

### The Q Factor: Modal Rationalism Vs. Modal Autonomism

Materialists claim that phenomenal consciousness is “nothing over and above” a certain physical (or functional) process. While the precise interpretation of “nothing over and above” is disputed, almost all agree that it entails metaphysical supervenience<sup>1</sup> of the phenomenal on the physical. This means that there do not exist two metaphysically possible worlds that agree in all their physical respects but differ phenomenally. A popular way of putting the claim is to say that zombies aren’t possible, where a zombie is a creature that is physically identical to a normal conscious human being but isn’t conscious; there is nothing it is like to be this creature. If a zombie were possible then it wouldn’t be the case that phenomenal states metaphysically supervene on physical states, and so materialism would be false.

The “conceivability argument” against materialism begins from the premise that zombies are conceivable. That is, there seems to be nothing incoherent or contradictory, even upon rational reflection, in the thought that zombies exist. The dualist then infers from the conceivability of zombies that they are metaphysically possible, and therefore that materialism is refuted. Some materialists, those dubbed “type-A” by Chalmers (1996), deny the initial conceivability premise, and so stop the

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<sup>1</sup>Since metaphysical supervenience, as opposed, say, to nomological supervenience, is all that concerns me in this paper, understand all future uses of “supervenience” to mean the metaphysical variety.

argument in its tracks. For them, the very idea of a zombie contains some internal incoherence or contradiction. However, many materialists, those Chalmers dubs “type-B”, accept the conceivability of zombies. Since, as stated above, materialism is incompatible with the metaphysical possibility of zombies, type-B materialists must maintain that zombies are metaphysically impossible, even though they are conceptually, or epistemically possible.<sup>2</sup>

The debate between type-B materialists and dualists<sup>3</sup> can be usefully framed, therefore, in terms of a debate over the relation between metaphysical modality and epistemic modality. Dualists advocate what Chalmers calls “modal rationalism”, the doctrine that there is a tight connection between metaphysical and epistemic modality. The opposing view, the doctrine that metaphysical modality is significantly autonomous from epistemic modality, I will call “modal autonomism”. Here is how Chalmers describes and motivates his modal rationalism:

It is widely acknowledged that there is a circle of modal notions: possibility, consistency, and rational entailment, for example. Some of these, and perhaps the most grounded of all, are clearly rational notions, such as consistency and rational entailment. The framework of possible worlds is tremendously valuable in

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<sup>2</sup>Throughout this paper I will use the terms “conceptually possible”, “epistemically possible”, “conceivable”, and “a posteriori” interchangeably; correspondingly, I will use “epistemically necessary” and “a priori” interchangeably as well.

<sup>3</sup>That is, those dualists who base their position on the conceivability argument. Let that be understood in what follows.

making sense of these notions; and as I suggested earlier, the space of worlds that we need here is the space of logically possible worlds, with one world for every ideally conceivable scenario. A narrower class of worlds is no help in making sense of these notions; breaking the tie between conceivability and possibility breaks the tie between rationality and modality. (Chalmers 1999, page 489-490)

So far we only have a fairly vague characterization of the distinction between modal rationalism and modal autonomism, in terms of the relative strength of the connection between epistemic and metaphysical modality. Indeed, developing a precise characterization of the issue that divides the two camps will be my next order of business. But before doing so, I want to briefly lay out my main line of argument in this paper. I will argue that advocates of modal rationalism - in particular, Chalmers and Jackson (2001, C&J from now on) - are guilty of assimilating two notions of fundamentality: a semantic one and a metaphysical one. I will show that so long as one clearly maintains this distinction, their argument for modal rationalism, and against type-B materialism, only goes through if one grants them at least one of the following two assumptions: first, that what is semantically basic must also be metaphysically basic; second, that phenomenal properties happen to be metaphysically basic. The latter assumption obviously begs the question against materialism. But the former, I maintain, begs the question against modal autonomism, and thus also type-B materialism, because only someone already convinced of modal rationalism would have reason to accept it.

