The resurgence of metaphysics in late analytic philosophy: A constructive critique

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Abstract: The purpose of the first part of this paper is to examine the major turning point events that transformed the attitude of analytic philosophers towards metaphysical discourse. We will focus on one such turning point, the modal revolution, based on the resources of possible world semantics, developed by Kripke (who devised suitable models for modal logic) and by philosophers such as Lewis and Plantinga (who offered influential metaphysical interpretations of those models). We shall see how the modal revolution, by bringing an unprecedented change in the way in which modal notions were understood by analytic philosophers, was central to the revival of metaphysics in contemporary philosophy. Yet, analytic philosophers encountered serious obstacles in their attempt to understand the ontological and epistemological foundations and implications of one of the most basic notions of the modal revolution, that of a possible world. In the second part of the paper, it will be argued that, surprisingly enough, the work of the pre-Kripkean "middle" analytic philosopher Wilfrid Sellars, especially as interpreted and reconstructed by Robert Brandom, can perhaps throw light on the semantic, epistemic and ontological dimension of possible world talk. Sellars does this mainly through 1) (what Brandom calls) the "Kant-Sellars thesis about modality", 2) his understanding of modal discourse as non-descriptive, expressive, categorial and "metaliguistic", and 3) his nominalism about abstract entities. Thus, it will be suggested that the implications of this Sellars-inspired position are such that make it an unexpectedly relevant and novel contribution to contemporary debates in analytic metaphysics.

Keywords: modal revolution; possible worlds metaphysics; Kant-Sellars thesis about modality; nominalism.

1. *Introduction*

In this paper, I shall first describe what is commonly called the "modal revolution" in analytic philosophy, inaugurated mainly by figures such as Saul Kripke and David Lewis in the 1960s. The modal revolution, based on the resources of possible world semantics (first developed by Kripke 1959; 1963, who devised suitable models for modal logic, and Lewis 1968, who offered a

ISSN (print) 2281-8618-ETS

metaphysical interpretation of those models), brought a sea change in the way in which modal notions (possibility, necessity, contingency) were understood by analytic philosophers, and was central to the revival of analytic metaphysics, a philosophical research area still thriving in contemporary analytic philosophy. I shall then proceed by offering what I take to be a constructive critique of this whole line of thought about alethic modality (which stands behind the resurgence of analytic metaphysics), based on the works of a relatively neglected "middle" analytic philosopher, Wilfrid Sellars, and of a "late" analytic philosopher whose work is deeply influenced from Sellars (which probably explains why he is a minority figure in contemporary analytic philosophy), namely Robert Brandom. I will suggest that Sellars' work, especially as interpreted and reconstructed by Brandom for his own philosophical use, contains valuable insights about alethic modality, which can significantly contribute to discussions on the philosophical foundations of contemporary analytic metaphysics. Finally, based on a version of Sellarsian nominalism about abstract entities, I will explore the possibility of providing an account of possible world metaphysical talk, which though ultimately nominalistic, acknowledges the reality of modal phenomena and attempts to legitimate rather than eliminate them (i.e. it attempts to show what modal phenomena "really are" rather than that there are no such things as modal phenomena).

2. *The modal revolution in analytic philosophy*

It is interesting to be reminded of the fact that, as a result of the modal revolution in analytic philosophy, virtually all analytic philosophers nowadays not only do not have any reservations about the intelligibility of modal notions but, even more radically, they make free use of them – i.e. they consider them as unproblematically available – to explain philosophically puzzling phenomena, such as the semantic status of normative or intentional vocabulary. It is surely worthwhile to remind ourselves how surprised early or "middle" analytic philosophers would be to find out that by the end of the 20th century modal notions such as dispositions, counterfactual dependencies and nomological relations would be considered as unproblematically available to explain allegedly more puzzling phenomena such as the semantic status of normative, intentional or even semantic vocabulary itself. For up until the late 1960s, most analytic philosophers were highly suspicious of modal notions. A whole tradition of 20th-century analytic philosophy, from Russell, through Carnap and the other logical positivists to Quine (himself an ardent critic of logical positivism), expressed serious reservations about the very intelligibility of modal concepts.

The latter were not exactly considered to be the paradigm of clarity, and the only way for them to be philosophically unproblematic would be by being reduced to decidedly non-modal notions.

This extreme suspicion of the legitimacy of modal talk was a consequence of the fact that most of early and middle analytic philosophers were part of a broadly *empiricist* philosophical tradition[1]. Early analytic philosophers – from Russell, through Carnap and the other logical positivists, to Quine –, were all heirs of this Hume-inspired broadly empiricist tradition. Hence, their viewing modal notions with suspicion was only to be expected. Moreover, these reservations were reinforced for 20th-century versions of empiricism because the latter were strengthened and made more precise by the invention of extensional, first-order quantificational languages, which could express regularities and generalizations in a new, far more powerful and precise manner. And the fact that lawlikeness or counterfactually supporting necessity distinctive of some such generalizations (those that amount to natural laws) extended beyond what can be captured by the expressive resources of extensional, first-order quantificational logic, made modal vocabulary look even more problematic and led empiricist-minded analytic philosophers (including Quine) to the view that modal notions could be legitimized only if they could be explained in resolutely non-modal terms. If this could not be done, modal notions should be eliminated, explained away; we should just learn to live without them.

However, developments in formal logic, and especially in the field of modal logic (the logic of necessity and possibility), in the 1960s, primarily induced by Saul Kripke, led to a most remarkable development in the recent history of analytic philosophy: the resurgence of metaphysics – of a traditional speculative form – as a legitimate area of research for analytic philosophers. The transformation in analytic philosophy could not be greater: far from being inhibited by the logical positivists' exclusion of metaphysics as cognitively meaningless (as a result of their austere verificationist principle of significance) or by ordinary language scruples about the ways in which metaphysicians strained the use of ordinary words, the new analytic metaphysicians shamelessly began to engage in boldly metaphysical speculations, which, as Williamson notes, "might be

[1] As is well known, modality was treated with suspicion ever since Hume forcefully formulated his epistemological objections to the concepts of law and necessary connection. Specifically, Hume argued that even one's best understanding of actual observable empirical facts did not automatically yield a corresponding understanding of the rules (causal laws) relating them. That is, those facts did not by themselves settle which of the things that *actually* happened were *necessary* (i.e. had to happen, given other such facts) and which of the things that did *not* actually happen, nonetheless were *possible* (i.e. not ruled out by the laws concerning what really happened). Possibilities and necessities are not observable states of affairs nor can they be deduced from the latter (Brandom 2015: 149).

described by those unsympathetic to [them] as *pre-critical*, ranging far outside the domain of our experience, closer in spirit to Leibniz than to Kant" (Williamson 2017, 1).

What explains this radical transformation of recent analytic philosophy? The quick answer is 1) the formal-semantic revolution in modal logic, inaugurated by Kripke, who, based on the notion of a "possible world" (as well as that of "accessibility relations" among possible worlds), legitimized intensional modal logical vocabulary[2] by analyzing it in terms of a complete extensional semantic metalanguage[3], and 2) the fact that the analytic tradition gradually gave up empiricism in favor of naturalism (which was much less suspicious of modal talk)[4].

