelessly impoverished'. (Leech 2023, 103; my emphasis)

The world of such contemporary metaphysicians – among whom we can find the sceptic Leech envisions, but also many of the neo-Aristotelians that Leech *expects* to agree with (the intendedly neutral) Premise 3 – doesn't fit this conception however. In the way Leech uses 'real', the neo-Aristotelian ought not to be required to agree that metaphysical necessity is the strictest real necessity; let alone conceptually. For the neo-Aristotelian believes in certain entities – which I hereby will call, *semi-stipulatively*, 'sparse objects' – that have no room in Leech's impoverished world's conception. Because of this discrepancy, no matter how flexible Leech is about the 'something' of *something to do with the world*, her notion of 'real necessity' picks out too narrow a family of real necessities. The metaphysical necessity of the neo-Aristotelian, undoubtedly a *real* necessity by their lights, is simply not a member of that family. *It* cannot therefore be the strictest of *those*, because *it* is *nothing* of those.

Let me put the same point in different terms. Recall the phrase that Leech uses to unpack what 'real' means: 'being about *the world* and having its source in something to do with *the world*'. And now take 'the world' in that phrase to be a placeholder for *world-conceptions*.⁶ Now, what Leech has identified as *the target notion* of metaphysical modality – i.e. *being the strictest real necessity*, as per her answer to question (A) – should now be taken to be, if such answer is to be neutral common ground (as she intends), not a notion, but rather the schema of a notion. To unpack it: *being the strictest necessity about [the world] that has its source in something to do with [the world]*. This, as anticipated, has problematic consequences.

Consider now what results of unpacking 'real', in premises 2 and 3 above, in this suggested way. What we get is this:

2*. Objective Necessity is the strictest necessity about [the world] that has its source in something to do with [the world].

3*. Metaphysical Necessity is the strictest necessity about [the world] that has its source in something to do with [the world].

The claim is that, while Leech's conception of the world easily *enables* the right lexicon for her Objective Necessity (and Objective Modality), such

⁶I am not distinguishing here concepts from conceptions but the point being made survives this carelessness.

conception of the world *disables* the right lexicon for Metaphysical Necessity in the eyes of the neo-Aristotelian; whom are, nonetheless, a substantial part of Leech's target audience. This is to say, while the subject matter of Leech's Objective Necessity aligns with *her Kantian world* (making 2* true), plugging in that conception of the world into 3* constitutes something close to a category mistake for the neo-Aristotelian. On this basis, it is a challenge for Leech to find *one* conception of the world that, at once, delivers her Premise 2 while also the common ground that Premise 3 is meant to amount to.

This is a challenge because it is only by plugging in a world-notion that is compatible with the inclusion of their *sparse objects* (as I am calling them) that the neo-Aristotelian can start assessing the truth of the resulting thesis. As indicated above, the resulting thesis is even *false* for several neo-Aristotelian modal metaphysicians. In general, that it is false is the stand to take whenever one considers (as is standard!) metaphysical modality to have its source in *things* (thus being fundamentally *de re*) while nomic modality to have its source in the laws of nature (thus being fundamentally *de dicto*). On this understanding, we should not agree with Premise 3; let alone with it being a *conceptual truth*.

This is enough to show that Leech's *path* to claim 4 – to recall, that Objective Modality *is* Metaphysical Modality – is wanting. Although not implied by the faulty of the path, I also think claim 4 false. That is, my problem with this claim is not just the path Leech takes to endorse it, and by the end of §5 will have enough stock to see why I take it to be false.

But let me stress an important point: the fact that, as I will claim, Objective Modality *cannot be recognised* as Metaphysical Modality should nonetheless *not* shadow the theoretical interestingness of Objective Modality. Instead, the suggestion is that we stop seeing it as competing with neo-Aristotelian Modality for the same theoretical role. We have already a grip, since §2, on what Objective Modality is. The aim of the final two sections is to understand it better on its own (§4), and to understand it better also in relation to neo-Aristotelian Modality (§5). Together, the two sections will allow me to show what I find distinctively interesting of Objective Modality, despite claim 4 not being true of it.

4. *De re* objective modality (and essentialism)

We know quite a bit about Objective Modality by now, but here's a question about it I haven't touched upon yet explicitly: Can Leech's objective modality accommodate *de re* modality and essentialism? Leech finds it important not to neglect this question because such *de re* modal and essentialist cases 'are [very] commonly associated with metaphysical necessity' (171). And if, the thought goes, the negative answer to it was unavoidable, that could count against her intended claim 4; to recall, that objective modality is metaphysical

modality. I think that objective modality can straightforwardly, and fully satisfactorily, accommodate *de re* modality and essentialism. Because of this, *that it cannot do so* is not going to be my (eventual) reason, in the next section, for disagreeing with claim 4. Let me explain how I think it can do so.