As I said above, our first order of business is to make precise just what sort of connection between epistemic modality and metaphysical modality is being affirmed by the modal rationalist and denied by the modal autonomist. The simplest formulation would be this: every metaphysically necessary statement is epistemically necessary, or a priori. The problem is that ever since Kripke (1980) hardly anyone believes this; in particular, C&J certainly don't. Modal rationalists are quite happy to admit that statements like "water = H<sub>2</sub>O" are necessary a posteriori. So clearly the nature of the connection between epistemic and metaphysical necessity that is claimed to hold by the modal rationalist must be somewhat more complicated.

To see how to complicate the story, and develop a more accurate characterization of the alleged connection between epistemic and metaphysical necessity, let's look more closely at the way modal rationalists explain why necessities like "water = H<sub>2</sub>O" are a posteriori. They argue that the a posteriority of this identity statement comes from the epistemic (and metaphysical) contingency of the fact that it is H<sub>2</sub>O that plays the role we use to pick out water. That water is whatever plays that role - for instance, is the stuff that falls from the sky when it rains, quenches thirst, is liquid at room temperature, is found in lakes and oceans, etc. - is itself a priori<sup>4</sup>. Hence, if you

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<sup>4</sup>Though contingent, since water - i.e. H<sub>2</sub>O - doesn't play the water role in all possible worlds. Within the structure of 2D semantics this is handled by saying that "Water plays the water role" has a necessary primary intension but a contingent secondary intension, while "Water = H<sub>2</sub>O" has a contingent primary intension and a necessary secondary intension. It's the necessity/contingency of the primary intension that tracks a statement's epistemic status, while

provide a complete description of the facts that determine that H<sub>2</sub>O plays the water role, it will follow a priori that water is H<sub>2</sub>O. Yes, the statement “water = H<sub>2</sub>O” on its own is a posteriori, but the conditional “R → water = H<sub>2</sub>O”, where R characterizes all the conditions on which H<sub>2</sub>O’s playing the water role supervenes, is a priori.

What this analysis of the water example suggests is that not just any metaphysically necessary statement will be a priori according to modal rationalism. Rather, the crucial link between metaphysical and epistemic necessity is demonstrated by certain special conditional statements, which we can call “supervenience conditionals”. Let “B” represent a complete description of the supervenience base for all non-basic phenomena, N. We might then reformulate modal rationalism as follows:

MR: Conditionals of the form B → N are both metaphysically and epistemically necessary.

Both modal rationalists and autonomists will agree that B → N is metaphysically necessary, of course, since this just follows from the definition of “supervenience”. But it is here, in statements of this general form, that the nature of the connection between the two modalities over which they disagree is manifest. Though not all metaphysically necessary statements must be epistemically necessary, even according to modal rationalists, MR commits modal rationalists to the claim that all supervenience conditionals are a priori. The idea is that since all the relevant contingent information - all the basic facts, on which every other fact about a world supervenes - is already included in the antecedent of the conditional, there is now a sufficient basis to rationally

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it’s the necessity/contingency of its secondary intension that tracks its metaphysical status.

infer the consequent.

MR's application to the zombie argument is now straightforward. To see this, consider the following conditional (which comes from C&J):

(1) PTI  $\rightarrow$  Q

"P" stands for a description of all the basic micro-physical facts, including the physical laws.<sup>5</sup> "T" is a "that's all" clause, which rules out the existence of any "alien", non-physical entities or properties in addition to the physical. "I" is a kind of "you are here" marker, which provides the sort of indexical information necessary to determine the truth values of statements involving indexical terms. Finally, "Q" is a specification of the phenomenal (or qualitative, hence "Q") facts. According to materialists, this is a supervenience conditional, since the phenomenal facts are supposed to supervene on the facts described by PTI. Indeed, according to materialists, all non-basic facts supervene on PTI. However, if zombies are conceivable, then (1) is not a priori. By MR, though, either (1) is a priori or it's not metaphysically necessary, which means that the phenomenal facts don't supervene on the physical facts. So here we have an instance of a statement over which modal rationalists and modal autonomists must disagree: the latter allow it to be necessary and a posteriori, while the former insist it is either a priori or contingent.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>What does it mean to be "physical"? This is a controversial topic, but one that can be ignored for present purposes.

