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Grounding objectivity

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ABSTRACT

This paper articulates a grounding-based criterion for distinguishing between the objective and the subjective in response to some arguments made by Jessica Leech in *Thinking of Necessity* (2023). It claims that this criterion fares better than Leech's own proposal in that it is likely to be more widely acceptable, and is also able to do the philosophical work that Leech requires.

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In this paper I focus on one of the key argumentative moves in Jessica Leech's excellent book *Thinking of Necessity* (2023). The move is that which secures the need for concepts of the kind of metaphysical modality in which she is most interested, and of which her *modal transcendentalism* is an account. The basic idea is that metaphysical modal concepts are a condition on our ability to think objectively. This condition comes about because of the need to distinguish not only between subjective and objective thoughts, but also to distinguish these two from a further category of thought: the *non-jjective*. These thoughts are neither subjective nor objective, and the reason they are not objective is that their truth conditions are not determined by the world; they could not possibly be true of the world. Grasping a distinction between objective and nonjjective thought requires an understanding of what it is for a thought to be objective, which is that it be possibly true of the world. One of the conditions on the objectivity of thought is that such thoughts are represented as being objective-possible, which requires a conception of modality relativised to conditions on objectivity: we need a conception of objectivity to be able to think objective thoughts, and this conception of objectivity requires a conception of metaphysical modality.

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Leech motivates the need for a category of nonjective thought by arguing that plausible extant conceptions of the distinction between objective and subjective thought should really be considered non-exhaustive.

I begin in Section 1 with a discussion of the ways of distinguishing between objective and subjective that Leech considers in chapter 5 of her book. I then argue (Section 2) for an alternative characterisation of the distinction that I think is independently plausible, and does better than the characterisations Leech discusses as an account of that distinction. In Section 3 I consider how the proposal deals with the kinds of thoughts that Leech takes to be nonjective, and in Section 4 I argue that even without a category of nonjective thought, my proposal is consistent with Leech making the kinds of claims she wants to make regarding conditions on objectivity, and can ultimately still motivate her modal transcendentalism.

1. The subjective/objective distinction

Leech (2023, 107–108) considers four ways in which we might distinguish between subjective and objective that have been presented in the literature:

1. Ontological: ‘something is objective when it doesn’t depend for its existence on minds, and subjective otherwise’ (Gomes 2016, 947).
2. Perspectival: ‘things are objective to the extent that they are independent of a subject’s point of view, and subjective otherwise’ (Gomes 2016, 947).
3. Minimal: ‘Judgement ... and other mental states ... have minimal objectivity in this sense: making the judgement or being in the mental state does not thereby in general make the judgement correct’ (Peacocke 2009, 739).
4. Normative: ‘the realm of the subjective is the realm of the normative ... the realm of the objective [is] the realm of the brute, meaning-free world’ (Eilan 1997, 248).

Leech worries that the fourth criterion builds in too many commitments and seems incompatible, for example, with the claim that there is objective value in the world (2023, 109). I share these concerns and so for the purposes of this discussion I will set this criterion aside, focussing instead on 1–3.

Leech’s aim here is to argue that plausible accounts of the subjective/objective distinction render that distinction *non-exhaustive*. In other words, some thoughts fail both to count as subjective and to count as objective. I argue that Leech is too quick to abandon the ontological criterion, and that both the perspectival and the minimal criteria are in fact exhaustive. In Section 2 I introduce a new criterion which, while exhaustive, will allow Leech to capture much of what she hopes to capture by appeal to the ‘non-jjective’; that which is neither subjective nor objective.

1.1. The ontological criterion

Leech is pessimistic about the prospects for the ontological criterion because she thinks it generates various difficulties and complications (2023, 108–109). In conversation, she suggests that many consider the criterion overly simplistic and somewhat outdated. I think it's right that while many might think of the ontological criterion as something like a useful heuristic for getting at (or for teaching, perhaps) the distinction between objective and subjective, it fails as a sophisticated philosophical account of that distinction. The view I ultimately defend in this paper draws quite heavily on this way of understanding the distinction, and so here I will say a few words to defend it against the problems Leech briefly raises.