The Kripkean new semantics for modal logic, together with his new "causal" or "direct" theory of reference (applied to proper names and natural kind terms) (Kripke 1972), provided an unexpected legitimation to – hitherto discredited – metaphysics since it offered a new and more precise way of thinking about the traditionally metaphysical notions of essence and accident. Both

[2] A classic problem of the pre-Kripkean modal logic was that, unlike first-order quantificational languages such as the *Principia Mathematica*, it could not be formalized, one of the reasons for this being that it was intensional, i.e. not truth functional: 'Necessarily *p*' ($\Box p$) could be false even though *p* is true. This is the case whenever *p* (e.g. 'snow is white') is contingently true but not necessarily true. Similarly, it may be true that 'possibly *p*' ($\Diamond p$) even though *p* is false. It may be true that it is possible that snow is blue even though the claim that snow is blue is false. Now, for the logical positivists, Quine and Kripke alike, the paradigm of a philosophically unproblematic body of discourse is one that is extensional, because only in extensional contexts do we have an absolutely firm grasp of what we are committed to in making particular claims. Yet, until the Kripkean modal revolution nobody had shown how modal discourse could be understood extensionally.

[3] In the beginning of the 1960s Kripke (1959; 1963) showed that we could give an "extensionalistically respectable" sense to modal operators (which, of course, remain non-truth functional) by utilizing the essentially Leibnizian idea that our world, the actual world, is just one of infinitely many different *possible worlds*. The basic idea was that just as propositions can be true or false in the actual world, they can have truth values in *other* possible worlds. Thus, on this view, to say that a proposition is (actually) true is to say that it is true in that possible world that is the *actual* world; to say that a proposition is necessary (necessarily true) is to say that it is true in *every* possible world and to say that a proposition is possible (possibly true) is to say that it is true in *some* possible world or other. In this way, the notions of necessity and possibility are understood in terms of *quantification over possible worlds*. Furthermore, the framework of possible worlds proved to be illuminating in the case not only of ascriptions of *de dicto* modality but also of *de re* modality. Just as propositions are true or false in possible worlds, objects exist or fail to exist in possible worlds. Thus, in the possible world framework, to say that an object has a property necessarily or essentially is to say that it has this property in every possible world in which this object exists (including the actual world). And, to say that an object has a property contingently or accidentally is to say that while it has this property in the actual world, there is at least one possible world where it exist and fails to exemplify that property.

[4] Naturalism as a philosophical thesis is far more congenial to modal notions since modal language is essential to natural science. Fundamental physics makes essential use of the language of natural *laws*, and virtually all special sciences distinguish between true and false *counterfactual* claims.

these notions, having been revitalized by Kripke's theory of direct reference, could also now be understood in terms of quantification over possible worlds. Moreover, the application of Kripke's new theory of direct reference to proper names and natural kind terms[5] aided by his revolutionary distinction between metaphysical and epistemic modalities[6] (and backed by possible world semantics), resulted in the rebirth of something akin to Aristotelian (yet science-friendly and semantically updated) essentialism within analytic philosophy. It would not be an exaggeration to say that contemporary analytic metaphysics owes its very existence to the above cluster of (Kripkean) views.

3. *The metaphysical interpretation of possible worlds: modal realism, modal actualism and their problems*

Now, while the abovementioned novel conceptual framework of possible worlds delivered understanding and insight in a wide range of philosophical topics (besides those of *de re* and *de dicto* possibilities, it illuminated topics such as the function of proper names (Kripke 1972), the nature of counterfactuals (Lewis 1973), time and temporal relations, causal determinism, etc.), it certainly had its problematic features. The major problematic features of the possible world framework (besides technical ones, which will not concern us) are of the following kind: 1) *Ontological* problems: Are possible worlds abstract objects (Plantinga 1974; 1979; Adams 1974; Fine 1977) or concrete particulars

[5] Famously, Kripke (1972) argued that proper names and natural kind terms are "rigid designators", i.e. refer to the same individual in every possible world in which that individual or natural kind in question exists, and hence, refer independently of identifying descriptions (see also Putnam 1973). None of the identifying descriptions of a proper name or a natural kind term (i.e. its identification on the basis of superficial phenomenal properties) are essential to them. But if proper names and natural kind terms are rigid designators, then identities in which both terms are proper names or natural kind terms are necessarily true (and not contingent, as many philosophers before Kripke believed). If in the identity 'Hesperus is Phosphorus', 'Hesperus' and 'Phosphorus' are rigid designators, then since rigid designators refer to the same object in all possible worlds, there will be no world in which 'Hesperus' refers to an object other than 'Phosphorus'. The same goes with natural kind terms like 'water' and identities like 'water is H_2O'.

[6] Kripke famously distinguishes between metaphysical and epistemic modalities. Necessity and possibility are metaphysical notions, while a prioricity and conceivability are epistemological. 'Necessarily true' means 'true in all possible worlds' while '*a priori*' means 'knowable independently of experience'. 'Possibly true' means 'true in some possible world' while 'conceivable' means 'coherently imagined to obtain independent of experience'. Hence it turns out that metaphysical modal notions and epistemic modal notions are different, and not necessarily coextensional. Thus, in this Kripkean framework, it becomes possible to have *a posteriori* knowledge about 'essences' or necessary connections ('water is H2O') and to disentangle conceivability from (metaphysical) possibility, since the former does not entail the latter (something can be conceivable yet impossible and *vice versa*).

spatiotemporally unconnected to our universe? (Lewis 1986). 2) *Epistemological* problems: How are we to understand the possibility of our knowing anything about possible worlds and their accessibility relations?

Now, providing answers to those basic questions, besides being of intrinsic interest, seems necessary for getting clearer about the precise meaning and significance of the other two pillars of the modal revolution: the theory of direct reference and the distinction between metaphysical and epistemic modalities[7]. Here we will not attempt to provide an account of the complex interrelations between those three major pillars of contemporary analytic metaphysics[8]. We shall limit ourselves to providing a brief description of the ontological perplexities that occur if one adopts the two most famous and most rigorously worked out ontological interpretations of possible world semantics, Lewis' modal realism (1986) and Plantinga's modal actualism (1979).

Possible worlds are, roughly, "total ways that things could have been". But what exactly is that? Are possible worlds real things out there or just artifacts of language (such as Carnap's "state descriptions" (1947))? Do individuals in other possible worlds really exist or is this just a manner of speaking?

David Lewis' "modal realism" (Lewis 1986) was meant to provide answers to these kinds of questions. Modal realism is the view that other possible worlds are just as real and concrete as the actual world. Individuals in those worlds are just as real and exist just as fully and concretely as actual individuals. Our world is but one world among many. Yet, other possible worlds are spatiotemporally and causally isolated from the actual world and from each other. Our world – the actual world – does not have an ontologically privileged status. The term 'actual' is merely an indexical term, whose reference is determined by the context in which it is uttered. It is like 'I' or 'here'[9].