<sup>6</sup>Chalmers, a dualist, claims it's contingent, while Jackson, now a type-A materialist, claims it's a priori. In this paper, I'm mostly interested in the dualist challenge to type-B

Two points have been established so far. First, we've clarified just what sort of connection between epistemic and metaphysical necessity is at issue between modal rationalists and autonomists. The former claim that all supervenience conditionals of form  $B \rightarrow N$  are a priori, while the latter deny this. Second, we've seen how this dispute bears on the claim that since zombies are conceivable they must be possible.

Assuming PTI accurately describes our world, statement (1) is inconsistent with the existence of zombies. Both type-B materialists and dualists agree that (1) is epistemically contingent. Dualists also claim it is metaphysically contingent,<sup>7</sup> so it is not of form  $B \rightarrow N$ , and MR does not apply. But type-B materialists must hold (1) is metaphysically necessary, and therefore, since it's an instance of  $B \rightarrow N$ , they must deny MR.

So far, of course, all we have seen are claims and counter-claims. Modal autonomists look to Kripkean considerations to support their denial of MR, while modal rationalists, as described above, claim that Kripke's arguments don't touch the heart of modal rationalism. In order to tip the balance in their favor, modal rationalists argue as follows. All other things equal, modal rationalism is a metaphysically less audacious position than is its rival. This is what Chalmers was expressing in the passage quoted

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materialism, so I will generally ignore the type-A materialist alternative.

<sup>7</sup>But don't they have to go farther and say it's false? No, because dualists can allow that in our world there are no zombies. In fact, they can say something even stronger, as Chalmers does: the Q-facts nomologically supervene on the physical facts. This is consistent with the claim that the Q-facts are metaphysically basic.

above. Modal autonomists must claim that the space of epistemically possible worlds is greater than the corresponding space of metaphysically possible worlds, thus introducing a kind of modality that is divorced from rational, logical notions. Unless one is forced to acknowledge such a notion of “strong metaphysical necessity” (Chalmers 1996), it is better not to. Now, if, as modal autonomists insist, MR is violated in most cases - that is, if for many non-phenomenal facts as values of N,  $B \rightarrow N$  is necessary a posteriori - then of course there is no problem about statement (1) violating MR. But if, as modal rationalists contend, for all non-phenomenal values of N there are no violations of MR, then it seems more plausible to conclude that (1) too does not violate MR, which would entail rejecting modal autonomism (along with the type-B materialism that depends on it).

Thus we arrive at the central argument of C&J, which is to show that when it comes to standard non-phenomenal macro facts, involving ordinary kinds like water and gold, MR does indeed hold. Letting the “M” represent facts involving non-phenomenal macro kinds, what C&J argue is that the following conditional is a priori:<sup>8</sup>

(2)  $PQTI \rightarrow M$

The letters P, Q, T, and I mean what they did above, and of course we have just defined M. So the idea is that if you include all the micro-physical facts and the qualitative facts, along with the “that’s all there is” and “you are here” conditions, in the antecedent, and any statement involving non-phenomenal macro terms in the consequent, the conditional is a priori. This is indeed what you would expect if modal rationalism held.

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<sup>8</sup>It’s also metaphysically necessary, but this isn’t in dispute here.