First, it is seemingly the case that *all* mental states depend for their existence on minds, and this would seem to render all thoughts subjective (Leech 2023, 108). It seems to me that the friend of the ontological criterion has two options: to accept this consequence, or to clarify that it is the *content* of the thought (and not the existence of the thought itself) that must depend on minds if the thought is to be considered subjective. Leech doesn't consider the first option, but, in fact, I think one might well consider the specified consequence perfectly reasonable. This could be combined with the idea that, while all thoughts are subjective in virtue of their dependence on minds for their existence, one might ask a further question as to whether the *content* of a particular thought is subjective also. Subjective thoughts might have objective contents just as, for example, normative propositions might have (some) non-normative constituents, or as one might subjectively value some objective good.

In any case, there is certainly an interesting question what makes it the case that the content of a given thought is objective, and this is perhaps the most pertinent one in the context. An obvious candidate answer is that the content of a thought is subjective if it depends on minds, and objective otherwise. Leech (2023, 108–109) doubts whether it is really the *content* of a subjective thought that is so dependent, because we can make claims about minds and about minded creatures that are plausibly *objective* (i.e. they have objective contents) whether or not they are true. Leech's worry is that thoughts that seem to imply a relation to minded creatures (the thought that Marmite is delicious, for example) will, in a world without minds, come out not just as false, but as *meaningless*. We should perhaps think therefore that it is the *truth* rather than the content of a thought like 'Marmite is delicious' that depends on minds.

It seems pretty clear that the truth of the thought 'Marmite is delicious' depends on minds; deliciousness seems like a paradigmatically mind-dependent property. Might the content of the thought also be mind-dependent? I think it plausible that it is. If something's being delicious or otherwise

depends on there being minded creatures then in the absence of minded creatures, perhaps such a thought would indeed be meaningless (if it qualifies as a thought at all). We wouldn't want to say, perhaps, that the thought was *false*, because that would incorrectly imply that the thought that it is not the case that Marmite is delicious is true.

But we don't need to settle this here. The proposal corresponding to the ontological criterion is that thoughts are subjective when they depend for their existence on minds, but on further reflection that is already not quite right. What is important is that the existence or perhaps the content of the thought depends on minds *in the right kind of way*. It's not mere existential dependence on minds that is important; we can see this by reflecting on the fact that thoughts like 'children have minds' are intuitively objective even though both the truth and the content of the thought seem to be mind-dependent. We want to capture the sense in which subjective thoughts depend on minds *doing the thing that is distinctive to them*.

It's helpful here to consider Sider's (2017, 2477) response to various social metaphysicians including Barnes (2017) and Mikkola (2015), who argue that the kind of realist approach to metaphysics developed in Sider (2011) threatens to prevent social metaphysics from counting as legitimate metaphysical enquiry¹. Their worry is that Sider's focus on fundamentality and on mind-independence and objectivity leaves little room for a derivative, messy, mind-dependent social reality. The details of this exchange needn't concern us here, but Sider is at pains in his response to insist that there can be objectively true facts about humans and their causal influence. What must be the case to ensure objectivity is that the *theorist's point of view* doesn't intrude into a description of reality, and not that human thought and language plays no role in determining what reality is like. For our part, the point is that failure of objectivity doesn't have to do with the mere existence of minds, *or even* with their causal *or even constitutive* role in bringing certain things into existence. What matters in characterising the subjective/objective distinction is the role that the theorist *themselves* is playing in giving the thought the content it has. Thoughts like 'children have minds' are objective because they have nothing to do with the existence of the *thinker's* mind, or her perspective. I'll return to this thought shortly.

1.2. The perspectival criterion

The perspectival criterion ties subjectivity to a point of view, and Leech exploits this to argue that some thoughts could be independent of the subject's point of view but nevertheless fail to be objective, because objectivity is a matter of being in some sense 'about' or 'beholden to' the world (2023,

¹Taylor (2023) uses this terminology in a later paper.