This 'realist' Lewisian account of possible worlds has another somewhat counterintuitive consequence. If the expression 'actual world' refers to just

[7] For example, an examination of the ontology of possible worlds could throw light on the kind of ontological commitments that we make when we talk about metaphysically necessary identities involving terms that are rigid designators.

[8] There is some indication that Kripke, for example, believed that we need not answer detailed questions about the nature of possible worlds to provide an account of modal semantics of notions to be used in discussing theories of meaning such as the notion of rigid designator (see e.g. Kripke 1972: 17-19; Fitch 2004: 16). That is, he seems to believe that our ordinary intuitions about counterfactual situations suffice to semantically fix the notion of possible world and rigid designator for philosophical purposes. But philosophers disagree as to whether this is correct.

[9] To refer to a place as 'here' is not to ascribe to it a special ontological status denied to other places. The same, Lewis claims, is true of 'actual world'. The term 'actual' is a device for referring to a possible world; and the possible world it takes as its referent on any given occasion of utterance is just the possible world in which it is uttered.

one possible world, and all other possible worlds and all their inhabitants are fully existent, then it is difficult to understand how any ordinary concrete object could be a transworld individual, an individual that exists in more than one possible world. Lewis agrees, and actually embraces this counterintuitive consequence. Individuals from different possible worlds cannot be related by strict numerical identity (there is no transworld identity). However, there is a weaker relation that ties individuals from one world to individuals from another, and he considers this relation strong enough to support our prephilosophical intuitions about modality. This is the *counterpart* relation, a relation of similarity or resemblance between individuals from different worlds[10].

Unfortunately most philosophers were not convinced by Lewis' modal realism. Their typical response to Lewis' account was what himself describes as "incredulous stares". That is, most critics take Lewis' view to be closer to a bizarre piece of science fiction fantasy than to a sober philosophical view which could be accepted as literally true. Very few philosophers are willing to believe that there exist concrete but non-actual objects. The natural view here is modal actualism, i.e. the view that only the actual world exists, or in other words, that the only things that exist are the entities that make up the actual world.

Now, more specifically, according to one of the best known and most vigorously defended versions of modal actualism (Alvin Plantinga's), other possible worlds and everything in their domain must consist of things found in the actual world. Hence, modal actualists, on their part, have the burden of explaining how other possible worlds are to be constructed out of things found in the actual world. Here is how Plantinga attempts to pull this trick off. For him, possible worlds are maximal states of affairs, i.e. ones that for every state

[10] Lewis' major philosophical motivation for developing the above initially counterintuitive views about the ontological status of possible worlds and the transworld identity of individuals, is that by treating possible worlds as (spatiotemporally isolated) concrete particulars we are in a position to reduce a host of other related notions, such as propositional necessity, possibility, contingency, essential and accidental properties to the nominalistically respectable notion of a (Lewisian) possible world, thereby avoiding an extravagant metaphysically realist account of all the above modal notions. Note, for example, that the above analysis of transworld identity in terms of counterpart relations turns facts about essences into facts about similarity relations between concrete particulars. Facts about an object's essence are thus not mysterious new facts over and above the features the object in fact has. More generally, from this point of view, all the above kinds of propositions and properties turn out to be, each in its own distinctive way, nothing more than set theoretical constructions out of concrete particulars – the inhabitants of possible worlds (see also Nolan 2004: 67-74). Thus, when we speak of a proposition as necessarily, possibly or contingently true or false, or when we say that an object exemplifies a property actually, essentially or contingently/accidentally, we are not ascribing mysterious properties or relations; we are simply engaging in a complicated form of set theoretical discourse which ultimately commits us ontologically only to the inhabitants of possible worlds, i.e. concrete particulars (and their qualitative similarities and differences).

of affairs S, they either include S or preclude S. A state of affairs is defined as an individual having a property (e.g. David Lewis' being a philosopher) (Plantinga 1979: 258). Now, some possible states of affairs obtain, and thus are actual, while others do not obtain (such as Lewis' being a track and field athlete). Yet, those non-obtaining states of affairs exist and are part of the actual world. They are abstract entities that need not be exemplified in the actual world, but nonetheless exist in the actual world as serenely as the most solidly actual states of affairs. How is this so much as possible? The key to understand this lies in the notion of *individual essence*. An essence is a property or conjunction of properties that is necessary and sufficient for being a particular individual. Essences exist necessarily but need not be exemplified[11]. Hence, according to this line of thought, individual essences necessarily exist as abstract objects in the actual world and in every other possible world (which, in turn, exist in the actual world)[12]. In some of these worlds, some essences are exemplified and others not (see also Loux 1998: 190-194).

Yet here it seems that a serious problem occurs for Plantinga's modal actualism. How does modal actualism understand the commonsensical belief that I might have had a younger brother (but do not)? Modal actualists are committed to interpreting examples such as the above as follows: In some alternative possible world an individual essence of a younger brother of mine is exemplified, but it is not exemplified in the actual world. Some alternative possible world contains the state of affairs of that essence being exemplified. My younger brother exists in that possible world but his essence is not exemplified in the actual world. However, this way of understanding ordinary commonsensical modal statements such as the above populates the world with countless individual essences, one for every possible person, for every possible object, and, perhaps, even for impossible objects. For example, we want to say that the round square does not exist in any possible world. According to modal actualism, this means that the essence of round square is not exemplified in

[11] As Plantinga puts it: "Socrates is a contingent being; his essence, however, is not. Properties like propositions and possible worlds are necessary beings. If Socrates had not existed, his essence would have been unexemplified, but not nonexistent. In worlds where Socrates exists, Socrateity is his essence; *exemplifying Socrateity* is essential to him. Socrateity, however, does not have essentially the property of being exemplified by Socrates; it is not exemplified by him in worlds where he does not exist" (Plantinga 1979: 268).

[12] Note that, on this view, even our world, the actual world, is an abstract entity. As Plantinga explains, the actual world "has no center or mass; it is neither a concrete object nor … a sum of concrete objects; [it] … has no spatial parts at all" (Plantinga 1979: 258). Hence, the actual world is something different from the physical universe (including myself and all my surroundings). The latter is, for Plantinga, a contingent being, while the actual world, being a state of affairs, is a necessary being. It could have failed to obtain, but it could not fail to exist (see also Loux 1998: 192-193).

any possible world. Yet, as all essences, it exists (as an abstract entity) in the actual world, since everything that exists is actual. But this view seems to be committed to an extreme version of essentialism (combining familiar Aristotelian and Platonic themes), which, as Quine predicted, leads directly to a completely unconstrained "metaphysical jungle" of essences (Quine 1966: 174; see also Quine 1948: 1961). How is this less counterintuitive than Lewis' views discussed above? Instead of concretely existing alternative possible worlds and possible individuals (Lewis), we have all kinds of existing states of affairs and essences (such as Socrateity) exemplified and unexemplified, supposedly "serenely" existing – as abstract objects – in the actual world. Does this not seem just as outlandish as Lewisian concretely existing but non-actual worlds?[13] (see also Schwartz 2012: 219-223).

I think that by now enough has been said to show the controversial – i.e. metaphysically inflated – status of both modal realism and modal actualism as interpretations of the ontological status of possible world talk.

