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Limits, Limitations, and Necessity in Margaret Macdonald

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ABSTRACT

I offer a contribution to recent work on Margaret Macdonald (1903–1956), a prolific though largely unknown figure in the history of analytic philosophy who applied Wittgensteinian insights to a broad range of issues. Here I examine the development of Macdonald's views with respect to idealism and conventionalism, through the application of a conceptual distinction between *limits* and *limitations* found in discussions of the same issue as it appears in the work of Wittgenstein. I show that Macdonald rejected both Platonism, idealism, and conventionalism in her doctoral thesis, and that she subsequently viewed these positions as specimens of nonsense issued under the misapprehension that necessary truths admit of justification.

KEYWORDS
conventionalism, history of analytic philosophy, idealism, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Margaret Macdonald

1 | INTRODUCTION

Investigations into the question of whether or not Wittgenstein's philosophy involves either conventionalism or idealism, as characterised below, have engendered some of the most sophisticated treatments of his work available.[1] In this article I assess the views of Wittgenstein's student, Margaret Macdonald (1903–1956), in the light of this same

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[1]For just a handful of examples, see Dummett (1959), Lear (1982), Moore (2003, 2011, 2013), Mulhall (2009), Stroud (1965), Sullivan (2003, 2011, 2013), and Williams (1973).

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question. Macdonald has very recently attracted the attention of philosophers and historians of philosophy[2]; and here I aim to build upon this welcome development through an examination of Macdonald's views in terms borrowed from fruitful interpretive approaches to Wittgenstein. I describe and employ a conceptual distinction found in the works of Adrian Moore (2003, 2011, 2013) and Peter Sullivan (2003, 2011, 2013), that between *limits* and *limitations*. The distinction is employed by Moore and Sullivan in an assessment of the extent to which the range of intelligible thought and speech is viewed by Wittgenstein as requiring an *explanation*. Conceiving of thought and speech as possessing limitations, but not limits, they argue, involves incurring an explanatory burden with respect to the character of those limitations. Idealist responses to this explanatory burden involve the conception of limitations as depending upon features of those subjects whose thought and expression possess the limitations in question. On the idealist view, the limitations of intelligible thought and language are explained by appeal to the nature of human beings, and not by features of the world available independently of minded subjects. On the conventionalist view, the relevant limitations are explained by appeal to the behaviour, or decisions, of the same subjects. We shall see, in what follows, that Macdonald does not always draw a sharp distinction between conventionalism and idealism, and treats these positions as closely related insofar as human subjects figure in both views as explanatorily prior to the limitations in question. Viewing thought and speech as possessing *limits*, by contrast, does not involve conceiving of those limits as requiring an explanation of the kind offered by idealism or conventionalism. Below, I suggest that what is distinctive of a *therapeutic* treatment of these issues is the rejection of explanatory demands as confused. The employment of limitations, and not limits, therefore constitutes an obstacle to the adoption of a therapeutic approach.

In section 2 I describe the distinction between limits and limitations at greater length before employing it in the treatment of Macdonald's views as expressed in her 1934 PhD thesis. I approach Macdonald's work through an interpretation of her views on necessary, and logically necessary, truth. I argue that truths of this kind constitute key examples for Macdonald of cases in which philosophers have attempted to issue *explanations* which in her view are unsatisfactory, and I argue that the attempt to give explanations here emerges from an implicit conception of thought and expression as bounded by limitations. In her thesis, I show, Macdonald refuses to conceive of logical truth as explicable in either idealist or conventionalist terms, but her arguments are narrowly applied and she does not offer an attendant positive vision with which to replace the views she rejects. In section 3 I show how these views were subsequently developed by Macdonald in a therapeutic direction under the influence of Wittgenstein, such that the considerations from which philosophical explanations emerge are viewed by Macdonald as nonsensical. In section 4 I outline remarks of Macdonald made in the context of a discussion concerning Rudolf Carnap's *Logical Syntax of Language* (*Logical Syntax*) which appear to undermine the narrative established in sections 2 and 3. I argue, though, that the appearance of tension here can be dissolved through an understanding of Macdonald in which her approach to philosophy as *descriptive*, and not explanatory, is emphasised. In what follows my aims are exegetical; while Macdonald's views are portrayed sympathetically, my discussion should not be construed as an attempted defence of her position.