110). We shouldn't just define the objective in contrast to the subjective, but instead should think of it as saying something about the world and doing so independently of any point of view. Leech thinks certain kinds of thoughts, perhaps including those that seem to involve something like a category mistake (her example is 'the number two is rocky') might be such that they fail either to count as objective or as subjective on this account of the distinction. Such thoughts are neither a matter of a subject's point of view, nor do they have the right sort of content to be true or false of the world. The thought is not *meaningless*, but neither is it about the world, and nor is it perspectival.

It seems to me that Leech builds in here the idea that objective thoughts are about the world, which I'm not sure is there in the original presentation of the perspectival criterion. No matter though; what is interesting is whether such a criterion might be a good account of the distinction between objective and subjective thought, and whether that distinction is exhaustive. There is something important in the idea that subjective thoughts are from a perspective; this is the importance of the theorist's point of view that we identified in the previous subsection. It seems natural and intuitive then to define objective thoughts as those that do not build in any particular perspective, and this isn't what Leech's account gives us. But even if we follow her in thinking that objective thoughts on this view must say something truth-apt about the world, it's not clear that thoughts such 'the number two is rocky' fail to do this. Insofar as the thought has any meaningful content, it is objective. The number two is not rocky, and what makes it the case that the number two is not rocky has to do with the nature of the number two (and rockiness) both of which are worldly phenomena independent of any subject's point of view.

1.3. The minimal criterion

The final option Leech considers assumes that thoughts have correctness conditions. These are conditions under which a thought counts as correct, and the idea is that these conditions will be *trivially satisfied* for subjective thoughts and will be determined by how the world is for objective thoughts. The mere thinking that Sarah has red hair does not make it the case that Sarah has red hair, but (according to Leech's interpretation of the criterion) merely thinking that Sarah is beautiful is (assuming that beauty is a subjective matter) sufficient for the correctness of the thought (Leech 2023, 111). So long as Sarah does indeed seem beautiful to S, then S's thought that Sarah is beautiful is correct.

As before, Leech thinks that we should avoid a default to objectivity such that a thought is to be considered objective just in case the criterion for subjectivity (in this case, trivial satisfaction of correctness conditions) is not met.

Objective thoughts must have their correctness conditions determined by how the world is, and so again Leech sees a gap between the objective and the subjective: some kinds of correctness conditions are neither trivial nor obviously determined by the world. For example, a thought like 'Sarah is beautiful or it is not the case that Sarah is beautiful' seemingly has logical correctness conditions whose fulfilment is neither trivial (since I might have a logically false thought) nor determined by the world (since their fulfilment doesn't seem to require any relation to the world).

I think this is an interesting case. Peacocke (2009, 739) is careful to emphasise just how *minimal* his target notion of minimal objectivity is, and his use of a mathematical example later in the paper (2009, 750) suggests that he might take a thought such as that in Leech's example above to meet the relevant criterion for minimal objectivity. It's a question for Peacocke how we ought to deal with this particular thought, but that there is such a question is, I think, insufficient motivation to look for a third option in addition to objective thoughts and subjective thoughts. It is worth noting too that (contrary to what Leech sometimes suggests) Peacocke's characterisation of minimal objectivity is not merely offered as the converse of thoughts that have trivially satisfied truth conditions. On the contrary, it is carefully spelled out:

The judgement will have a conceptual content, built up from concepts of objects, properties, and relations, of whatever order. For each of these concepts, there is a condition for something to be, in the context of the judgement, the reference of the concept. The truth-value of the complete content judged will depend on the relations of these various contextually determined references (when the concepts have references). In the simple case of a monadic predicative concept combined with a singular concept of an individual object, the judgement is true if the reference of the singular concept has the property that is the reference of the predicative concept ... The various cases in which, if a judgement is made, it is thereby guaranteed to be true, are very special cases in which the references of the concepts of the judgements are picked out in such a way that, when the judgement is made, the resulting content is guaranteed to be true (Peacocke 2009, 740–741).

