

“It is conceivable, and hence metaphysically possible”

Antoine Taillard – June 8, 2023

Is every natural necessity a metaphysical necessity? Fine (2002, sect. 2) contains an argument that supports a negative answer. The core of this argument is expressed in the following passages.

Suppose that one billiard-ball hits another. We are then inclined to think that it is no mere accident that the second billiard-ball moves. Given certain antecedent conditions and given the movement of the first ball, the second ball *must* move. And the ‘must’ here is the *must* of natural necessity. (p.265)

The answer to [the question ‘is every natural necessity a metaphysical necessity?’] would appear to be a straightforward ‘No’. For surely, it is conceivable, and hence metaphysically possible, that the one ball should strike the other in the given circumstances without the other moving. (p. 257)

For readability, let us define the following abbreviation:

B: The ball moves when it is hit by another

The above argument can then be summarized as follows.

- (1) It is naturally necessary that *B*.
- (2) It is conceivable that not-*B*.
- (3) If it is conceivable that not-*B*, it is not metaphysically necessary that *B*.
- (4) So, it is naturally necessary that *B* and it is not metaphysically necessary that *B*.

Therefore, not every natural necessity is a metaphysical necessity. The text then consider and reply to an objection against the second premise (or the third premise, depending on how one understands conceivability) in the spirit of Kripke (1972). I think this reply is successful.

There is, however, an objection that one can address against the argument’s third premise. To begin, notice that (3) gains its plausibility from what we may call the Conceivability principle: whatever is conceivable is metaphysically possible. To spell out this idea in more details, consider the following schema where *p* stands for a statement.

- (5) If it is conceivable that *p*, it is metaphysically possible that *p*.

The Conceivability principle states that all instances of this schema are true. Since (3) immediately follows from an instance of (5), (3) is true given that the Conceivability principle is true.

However, there is a problem with the Conceivability principle. Indeed, the principle seems to classify some metaphysically necessary statements as metaphysically contingent statements. For example, consider the following.

C: Nothing is both red and green (all over).

This statement is a metaphysical necessity. Yet, given the Conceivability principle and additional plausible statements, it turns out that *C* is not metaphysically necessary:

- (6) It is conceivable that someone conceives that not-*C*.
- (7) If (6), it is metaphysically possible that someone conceives that not-*C*.
- (8) If it is metaphysically possible that someone conceives that not-*C*, it is conceivable that not-*C*.
- (9) If it is conceivable that not-*C*, it is metaphysically possible that not-*C*.
- (10) So, it is metaphysically possible that not-*C*.

Sentences (7) and (9) are instances of schema (5). Thus, they are true if the Conceivability principle is true. Sentence (6) strikes me as true. I can easily think of a hypothetical situation in which someone conceives that not-*C*, e.g. a situation in which a mad scientist meddle with my brain so that I conceive that not-*C*.

Sentence (8) will undoubtedly be more controversial. However, a similar problem appears by modifying (8) and (9) as follows.

- (6) It is conceivable that someone conceives that not-*C*.
- (7) If (6), it is metaphysically possible that someone conceives that not-*C*.
- (8*) If it is metaphysically possible that someone conceives that not-*C*, it is metaphysically possible that it is conceivable that not-*C*.
- (9*) If it is metaphysically possible that it is conceivable that not-*C*, it is metaphysically possible that not-*C*.
- (10) So, it is metaphysically possible that not-*C*.

Now, (8*) is much more plausible than (8). Of course, (9*) is not an instance of (5), and so it is not entailed by the truth of the Conceivability principle as stated above. However, (9*) is an instance of

- (5*) If it is metaphysically possible that it is conceivable that *p*, it is metaphysically possible that *p*.

The question then is the following: why should the Conceivability principle hold when it is formulated with (5) but not when it is formulated with (5*)? In other words, why should we accept ‘whatever is conceivable is metaphysically possible’ but not ‘whatever is possibly conceivable is possible’. It seems that the only reason to deny that the Conceivability principle applies when it is formulated with (5*) is to avoid the sort of issue just mentioned.

References

- Fine, K. (2002). The Varieties of Necessity. In T. Gendler & J. Hawthorne (Eds.), *Conceivability and possibility* (pp. 253–281). Clarendon Press.
- Kripke, S. A. (1972). *Naming and Necessity*. Harvard University Press.