

# Modal Reliabilism as A Modal Normativism Approach

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**Abstract.** Amie Thomasson points out that the rationalist approaches to modal epistemology usually face the challenges of integration problem and reliability problem, due to their descriptive and realistic assumptions about modal facts and modal properties. Thomasson instead defends a modal normativism position. George Bealer's theory of modal reliabilism can be seen as a more complete approach to modal normativism. It can further explain the conundrum of integration problem and reliability problem. Therefore, the modal reliabilism theory as a modal normativism approach is worth defending.

**Keywords:** Modal Normativism; Integration Problem; Reliability Problem; A Priori/Semantic Stability.

## 1. Introduction

In my paper A Modal Epistemological Strategy Based on Conceptual Classification, I argue that George Bealer's Modal Reliabilism can be seen as an optimal alternative, as a modal epistemology approach from the moderate rationalist position, to the conceivability-based scheme and the Bob Hale-style essentialist approach<sup>1</sup>. So why is modal reliabilism the optimal solution? This paper will give a further discussion from the perspective of normativism. In our view, a more general question underlying the theory of Modal Reliabilism is how MR can be effectively defended as a Modal Normativism (MN) approach. In other words, MR theory can serve as an optimal modal epistemological strategy because it is essentially a normative theoretical approach. In this paper, the discussion will be roughly expanded as follows: First, a brief discussion of what is the position of modal normativism, that is, a representative scheme proposed by Amie Thomasson; Further, we will provide an explanation of the theoretical dilemmas and problems faced by the MN position -- questions about the scope of its theoretical interpretation and theoretical consequences -- to which MR can effectively respond. Thus the Modal Reliabilism theory can be regarded as a more complete Modal Normativism solution. Finally, we show how MR theory can generally respond to the integration problem and the reliability problem. In this sense, it also provides a somewhat advanced and extended approach to our discussion of the general problems of modal epistemology and modal metaphysics.

## 2. Modal Normativism

More recently, the leading proponent of the modal normativism position is Amie Thomasson (2021). She uses this theoretical scheme to refute and oppose the most mainstream and classical account in the field of modal studies, that is, the descriptive approach. For example, the theory of "Possible Worlds" given by David Lewis is the representative scheme of the descriptive approach. In contrast to this, Thomasson advocates a normative position -- Modal Normativism. She argues that: "The function of modal vocabulary is to express, teach, convey, or re-negotiate semantic rules and their inferences in a particularly advantageous way."<sup>2</sup> Thus, in the MN approach, possibility and necessity would be explained by semantic rules, rather than the appeal to the existence of mind-independent modal facts. From Thomasson's position of modal normativism, as long as the speaker has the ability to use the semantic rules correctly, she also has implicit modal knowledge.

Moreover, a speaker is considered to have explicit modal knowledge when she is able to express the relevant semantic rules explicitly in the object language and indicative mood.

Next, we will explain in detail why Thomasson developed the MN modal theory. In Thomasson's *How Do We Arrive at Metaphysical Modal Truth?*<sup>2</sup> She argues that any epistemological scheme about modal knowledge inevitably faces two main challenges: one is called the "integration problem" and the other is called the "reliability problem." The integration problem is the idea that an account that aims to show what it is like to have cognitive truths about modality needs to be simultaneously coherent with a plausible explanation of how exactly we can acquire these cognitions. The reliability problem is that we need to give a plausible explanation of how we were able to develop a reliable capacity to acquire modal knowledge. If we think of the metaphysical modal vocabulary as giving us clear ways to conveying, reasoning with, and renegotiating semantic rules, the aforementioned integration and reliability problems no longer pose any challenge or threat to a MN approach to modal epistemology. In other words, a MN approach will be able to respond appropriately to the two challenges mentioned above.

Thus, once we have taken the normative position, these two classical questions can be expressed as follows: first, how to give a positive explanation of how we obtain modal knowledge through the normative approach; Second, how to give a valid account of having modal capabilities, such as how we can make modal assertions and be able to express and respond to modal truths. For the former, then, normativists claim that for a proposition P, if it is an object-language expression of a particular semantic rule, then we are perfectly capable of asserting "necessarily, P"; And from "necessarily, P" we can then assert, according to the T-schema, that "' necessarily, P 'is true." Thus, as qualified speakers, we achieve some tacit modal knowledge only by grasping certain semantic rules and explicitly expressing and applying these rules in object language and statements. With regard to the latter, normativists argue that we try to explain what it means for a claim/proposition to be true about a metaphysical modal notion. And this explanation must be related to the semantic capacity of the speaker, his reasoning capacity as well as the auxiliary role of some empirical knowledge. Based on the above, then, Thomasson argues that once we abandon our assumptions about the function of descriptivism, the forms of problems left over from the integration and the reliability conundrum can still be effectively answered by modal theories of the normative approach.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. MR Theory as A More Complete MN Solution

At the same time, Thomasson's modal normativism theory also faces some critical challenges. The challenges point out that the range of explanations that normative theory can cover may be limited, and that there are also questions about the theoretical consequences that its position will lead to. First, a key problem is whether Thomasson's modal normative scheme can explain the metaphysical modality at all. Since metaphysical modality needs to be distinguished from epistemic analyticity and logical/conceptual modality. That is to say, can the mastery of semantic rules and the supplement of some empirical knowledge ultimately lead to the acquisition of metaphysical modal knowledge/judgments? Thus, the normativism position is subject to criticism that the scope of interpretation is limited. One of the theoretical consequences that the question of scope then leads to on this basis is that, precisely by focusing on the utility of "semantic rules" themselves, the normativism position seems to turn many of the arguments about metaphysics into arguments about "verbal disagreement and negotiation."