Even so, one might raise some concerns about the proposal as it is taken by Leech to apply to thoughts specifically (though this worry plausibly doesn't apply to judgements). The proposal at hand cannot account for the way in which we might deliberate about even the most subjective-seeming of thoughts. I can wonder, for example, whether I feel a pain in my stomach, or about whether the sky appears blue to me. If these thoughts are subjective as presumably a proponent of the criterion would take them to be, deliberation doesn't make sense. There is more to be said here, but I think we have motivation enough to explore an alternative that seems better suited to modelling subjectivity and objectivity consistent with Leech's objectives.

2. A grounding-based criterion

In this section I develop an alternative criterion that combines plausible elements of each of the three proposals we considered in the previous section. Leech (2023, 113) says that thoughts are ‘constituted by concepts unified into something like a propositional form’. I’ll make the further assumption that thoughts (at least sometimes) express propositions, which given Leech’s understanding of thought doesn’t seem to be too controversial. Thoughts can have propositional content without the thinker of the thought believing that content (as may be the case when thinkers deliberate, for example). We can however make sense of the question whether the thought is subjective or objective by thinking about the grounds for the proposition expressed, or so I shall argue.

At a first pass, we can propose the following grounding-based criterion for the distinction between objective and subjective thoughts:

A thought is *objective* iff none of the essential constituents of the proposition expressed by the thought are grounded in the thinker of the thought.

A thought is *subjective* iff at least one of the essential constituents of the proposition expressed by the thought is grounded in the thinker of the thought.

The notion of an *essential constituent* of a proposition comes from Fine (2001, 18), where to be an essential constituent of a proposition is to be such that replacement by some other constituent may induce a shift in truth value. The proposition that Sarah is beautiful has beauty as an essential constituent, where the proposition that Sarah is beautiful or it is not the case that Sarah is beautiful doesn’t. I’ll assume here that what enters into the grounding relation are propositions, and that for an essential constituent of a proposition to be grounded in the thinker of the thought requires that propositions that essentially contain that constituent are so grounded.

Here I follow Fine (2001) in discussing the grounds for a given proposition without taking a stand on whether or not the grounds obtain or the proposition is true. What the grounding story tells us is what *would* have to be the case in order for the grounded proposition to be true, from a particular perspective. In other words, if two people have a disagreement about the grounds for a given proposition, they can each offer their own account of the purported grounds. Our notion of grounding is thus non-factive. This is useful because the grounding story they tell helps to reveal their commitments (of interest to us, it helps to reveal whether the proposition of interest is expressed by an objective or a subjective thought, on their account). This is all consistent with there being a fact of the matter about which grounding story is the correct one and whether a given thought is in fact subjective or objective, but it gives us terms in which to conduct that debate.

It's important to note that not everybody will agree on a grounding story. An objectivist about beauty, for example, will claim that no essential constituents of the proposition 'Sarah is beautiful' are grounded in the thinker of the thought. According to the objectivist, that proposition might be grounded in the symmetry of Sarah's features, her eye colour, and her unblemished skin (for example), along with a definition of beauty such that to be beautiful is to exemplify these features. The thinker of the thought does not appear in this grounding story². A subjectivist *S* about beauty in contrast might say that part (or even all) of what makes it the case that Sarah is beautiful is that Sarah appears beautiful to *S*. This is enough to render the relevant thought subjective because of the role that the thinker of the thought plays in the grounding story. That this disagreement about the subjectivity of beauty can be seen to play out in terms of a disagreement about the grounds for the relevant proposition supports the grounding-based criterion.

Giving an account of the grounds for a given proposition tells us what would need to be the case for that proposition to obtain. Reasonable people can disagree about this, and that is a further advantage of understanding the subjective/objective distinction in these terms. Unlike the other criteria, the grounding criterion separates the precise content of the grounds or correctness conditions for a thought from the classification of that thought as subjective or objective. In that way, it can be shown to be compatible with elements of some other approaches to the subjective/objective distinction. An example can help make this clearer.