Notice that Q is included in the antecedent. Included in Q are statements about which visual, auditory, and other sensory experiences I have in all sorts of circumstances. In particular, it tells me that in certain circumstances I'm having visual appearances qualitatively identical to those I currently have when I look at water, taste experiences just like those I have when I taste water, tactile experiences just like those I have when I touch water, and so on. Now, C&J argue, if given all of this information about a world, the information embodied in PQTI, wouldn't I know what the water is in that world without recourse to further empirical information? After all, all the relevant empirical information is already embodied in PQTI. Thus the conditional itself is knowable a priori. To quote C&J:

For example, knowledge of the appearance, behavior, and composition of a certain body of matter in one's environment, along with complete knowledge of the appearance, behavior, and composition of other bodies of matter in the environment, and knowledge of their relationships to oneself, puts one in a position to know (on rational reflection) whether the original system is a body of water. The same goes for knowledge of whether the system is gold, whether it is alive, whether it boils at a certain temperature, or whether it is found in the oceans. And the same applies to ordinary macroscopic truths M in general: complete knowledge of structure, dynamics, composition, distribution, and appearance puts one in a position to know whether M is true. (pg 332)

The following science fiction example helps to make their argument even more intuitively plausible. They write:

We can summarize the argument in a way that makes clear the role of the idealization, by appeal to a fanciful thought experiment. Imagine a human augmented by a “virtual world” machine. This is a machine containing (i) a supercomputer to store the physical information in P and to make the a priori calculations required to move from microscopic structure to macroscopic structure, (ii) a virtual reality device to produce direct knowledge of the phenomenal states described in Q, and (iii) tools that use these devices to focus on arbitrary regions of the world, and to deliver information about the macroscopic structure, dynamics, composition, and perceptual appearance of systems in those regions. Using such a machine, a human with no other empirical information could straightforwardly ascertain the truth of the relevant claims M. The virtual world does no more than give access to the information contained in PQTI and process this information on a priori grounds. So if a human using such a device can ascertain the truth of M, it is plausible that  $PQTI \rightarrow M$  is a priori. (pg 334-5)

To summarize the modal rationalist argument. Belief in “strong metaphysical necessity”, which for our purposes is operationalized as violations of MR, is metaphysically extravagant, or costly. So long as one finds such violations in non-phenomenal cases - that is, where the “N” term in “B  $\rightarrow$  N” takes non-phenomenal facts as values - then type-B materialism is not guilty of special pleading on behalf of phenomenal facts. However, C&J argue, we have demonstrated that (2) is a priori, and therefore non-phenomenal facts do not involve violations of MR. Since we are driven to

the metaphysically extravagant thesis of entertaining violations of MR only to accommodate type-B materialism, the type-B materialist is guilty of endorsing modal autonomism only to save her materialism.

Now there are various ways to reply to this argument. A fairly standard way, exemplified by Block & Stalnaker (1999)<sup>9</sup>, is to deny the claim that (2) is a priori. They challenge the claim that natural kind terms like “water” possess a priori reference-fixers - i.e. whatever actual descriptions are abbreviated by terms like “the water role” - that underlie the necessity of statements like “water = H<sub>2</sub>O”.<sup>10</sup> Rather, they claim, the identification of water with H<sub>2</sub>O is an empirical hypothesis that garners its support from its role in explaining the various facts about water’s behavior that stand in need of explanation.

For my part, I am inclined to agree with Block & Stalnaker in rejecting the

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<sup>9</sup>Of course C&J is itself a response to Block and Stalnaker, but the same type of argument had been pressed earlier in Chalmers (1996) and other places.

<sup>10</sup>It’s important to note that C&J are not committed in fact to the claim that there literally exist descriptions we can express that capture the reference-fixing conditions for a term like “water” (or mental representation of water). Rather, the notion of a primary intension supposedly captures the reference-fixing content in question. Since nothing in my argument depends on this distinction, I will often speak as if there are supposed to be actual descriptions we can articulate that fix a term’s reference. I will also not worry about the distinction between public language and private concepts, though this does matter for their doctrine, since, again, this difference will not figure in my argument.

existence of a priori reference-fixers and their purported role in explaining the necessity of macro theoretical identities like “water = H<sub>2</sub>O”. Without such a priori reference-fixers, the relevant supervenience conditionals would not themselves be a priori. However, for the purposes of this paper, I want to see what follows if we accept C&J’s argument for the epistemic necessity of (2). I want now to argue that even if they are right, we still have been provided no non-question-begging reason to accept modal rationalism - to accept MR - and therefore also to reject type-B materialism.