2 | LIMITS AND LIMITATIONS

In the preface to his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* Wittgenstein writes,

> The book will, therefore, draw a limit to thinking, or rather—not to thinking, but to the expression of thoughts; for, in order to draw a limit to thinking we should have to be able to think both sides of this limit (we should therefore have to be able to think what cannot be thought).

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[2]For recent work on Macdonald see Chapman (2024), Kremer (2022; forth.), Misak and Kremer (forth.), Misak (2024), Spinney (2023; forth. a; forth. b), Vlasits (2022), West (2024), Whiting (2022), and Yetman (forth.).

> The limit can, therefore, only be drawn in language and what lies on the other side of the limit will be simply nonsense.
>
> (1922: 27)

In the _Philosophical Investigations_ he says,

> The results of philosophy are the uncovering of one or another piece of plain nonsense and of bumps that the understanding has got by running its head up against the limits of language. These bumps make us see the value of discovery.
>
> (1974: §119)

The notion of a _limit_ maintains its centrality in Wittgenstein's thought throughout various other changes in his orientation. A distinction between kinds of limit, between _limits_ and _limitations_, has been drawn in the service of better understanding just what Wittgenstein has in mind in these and other passages. Sullivan for instance writes,

> This notion of a limit is not a contrastive one. There is nothing thought-like excluded by the limits of thought for lacking thought's essential nature, just as there are no points excluded from space for being contra-geometrical. But thinking in general is contrastive: in general, that is, thinking something to be the case is thinking it to be the case rather than not. That is the broadest reason, if only the initial reason, why thought about limits is apt to portray them instead as limitations, boundaries that separate what has a certain nature from what does not.
>
> (2011: 172)

To chart _limits_ here is to describe the features of thought or language[3] such that, having understood those features, we have thereby understood also the full gamut of thinkable or expressible items. Crucially, one hasn't, in charting the limits of intelligible expression through grasping these features, attempted to draw up a _boundary between_ intelligible and unintelligible (pseudo) expressions. In coming to understand, by means of this method, the limits of expression one doesn't thereby conceive of those limits as holding out against another region of items which fall short of intelligibility; and this is why Sullivan describes the relevant notion as not being a contrastive one. The notion of a _limitation_ is, though, a contrastive one, for drawing up limitations involves distinguishing one's quarry from something else, and making the distinction is intended to aid in our gaining purchase on the distinguished things in question. It is important to note here that drawing this distinction does not require adopting what appears to be Sullivan's view, that "thinking in general is contrastive" (2011: 172); having made the distinction it remains an open question how it is correctly applied. The reading I present does not involve portraying Macdonald as following Sullivan in this respect, and in what follows I do not offer an answer to the question of whether thought is in general contrastive. It is also important to register the fact that the terms 'limit(s)' and 'limitation(s)' are here terms of art; it is not suggested that the distinction drawn above is intended to capture the use of these expressions in ordinary language.

In conceiving of intelligible expression as bounded by limitations, such that our available intelligible expressions stand in sharp relief against an alternative space of presently unintelligible items, it is natural to ask how such a boundary is determined. Moore, in discussion of the _Tractatus_, writes,

> There are, in the _Tractatus_ [...] remarks in which the limits of language and the limits of the world appear not merely as _limits_, not merely as essential features, but as _limitations_, as features that at

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[3]For the purposes of this discussion, I treat intelligible thought and expression as so intimately connected as to license the substitution of 'thought' for 'expression' in much of what follows. I will not argue for this assumption here.

some level exclude certain possibilities. Because these features appear to exclude certain possibilities, they also appear to admit the question why they are as they are.