Suppose one thinks (as per the minimal criterion) that subjective thoughts can't be mistaken. *What makes it the case*, on this view, that the cake is delicious is that it appears to *S* to be delicious. We can then say that *S*'s thought that the cake is delicious expresses the proposition <the cake is delicious> which is fully grounded in the proposition <the cake appears to *S* to be delicious>. There might then be some further story about what grounds the grounding proposition, but the thinker of the thought is an essential constituent of the grounding proposition. This is therefore a subjective thought by the lights of the grounding criterion.

Some people think that there are subjective thoughts that the thinker can in fact be wrong about, and the grounding criterion can also accommodate this view. Take *S*'s thought at time *t* that *x* is red. This thought <*x* is red> might plausibly have grounds that include propositions about how *x* generally appears to people in *S*'s community (as well as that *x* seems red to *S* at *t*). If so, the thinker of the thought does indeed appear as an essential constituent of a ground for the proposition expressed by the thought at *t* that *x* is red,

²Perhaps the thinker of the thought does appear somewhere in the grounding story, e.g. perhaps as a ground for the definition of beauty. Since grounding is transitive, this will render the thought subjective after all.

and yet *S*'s thought might nevertheless be mistaken because another of the grounds for the proposition it expresses (that concerning how *x* generally appears to people in *S*'s community) might fail to obtain even when *x* seems red to *S* at *t*³.

Objective thoughts, in contrast, have their correctness conditions given entirely by the world (all of the constituents of the relevant propositions and their grounds will be worldly). This way of understanding things in fact fits with comments Leech herself makes: 'we need ... conceptual resources which capture [the] possibility of correctness and incorrectness and ... the kinds of conditions that could make different non-subjective thoughts correct' (2023, 115). The grounding criterion gives us this (but for subjective thoughts too). The relevant thoughts are *correct* when their grounds obtain.

But there's a wrinkle. Consider the thought 'I have hands'. This thought expresses a proposition that is partially grounded in the thinker of the thought, and is correct just in case the thinker does indeed have hands. Since the thinker of the thought is an essential constituent of the grounds for the proposition expressed by the thought, this would seem to suggest that the thought is *subjective* when it ought presumably to count as *objective*. It's not the mere existence of the thinker that is important, but something more specific.

We might attempt to fix things by focussing on the mental states or attitudes of the thinker, but this will invite counterexamples from thoughts like 'I have mental states'. I think the way to solve this is to recapture something from the perspectival criterion, which said that subjective thoughts depend on the thinker's point of view. What we need is the idea that subjective thoughts are at least partially grounded in the *thinker's attitude towards some essential constituent of the relevant proposition*. This should avoid the kinds of counterexamples just discussed while holding on to the idea that not just the existence but the activities or perspective of the thinker are making the case the proposition expressed by the thought.

So, our amended proposal is the following:

A thought is *objective* iff none of the essential constituents of the proposition expressed by the thought are grounded in the thinker's attitude.

A thought is *subjective* iff at least one of the essential constituents of the proposition expressed by the thought is grounded in the thinker's attitude.

This modified proposal combines elements of other promising proposals into a criterion that seems to do a good job at capturing the intuitive distinction between the subjective and the objective. The distinction above is exhaustive (and exclusive) and leaves no room for the nonjective. Leech warns against making objectivity the default and defining subjectivity in terms of it, and

³Thanks to Darragh Byrne for suggesting this example.

this proposal doesn't do that. While there is a sense in which the objective and the subjective are converses, there is no presumption in favour of either of them.

3. Impossible thoughts

Leech's tripartite distinction has it that there are some thoughts that fail to be objective and also fail to be subjective. She argues that this category of thoughts – the nonjective – can be identified for each of the ways of thinking about objectivity and subjectivity that she finds attractive. These are the minimal and the perspectival criteria. The criterion I introduced above (as we have seen) leaves no room for the nonjective. Nevertheless, it would be attractive if we could use the criterion to show what might be special about the sorts of thoughts that Leech takes to be nonjective. I aim to do that in this section.

