

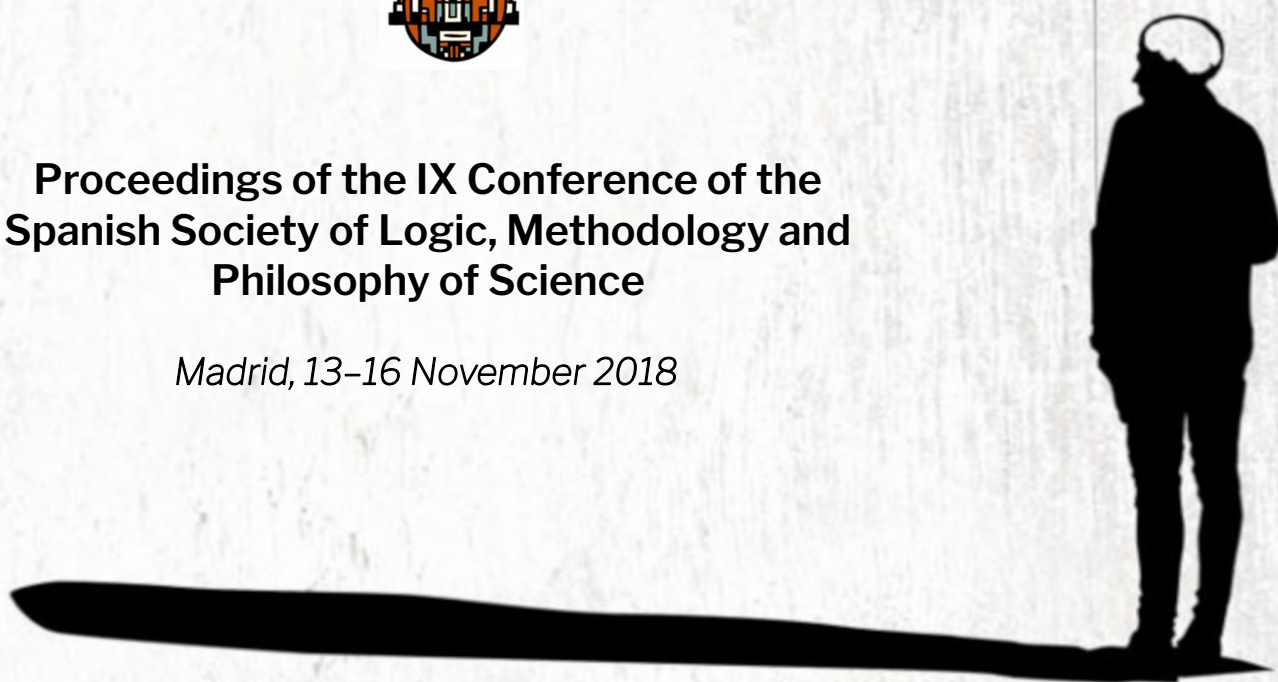
**Actas del IX Congreso de la Sociedad de  
Lógica, Metodología y Filosofía de la Ciencia en  
España**

*Madrid, 13–16 de noviembre de 2018*



**Proceedings of the IX Conference of the  
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**Editado por:**

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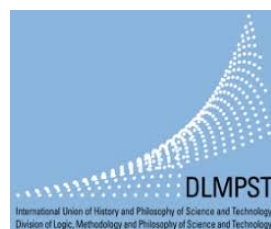
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# On the question of the indispensability of modal thought

Felipe Morales Carbonell

What is the role of experience in the acquisition of modal knowledge? What is the role of modal knowledge in experience? These questions loom large in contemporary modal epistemology (hence, for example, the emphasis on the debate between empiricist and rationalist approaches). Here, my goal is to frame these debates in terms of the question of whether and how modal thought is indispensable.

This way of posing the problem might sound reminiscent of the Kantian idea that modal categories are constitutive of experience. Recently, Brandom (2008) has developed a defense of what he calls the *Modal Kant/Sellars thesis* (KST), which is the conjunction of:

- 1) 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.
- 2) The expressive role characteristic of alethic modal vocabulary is to *make explicit* semantic, conceptual connections and commitments that are already implicit in the use of ordinary empirical vocabulary.