Let us consider Figure 2 again, and let us make the exercise of generalising it to complete space–time units. Granting, as per §2, some degree of contingency in our conceptual repertoire, there are various ways our (active) synthesising faculties could have partitioned these space–time structures into *types of objects*. As a matter of fact, we have realised *one* of these partitions: our conceptual network includes *head, tree, table, chair, cat, mat*, etc., rather than any potential concepts in their vicinities like, for example, *table** (again from §2). What our concepts *are* delimits, as illustrated in Figure 2, the size of Leech’s possible objects of experience.

Now, we saw in §2 that Objective Modality is primarily a *de dicto* modality – the conditions of objectivity are general – and that ‘intuitions are required for individuation’. Because of this, cognised objects are the only objects we can have *de re* thought about, understanding ‘*de re* thought’ here as the theory requires us to understand it: thought directly about an *individual* possible object of experience, within Leech’s Kantian (thinkable) world. About cognised objects, there’s a battery of true objective-modal judgements we can make and know, as we witnessed in §2 with the *table*, let’s now call it *a*, of Figure 2. To recall: *a* could have failed to be painted at all but still been destroyed at the same time (w_2), it could have been painted earlier and still destroyed at the same time (w_3), it could have been made a bit later (w_4), and it could have been destroyed earlier (w_5), among others.

In my understanding of the modality Leech is offering us, there are also true necessity judgements we can make about that table-appearance. Without further ado: *a is necessarily a table*.

The following is why, as per my understanding, we can say all these things. When the *material* conditions of experience are met such that our objective thought (despite general) latches onto a specific *table*, *a*, the modal profile that is required of *any* entity if it is to fall under the concept *table* (‘any entity’ as per the generality of the concept) can thereby be truly predicated of *a*. Any truth about *a* that is not so required is thereby contingent of *a*. As such, for instance, because it’s not required by the concept *table* that tables keep their colour constant, it is not necessary of *a* not to be painted; as witnessed by w_1 and w_3 . It is on the other hand required of any table that it is an object of that *type* if it is to fall under the concept *table* (and that it is thought as such, if thought about at all). For tables, after all, are not thought about independently of what they *performatively* (so to say) appear to us to be.

Add essentialist jargon to this picture, along with the close relation that essentialism is (widely) taken to stand in with *de re* modality, and we

quickly enable essentialist truths about *a* as well: e.g. *a* is essentially a table but accidentally brown.

And here now my confession of an exegetical puzzlement: I am not ignoring Leech's different take on *de re* modality and essentialism (in chapters 8 and 9). Rather, my take brings with it my puzzlement at her moves there. As noted, she wants her Modal Transcendentalism to *be able to* accommodate, meaningfully, *de re* modality and essentialism. What she offers in each case (respectively, in chapters 8 and 9) is ingeniously carved and complex. I am left wondering however if she's missed an opportunity for a simpler accommodation of *de re* modality (and essentialism), such as the one just sketched, or else if the way just sketched is contrary to the spirit of her position in ways I am overlooking.

Let me explore this issue. In the interest of brevity, I'll focus only on how (and the extent to which) she finds room for *de re* modality within her objective(= metaphysical) modality. Crudely, she takes the fact that objective modality is primarily *de dicto* – constrained by *general* conditions – to imply that all non-derivative necessities will be *de dicto necessities*. And this in turn implies that all *de re* necessities afforded by objective modality will be instances of (and derived from) the *de dicto* necessities it primarily delivers. For instance, on the assumption that it is objectively(= metaphysically) necessary that (all) humans are rational, then, 'it is conditionally metaphysically necessary that Socrates is rational: conditional on a general metaphysical necessity and the actual facts about Socrates, such as the fact that he is human' (190).

There are various ways we can understand this. But here is a constraint: we ought to understand it compatibly with what Leech takes to be a consequence of her so-delivered account of *de re* necessities: namely, that Modal Transcendentalism doesn't give us non-trivial *de re* necessities. The way I understand it is that Socrates is: *necessarily rational-if-(necessarily-all-humans-are-rational and Socrates-is-human)*. 'Hence, we end up with the complex conditional modal predication: 'x is (logically) necessarily F-if- ϕ ' (Leech 2023, 190). As required by the constraint, this implies indeed trivality because a dog also satisfies 'being necessarily rational-if-(all-humans-are-rational and x-is-human)'.

Triviality for Leech is not a problem. More important for her is making sure that, in accommodating *de re* modality to *any* extent, she avoids making her account thereby 'enter the metaphysical jungle of Aristotelian Essentialism'. She wants, that is, to avoid sacrificing the Quine-immunity that a *de dicto* modality enjoys (to some *degree*) (Leech 2023, §8.4.3). And this, she has a way of arguing she has avoided. She avoids it by what we can reconstruct as a three-stage manoeuvre. First, admitting that such *de re* predication is 'predication regardless of how we refer to things'; second, distinguishing two ways of understanding the 'regardless' phrase: a problematic one, and

a non-problematic one; and, third, showing that her admittance (first stage) is of the unproblematic type.