4. *Providing a semantic legitimation for modal talk: the "Kant-Sellars thesis about modality"*

What does "middle" analytic philosophy have to offer in the above possible world metaphysical battles? Has not early and middle analytic philosophy, with its suspicion of modal and metaphysical discourse, become obsolete since the Kripke-Lewis modal revolution? I will suggest that, at least in the case of Wilfrid Sellars, this is not the case. What is more, I shall argue that some relatively neglected parts of Sellars' work on alethic modality, as the latter is interpreted and reconstructed by Robert Brandom (2015), contain valuable insights about alethic modality, which can throw light on the semantic and epistemological import of modal talk and, by implication, to the semantic foundations of contemporary analytic metaphysical discourse.

In section 2 we mentioned that early and middle analytic philosophers – from Russell, through Carnap and the other logical positivists, to Quine – were all heirs of a Humean broadly empiricist tradition which treated modal notions with extreme suspicion. Possibilities and necessities were not observable states of affairs nor could they be deduced from the latter. Moreover, we saw how these reservations were strengthened by the invention of extensional, first-order quantificational logic. The fact that lawlikeness or counterfactually

[13] Of course, the modal actualist could claim that his divergence from common sense at this point costs less than the modal realists' claim that e.g. my younger brother (and countless many other such "younger brothers") exist concretely in other possible worlds but are not actual.

supporting necessity distinctive of some empirical generalizations (those that amount to natural laws) extended beyond what can be captured by the expressive resources of extensional, first-order quantificational logic, made modal vocabulary look even more problematic and led empiricist-minded analytic philosophers (including Quine) to the view that modal notions could be legitimized only if they could be explained in resolutely non-modal terms. Finally, we saw how the radical change of attitude toward modal notions in analytic philosophy can be explained by the formal-semantic developments in modal logic, and by the fact that the analytic tradition gradually gave up empiricism in favor of naturalism (which was much less suspicious of modal talk).

Yet, at this point it is important to understand exactly *which* questions those developments did offer answers to, and to which they did not. As was mentioned in section 2, Kripke showed that we could give an "extensionalistically respectable" sense to the notions of necessity and possibility by developing a novel possible world semantics. Obviously, this *is* an adequate response to empiricist worries stemming from the extensional character of the first-order logical vocabulary in which semantics had been conducted. That is, it provides the missing expressive resources needed in order for this first-order extensional logical vocabulary to capture the formal-logical "multiplicity" of modal notions. But these developments in formal logic do not provide an adequate response to residual empiricist worries about the overall *intelligibility* of modal concepts. This is because the extensionality of the semantic metalanguage for modality is bought at the price of relying on a notion of possible world and of accessibility relations among such possible worlds which not only is problematic with respect to its proper ontological interpretation (see section 3), but, more importantly, remains epistemologically and semantically unfounded. Does the appeal to our prephilosophical intuitions about what possible world talk might mean and what accessibility relations among *possibilia* really amount to suffice to silence empiricist qualms about the semantic and epistemic status of possible world talk? It seems that, even abstracting from problems concerning the proper ontological interpretation of possible world talk (which, as we saw in section 3, are serious enough to cast doubt on our ability to use this notion in an ontologically transparent way), both the epistemological question of how we are to understand the possibility of our *knowing* anything about possible worlds (and their accessibility relations) and the semantic question how, if the possibility of such cognitive contact is mysterious, the idea of our having the semantic contact necessary so much as to talk or *think* about them, can be made intelligible, is left untouched by the Kripkean formal-logical apparatus.

It is precisely at this point that Sellars' ideas about modal notions and the

function of modal discourse become relevant. For they can provide a (semantic and epistemic) *justification* for the new comfort of late analytic philosophers with modal idioms, while at the same time *criticizing* metaphysically inflationary conceptions of modality.

4.1. Quine's and Sellars' attack on semantic atomism

The semantic and epistemic justification of modal vocabulary is to be found in Sellars' principled rejection of some crucial presuppositions of the empiricist critique of the credentials of modal concepts. One such crucial unquestioned presupposition of this empiricist critique regarding the legitimacy of modal vocabulary is that there is an independently and antecedently intelligible stratum of empirical discourse that is purely descriptive and involves no modal commitments; this "purely descriptive" level provides a semantically autonomous background and model with which the credentials of modal discourse can then be (unfavorably) compared.

Interestingly, the above unquestioned presupposition can be discerned even in Quine, an otherwise ardent critic of related empiricist doctrines. This is ironic, since Quine was one of the first philosophers to challenge the underlying semantic atomist picture of traditional and 20th-century logical empiricism. In his classic "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" (1951), Quine, among other things, connected the meaning of an expression with its inferential role noticing that what follows from or is evidence for or against a claim depends on what other claims are available as auxiliary hypotheses or collateral premises. From this he derived his *semantic holism*: he famously concluded that the smallest unit of meaning is not a sentence (even in the case of observational sentences) but a whole "theory", i.e. the whole constellation of all sentences held true in our conceptual scheme.

Sellars, on his part, in his "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" (1956) presented his own version of semantic and epistemic holism, arguing that even observational beliefs acquired non-inferentially through perception can be cognitively significant only if they are inferentially related with other conceptually contentful items. To cut a long story short, the bottom line of his critique is that for something to function in semantically and epistemically significant (i.e. efficacious) ways is for it to be a "node" (play a functional inferential role) within a wider network of contents and practices, i.e. within what Sellars calls the "logical space of reasons" or the "language game" of "giving and asking for reasons" –the rationality of which does not depend of its having any foundations, but in its self-correcting character[14] (Sellars 1956, §38).

[14] This self-correcting character, in turn, goes hand in hand with the fact that within the space of

Both Quine's and Sellars' arguments were leveled against a certain problematic empiricist foundationalist layer-cake picture: that of a semantically and epistemically autonomous "base" of perceptual experiences or reports, on which, at a second separate step, is erected a semantically and epistemically "dependent" ("second-class") superstructure of unobservable entities and "theories" inferentially dependent on the observational "base" (see also Brandom 2015: 148). If successful, these arguments undermine the logical empiricist worries about the status of laws, necessary connections, dispositions and counterfactual possibilities since the latter stem from the alleged inherent difficulty of justifying the inferences that would add them to the supposedly semantically and epistemically autonomous base of nonmodal "purely descriptive" reports of actual perceptual experiences. However, the above Quinean and Sellarsian criticism of the traditional empiricist's semantic and epistemic atomism (foundationalism) is of *general* application. It does not concern only modal notions but it can equally be applied to a variety of other vocabularies traditionally treated with suspicion (or as having "second-class" status) by the empiricists, such as theoretical (non-observational) discourse, normative discourse, probabilistic discourse, talk about primary qualities, and so on.