My argument will proceed in two stages. First, I will briefly demonstrate that acknowledging the a priori of (2) in no way commits the modal autonomist (who is also a type-B materialist)<sup>11</sup> to grant that there are any non-phenomenal cases that constitute violations of MR. Second, I will argue that reflection on this dialectical situation reveals the deeper problems with the modal rationalist case that I briefly described at the start of the paper.

Let’s look again at MR.

MR: Conditionals of the form B → N are both metaphysically and epistemically necessary.

What’s crucial is that the antecedents of supervenience conditionals, the “B” terms, contain all and only descriptions of metaphysically basic facts, those on which non-basic facts supervene. Why they must contain a complete supervenience base is a matter I will discuss below. But it should be clear why they can contain only metaphysically

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<sup>11</sup>Since the only modal autonomist of interest to us here is a type-B materialist, I will just assume this from now on.

basic facts if MR is to capture the core idea of modal rationalism. For if we allowed non-basic facts to be represented in the antecedent of the conditional, this wouldn't show that epistemic and metaphysical necessity coincided at this fundamental level. After all, maybe the conditional in question is a priori by virtue of inclusion of some of the non-basic facts, though of course its metaphysical necessity couldn't depend on that. So long as we provide a sufficient supervenience base for the facts mentioned in the consequent, the conditional will be metaphysically necessary.

But once we point this out, it's clear that from the point of view of the type-B materialist, (2) is not a legitimate instance of "B -> N", and therefore, the fact that it turns out to be a priori is not a test of MR. In order to test MR, we need to look at the following conditional:

(3) PTI -> M

If (3) were a priori, then indeed the modal rationalist would have a case against the modal autonomist. Both modal rationalists and modal autonomists agree that PTI only contains representations of metaphysically basic facts. For the modal autonomist, PTI is also a complete supervenience base for everything.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, if C&J had shown that (3) is a priori, they would have demonstrated that when non-phenomenal facts are described in the consequent of supervenience conditionals of the right sort you do not get violations of MR, and so the phenomenal case counts as special pleading. But since, for the modal autonomist, the phenomenal facts are not metaphysically basic,

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<sup>12</sup>Or at least everything empirical. Mathematical facts and moral facts are beyond the scope of the debate discussed here.

conditionals, like (2), that contain descriptions of these facts in their antecedents, are not legitimate tests of MR. The modal autonomist can say that her position involves no special pleading at all. Since neither (3) nor (1) are a priori, both phenomenal and non-phenomenal cases constitute violations of MR. Hence, there is no reason to buy modal rationalism.

Admittedly, for dualists, (2) does count as a legitimate instance of “B → N”, and therefore a legitimate test of MR. But you can immediately see how this begs the question against the modal autonomist in either one of two ways. First, suppose you just assume that phenomenal facts are basic, and therefore can be included in the antecedents of supervenience conditionals. Well, obviously you can’t just assume that when you’re arguing against a modal autonomist who is also a materialist; especially if the whole point of your argument is to refute their materialism!

Second, suppose you don’t just start out by assuming that phenomenal facts are basic, but reason as follows. Statement (1) is either a priori or it’s not. If it is, then we’ve established type-A materialism and there’s no need to go further, as both dualists and type-B materialists are refuted. But if it isn’t, then we have reason to think the phenomenal facts are basic after all, and therefore it’s legitimate to include them in the antecedents of other supervenience conditionals, as in (2). (As we’ll see below, C&J say something quite like this at one point.) But this too clearly begs the question, since to take the a posteriority of (1) as a sign that the phenomenal facts are basic is already to have assumed the doctrine of modal rationalism. In this context, only (3) is a non-question-begging candidate for testing MR, since both sides grant that its antecedent

contains only descriptions of metaphysically basic facts. But of course C&J don't even attempt to argue that (3) is a priori. Hence a modal autonomist can accept their entire case without embarrassment.