It follows that the task of modal epistemology will be double: first, it should describe the conceptual capacities involved in modal thought, and second, it should give an account of how those capacities are established. Brandom's suggestion is that modal vocabulary is grounded in some of the same conceptual capacities empirical vocabulary makes use of. A similar point is made by Williamson (2007, p. 137):

Our overall capacity for somewhat reliable thought about counterfactual possibilities is hardly surprising, for we cannot know in advance exactly which possibilities are or will be actual. We need to make contingency plans. In practice, *the only way for us to be cognitively equipped to deal with the actual is by being cognitively equipped to deal with a wide variety of contingencies*, most of them counterfactual. (the emphasis is mine)

This leads him to commit to *anti-exceptionalism*, which is the claim that the means to acquire modal knowledge are instances of more general, ordinary, capacities, not *sui generis*.

As I indicated above, my suggestion here will be that the KST and Williamson's claim (and similar claims) should be spelled out in terms of *indispensability*.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>As an antecedent, Hale (2013) refers to the indispensability of logical modality more explicitly.

What do I mean by this? A typical definition of indispensability is as follows:

**Indispensability:** X is *indispensable* for G iff there is no alternative to X for G that serves or would serve the goal of G better (alternatively: iff it would be impossible (in some relevant sense) to realize G unless with X)<sup>2</sup>

Indispensability claims are used to support *commitments*. The probably most famous example of an argument based on indispensability is Quine/Putnam's about mathematical entities:

- 1) We ought to have *ontological commitment* to entities which are indispensable for our best scientific theories.
- 2) Mathematical entities are indispensable for our best scientific theories.
- C) We ought to have ontological commitment to mathematical entities.

There is nothing, however, that restricts the type of commitment that any indispensability argument could support to *ontological* commitment. At its core, an indispensability argument transfers certain epistemic properties (justification, truth, etc.) from an admissible *datum* to some disputed claim (Panza & Sereni 2016). For example, we can try to support commitment to theories, principles, the applicability of methods of belief formation, and so on.

Enoch and Schechter (2008) present an argument for *vindicating* basic belief-formation mechanisms (like inference to the best explanation (IBE) or reasoning by *modus ponens*) which can serve as a template for an indispensability argument in the modal case. The central notion they use is that of a *rationaly required project* (RRP): a long term recurring task which can be assessed in epistemic terms, and which we would be rationally blameworthy for abandoning. They identify 4 RRP's: the explanatory project of making sense of and understanding the world, the deliberative project of making decisions, the project of planning for the future, and the project of self-evaluation. Their argument in defense of IBE and reasoning by *modus ponens* runs as follows:

- 1) We ought to commit to the belief-formation mechanisms which are indispensable for our *rationaly required projects* (RRP).
- 2) IBE and reasoning by *modus ponens* are indispensable for our RRP.
- C) We ought to commit to IBE and reasoning by *modus ponens*.

Indispensability claims like those in 2) take the form:

**Indispensability\*:** For some rationally required project *R*, it is or would be impossible\* to realize *R* unless one engaged in X.

Taking this as a template, we then have for the modal case the following claim:

**Indispensability-Modal:** For some rationally required project *R*, it is or would be impossible to realize *R* unless one engaged in modal thought (of type *t*).

There are reasons to think that modal thought is at least involved in all the projects that Enoch and Schechter identify as rationally required. This is the clearest, I think, in the case of decision-making, where reference and evaluation

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<sup>2</sup>I follow Colyvan (1999) and Field (1989).

of alternatives (hence, possibilities for the one who makes decisions) seems incapable, along with consideration of what would happen if those alternatives were taken (cf. Stalnaker (1996)). The same goes for planning, where besides the consideration of alternatives in the form of different ways that aims could be realized, one often has to consider, on the one hand, contingencies that could prevent those aims to be realized, and, on the other, fixed points that we can rely on. Some notion of fixedness seem to be operative in that of an explanation, in the sense that whatever is explained is shown, through the explanation, to have been fixed in some way by something else that serves as its support or ground. Furthermore, looking for explanations requires the consideration of what could fill that role of fixing the *explanandum* in that way. This modal aspect of explanation is present no matter what kind of account of explanation we commit to. Finally, while self-assessment may appear to deal with the evaluation of actual *de se* properties, it seems to be equally important for it that we are capable of evaluating our dispositions and capacities. In an important sense, we engage in self-assessment *because* we need to consider what we *can* do.

The importance of modal thought for the engagement in rationally required projects is plausible. However, we might still need more assurance. How robust are the dependency relations we have adduced so far in counterfactual terms? That is, is it really impossible for us to engage in rationally required projects without engaging in modal thought? On the other hand, are we not overloading the notion of rationality if we make those projects required, and further, if we make it a requirement for those projects to engage in modal thought?