For Leech, the correctness of objective thoughts depends on how things are with the world (whether or not the thought is true or false). We want to leave open that a thought can be objective and nevertheless false (and this is why I have appealed here to a non-factive notion of grounding)⁴. What's important for Leech is that objective thoughts carry in them the possibility of correctness: objective thoughts could be true of the world (2023, 116). There are some thoughts then that Leech thinks *could not* be true of the world. For example, the thought that $2 + 2 = 5$. Such a thought is more than false; Leech thinks it is not objective (and that since it is also not subjective, it is nonjective). Impossible thoughts are not merely not possibly true, but thereby not objective (Leech 2023, 117).

Leech wants to capture a distinction between two ways in which a thought might fail to represent the world. One way it can do that is by being false (and thus failing to represent it correctly). Another is by failing to represent it at all. The role all of this plays in Leech's argument is in securing a place for modality because modal notions are required in grasping this distinction, but for our purposes we can consider whether the grounding criterion is capable of capturing a distinction between failing to represent the world at all, and failing to do so correctly.

First, consider a (necessarily) true mathematical thought: $2 + 2 = 4$. This thought expresses the proposition $\langle 2 + 2 = 4 \rangle$, and that proposition might be grounded in various ways. Perhaps it is fundamental and thus ungrounded. In that case, there are no essential components of the proposition expressed by the thought that are grounded in the thinker's attitude (because there are no essential components that are grounded at all) and thus the thought is objective. Others might tell a different grounding story.

⁴Leech prefers the minimal criterion according to which a thought cannot be both subjective and false, but our account also allows for this possibility.

Perhaps $\langle 2 + 2 = 4 \rangle$ is grounded in the mathematical structure of which those numbers are a part. In that case, the thinker's attitude towards essential constituents of the thought again doesn't feature in the grounding structure, and the thought is objective.

Now consider $2 + 2 = 5$. Because there is no way for that thought to be true, there is nothing that could make it the case that the proposition expressed by the thought obtains. In other words, that proposition is *ungrounded* (and is necessarily so). The thought is objective for the same reasons as $2 + 2 = 4$ is objective when the proposition expressed is taken to be fundamental, but unlike $2 + 2 = 4$ the proposition is fundamental and false. Fundamental falsehoods form an interesting and distinctive category. All impossible thoughts will fall into this category, because all are such that there is nothing that could make them the case. They can be distinguished (by looking at the grounds for the propositions they express) from contingently false thoughts which express propositions that have grounds such that if the grounds obtained, then the proposition would also obtain⁵.

One might object that there is no way to tell the impossible thoughts from those that express propositions that are fundamental but only contingently false. On reflection though, it's hard to see what kinds of thoughts these might be⁶. Most people think that whatever is fundamental is necessarily fundamental. If it is also false, it will fall into the category of impossible thoughts we have just been discussing.

The upshot is that we can recognise the distinctive category Leech has identified using the tools of the grounding criterion and without the need for the nonjective. Moreover, in order to understand this category requires an understanding of modal notions (e.g. *not possibly grounded*) and so we can secure in this way the role that Leech seeks out for the nonjective, but without committing ourselves to that category of thoughts and thus without the claim that the thought that $2 + 2 = 5$ is not objective. That seems to me to be a good result. There is a clear sense in which that thought is *about* the world (rather than, for example, about the thinker's perspective or dependent on that perspective), and this is held in common with other objective thoughts. In the final substantive section, I show that despite there being no nonjective thoughts according to the grounding-based criterion, Leech can nevertheless use it to motivate her modal transcendentalism.

⁵This again requires the non-factive approach to grounding that is under discussion here.

⁶A possible avenue for this was suggested to me by Sònia Roca-Royes. One might think that some sorts of essential truths can be contingent, e.g. 'it is essential for the table to originate in a piece of wood largely overlapping with m ', where had the table in fact originated from m^* , then the essential truth would instead have been 'it is essential for the table to originate in a piece of wood largely overlapping with m^* '. Such examples deserve more discussion than I can give them here, but one might coherently question whether such a thought should really count as fundamental.

