Handout for Week 11: Alethic Modal Vocabulary

Philosophy of Language.
Metavocabularies of Reason:
Pragmatics, Semantics, and Logic
https://sites.pitt.edu/~rbrandom/Courses

Plan:
1. Introduction
2. Traditional and Logical Empiricism
3. The Kripkean Modal Revolution. But Why?
4. Sellars's Diagnosis: Contra Descriptivism
   Description, Implication, Explanation, and Modal Vocabulary
5. Kantian Categorial Metaconcepts
6. The Modal Kant-Sellars Thesis
   Semantic, Expressive, and Epistemological Subtheses
7. The Normative Kant-Sellars Thesis

Sellars:

Descriptivism is the "tendency to assimilate all discourse to describing," which is "responsible for the prevalence in the empiricist tradition of 'nothing-but-ism' in its various forms (emotivism, philosophical behaviorism, phenomenalism)." [CDCM §103]

The idea that the world can, in principle, be so described that the description contains no modal expression is of a piece with the idea that the world can, in principle, be so described that the description contains no prescriptive expression. For what is being called to mind is the ideal of statement of 'everything that is the case' which, however, serves *through and through only* the purpose of stating what is the case. And it is a logical truth that such a description, however many modal expressions might properly be used in *arriving at* it or in *justifying* it, or in showing the *relevance* of one of its components to another, could contain no modal expression. [CDCM § 80]

It is only because the expressions in terms of which we describe objects, even such basic expressions as words for perceptible characteristics of molar objects, locate these objects in a space of implications, that they describe at all, rather than merely label. [CDCM §108]

Although describing and explaining (predicting, retrodicting, understanding) are *distinguishable*, they are also, in an important sense, *inseparable*….The descriptive and explanatory resources of language advance hand in hand. [CDCM §108]

To make first hand use of these [modal] expressions is to be about the business of explaining a state of affairs, or justifying an assertion. [CDCM §80]

[Modal locutions are tools used in the enterprise of:]
…making explicit the rules we have adopted for thought and action…I shall be interpreting our judgments to the effect that A causally necessitates B as the expression of a rule governing our use of the terms 'A' and 'B'.
["Language, Rules, and Behavior" footnote 2 to p. 136/296 in *PPPW*.]
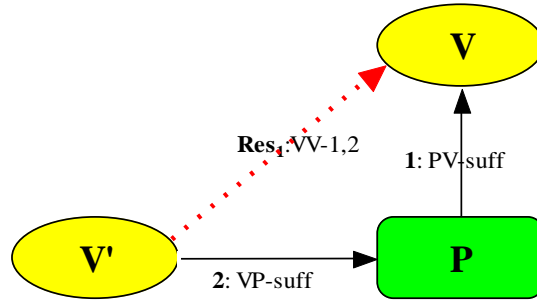
[O]nce the tautology 'The world is described by descriptive concepts' is freed from the idea that the business of all non-logical concepts is to describe, the way is clear to an *ungrudging* recognition that many expressions which empiricists have relegated to second-class citizenship in discourse are not *inferior*, just *different*. [CDCM §79]

It is sometimes thought that modal statements do not describe states of affairs in the world, because they are *really* metalinguistic. This won't do at all if it is meant that instead of describing states of affairs in the world, they describe linguistic habits. It is more plausible if it is meant that statements involving modal terms have the force of *prescriptive* statements about the use of certain expressions in the object language. Yet there is more than one way of to '*have the force of*' a statement, and failure to distinguish between them may snowball into a serious confusion as wider implications are drawn. (CDCM § 81)
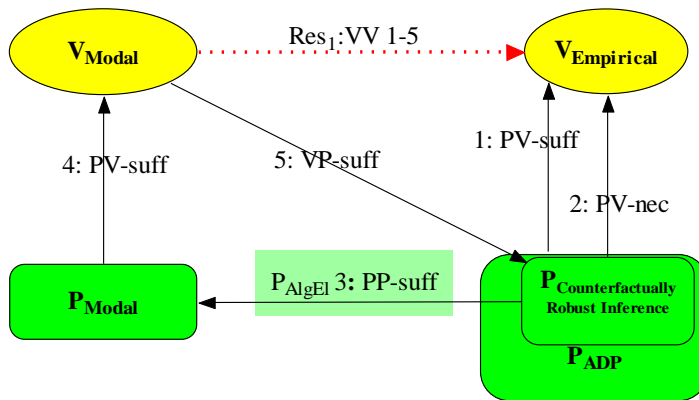
Shall we say that modal expressions are metalinguistic? Neither a simple 'yes' nor a simple 'no' will do. As a matter of fact, once the above considerations are given their proper weight, it is possible to acknowledge that the idea that they are metalinguistic in character oversimplifies a fundamental insight. For our present purposes, it is sufficient to say that the claim that modal expressions are 'in the metalanguage' is not too misleading if the peculiar force of the expressions which occur alongside them (represented by the 'p' and the 'q' of our example) is recognized, in particular, that they have 'straightforward' translation into other languages, and if it is also recognized that they belong not only 'in the metalanguage', but in discourse about *thoughts* and *concepts* as well. (CDCM§ 82)

We must here, as elsewhere, draw a distinction between what we are committed to concerning the world by virtue of the fact that we have reason to make a certain assertion, and the force, in a narrower sense, of the assertion itself. (CDCM §101)

Meaning-Use Diagram #1:
Pragmatic
Metavocabulary

V

Res_1:VV-1,2

1: PV-suff

V'

2: VP-suff

P

The Kant-Sellars Thesis:
Modal Vocabulary is
Elaborated-Explicating (LX)

V_{Modal}

Res_1:VV 1-5

$V_{Empirical}$

4: PV-suff

5: VP-suff

1: PV-suff

2: PV-nec

P_{Modal}

P_{AlgEl} 3: PP-suff

$P_{Counterfactually\ Robust\ Inference}$

P_{ADP}

3

The role in reasoning characteristic of normative vocabulary:

Consider the following three bits of practical reasoning:
α)   Only opening my umbrella will keep me dry,   so
        I shall open my umbrella.
ß)   I am a bank employee going to work,   so
        I shall wear a necktie.
γ)   Repeating the gossip would harm someone, to no purpose,   so
        I shall not repeat the gossip.

The Humean-Davidsonian approach treats these as enthymemes, whose missing premises might be filled in by something like:
a)   I want (desire, prefer) to stay dry.
b)   Bank employees are obliged (required) to wear neckties.
c)   It is wrong (one ought not) to harm anyone to no purpose.

Thesis:
Normative vocabulary (including expressions of preference) **makes explicit the endorsement (attributed or acknowledged) of** *material* **patterns of** *practical* **reasoning** relating *doxastic* commitments to *practical* commitments.