Given the theoretical difficulties that such a MN position may face, we therefore attempt to answer questions about the scope of the foregoing explanation and its theoretical consequences by defending modal reliabilism theory (MR) as a more complete MN approach. In particular, his paper will show whether MR theory can effectively cover metaphysical modality, especially with the help of "category concepts" and "content concepts" as defined by George Bealer.

First, according to the theoretical framework of modal reliabilism theory, Bealer gives a definition of “determinateness<sup>49</sup>”. What, then, does the concept of “A priori stability” mean? First, he divided concepts into Category Concepts, Content Concepts, and Naturalistic Concepts. Category concepts include predication, number, identity, relation, proposition, quantity, quality, stuff, etc. Content concepts include phenomenal concepts & concepts of psychological attitudes. Naturalistic Concepts are mainly related to Scientific Essentialism. While unlike naturalistic concepts, category and content concepts are precisely related to “A priori stability”. As can be seen from the aforementioned enumerations of these two types, category and content concepts are primarily related to the subject's innate cognitive and linguistic abilities, rather than to empirical science. In other words, they are semantically stable. In contrast, naturalistic concepts are only a posteriori stable. In addition, another concept discussed by Bealer in his paper, semantic stability, can help us understand “a priori stability”. The distinguishing feature of category and content concepts from naturalistic concepts is that they possess “semantic stability”. According to Bealer, a semantically stable proposition is one that is identical to all of its epistemic counterparts. In other words, if a proposition *p* is semantically stable, then the epistemological possibility of *p* implies the metaphysical possibility of *p*.

Thus, Thomasson's MN theory has been challenged about their explanatory scope and theoretical consequences. In the foregoing explanation of Bealer's MR theory, it can be seen that modal reliabilism effectively communicates epistemic and metaphysical modal concepts through the core concept of “A priori/semantic stability”. In fact, it can be argued that neither critics of the MN position, nor Thomasson's own normative solution, have been able to give a further explanation of “semantic rules”. They have no doubt simplified their interpretation, that is to say, semantic rules are merely some kind of grammatical or relevant rules of language use itself. Thus, in order to be able to answer this challenge, Thomasson's scheme must either develop some kind of effective explanation of semantic rules, or extend it to the classification of concepts. Obviously, this revision will point to the consideration of MR theory as a more complete MN approach.

One theoretical consequence of the scope question, then, is that by focusing on the utility of “semantic rules” themselves, the normativism position seems to reduce metaphysical arguments to mere disagreements and negotiations about words. How, then, can MR theory respond to this problem? We have shown previously that the three categories of concepts given by Bealer cover the classification and clarification of concepts in the most general sense we can make. Category concepts like “predicates, identity, propositions, relations, etc.”, as well as content concepts of phenomenal concepts and psychological attitudes, naturalistic concepts of natural kinds, these three categories of concepts are much more than mere “disagreements and negotiations of words.” Rather, according to the conceptual classification given by MR theory, it can give a detailed description of the general acquisition and interpretation of concepts at epistemological and metaphysical levels, or a mechanism which is concerned with concepts, semantics, and propositions, rather than just words.

#### 4. Conclusion

Based on the above, this paper can conclude that it is through the articulation of the category and content concepts with “a priori/semantic stability” that the scheme of modal reliabilism theory can effectively respond to the above-mentioned major challenges faced by modal normativism position--namely, questions about its explanatory scope and theoretical consequences. In other words, by virtue of the a priori/semantic stability itself, we can arrive at the metaphysical modal concepts from the analytic/conceptual modality. For example, we can give a mathematical definition of a circle or a square, such as “A set of points in the same plane whose distance from a fixed point is equal to its length is called a circle”. This definition is both a definition of the circle

itself and a definition of our cognition of what is “a circle” . That is, the "meaning" of the definition in the epistemological/conceptual sense is equivalent to its "essence" in the metaphysical sense.

Second, opponents argue that a theoretical consequence of the scope question is that, by focusing solely on the utility of the "semantic rules" themselves, the MN position appears to reduce many metaphysical arguments to mere disagreements about words. Drawing on Bealer's elucidations of the category and content concepts, this paper argues that the MR scheme is not just about semantic rules and words. Fundamentally, it is a transcendental argumentation strategy that uses "intellectual intuition" as our basic source of evidence for general knowledge. Instead, through the discussion of intellectual intuition as a basic source of evidence, the intuition is given as category, content and naturalistic concepts in three categories, and finally from the grasp and understanding of these three concepts in intuition, the MR theory itself can be defended. This is the explanation of modal facts, intellectual intuitions and true judgments on the level of epistemological mechanism given by MR theory. We therefore argue that the basic model of MR theory has gone far beyond what its opponents suggesting that MN schemes are usually only concerned with disagreements at the level of words and speech. On the contrary, we can now conclude that the MR theory has completed and deepened the general MN approach.

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