This concludes the first stage of my argument, which was to show that establishing that (2) is a priori does not constitute a real challenge to modal autonomism, or the type-B materialism that depends on it. However, a number of questions naturally arise. First, why don't C&J try to show that (3) is a priori anyway? Second, how do they justify the inclusion of Q in the antecedent of (2)? Third, even if what I've just argued is correct, wouldn't a demonstration of the epistemic necessity of (2), along with the acknowledged epistemic contingency of (1), show at least that there is something quite special about the phenomenal case, and therefore wouldn't it provide at least some reason for thinking phenomenal facts are metaphysically basic after all?

With regard to the first question, consider again the two passages from C&J quoted above. It's clear that the argument for the epistemic necessity of (2) relies heavily on the contribution of Q. As emphasized in these passages, the claim that one would be in a position to determine the facts about water, gold, and so forth from the information specified by PQT1 crucially involves how the world would phenomenally appear. Without the contribution to one's information base of the appearances, the case for an a priori inference to the facts about water and gold is much less convincing.

But it would be a mistake to interpret their choosing to make their case for the epistemic necessity of (2) over (3) merely on grounds of ease of argument. In fact, from the point of view of their own theory there is no reason to think that (3) would be a priori.

What's supposed to be a priori is the connection between application of the concept in question and the satisfaction of its reference-fixing conditions. Remember above how the a priori element in the derivation of "water = H<sub>2</sub>O" was the claim that water is whatever satisfies the water role, where we understand the latter term as an abbreviation of a list of the superficial properties by which we ordinarily identify water. But it's obvious that if such a priori reference-fixing conditions exist, they must include facts about how the macro objects and kinds in question affect us phenomenally. If water's appearance, taste, texture and the like are not part of our a priori designation of the water role, then what is? But this means (3) couldn't be a priori, even for the modal rationalist (unless, of course, (1) is too).<sup>13</sup>

Turning to my second question, C&J do explicitly justify their including Q in the antecedent of (2) - or, to put it another way, justify their basing their argument on the epistemic necessity of (2) as opposed to (3). What they have to say is quite instructive.

To see that this is a neutral way of posing the issue [including Q in the

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<sup>13</sup>Which is precisely what C&J say, as we'll see below. Notice that this also explains why the "B" term in MR must contain all as well as only descriptions of basic facts. The point is that one could frame a conditional that described a set of metaphysically basic facts in the antecedent on which the facts described in the consequent are supervenient, but which nevertheless failed to capture the supervenience base of those conditions involved in the reference-fixers for the concepts in the consequent. Modal rationalists would not claim that such a conditional must be a priori, even though it would be necessary. Indeed, (3) is an example of precisely that kind of conditional.



antecedent, that is], note that if PQTI implies<sup>14</sup> all such M (as we shall argue), then either (i) PTI alone implies all such M, or (ii) PQTI implies all such M, but PTI does not. In the first case, the original thesis involving PTI will be upheld. (In this case, phenomenal truths will themselves be implied by PTI.) In the second case, all failures of PTI to imply a relevant M will be associated with the failure of PTI to imply Q, in the sense that adding Q will close any epistemic gaps. Putting these cases together, the thesis concerning PQTI entails the crucial claim that if phenomenal truths are not implied by PTI, then there is a special epistemic gap in the phenomenal case. (pg 319)

They set up a dilemma. On the one hand, either “PTI alone implies all such M” - in other words, (3) is a priori - or (3) is not a priori but (2) is. We are mostly interested in the second horn, but I want to focus for a moment on the first horn, to reinforce what I just argued above in answer to my first question. They say if PTI implies all such M then that means that Q itself is implied by PTI. Why? Well, one reason might be that, for their purposes, “all such M” includes Q. But I think what they also intend is what I just argued; namely, that the only way to get an a priori inference to the facts about water, say, from some basic description of a world, is to somehow include facts about how things appear. If the appearances are already included in PTI, then fine. But if not, then they have to be explicitly cited in the antecedent.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>C&J use the term “implies” to mean epistemically necessitates.