<div align="right">(2013: 240–241, emphasis original)</div>

Ignoring the question of how to interpret the *Tractatus*, we can see why, in Moore's view, the construal of some region as bounded by limitations leads to the question of *why* those limitations are as they are. Given a contrast between the way in which some limitations are presently configured, and another way in which they might have been, it is legitimate to ask why it is that one configuration obtains and not the other. The conception of intelligible thought as possessing limitations therefore involves viewing the range of intelligible thought as admitting of an *explanation*. An explanation here may take a variety of forms; those in which the configuration of thought's limitations is owed to features of the relevant thinking subjects will count as idealist. This explains Sullivan's remark, that "the crucial step in embracing or resisting idealism consists in succumbing to or resisting the construal of limits as limitations" (2011: 172). The step in question is crucial because it is this step from which the question of limitation-determination emerges and, in this context, it is the question of limitation-determination which idealism purports to answer. This does not rule out answers of other kinds. A *Platonist* view will explain the configuration of thought's limitations by appeal to facts concerning mind-independent, abstract entities; the range of intelligible mathematical thought, for example, is determined by the nature of the abstract mathematical entities to which the Platonist is committed. The question of Wittgenstein's advancing a Platonist answer to the issue of limitation-determination does not seriously arise though, for the suggestion that Wittgenstein advanced such a conception of boundaries cannot survive any plausible reading of the texts.[4] We shall see, below, that Platonism is for Macdonald equally unacceptable. In what follows I will not adjudicate between further interpretations of Wittgenstein; my aim is rather to assess Macdonald's views in light of the philosophical issues raised by these questions. Wittgenstein will appear, however, as an influence on Macdonald's developing position.

No space for an *explanation* emerges if limitations are exchanged for limits, though, for no question of the form "why are the items in *this* range intelligible, and those in *that* range not?"[5] is then raised. Resisting the construal of limits as limitations is felt to involve a resistance to any demand for an *explanation* of those limits; there is no position *outside* of our limits from which to assess their contours, and so no position from which to begin an explanation as to the shape of those contours which may lead to idealist or Platonist thinking. Macdonald, we shall see, resists the construal of thought as possessing limitations and consequently resists the attempt to take up a position from which constructive philosophical theorising may begin, irrespective of the form such a theory may take.

In what follows the question of limitation-determination will be approached *via* the issue of necessary truth, for inspection of the claims we accept as necessarily true plausibly contributes to our identifying the range of intelligible thought or expression, whether that range is viewed as possessing *limits* or as bounded by *limitations*. Our reaction to a subject who sincerely claims, e.g., that "the four sides of this triangle are equal in length" involves viewing that subject as confused rather than – or, not merely – wrong. An explanation of our reaction is likely to include reference to the status of "all triangles have three sides" as *necessary*. An account of necessary truth then promises to explain the basis upon which we accept or reject certain statements as either truth evaluable or confused, and promises also therefore to shed light upon the range of intelligible thought. A view of necessity in which claims of the relevant kind figure as adopted in the light of alternatives is to that extent a view of intelligible thought as bounded by limitations, and therefore a view on which the question of limitation-determination requires an answer. It is, we shall see, to views of this kind that Macdonald objects both in her thesis and in subsequent works. As was usual for the period, Macdonald treats 'necessary' and 'a priori' as coextensive and interchangeable. I follow Macdonald's usage in the

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[4]Sullivan writes, "And in this Wittgenstein was always with Kant: *if* there had to be any account of such things, then an idealist account was the only contender he could take seriously" (2011: 172, emphasis original).

[5]Articulated in this way it is unclear how coherent is the exercise of drawing limitations to intelligible thought. This is a substantive philosophical question which I shall not fully address here. Sullivan (2011: 174) at least appears to treat the relevant exercise as confused, and it is this assessment which gives his interpretive task its interest.

discussion below, while recognising that the orthodox philosophical view today, following Kripke,[6] is to deny that these terms are co-extensive.