4.2. The Kant-Sellars thesis about modality

Now, as Brandom forcefully argues in his *From Empiricism to Expressivism* (2015), there is another more *direct* and positive connection between arguments against semantic atomism and our understanding of specifically *modal* vocabulary. As we saw above (4.1), the ultimate reason why traditional and logical empiricists viewed modal talk with suspicion and thought that the only way for it to be considered legitimate is to be explained in resolutely non-modal terms was that they believed that a) there exists an independently and antecedently intelligible stratum of empirical discourse that is purely descriptive and involves no modal commitments, and that b) this purely descriptive level can function as a semantic and epistemic foundation or criterion for assessing the semantic and epistemic credentials of modal discourse. Against this, Sellars argues that the ability to use ordinary descriptive terms such as 'green', 'rigid' and 'mass' *already presupposes* grasp of the kind of properties and relations made explicit by modal vocabulary. As Sellars himself puts this point:

> Although describing and explaining (predicting, retrodicting, understanding) are distinguishable, they are also, in an important sense, inseparable. It is only because the expressions in terms of which we describe objects, even such basic expressions as

reasons any claim can be put into jeopardy, though not all at once.

words for perceptible characteristics of molar objects, locate these objects in a space of implications, that they describe at all, rather than merely label. The descriptive and explanatory resources of language advance hand in hand. (Sellars 1957, § 108)

Describing something as being of a certain kind, as opposed to labeling something in the sense of grouping it one way rather than another, is to place it in a space of implications, which articulates the *inferential consequences* of it falling in one group rather than another (Sellars 1957: § 108; Brandom 2015: 41-42, 180-181). For Sellars, these (material) "implications" must be *counterfactually robust* ones – that is, they must *remain* good under various merely hypothetical circumstances, otherwise the putatively "descriptive" term could not be consistently applied to new cases (Sellars 1953b; 1963a). An important consequence of this line of thought is that the inferences in this "space of implications" always include inferences that involve collateral premises or auxiliary hypotheses not drawn exclusively from one's actual commitments[15].

On this view, which Brandom terms the "Kant-Sellars thesis about modality", *every* empirical descriptive concept has *modal* consequences. That is, its correct application has necessary conditions that would be expressed explicitly using subjunctive conditionals, and hence depends on what is true in *other* possible worlds besides the one in which it is being applied. For example, the ordinary descriptive sentence 'That lion is sleeping lightly' has as necessary conditions that some moderate stimulus (e.g. a sufficiently loud noise, bright light) would wake the lion, while the ordinary descriptive sentence 'This patch is red', among other things, entails that e.g. 'The patch would look red under standard conditions, and would look brown to a standard observer under green light.' Thus, describing something in the actual situation always involves substantial commitments as to how it *would* behave, or what else would be true of it, in other *possible* situations (Brandom 2015: 67-68). And an important consequence of the Kant-Sellars thesis about modality is that one who understood none of the subjunctive implications one was committing oneself to by applying the descriptive term 'lion' or 'red' could not count as grasping the concepts in question.

If this is right, then one cannot be in the position the atomist empiricist critic of modality professes to find himself in: having fully understood and mastered the use of "purely descriptive" non-modal vocabulary, but having thereby afforded himself no grip on the use of modal vocabulary and no access

[15] As Brandom puts this point: "Part of taking an inference to be materially good is having a view about which possible additional collateral premises or auxiliary hypotheses would, and which would not, defeat it. Chestnut trees produce chestnuts – unless they are immature of blighted. Dry, well made matches strike – unless there is no oxygen" (Brandom 2015; 141-42).

to what it expresses. Thus, the Humean or Quinean predicament with respect to modal notions can be diagnosed as resulting from a failure properly to understand that, as Brandom puts it "in using ordinary empirical vocabulary, one already knows how to do everything one needs to know how to do in order to introduce and deploy modal vocabulary" (Brandom 2015: 152). I think that this suffices to show how the Kant-Sellars thesis about modality can be used to legitimize possible world talk at least at the semantic level.

4.3. Modal discourse as non-descriptive, expressive, categorial and "metalinguistic"

However, in the beginning of this section we said that Sellars' views about modality can be understood not only as justifying possible world talk but also as simultaneously *criticizing* metaphysically inflationary conceptions of modality. To see how this is so we must first note that, beyond the Kant-Sellars thesis about modality, Sellars also attempts to sketch a "big-picture" view about the place and function of modal discourse as a whole in our practices. Specifically, Sellars believes that the function of modal vocabulary (along with that of semantic, intentional, and even categorial vocabulary) is not *descriptive*. That is, its function is not fact-stating in the narrow sense that that assimilates fact-stating to describing how the world is. To the extent that we can speak of modal or conditional facts (or, for that matter, normative facts, semantic facts, facts about abstract universals) as "true" – which, *pace* empiricism, we can surely do –, we should not be carried away into thinking that we are thereby committed to the existence of *sui generis* metaphysical facts, irreducible to ordinary empirical or scientific ones, that "make" our modal beliefs and sentences true (see also section 5). According to Brandom's persuasive interpretive line, for Sellars the job of modal discourse and facts is *expressive*: it makes explicit necessary structural features of the framework within which alone empirical description and explanation are possible[16]. In other words, the expressive role of modal concepts is to make explicit what is implicit in the use of ground-level (empirical) concepts: the conditions under which it is possible to apply them, use them to make judgments and revise them (for this latter function of the "causal modalities" see e.g. Sellars 1957, § 103). Specifically, the job of alethic modal concepts is to make explicit the *subjunctively robust* consequential relations between ground-level descriptive concepts. It is precisely those relations that make possible explana-

[16] Note the characteristic Kantian ring of this view. Modal concepts function as "categories of the understanding". Note, however, that this does not commit one to the further Kantian view that such concepts thereby articulate the structure of the "phenomenal" world, or to a spurious absolute distinction between phenomena and "noumena".

tions of why one empirical description applies because another does. For example, that force *necessarily* equals the product of mass and acceleration means that one can *explain* the specific acceleration of a given mass by describing the force that was applied to it. Furthermore, for Sellars, modal concepts thereby function "metalinguistically", as *material inferential rules* for the proper use of ground-level empirical concepts. And they do this, i.e. they determine the descriptive meaning of empirical terms, precisely by making explicit the counterfactually robust, explanation-supporting, inferential connections between them (Sellars 1948; 1957; see also Brandom 2015: 35-48)[17].

With these theoretical moves, Sellars, in one stroke, objects both to the traditional "dogmatic metaphysician" (a figure often revived in contemporary analytic metaphysics) who reifies the semantic irreducibility of modal to non-modal discourse into a *sui generis* ontological irreducibility of the former to the latter, *and* to the "skeptical empiricist", who, for fear of this ontological reification, denies the very *legitimacy* or truth of modal talk. Sellars traces the error of both the dogmatic rationalist metaphysician and the skeptical empiricist to their common acceptance of what he calls "the *descriptive fallacy*": the idea that the business of all non-logical concepts is to describe. And, as he characteristically puts it:

> Once the tautology 'The world is described by descriptive concepts' is freed from the idea that the business of all non-logical concepts is to describe, the way is clear to an *ungrudging* recognition that many expressions which empiricists have relegated to second-class citizenship in discourse are not *inferior*, just *different*[18] (Sellars 1957 §79).