4. The problem of reality

An important part of Leech's project is to answer what Gardner (1999, 33–34) calls 'The Problem of Reality'. This is a problem that has come up in various guises, but Leech is especially interested in it as it arises in Kant. In Leech's words (2023, 101) the question is: 'what is the relationship of the mind to the world such that our mental states are or can be about the world?' In the case of objective thoughts, it seems that we need some kind of link between the thought (which is a mental state) and the world such that the thought is about the world and thereby comes to have the worldly correctness conditions it does. Leech thinks that (part of) an answer to this question is that the thoughts must be *represented as objective by the thinker themselves* (2023, 121). In other words, the thinker must themselves take their thought to have objective correctness conditions or to be objective, and it follows from this that the thinker must themselves have a conception of objectivity that allows them to do this. Leech says '[o]ur thoughts are objective *because and when* we in some sense take them to have objective correctness conditions' (2023, 124).

For Leech, the need to answer the problem of reality by placing this condition on objective thought (that we must take objective thoughts to be objective) requires that we have the concept of objectivity and are able to apply it. Our concept must be modal because of the requirement that we can distinguish between the objective (possibly true of the world) and the nonjective (not possibly true of the world). Answering the problem of reality thus secures a role for the particular species of modality – metaphysical modality – that she aims ultimately to characterise in the book: 'we need metaphysical modal concepts as a condition on our ability to think objectively' (Leech 2023, 235).

I have argued above that we should understand the objective/subjective distinction in accordance with the grounding-based criterion, which leaves no room for the nonjective. Is this then tantamount to an argument that Leech's project collapses? I don't think so. Answering the problem of reality for us amounts to telling a metagrounding story; giving an account of what grounds a proposition about grounding. One such story requires competence with notions of ground, which themselves require the concepts of metaphysical modality that Leech seeks a role for.

The problem of reality asks about the nature of the relationship between mind and world such that our objective thoughts are about the world. Substituting this into a grounding framework given our grounding-based criterion for objectivity, we are asking what is the relationship between mind and world such that all of the essential constituents of a proposition expressed by an objective thought are fully grounded in reality (and none are grounded in the thinker's attitude). In other words, we are asking *what*

makes it the case that all of the essential constituents of a proposition expressed by an objective thought are fully grounded in reality (and none are grounded in the thinker's attitude). We can understand this as a generic question holding for objective thoughts in general, and as a question of metaground. We are seeking a ground for a proposition about grounding (i.e. the proposition <all of the essential constituents of a proposition expressed by an objective thought are fully grounded in reality (and none are grounded in the thinker's attitude)>).

Perhaps the standard view is that grounding facts are fully grounded in the grounding fact or facts, i.e. if [P] grounds [Q] then [[P] grounds [Q]] is itself grounded in [P]⁷. Proponents of this position include Bennett (2011), Litland (2017) and deRosset (2013). The view is sometimes called *upwards anti-primitivism*, and can be contrasted with what we might think of as the *downwards* anti-primitivism espoused by Fine (2012) according to which the nature of the grounded fact grounds the ground-theoretic connection. Other accounts appeal to general connections between the relevant kinds of things (e.g. Dasgupta 2014). Recently, some philosophers have denied that there is any general systematic account of what grounds the grounding facts (see e.g. Sider 2020).

We can offer a Leech-inspired answer to the metagrounding question which is an example of the final kind. What makes it the case that all of the essential constituents of a proposition expressed by an objective thought are fully grounded in reality is (in part) that the thinker takes the thought to have objective correctness conditions. A full ground on Leech's account will include the other conditions on objectivity that she (e.g. 2023, 105), following Kant, takes to hold, such as that all objects are in space and time; that every event has a cause. These further conditions on objectivity tell us what the world must be like for us to represent it, or what our mental states must be like such that they count as objective.