<sup>15</sup>Again, this also explains why the “B” term must express a complete supervenience base, as discussed in note 13.

But now let's look at the second horn of their dilemma, as this constitutes their justification for why it's legitimate to include Q in the antecedent of the supervenience conditional for ordinary macro facts, M. What they say is that if the only way to get an a priori supervenience conditional with M in the consequent is by explicitly including Q in the antecedent, this shows "that if phenomenal truths are not implied by PTI, then there is a special epistemic gap in the phenomenal case". In other words, they seem to be making the same argument implicit in my third question. The very fact that the implication of all the ordinary non-phenomenal macro facts from the base goes through when we include the phenomenal facts among the base facts, but not otherwise, shows that there is something special about the phenomenal facts. And isn't that good reason to think they are metaphysically basic? And doesn't that vindicate modal rationalism after all?

My answer is an emphatic "No". It is at this point in the argument that the illegitimate assimilation of the two forms of fundamentality mentioned at the start of the paper - semantic and metaphysical - becomes relevant. C&J want to argue as follows. Let's suppose that (2) is a priori, but both (1) and (3) are a posteriori. This pattern of epistemic modal assignments demonstrates "a special epistemic gap in the phenomenal case". So far, I agree with them completely. However, what the dualist-modal rationalist needs to show is not just that there is "a special epistemic gap" between the facts described by PTI and the phenomenal facts, but that there is therefore a corresponding metaphysical gap. Not only is there no argument for that claim, but there is a perfectly coherent account available, from C&J's own neo-descriptivist

semantic theory, for why the Q-concepts should be semantically basic without being metaphysically basic.

Suppose one accepted the following semantic theory: SR, for “semantic reductionism”. According to SR, we possess a stock of basic concepts - all expressible by semantically stable terms<sup>16</sup> - in terms of which other concepts are definable. This class of semantically basic concepts consists of precisely those involved in the formulation of PQT: phenomenal concepts, logical concepts, basic physical concepts (perhaps) and also perhaps the concept of causation.<sup>17</sup> Definable concepts fall into two categories. The semantically stable ones are straightforwardly definable in terms of the basic ones. The semantically unstable ones are only definable in the sense that their reference is determined by rigid reference-fixing descriptions expressible in semantically stable terms (themselves, as per above, either basic or definable in basic terms). The 2D semantic apparatus seems like a good way to model the theory.

Again, note C&J’s claim that if (1) is a posteriori while (2) is a priori it reveals a special epistemic gap between PTI and Q. Precisely! On SR, given that the concepts

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<sup>16</sup>The term “semantically stable” comes from Bealer (1987). A term is semantically stable if it’s not “Twin-earthable”, or, more technically, if its primary and secondary intensions are identical. The idea is that what it refers to does not vary as a function of which world, “considered as actual”, one inhabits.

<sup>17</sup>See Chalmers (2002) for a detailed discussion of the basic concepts in terms of which “scenarios”, descriptions of worlds that form the domains for primary intensions, are constructed.

in terms of which PQTI is formulated constitute a sufficient base to define all (empirical) concepts, it is no wonder that (2) is a priori and (1) isn't. Since the Q terms are semantically basic, there has to be an epistemic gap reflected in (1) that won't exist for (2).

Many philosophers object to this semantic reductionist picture, denying that most of our concepts are definable (either outright, or via rigid reference-fixing descriptions) in terms of a restricted class of basic concepts. They take the lesson of the Kripke-Putnam-Burge attack on internalism and descriptivism to demonstrate the bankruptcy of the semantic reductionist program. This is clearly behind the Block and Stalnaker attack on the conceivability argument. As I said above, I'm sympathetic to this attitude. But the question I want to pursue is this. Suppose one accepted the semantic theory SR. How does one get from SR to modal rationalism? After all, SR is a thesis concerning the structure of our conceptual space. Modal rationalism, on the other hand, is a thesis about the structure of modal space. How can one infer the latter from the former?