[17] Sellars is careful not to commit himself to the implausible view that modal statements literally *say* that some (e.g. counterfactually robust) entailment holds. He distinguishes between what is said by using a specific vocabulary (i.e. its content) and what is *contextually implied* or *conveyed* by doing so (Sellars 1953c). This distinction can be understood, roughly, as one between semantic and pragmatic inferences (Sellars 1957 §101). And what Sellars says about modal vocabulary must be understood as referring to this latter dimension of pragmatic inferences, or in Brandom's words to "what one is *doing* in making a modal claim" (Brandom 2015: 140). By doing that, one is endorsing a pattern of inference (which is not to say that modal statements are semantically *about* patterns of inference).

[18] Interestingly, Sellars' move here is reminiscent of (and, I would argue, directly descended from) the later Wittgenstein's attack to this kind of Procrustean descriptivism in the beginning of *Philosophical Investigations* (1958). There Wittgenstein warns us again and again of the dangers of being "bewitched" by the descriptivist picture. We must not simply assume that the job of all declarative sentences is to state facts or that the job of all singular terms is to pick out objects. This does not, of course, mean that there are no differences between Sellars' and Wittgenstein's anti-descriptivism. For example, Sellars characterizes a broad class of non-descriptive vocabularies (modal, intentional, categorial, semantic) as playing generically the same expressive role: they are broadly "metalinguistic" tools expressing necessary features of the framework of discursive practices that make description and explanation possible. By contrast, there is no such binary distinction of expressive roles in Wittgenstein.

4.4. A novel kind of semantic externalism

Now, a very interesting characteristic of Sellars' views about modality, and in particular, of the Kant-Sellars thesis about modality, is that it entails a peculiar version of *semantic externalism*. However, this semantic externalism is very different from the one that many "late" analytic philosophers espouse (which comes from Kripke and Putnam), and, as we shall see, it is a novel position worthy of serious consideration by contemporary analytic philosophers.

As we shall see below, this novel kind of semantic externalism emerges as a way of responding to a Kripke-inspired objection to the viability of the Kant-Sellars thesis about modality.

We said above that, for Sellars, the expressive role characteristic of alethic modal vocabulary is to make explicit conceptual connections and commitments that are already implicit in the use of non-modal empirical vocabulary. But, on the face of it, this view, from a Kripkean, "late" analytic point of view, faces at least one serious objection. For, as was mentioned in section 2, semantic investigations of modally rigid designators reveal the sort of necessity they articulate as metaphysical, not conceptual, and as knowable only *a posteriori*. But, as Brandom observes (2015: 152-153), the conclusion that such necessity should not be understood as conceptual necessity follows only if one either identifies conceptual content with *descriptive* content (by contrast to the causally-historically acquired content of proper names and demonstratives) or takes it that conceptual connections must be knowable *a priori* by those who have mastered those concepts. However, both of these views can be rejected without flying in the face of reason.

For example, regarding the first point, as McDowell has shown, the content expressed by demonstrative vocabulary can and should be understood as conceptual (McDowell 1987). And Brandom, in *Making It Explicit*, has proposed that the same can be done in the case of the phenomenon of modal rigidity (Brandom 1994: 367-376, 547-583).

As regards the second point, Sellars' responds in a way that shows extremely interesting points of contact with Kripke's notion of *a posteriori* necessity, and yet equally interesting divergences from the latter. As mentioned earlier, Sellars holds that the inferential relations that determine the conceptual content of descriptive terms are those that are counterfactually robust. But a consequence of this view is that to discover what is contained in an ordinary empirical or scientific *concept* one needs to *empirically* investigate the laws of nature. More specifically, Sellars accepts *both* that 1) physical or causal necessity and possibility are a kind of *conceptual* necessity, *and* that 2) physical or causal necessities and possibilities must ultimately be established *empirically*. (This is the Sellarsian peculiar version of *a posteriori* necessity.) But he is in a position

to do so only because he rejects a deeply ingrained assumption operative *both* in middle and late analytic philosophy (e.g. in Quine, Carnap, Wittgenstein, but also in Kripke and Putnam). This is the assumption that *conceptual* necessities and possibilities can be established *a priori*[19]. Sellars emphatically rejects this (seemingly platitudinous) assumption and this reveals the innovative and radical nature of his semantic externalism. In effect, Sellars believes that we cannot discover the contents of our concepts just by introspecting. Concepts are understood by Sellars (and by Brandom) as rules (norms) we bind ourselves by *without* knowing everything about what we are committing ourselves to by applying those concepts. In other words – and this shows the radical nature of Sellarsian semantic externalism –, to find out what the contents of the concepts we apply in describing the world really are, we have to find out what the laws of nature are[20]. And this is not a purely *a priori* matter (see e.g. Sellars 1957 §86)[21].

It would be, of course, interesting to continue exploring this theme of the peculiar Sellarsian semantic externalism and compare his notion of *a posteriori* necessity (developed as early as 1948 and 1953a) with Kripke's related (but strictly speaking very different) views which revived metaphysics within analytic philosophy. Unfortunately, this is beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that the Sellarsian-Brandomian notion of *a posteriori* necessity agrees with the Kripkean in that necessity and possibility are different notions from a prioricity and conceivability. The latter are epistemological while the former are "metaphysical". However, the Sellarsian-Brandomian and the Kripkean would not mean the same thing by using the word 'metaphysical' since, according to the Sellarsian-Brandomian view, *pace* Kripke, this notion is inseparable from the notion of *conceptual*. This does not mean that modal claims (e.g. laws of nature) depend for their *truth* on the *existence* of modal expressions or language users. Yet, it does mean that to grasp the *sense* or meaning of modal claims one needs to know how to *use* ordinary empirical vocabulary, and this, in turn,

[19] Note that both Sellars and post-Kripkean analytic philosophers agree in that physical necessities and possibilities must be established empirically. But precisely because most late analytic philosophers tacitly or explicitly hold that conceptual necessities and possibilities can be established *a priori* (a view that Sellars rejects) they arrive naturally to the view that physical or causal necessity and possibility *cannot* be understood as conceptual in kind.

[20] Note that, in contrast to contemporary versions of semantic externalism, Sellars' version of this thesis does not need to take on the task of making sense of a notion of the "internal" (as opposed to the "external").

[21] Thus, in Sellars' words: "While one does not inductively establish that A P[hysically]-entails B by armchair reflection on the antecedent 'meanings' of 'A' and 'B', to establish by induction that A P[hysically]-entails B is to enrich (and perhaps otherwise modify) the use of these terms in such wise that to 'understand' what one now 'means' by 'A' and 'B' is to know that A P[hysically]-entails B" (Sellars 1957 §86).

presupposes that one needs to know one's way around within the "realm of the conceptual" – the language game of giving and asking for reasons. Thus, the distinction between "metaphysical" and epistemological notions of modality (or that between *de re* and *de dicto* modality) is not erased, but it is reconceptualized, to the extent that the distinction between metaphysical and conceptual is reconceptualized, i.e. to the extent that it is now recognized that however distinguishable, those latter notions are also essentially *inseparable*.

I think that what was said above justifies our contention that, although Sellars' Kant-Sellars thesis about modality and its corollary, semantic externalism, were products of a pre-Kripkean middle analytic philosopher, they retain their relevance, novelty and interest even in the context of late analytic philosophy. In this sense, they ought to be taken seriously not only from a historical and interpretive point of view, but also from the standpoint of contemporary debates in analytic metaphysics.