The unproblematic way exploits, precisely, the triviality: it is because *de re* necessities are true of all objects, no matter the type, that they are true of them regardless of how we refer to them:

We can make sense of a range of modal predicates that apply, or not, to objects, regardless of how we refer to those objects. But this is not because those objects have necessary and contingent properties, understood in a metaphysically deep way, as creatures lurking within the Aristotelian jungle. Rather, it is because those predicates correspond to conditions the satisfaction of which is determined by the logical form of the condition alone, independently of the object and how we refer to it. (Leech 2023, 189)

Although triviality is not a problem for her, it is a problem for many of us, as she shows awareness of in quoting Hale (2020) being worried about it (189). Thus, even if not internally problematic, it is nonetheless dialectically problematic, because non-triviality is a desideratum for many of her interlocutors. It is then a dialectically salient question whether her objective (= metaphysical) modality can accommodate *non-trivial de re* metaphysical necessities and *still* avoid the jungle of Aristotelian Essentialism. I contend it can: the simpler account of *de re* modal predication above is a way of doing just this. It trivially delivers non-trivial *de re* necessities: *a* is necessarily a table but not every object is. And this is a non-triviality that does not bring with it the jungle of Aristotelian essentialism. In fact, in disagreement with Leech's admittance (first stage), Modal Transcendentalism brings the risk of this jungle down to zero. It does so because the way we refer to the objects of *de re* modal predications is (so to say) *performative* of them; as per Leech's solution to the Problem of Reality. In other words: what objects are there in (Leech's) *Reality for the Mind to refer to* is not independent of the concepts *the Mind thinks with*. Table *a* would not exist in the first place, *as an object of possible reference*, if *table** – rather than *table* – was the concept with which we represent (thereby partition) reality into, precisely, *objects*.

I shall then take it that Leech *has* missed an opportunity here. Not only of having a simpler account of *de re* modal predication that (still) preserves the Quine-immunity she wants to preserve, but also of doing this in a dialectically more effective manner.

On this understanding of Objective Modality, I shall now proceed to explore how *it* relates to the jungle's modality.

5. Objective Modality vis-à-vis Neo-Aristotelian Modality

Let me take stock by freezing, for now, the use of the label 'Metaphysical Modality'. In addition to using 'sparse objects', as introduced in §3, to talk about the entities of the neo-Aristotelian metaphysician – in particular, to

entities whose modal profiles independently of representation they are wondering about – I shall also use ‘abundant object’, *semi*-stipulatively too, to refer to Leech’s (possible) objects of experience.⁷ I will also use ‘neo-Aristotelian modality’ as a label for the modality that sparse objects’ natures engender.

With this in place, I shall explore in this section how we can think of the relation between Leech’s Objective-Modality (‘O-modality’ for short) and Neo-Aristotelian modality (‘NA-Modality’ for short). I shall do this by exploring, in particular, the *alignment* (or else *misalignment*) of sparse objects and abundant objects when we superpose (under certain conditions) the respective modal spaces of these two modalities. Also, my exploration rests on the close connection between (non-trivial) *de re* modality and essentialism.

Exploiting this connection, here are two more labels to offer before diving into the exploration. First, I call ‘Abundant Essentialism’ the type of essentialism delivered by O-Modality; because, after all, abundant objects are the bearers of (abundant) essential properties. And second, by analogy, ‘Sparse Essentialism’ refers to the essentialism of the neo-Aristotelian. A difference between them is that abundant essentialist knowledge is cheap; not difficult to attain. (Here comes the echo of the contemporary modal rationalist: ‘tables are essentially tables in virtue of what I mean by ‘table’’). By contrast, sparse essentialist knowledge is a lot more difficult to acquire (if-and-when acquirable).

Let me now start superposing the modal space of O-Modality on that of NA-Modality. It is a theoretical possibility – that is, a possibility for us theorists to consider – that *sparse objects* and *abundant objects* (in particular, their modal profiles) are aligned. Similarly, it is a theoretical possibility that they are misaligned. Let me unpack.

If sparse Socrates satisfied, as a matter of (sparse-)essence, exactly what is required of an entity to fall under our concept *human*, then, there is an abundant object, Abundant Socrates, whose modal profile is perfectly aligned with that of Sparse Socrates.⁸ This would be a scenario where the abundant-essentialist principles retrievable from our concept *human* are also sparse-essentialist principles that are non-vacuously true *of* sparse-Socrates. In other words, it would be a scenario where *sparse Socrates is (fundamentally) a human*.