It is, as has so far been noted, partially constitutive of our viewing the space of intelligible expression as bounded by limitations that the space in question be viewed as divided *from* alternatives not so intelligible. Macdonald's first treatment of alternative forms of thought and speech is found in her 1934 PhD thesis 'The Logical Characteristics of Expression'. This thesis was supervised by Susan Stebbing and written prior to Macdonald's attendance at Wittgenstein's 1934–1936 lectures in Cambridge.[7] Wittgenstein figures in Macdonald's thesis chiefly as the author of his *Tractatus*; and while mention is made of Wittgenstein's developing new ideas not then widely available, Macdonald's understanding of those views is mediated by the explanations given by Richard Braithwaite and which were subsequently rejected as inaccurate by Wittgenstein in a letter to *Mind*.[8] Other figures discussed at length by Macdonald in 1934 are Rudolf Carnap, C. I. Lewis, C. S. Pierce, and Moritz Schlick. A question which lies at the centre of her thesis is: *How is communication possible?* Macdonald engages at length with the answer to this question she ascribes to Carnap's 1928 *Der Logische Aufbau der Welt* (*Aufbau*),[9] as well as that of Lewis (1929) in his *Mind and the World Order*. Here my aim is not to determine whether or not Macdonald's interpretations of these figures is correct, but rather to describe the positions with which *she* finds objection.

An explanation of the basis for communication must enable us to grasp what is *shared* between subjects, according to Macdonald, such that the content of an utterance is not wholly private to the agent whose utterance it is. An explanation of communication must also, in Macdonald's view, aid in showing that we may grasp content which is *objective*, such that the content in question is mind-independent and where its being grasped may aid in our acquiring *knowledge*. This demand will become clear from Macdonald's treatment of Lewis, discussed below.[10]

Carnap's version of an explanation here appeals very strongly to a notion of *common structure* which is exhibited by the phenomenal content private to individuals. In the *Aufbau*, Carnap aims to show that the concepts employed in science may be "constructed" (1967: 6–7) from resources which are purely structural. In other words, the concepts of science are reducible to,[11] and derivable from, concepts concerning certain formal properties describable with the aid of Russell's logic of relations. Although the details of this reduction need not be given here, the philosophical import of its possibility to Carnap is clear:

> Even though the subjective origin of all knowledge lies in the contents of experiences and their con-nections, it is still possible, as the constructional system will show, to advance to an intersubjective objective world, which can be conceptually comprehended and which is identical for all observers.
>
> (Carnap, 1967: 7)

In the *Aufbau* Carnap describes as intimately related the notions of intersubjective communication and objectivity. In one sense, according to Carnap, 'objective judgement' may mean merely that the judgement in question "does not depend on my whims" (Carnap, 1967: 106). But the sense of 'objective' which is relevant to science, and therefore to project of the *Aufbau*, is quite different:

> [B]y objectivity is sometimes meant independence from the judging subject, validity which holds also for other subjects. It is precisely this intersubjectivity which is an essential feature of "reality"; [...].

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[6]See, e.g., Kripke (1980: 56).

[7]Notes of these lectures were edited by Alice Ambrose and published alongside those of Ambrose in Wittgenstein (1979).

[8]At the outset of chapter four of her thesis, in which she concentrates most fully on the work of Wittgenstein, Macdonald writes, "The following remarks will be based chiefly on the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1922), the article on Logical Form ([Wittgenstein, 1929]), and the article entitled 'Philosophy' contributed by R. B. Braithwaite [...]. These contain all the published information concerning Dr. Wittgenstein's doctrines. The last-named article includes some more recent views which Wittgenstein expounds in his lectures at Cambridge and which are not explicitly stated in any of his publications" (Macdonald, 1934: 105–106). See Braithwaite (1933), and Wittgenstein (1933).

[9]References to page numbers in the *Aufbau* are to the 1967 English translation.

[10]My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for identifying as distinct the notions of *shareability* and *objectivity*. This distinction bears helpfully on what follows.