The key point so far as we are concerned is that a metagrounding story for any objective thought includes that the thinker takes the thought to have objective correctness conditions. That is, expressing a proposition all of the essential components of which are fully grounded in reality is an achievement of the thinker themselves; the thinker's attitude towards a given thought helps to ground the proposition that that thought is objective. Because the relevant proposition is a merely partial ground for the grounding proposition, a thinker may be mistaken about whether their thought is objective. In other words, it is not the case that merely taking ones thought to have objective

⁷The discussion is conducted in terms of facts because grounding is usually assumed to be factive. We can reinterpret this discussion in terms of propositions that might not obtain straightforwardly enough.

correctness conditions is sufficient to make it the case that that thought is indeed objective. This seems the right result (see Leech 2023, 121).

One might worry that this leads to a kind of collapse: does this ultimate reference to the attitudes of the thinker of the thought not bar the thought from counting as objective in the first place? In fact, this worry is a kind of confusion. The metagrounding story we tell does not affect the (first-order) grounding story we tell about the proposition expressed by the thought itself (which tells us what makes the proposition expressed by the thought the case, and determines whether or not it is objective). This is best seen by way of an example.

Take some particular thought, e.g. 'Wales is hilly'. That thought expresses the proposition <Wales is hilly> which itself is fully grounded in the topography of a particular region of the UK. This thought counts as objective since it contains no essential constituents grounded in the attitude of the thinker. What grounds the proposition <<Wales is hilly> is fully grounded in the topography of a particular region of the UK>? Plausibly (perhaps) (partially) that the thinker of the thought takes it to have its correctness conditions fully determined by the world. The metagrounding story *does* make ineliminable reference to the attitudes of the thinker of the thought. This doesn't make all thoughts themselves subjective, but does ultimately make a thought's objectivity (in a sense) subjective. That is, it makes what it is for a thought to count as objective a subjective matter.

Perhaps that sounds bad at first, but in fact I take it to be very much in keeping with Leech's project here. Kant's insight is that *our cognitive capacities* constrain what reality is like, since reality must be such that it can be an object for us (see Leech 2023, 104). And it's not that our cognitive capacities must simply be as they are, rather what is required is that we actually *do* something; we represent objective thoughts as being objective-possible, i.e. that there are no conditions on objectivity that rule out the contents of those thoughts (See Leech 2023, 106). This kind of role for the mind in making the world strikes to me as very much consistent with the broader programme of transcendental idealism. It might even prove helpful in characterising such ideas in a novel way.

For Leech, the requirement that objective thoughts be represented as such by the thinker secures a role for the kind of modality that is not purely logical, but rather is tied to how reality might be as an object for us (see 2023, 159). This is the metaphysical modality in which she is most interested. But for Leech, it is the distinction between the objective and the nonjective that forces the use of such modal conceptual resources, and one might worry then that without such a distinction we no longer secure a place for metaphysical modality. This is not so, because in our framework, the thinker is required to be able to grasp a grounding proposition obtaining between the proposition expressed by an objective thought, and the proposition(s)

that ground that proposition. Grasping a grounding proposition requires a competence with modal conceptual resources. In particular, since our concern is with *metaphysical* (and not with logical) ground, it requires a grasp of metaphysical modal resources⁸.

5. Concluding remarks

I have argued that Leech does not consider one very plausible framework for distinguishing between the objective and the subjective: a grounding-based criterion. Though this framework leaves no room for the nonjective, it can be shown nevertheless to allow Leech to motivate her modal transcendentalism. It also allows for disagreements with Leech to be clearly stated using the same framework, as proponents of different views will offer different accounts of both grounds and metagrounds. The framework is thus versatile and well-motivated, making use of conceptual resources already available in the literature.

In conclusion, it is worth noting that we can make use of grounding-talk in this way without any ultimate commitment to realism about grounding⁹. This might prove attractive to the Kantian who might well find the full-blooded realism usually associated with grounding talk somewhat uncomfortable. We can see grounding just as the Kantian sees modality, not as a primitive feature of reality, but rather as ‘having [its] source “in us”’ while nevertheless shaping reality (Leech 2023, 3)¹⁰.

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⁸For the distinction between the two, see e.g. McSweeney (2020), Trogdon (2018).

⁹‘Antirealist’ accounts of grounding are discussed and defended in Thompson (2018, 2022).

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