5. *Sellars' Nominalism and the Possible-World Metaphysical Battles*

In the previous section we saw how the Kant-Sellars thesis about modality and the peculiar semantic externalism entailed by it can provide a (semantic and epistemic) *justification* for the pervasive use of modal idioms by late analytic philosophers, while at the same time *criticizing* metaphysically inflationary conceptions of modality. However, the Kant-Sellars thesis about modality does not, all by itself, entail a *specific* view about possible world ontology, i.e. about what possible worlds "really are". And while the "big-picture" view about the function of modal discourse that Brandom extracts from Sellars (sketched in 4.3) does imply the rejection of metaphysically inflated conceptions of modal discourse, it does that at such a high level of generality that precludes us from drawing any direct ontological implications about possible world talk in particular. In this section we shall attempt to show how another, again neglected, aspect of Sellars' philosophy, i.e. his nominalism about abstract entities, can be used to address issues about the specifically *ontological* dimension of possible world talk. More specifically, following Kraut (2016), we will suggest that although a Sellarsian account of possible world metaphysical talk cannot but be ultimately nominalistic[22], it acknowledges the reality of modal phenomena and

[22] As will become evident in what follows, Sellarsian nominalism about possible world talk is very different from e.g. Lewis' nominalistic position presented in section 3. For example, unlike Lewis, Sellars does not attempt to reduce the abstract to the concrete or to ground normativity in ontology. However, an interesting point of similarity between them is that Sellars, like Lewis, but for very different reasons, ultimately endorses a radical materialist *Humean* as opposed to Aristotelian or Kantian categorial ontology.

attempts to *legitimate* rather than eliminate them. That is, it attempts to show what modal phenomena "really are" rather than that there are no such things as modal phenomena.

Sellars' theory of universals or abstract entities (propositions, properties, kinds, sets) provides a way of understanding the role played by such entities, i.e. to legitimize them as *essential "skeletal", "formal" features* necessary for the existence and functioning of our descriptive and explanatory practices, yet without treating them as legitimating normative grounds of the latter, supposedly provided by the "metaphysical" structure of reality (Sellars 1963b; Brandom 2015; Kraut 2016). Unfortunately, for reasons of space, we cannot provide here a detailed description of Sellars' nominalism (but see Brandom 2015: 236-272). It suffices for our purposes to observe that an essential part of Sellars' nominalism about abstract entities is the denial of the view (popular in late analytic philosophy) to the effect that the truth e.g. of the sentence 'Peter is mortal' can be explained (i.e. grounded for its correctness) by the relevant abstract entity, the "property of mortality" and its "exemplification" in a particular existing being, Peter. Reference to universals such as the property of mortality, and its exemplification, does no explanatory work. If we want to explain why Peter is mortal, which of course we can (at least in principle), we have to appeal to empirical investigations, presumably to physics, evolutionary theory, genetics and biochemistry, not to metaphysics.

The same, I suggest, goes for possible world talk in metaphysics. Possible worlds are real in the sense that they are essential "skeletal" features necessary in order for our descriptive and explanatory practices to be able to *represent themselves as such*, codify their (material inferential) commitments, and revise them in the face of "anomalies" (materially incompatible commitments) (Sellars 1948); they are *not* metaphysical entities (Plantingian individual essences or Lewisian concrete particulars) which provide *external grounds of correctness* from which our descriptive and explanatory practices derive their normative guidance[23].

Although Sellars never explicitly addressed issues about the ontological interpretation of post-Kripkean possible world semantics, his nominalism, I think, provides the conceptual tools needed for taking a stand on the issue, and an original one at that. In section 3, where we briefly examined Lewis' modal realism and Plantinga's modal actualism, we saw that both those views

[23] According to this line of thought, normativity is constituted by patterns of human interaction (commitments, authorizations, permissions, entitlements), not from objects, concrete or abstract. Objects, considered independently of their meaning and function within a human practice, cannot tell us what we should do. At most, they provide causal-evolutionary constraints to be factored into decisions about what we should do.

(and Kripke's more ontologically neutral view), notwithstanding their differences, agree in viewing facts about possible worlds as being *truthmakers* for modal or counterfactual claims made in the actual world. (Recall that the basic idea of possible world semantics is that propositions can have truth values not only in the actual world but also in other possible worlds. Propositions are sets of possible worlds and truth conditions are functions from possible worlds to truth-values.) Yet this seemingly ontologically neutral possible world semantics embodies a certain metaphysical picture, at least to the extent to which the truthmakers in question are understood as providing either a legitimizing foundation or a causal explanation for our ordinary practices of making modal claims. This would be unacceptable from a Sellarsian point of view. As Kraut eloquently puts it, according to the latter

> possible worlds can be regarded as a helpful mechanism for codifying aspects of modal discourse: clarifying modal intuitions, regimenting modal inferences, and recursively characterizing truth for modal assertions. Possible worlds are no "metaphysical foundation" of our modal practice, nor are they part of the best explanation of that practice. The worlds do not *legitimize* or *explain* our modal practices; the worlds *represent* those practices (Kraut 2016: 74).

From this point of view, possible worlds talk is essentially a depiction of the material inferential norms (commitments and entitlements) constitutive of modal discursive practices, which enable us to see the consequences of various commitments and entitlements of ours when we engage in modal talk. But – and this is the most interesting part of what I take to be the Sellarsian position here – by functioning as such, that is, by raising us to "semantic self-consciousness" as to what we are doing when we engage in modal talk, possible world talk thereby enables the user of a conceptual framework to represent to himself (make explicit) the range of available "worldly alternatives" that are open to him and that demarcate his choices for improving his epistemic position. In this way, possible world talk enables the user of a conceptual framework to be *consciously self-critical* towards his own past, present and future tokenings of propositions licensed by the rules (counterfactually robust inferential commitments and entitlements) of a given conceptual framework in the face of explanatory anomalies (incompatible commitments)[24] (see Sellars 1948; 1957; Brandom 2015).

[24] Brassier, speaking on Sellars' behalf, puts this point as follows: "Modal vocabulary allows us to regulate the explanatory frameworks within which our empirical descriptions are deployed, and in doing so it endows our theories with a rational responsiveness to the world's unresponsiveness (i.e. to anomaly), enabling us to change our theories so as to maintain our cognitive (which also means practical) grip on the world" (Brassier 2018: 75).

Again, it must be emphasized here that the purpose of this account is not to eliminate modal talk, but to acknowledge and legitimate it. Possible worlds are *real* and have real effects in the world, albeit not as "inert" abstract entities ("real essences") that supposedly provide an external justificatory ground or causal explanation of modal talk, but as representations of norms sustaining modal talk which have the vitally important function of making our descriptive practices explicit and, through the representation of norms of explanation (counterfactually robust inferences), of sustaining, improving and reforming our descriptive practices so as for us to be able to achieve an ever-better "comportment" to the world. Possible worlds have what we might call "representative reality", but representative reality is reality enough. Not only is it not an illusion; it has real effects in the world and ourselves, and, most importantly, it is essential for our descriptive practices to get off the ground. Possible world talk is necessary for our ordinary descriptive terms to so much as *mean* something determinate (remember the Kant-Sellars thesis about modality). In this sense, possible world talk is perfectly justified and possible worlds of course exist. It is just that they are different kinds of "things" than some philosophers thought them to be.

