The Modal Theory of Anchoring

Kevin Richardson (www.kevinrichardson.org, kevin.richardson@duke.edu)

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Abstract. Several metaphysicians have criticized the idea that grounding and anchoring are distinct relations. The goal of this paper is to defend the distinctness of anchoring by arguing that anchoring is a modality generator (or modal function).

Grounding and Anchoring

(1) Michael is a war criminal because he is H.

(2) Because the Geneva Conventions hold, every H is a war criminal.

Social ontologists agree that explanations like (1) and (2) are often true and explanatorily connected. But what makes them true?

Grounding-only. (Michael is a war criminal) is fully grounded in:

- (Michael is H)
- (The Geneva Conventions obtain and say that: if x is H then: (x is H) fully grounds (x is a war criminal))

Grounding and anchoring. Posit anchoring relation (Epstein, 2015).

- (Michael is H) fully grounds (Michael is a war criminal)
- (The Geneva Conventions obtain) anchor (Necessarily: if x is H then: (x is H) fully grounds (x is a war criminal))

Why appeal to anchoring? Epstein writes: "Even in worlds in which there is no Geneva Convention and no International Criminal Court, there can be war criminals" (2019, 771). Our actual conventions can settle the modal facts in worlds without them.

Modal Objections

Anchoring has puzzling modal features (Schaffer, 2019).

Problem 1: Convention Necessitation. Anchoring makes social conventions necessary. If the Geneva Conventions obtain in the actual world, then the content of their laws spread to all possibilities (given the necessity claim).

Problem 2: Grounding Contingentism. Anchoring makes grounding contingent. The grounding conditions for being a war criminal could have been anchored differently; J rather than H could've made one a war criminal. Though this rules out the necessity of grounding.

Formalizing Convention Necessitation. If we anchor the relevant frame principle, then the following is the case.

(3) $\Box(\forall x(Hx \rightarrow (Hx < Cx)))$

(3) is actually the case but things could've been anchored in a different way. Or:

(4) $\diamond\neg\Box(\forall x(Hx \rightarrow (Hx < Cx)))$

But Axiom 4 and (3) jointly entail:

(5) $\Box\Box\forall x(Hx \rightarrow (Hx < Cx))$

Contradiction: (4) and (5).

Formalizing Grounding Contingentism. In the actual world, Michael's being a war criminal is grounded in Michael's being H.

(6) $Hm < Cm$

Though it is possible that being J, rather than being H, is what could make one a war criminal. In such a case, Michael might be H without being a war criminal

(7) $\Diamond(Hm \wedge \neg Cm)$

The necessity of grounding has the following instance:

(8) $(Hm < Cm) \rightarrow \Box(Hm \rightarrow Cm)$

Of course, (6)-(8) are jointly inconsistent (given K).

Epstein says we must use a multidimensional modal logic to understand anchoring, but he does not provide a specific formal logic or metaphysical interpretation of such a logic.

The Modal Theory of Anchoring

Anchoring explanations are modal explanations. Take (2). "Because the Geneva Conventions hold" expresses an anchoring context. There is no robust relation that holds between the laws and the quantificational fact.

An *anchoring context* tells us what is true relative to anchoring propositions. In the legal case, these propositions will concern the law. Each anchor A has its own sort of necessity $[A]$.

Anchoring contexts are not to be confused with the circumstances under which an anchoring proposition holds. I call these *anchoring circumstances*.

Anchoring contexts are *non-objective* contexts. Paradigm objective contexts: logical and metaphysical modality contexts. Paradigm non-objective contexts: fictional and belief contexts. Instead of taking $(Hm < Cm)$ to be true, we only assert this claim within an anchoring context.

The modal objections no longer apply.

Convention Necessitation. Anchors are not influencing what is going on at distant metaphysical possibilities anymore than authors of science fiction are influencing what is going on in the year 3077.

Grounding Contingentism. Grounding is not contingent because the grounding claims only occur within non-objective contexts.

Formally, we distinguish between anchoring (a modal function []), anchoring contexts (operators formed by applying modal functions to formulas, like $[A]$), and objective modalities ($\Box$ as metaphysical necessity). You no longer get modal problems.

Metaphysically, we accept social modalities alongside metaphysical, nomological, and logical modalities.

Necessitation. Suppose A and B are different anchors. Then (9) and (10) — which represent conflicting ways of anchoring a frame principle — are consistent.

(9) $[A](\forall x(Hx \to (\phi x < Cx)))$

(10) $[B]\neg(\forall x(Hx \to (\phi x < Cx)))$

Contingentism. Suppose we have

(11) $(Hm < Cm) \to [A](Hm \to Cm)$

We can let (11) hold in our logic. Perhaps grounding is necessary in this sense. However, we cannot let (6) $(Hm < Cm)$ be true.

Replies to Comments: Further Explicating the Modal Theory

- Anchoring contexts are similar to fictional contexts. P is true in the fiction, but it does not follow that P is TRUE. Similarly, $(Hm < Cm)$ is true in an anchoring context but not TRUE.
- Semantically, the claim (1) "Michael is a war criminal because he is H" could still be true if it expressed $[A](Hm < Cm)$.
- You can think of an anchoring context as a generalized social construction operator.
- Anchoring modalities are not conceptually reducible to more familiar modalities, but they may be metaphysically reducible.

References

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