I think we can alleviate both worries. First, assuming that rationally required projects are constitutive of rationality (which would explain why we are criticizable if we don't engage in them), we cannot easily be rational and abandon them: so in relevantly similar possible worlds where we are rational, we are engaged in those projects either in the same way we are in the actual world, or in similar ways. The second question can perhaps be answered by appeal to the generality of the adduced rationally required projects (so that they are ongoing to some degree already as long as we have a minimal form of agency and guidance).

Beyond the *global* case for the indispensability of modal thought, it is worth thinking about the *local* indispensability of *parts* of it. If we can identify those, we can distinguish between different ways in which modal thought can be indispensable for epistemic and practical projects. Thinking on how these relations can be spelled out can, I will suggest, help us clarify certain debates concerning the epistemic support of certain disputed cases.

One of these is the case of *dispositions*. It is a platitude that dispositions have modal profiles: at the very least, the unrealized manifestations of an object's dispositions are possibilities for it. Recently, people have asked whether we can appeal to dispositions in order to provide explanations of interesting phenomena; the move has been particularly appealing for authors working in the philosophy of biology. A typical objection against this explanatory strategy is that it is possible to provide the same explanations, or some which are sufficiently similar, in terms of counterfactuals. However, from a conceptual point of view this objection faces the problem that dispositional notions cannot be captured fully by counterfactual analyses. In this sense, it might turn out to be the case that

dispositional talk is indispensable for these explanatory projects in biology.

Now, even the counterfactual case is undecided. In Williamson (2007), the development of counterfactuals requires to keep certain things fixed, making the minimum possible alterations to actuality. Among those, one finds *constitutive* (essential) facts. Against this, Roca-Royes (2012) argues, convincingly in my opinion, that essentialist vision is not a core part of counterfactual evaluation. If she is right, essentialist thought might be dispensable:

As far as we've been given reasons to believe, it *might* still be that essentialist and metaphysical modal thought can be 'removed from our conceptual scheme without collateral damage', contrary to what Williamson argues. (170–171)

We can capture the relevant dependencies using the following taxonomy of indispensability relations. If we carve out modal thought  $M$  and identify its set of roles/projects  $R$ , for any such carving out  $P$  we have:

**External Indispensability:**  $m$  is externally indispensable for  $M$  iff  $m \in P$  and  $m$  is indispensable for the realization of  $R$ .

In this case, it might be worth asking whether  $m$  refines  $M$ , that is, whether the claim that  $M$  is indispensable for  $R$  can be refined to a claim that  $m$  is indispensable for  $M$ .

**Internal Indispensability:**  $m$  is internally indispensable for  $M$  iff  $m \in P$  and  $m$  is indispensable for the realization of some of the roles of an  $m'$  such that  $m' \in P$  and  $m' \neq m$ .

We can now apply these notions to the cases we considered before:

- a) In the case of dispositions, the question is whether dispositional language/thought is externally indispensable for the explanatory project (as we suspected), *and* whether counterfactual language/thought is internally indispensable for whatever uses dispositional language/thought may have. If the second point is true, perhaps (if dispositional thought ungrounded in counterfactual evaluation is dispensable for the explanatory project) dispositional language could be dispensed with.
- b) In the case of counterfactual and essentialist thought, the question is whether essentialist thought is internally indispensable for counterfactual thought, and thus, whether essentialist thought is externally indispensable.

These observations could be further enriched in two ways. On the one hand, the fact that we can make several independent or orthogonal categorizations of modal thought suggests that we should introduce some notion of *cross-carving indispensability*. This suggests that questions of indispensability can turn out to be a matter of what classificatory schemes we should use. For example, in cases where different carvings of modal thought overlap we can ask whether some roles of  $M$  can be fulfilled in terms of one classificatory scheme instead of another, or whether several of those carving exhibit relations of mutual support.

On the other hand, we should take into account that the projects and function of modal thought may develop and change over time. In this sense, the questions

of indispensability can also be sensitive to historical factors.

To summarize: I have motivated the introduction of discussions concerning the functional role of modal thought through the use of the notion of indispensability. I have sketched a (defeasible) positive argument in favor of the global indispensability of modal thought, and addressed some objections. Finally, I have attempted to explain how finer-grained notions of indispensability can be useful to understand several current debates in modal epistemology. In doing so, I have moved from the issues concerning the implementation of modal epistemologies to architectonic problems that arise for any modal epistemology.

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