I take it that this represents a genuinely new position on the issue of the ontology of possible worlds. Of course, this is just a rough and inadequate sketch. The position in question should be developed further and offer plausible responses in the face of criticism. But I think that it has earned its right to be considered a position worth taking seriously in contemporary debates in analytic metaphysics[25].

[25] An issue of some interest which we do not have the space to develop in detail here is that Sellars insists that somehow all the above points about the indispensable expressive or "representational" function of modal discourse are compatible with a radically materialist picture in ontology (which has affinities with Lewis' Humean metaphysics), according to which what really exists at the fundamental level are "absolute processes" devoid of modal (or, for that matter, logical, causal and deontic) structure. How can we reconcile this "Humean" vision in ultimate ontology with the Kant-Sellars thesis according to which even empirical descriptions are modally involved? Moreover, it can be shown that the Kant-Sellars thesis is intimately bound up with an Aristotelian metaphysical framework of objects and properties (Brandom 2015: 199-204). It can also be shown that such a Kantian-Aristotelian metaphysical framework, precisely because it is derived from the Kant-Sellars thesis which inseparably relates the conceptual with the metaphysical, goes hand in hand with the view that since the world itself is modally articulated (laws of nature exist independently of language users), it is thereby *conceptually* articulated (again independently of language or concept-users). I take it that one reason, among many others, that Sellars at the end of the day accepts a Humean rather than an Aristotelian *cum* Kantian categorial framework for ontology is precisely in order to avoid this kind of modally motivated conceptual realism. But how can he be a Humean in ontology and hold the Kant-Sellars thesis at the same time, which seems to commit him to a very different categorial ontology? As Brandom suggests, one way in which one might try to reconcile the Kant-Sellars thesis with Sellars' radically "amodal" "absolute process" naturalism is to hold that, for Sellars, amodal descriptive discourse could be intel-

6. *Concluding Remarks*

The purpose of this paper was to examine the major turning point events that transformed the attitude of analytic philosophers towards metaphysical discourse. We focused on one such turning point, the modal revolution, based on the resources of possible world semantics, developed by Kripke (who devised suitable models for modal logic), and other philosophers such as Lewis and Plantinga (who offered influential metaphysical interpretations of those models). We saw how the modal revolution, by bringing an unprecedented change in the way in which modal notions were understood by analytic philosophers, was central to the revival of metaphysics in contemporary philosophy. Yet, we also encountered serious obstacles in our attempt to understand the ontological and epistemological foundations and implications of one of the most basic notions of the modal revolution, that of a possible world. In the second part of the paper, we suggested that, surprisingly enough, the work of the pre-Kripkean "middle" analytic philosopher Wilfrid Sellars, especially as interpreted and reconstructed by Brandom, can perhaps throw light on the semantic, epistemic and ontological dimension of possible world talk. Sellars

ligible only as a totally unreflective and unselfconscious kind of discourse, which belongs to the stage of human language "when linguistic changes had *causes*, but not *reasons*, [before] man acquired the ability to reason about reasons" (Sellars 1957: 307). On my reading, although Brandom's proposal here is on to something important (namely, the fact that modal discourse has an essential *pragmatic* function, and reflects the framework in which a representer can be properly *critical* towards its past, present and future representings), it is not ultimately satisfactory as an interpretation of Sellars. *Pace* Brandom, I take it that Sellars' "purely descriptive" language of "pure processes" does not represent a regression to a stage where human language did not have a metalanguage at all (and hence, were completely unreflective and uncritical), but should be instead understood as having the status of a *regulative ideal* – i.e. as the culmination of a self-critical, self-correcting process of conceptual development. The regulative ideal in question points towards a kind of cognitive (and practical) "utopia" in which the critical/reflective resources of the "metalanguage" (including modal, normative and explanatory discourse) would be rendered dispensable or optional. And this would be so just in case the regularities in behavior which are implied by those critical/reflective resources were *fully materially realized* in the physical world and its relevant material mediums (in our case, the behavior – skills, habits – of embodied human beings). Hence, far from implying an impoverishment of the critical/reflective resources of discourse and a regression to more primitive stages of human language, the "purely descriptive" naturalistic "pure-process" language is actually the expression of what Sellars calls "the picture of *language triumphant* drawn in the heart of *language militant*" (Sellars 1957: 307). And, in this context, the Kant-Sellars thesis about modality can be understood as an *indispensable semantic-epistemic means* ("in the heart of *language militant*") for improving the descriptive and explanatory resources of language so as to approximate the above ideal. Of course, even if the above interpretation of Sellars is in the right direction, it does not, by itself, constitute an argument in favor of the overall position described here. Yet, I think it is fair to say that this unique combination of a radical materialist Humean ontology with the Kant-Sellars thesis about modality is a novel position not to be found in late analytic philosophy, and thus certainly worthy of being taken seriously in contemporary analytic metaphysics.

does this mainly through 1) the Kant-Sellars thesis about modality, 2) his understanding of modal discourse as non-descriptive, expressive, categorial and "metaliguistic", and 3) his nominalism about abstract entities. Further, we suggested that the implications of this Sellars-inspired position, notwithstanding the fact that it originates in a pre-Kripkean philosophical climate before the modal revolution, are such that make it an unexpectedly relevant and novel contribution to contemporary debates in analytic metaphysics.

As a final note, it might be also interesting to highlight another dimension in which the above Sellars-Brandom alternative conception of modality is important for contemporary analytic metaphysics. We are obviously in a post-Kripkean and post-Lewisian philosophical era: their views eventually won against empiricists and other skeptical critics of modality. However, as we saw, today there are also some divergent conceptions of modality, critical of contemporary modal metaphysics, represented in the field of analytic philosophy by minority figures such as Brandom. And Brandom himself explicitly recognizes Sellars' influence in the development of his views. We saw (in sections 4 and 5) how this significant divergent path in understanding modality in analytic philosophy took shape, originating in the work of Wilfrid Sellars in the 50s and 60s. An equally important aspect of the Sellars-Brandom alternative sketched in this paper, besides the fact that it constitutes a novel contribution in the contemporary discussion about the metaphysical and epistemological status of modality, is that it does so while fully respecting the *anti-empiricist* lessons about modality drawn by contemporary post-Kripkean and post-Lewisian analytic philosophers. What is more, the Sellars-Brandom view about modality is not only resolutely anti-empiricist, but, unlike contemporary analytic metaphysics which just takes this anti-empiricism for granted, it also provides a philosophical *justification* for this view. Hence, it can be argued that the alternative conception about modality presented in this paper, despite its many points of divergence from contemporary mainstream views on the issue, is, in an important sense, a view developed *within* the (decidedly anti-empiricist) framework of contemporary analytic metaphysics, and not just an alien appendage to it, a relic from a bygone philosophical era.

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