If, on the other hand, sparse Socrates could be a dog, his modal profile would outstrip that of abundant Socrates. Alternatively, if Socrates could

⁷Yes, I am thinking – and hereby making explicit – that, with a two-aspect interpretation of Kant (and stretching enough the commensurability of the views), ‘sparse objects’ is a *neutral* label to talk about Kant’s things-in-themselves/appearances, while ‘abundant objects’ captures only the phenomenal aspect of them. But I’d rather not stretch things that much, and my semi-stipulative labels are my way of avoiding doing that.

⁸I’m remaining neutral about what our concept *human* requires of the entities that fall under it. And I’m also remaining neutral about whether, in the case of alignment, Sparse Socrates = Abundant Socrates. (This is similar to the neutrality I didn’t want to break in the previous footnote.)

not have been a shoemaker, the modal profile of abundant Socrates instead would outstrip that of sparse Socrates.

Looking back at [Figure 2](#) for a further example, if the solid line captures the size of a sparse table but we *cognised* tables* instead, rather than tables, there would be misalignment between sparse tables and the would-be-our abundant tables. The thought, it is intended, generalises widely beyond tables and humans. The case of alignment is one where the way we categorise Leech's Reality aligns with the fundamental joints of the world of the neo-Aristotelian.

Now, the aspiration of the neo-Aristotelian modal metaphysician is that we have epistemic access (at least partially) to the modal profiles of what they are submitting as the entities of our ontology. On the possibility of *sparse* essentialist knowledge, pessimism and optimism aren't uniformly distributed across the community. Still, it is safe to assume widespread pessimism at least to some degree, by both advocates and detractors of sparse essentialism alike. I am, for one, rather pessimistic about *full* epistemic access (although optimistic about partial access). Such epistemological difficulties – as well as metaphysical ones – often lie at the heart of hostility towards neo-Aristotelian modality.

It is worth noting that the hypothetical case of alignment would not make things easier for the neo-Aristotelian epistemologist. Alignment cases, as just hinted at, would generate some *true* principles linking abundant-essential truths with sparse-essential truths. And yet, while abundant-essential truths are epistemologically cheap, those bridge principles would not amount to a cheap entry point to sparse-essentialist knowledge. For, in such alignment case, what would be required for sparse essentialist knowledge would *be* (identical to) what would be required for knowledge of the bridge principles; knowledge that the alignment occurs.

In this context, what I find particularly exciting about Leech's Objective Modality is that even a neo-Aristotelian modal metaphysician might happily endorse it, without *thereby* sacrificing NA-modality. There are different ways in which this endorsement can be made. For instance, O-modality can be endorsed as a mere epistemological surrogate, to otherwise satiate the appetite for the unattainable (if so it is) sparse essentialist knowledge. If – the suggestion goes – sparse entities are entities whose natures cannot be *fully* known, then maybe O-modality is the one that should earn our epistemological attention: we might not be able to have full sparse-essentialist knowledge but, for all that matters otherwise, abundant-essentialist knowledge might suffice.

There's also room for hybrid accounts at a metaphysical level, where O-Modality partly replaces NA-Modality. For instance, we might have thought that sparse-tables existed but become convinced instead that abundant tables are all there is, and we might generalise such ontological revision to all inanimate entities. On such a hybrid view – which I feel some attraction

to – living creatures are the only sparse objects that exist; the rest are all abundant objects, whose (abundant-)natures, about which we *can* be realists, are *exhausted* by the ways we represent them.

In whichever way the neo-Aristotelian might decide to embrace O-modality, the moral is the same: O-modality is not in competition with NA-modality because their different aboutnesses are not incompatible.⁹

Where, then, does this all leave us? It really doesn't matter what we should call 'metaphysical modality'. This discussion – that is, the discussion that emerges from Leech's question (B) – is a distraction. Not only this. When the theoretical interestingness of a type of modality (O-Modality) could be understood as bringing with it the destruction of another, no less interesting, modality (NA-Modality) such distraction is not innocuous.

Having said this, I'll wrap up with a remark that will nonetheless manifest my terminological dogmatism. We've seen in §4 that it is very important for Leech not to let her O-Modality fall prey to Quine's attacks against *de re* modality. I think that the way she protects the Quine-immunity of O-Modality is more complicated than needed, and I've offered a quicker route to that same effect. The main points in this section can now crystallise as a complaint against Leech's claim 4 – her answer to Question (B) – in the following way: the extent to which O-necessity is (indeed) immune to Quine's attacks is the extent to which O-necessity is not, but the Neo-Aristotelian necessity is, recognisable as metaphysical necessity.

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⁹I am here taking seriously the suggestion in (Hale and Wright 2009).

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