
BOOK REVIEW

Sanford Shieh: *Necessity Lost: Modality and Logic*
in *Early Analytic Philosophy*, Vol. 1
Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2019, xxiv+441 pages.

Jaroslav Peregrin*


It seems to be clear that the truth value of a sentence such as *The most populous city in the world is Shanghai* can fluctuate: it is true now, but perhaps it was not true in the past and it will not be true in the future. And it is certainly not true in many imaginable states of affairs alternative to the current one. And it may, nowadays, seem obvious that when we talk about necessity and possibility we are talking about this kind of fluctuation: we say that something is *possible* if there are conceivable circumstances in which the corresponding sentence is true, and we say that it is *necessary* if all circumstances are of this kind. This intuition, it may further seem, was put on firm foundations by the Kripkean possible worlds semantics and its various elaborations.

However, it would be erroneous to suppose that such intuitions have been held by all eminent logicians. True, the logic of possibility and necessity was already considered as integral to the agenda of logic by Aristotle, and some medieval and post-medieval logicians even mused about possible worlds; but the fact is that some of the founding fathers of modern logic, notably Frege and Russell, considered necessity and possibility as something that does not belong to the core of the subject matter of logic, at least not so that we could have something as a modal logic.

Why this was so is explained in great detail in Sanford Shieh's book. This volume, the author tells us, will be followed by a second, to be devoted to Wittgenstein and C. I. Lewis, whose attitudes to modal logic were much more

* Institute of Philosophy of the Czech Academy of Sciences

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0460-1933>

 Institute of Philosophy of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Jilská 1, 110 00 Prague 1, Czech Republic

 peregrin@flu.cas.cz



positive than those of Frege and Russell. Given the ever expanding literature on the origins of modern logic and about Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein etc., one might ask whether new publications on this subject can add anything really new to the already existing body of findings. But Shieh, I think, has managed to hit on a novel viewpoint, from which some of the well-known events of the story appear in a relatively new light.

How could Frege, such a meticulous thinker, we may want to ask, overlook the fact that truth is relative to circumstances? The answer is simple: what is true or false, he was convinced, are primarily not sentences, but propositions (or *thoughts*, as he would call them), and their truth values are not relative to anything. Every proposition is either true, or false, and it is true or false once and for all.

So what about *The most populous city in the world is Shanghai*? Is it not so that it is true here and now, but it can be false in the future or in an alternative world? Frege would say it is true in force of the fact that it expresses a proposition that is true. And it can become false only in force of coming to express a *different* proposition. The proposition expressed by the sentence now is better expressed by *The most populous city in the world in 2021 is Shanghai*, while that expressed by *The most populous city in the world in 2121 is Shanghai* is a different proposition.

The part of the book devoted to Frege consists of five chapters. In the first, Shieh discusses Frege's early philosophy, as it appears especially in *Begriffsschrift*. This is where he discerns the main thesis of Frege's conception of judgment, namely that a judgement is the step from a representation (later called a *thought*, the sense of a sentence) to its truth value. This made him part ways with Kant, whose views form the baseline of Frege's philosophy. It is already here that Frege expresses his reluctance to consider necessity or possibility as pertaining to the content of judgment, or to accept that necessary truth and possible truth are subspecies of truth.

In Chapter 2 Shieh discusses what he calls Frege's *amodalism*, viz. the conviction that truth cannot be relativized in any of the ways we now know from Kripkean possible world semantics and its later variations. Why Frege holds this view is discussed in great detail in Chapter 3. Here the author pursues Frege's view, that a judgment is a step from a thought to its truth value, through to its consequences. Shieh argues that the theory of truth held by Frege was in the redundancy theory genre, according to which "recognizing the truth

of a thought supervenes on recognizing the obtaining of what that thought represents". Frege himself holds that truth is undefinable, and Shieh argues that it is this overall conception of truth that prevents Frege from accepting that it need not be absolute.

In Chapter 4 the author explores the details concerning Frege's explaining away the intuition that truth, especially the truth of sentences, is relative. As I mentioned above, Frege's basic explanation was that a sentence can change its truth value only when it changes the proposition (thought) it expresses; and propositions are absolute because they incorporate all the factors to which they could be relative: thus, a proposition is not relative to times, because it always incorporates a specific time to which it relates etc. In this chapter Shieh also discusses Frege's reluctance to assimilate necessity to other historically "tried and true" concepts, such as analyticity or apriority.

In Chapter 5 Shieh discusses Frege's general views on the nature of logic. According to him, the question central for Frege was "what is it for a thought to be self-justifying, and how do we know which thoughts are self-justifying?", and Frege's answer was "that a thought is self-justifying just in the case it is true in virtue of its logical structure."

So in the case of Frege, the situation is relatively transparent. In the third realm, where thoughts reside, there is no room for empirical circumstances, hence no room for non-absolute truth or falsity, and hence no room for necessity and possibility. The problem, of course, is that the truth values of the sentences we use to communicate do usually depend on the context of their utterance, on time, on the state of the world etc. The propositions expressed by such sentences would have to "absorb" all these dependencies. Not only would they have to contain the exact time to which they refer, but also an indication that we are in the world we are etc. This all makes Fregean thoughts extremely chimeric.

The situation is much more complex with Russell, whose intellectual journey was more tortuous. After flirting with Hegelian and Bradleyian idealism he (accompanied by Moore) developed his non-idealistic theory of propositions, after which he came to conclude that no such self-standing entities as propositions can exist. In Chapter 6 Shieh maps the twists and turns of Russell's philosophical journey from Bradley to his rejecting of idealism and his attempting at an account for the necessity of mathematics.

In Chapter 7 the author discusses the after effects of Russell's (and Moore's) parting ways with Bradley and developing his own theory of propositions. At the end of this period, Shieh claims, he reached a view of necessity not too

dissimilar to Frege's: he rejects necessity and possibility because he holds truth to be absolute. Shieh quotes Russell: "there seems to be no true proposition of which there is any sense in saying that it might have been false.... What is true, is true; what is false, is false; and concerning fundamentals, there is nothing more to be said. (*The principles of mathematics*, §430, 454)". In Chapter 8 Shieh anatomizes some further consequences of Russell's rejection of idealism.

In Chapter 9 Russell's general views of the nature of logic are discussed. Shieh claims that for Russell logic is primarily a theory of the relation of (material) implication standing among propositions and determining the logically valid inferences from propositions to propositions. Strangely, we come to know this relation by a process "akin to sense-perception". Chapter 10, the book's final chapter, then summarizes the reasons for Russell's rejection of necessity and possibility in his post-idealistic period. Russell, according to Shieh, maintains that the intuitions we have about necessity and possibility turn out, on close scrutiny, to be incoherent.

It might be considered an embarrassment not to present any criticism of a book under an extensive review. But Shieh's book is a fine piece of meticulous scholarship, with no glaring omissions. It clearly results from an immense amount of work. It is perhaps not deeply revelatory, for the details of Frege's and Russell's contributions to logic have already been thoroughly explored, but Shieh unleashes a novel slant, which allows him to bring to light some connections that were not discernible before. In this sense, the book ranks alongside the most important contributions to the exploration of the history of modern logic.