It seems to me that there are only two possible routes by which to justify this inference, the same two question-begging assumptions identified above. First, one can assume that any concept that is semantically basic must express a property that is metaphysically basic. But what justifies this assumption? Why should we think that the way our cognitive life is organized must reflect the metaphysical structure of the world? At any rate, the problem with making this assumption in the context of an argument for modal rationalism is that it clearly presupposes the very connection between the

epistemic/semantic and the metaphysical at issue. In other words, the argument presupposes modal rationalism.

Second, one might claim that there are independent reasons for thinking that each of the concepts out of which PQTI is constructed happen to express metaphysically basic properties. Having surveyed the primitive semantic base and finding them all to express metaphysically basic properties, the requisite connection between semantic/epistemic structure and metaphysical structure emerges. Modal rationalism then becomes the reasonable hypothesis. Obviously, the problem with this argument is that one has to first establish that phenomenal properties are metaphysically basic. Since modal rationalism was being employed to establish just that - against the type-B materialist - one can't assume the metaphysical fundamentality of phenomenal properties at the outset. Hence, again, the argument is question-begging.

I will conclude by connecting my argument here to another well-known strategy for confronting the conceivability argument; namely, the so-called "phenomenal concept strategy". As I mentioned above, many type-B materialists, such as Block and Stalnaker,<sup>18</sup> totally reject the claim that any of the relevant conditionals are a priori, and therefore do not feel any burden to explain what is special about the specific conceptual gap between PTI concepts and Q concepts. However, some philosophers are willing to admit that conditionals like (2) might be a priori, and therefore do feel a burden to explain why, in C&J's terms, there is "a special epistemic gap in the phenomenal case."

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<sup>18</sup>And myself, see Levine (2001), chapter 2.

Their strategy is to claim that there is something special about the cognitive role of phenomenal concepts; that being acquired in a special first-person way disconnects them from other concepts so the normal conceptual connections don't apply.<sup>19</sup>

There are of course reasons for a materialist to appeal to the special etiology of phenomenal concepts that do not involve responding to the conceivability argument. In particular, this appeal is employed to get around the explanatory gap. But if all one is concerned with is the modal rationalist challenge to type-B materialism, then a much simpler version of the phenomenal concept strategy is available. Rather than appeal to the peculiarities of the first-person perspective, one can just appeal to the fact that phenomenal concepts are included in the set of semantically basic concepts.<sup>20</sup> On this view there is nothing peculiar about phenomenal concepts - nothing that distinguishes them from other semantically basic concepts. In particular, there is nothing special about their first-person origins.

Of course many philosophers, especially those still deeply influenced by the Quinean attack on the analytic-synthetic distinction, will be deeply suspicious of any appeal to the notion of a semantically basic concept - unless, of course, one classifies almost all concepts as semantically basic. As I've said, I join in that suspicion. My argument here, however, has been aimed at those who think that by establishing a

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<sup>19</sup>Loar (1997) was the first, I think, to use the term "phenomenal concept". For both advocates and critics of this strategy, see Alter & Walter (2007).

<sup>20</sup>Again, this is on the assumption that one buys C&J's argument about the epistemic necessity of (2).

semantic hierarchy they have also supported their claims to a metaphysical hierarchy that corresponds to it. By demonstrating the ubiquity of certain epistemically necessary connections, they believe they have shown that metaphysical and epistemic necessity conform to the principle MR. By articulating an alternative semantic and metaphysical picture that accounts for the pervasive correspondence between the two modalities C&J claim to have demonstrated, while also allowing them to come apart in the crucial case, I hope to have shown that the case for modal rationalism is really much weaker than even some of its opponents have realized.<sup>21</sup>

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