[11](Carnap, 1967: 6)

> Thus, especially for scientific knowledge, intersubjectivity is one of the most important requirements.
>
> (Carnap, 1967: §106)

Macdonald rejects Carnap's explanation of the basis for an "intersubjective objective world" (Carnap, 1967: 7):

> Communication by means of language, then, requires the presence of universal elements common to the giver and recipient of the communication. These are defined for the logical positivists in terms of structure [...]. We behave similarly because our worlds have a similar structure. But why should this be so? Is it just a miraculous pre-established harmony which we must accept as an ultimate fact or can it be explained?
>
> (Macdonald, 1934: 157)

> The logical positivists left the peculiar element of structure which makes communication possible in a state of 'pre-established harmony' between your mind and mine in virtue of which we have a common world.
>
> (Macdonald, 1934: 163)

Macdonald does not view the postulation of structure as constituting a satisfactory explanation of the shared basis for communication; the relevant strategy does not according to her alleviate our desire for explanation but invokes further items of which an explanation is equally required. The fact that distinct private experiences exhibit a shared structure is, Macdonald says, as mysterious a fact as is the possibility of communication which the fact in question was supposed to illuminate. Macdonald concludes that what Carnap asks us to accept is, absent some further account, a *miraculous* "pre-established harmony" (1934: 163)[12] obtaining between distinct individuals' experiences.

An attempt is made by Lewis, Macdonald argues, to fill the explanatory gap she identifies in Carnap.[13] In his *Mind and the World Order* Lewis writes,

> It does not follow [...] that the basis of accord between minds represents some universal pattern of human reason, apart from the world of sense in which we live; [...] [T]here is an alternative, to account for this agreement between minds, which is simple and even obvious. The coincidence of our fundamental criteria and principles is the combined result of the similarity of human animals, and of their primal interests [...]. Indeed our categories are almost as much a social product as is language [...].
>
> (1929: 20–21)

It is, Lewis says, the presence of both shared *biology* and, relatedly, *primal interests* which underpins the 'accord' between our minds. The categories with which we think are, moreover, the product of *social* forces and not "made in Plato's heaven" (Lewis, 1929: 21). Macdonald calls this Lewis's "pragmatic interpretation of the a priori" (1934: 163) and describes it also as "ingenious" (1934: 168). She argues that Lewis, in sharp contrast with Carnap, "at least [...] does give us some reason for saying that the 'structure' of experience is common" (1934: 176), for Lewis explains our shared capacity to communicate in terms of more basic characteristics common to human beings and explicable in biosocial terms.[14] Macdonald though rejects the position, and ascribes to Lewis an approach continuous with that of Kant (as well as Pierce):

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[12]The language of 'pre-established harmony' has a Leibnizian ring but is more likely directly borrowed by Macdonald from Lewis (1929: 197).

[13]Though not, as Macdonald (1934: 163) points out, in awareness of the logical positivist doctrines to which his view is applied.

[14]In a letter to Max Black Macdonald emphasises the point: "But I do think that in one sense Lewis is more intelligible than Schlick & Co. For he does not merely postulate a miraculous pre-established harmony between the structure of different experiences to account for communication and the notion of a common world. He does say that we relate our experiences similarly because we have similar needs and desires, etc. That is, he gives some sort of pragmatic reason" (letter 15, Kremer and Misak, forth., emphasis original).

> Lewis's answer then to the problem of universals and generality which is involved in language would be extremely like that of Pierce and the whole position is very close to that of Kant. We do not agree because we have a common world but we have a common world because we agree. We do not reach universality through objectivity but must reach objectivity through universality [...].
>
> (1934: 176)

And:

> But it seems to me that Lewis succeeds only by giving a peculiar metaphysical status to biological needs and ending in a strange sort of idealism which makes it difficult to account for knowledge.
>
> (1934: 177)

Here I will not appraise the accuracy with which Kant is portrayed; my concern is rather to show that Macdonald objects to a position which she recognises as broadly Kantian. Macdonald argues that an account of this kind involves a 'peculiar' metaphysical construal of human nature as explanatorily prior to the objective world about which we think and speak. Lewis therefore secures shareability at the expense of objectivity, according to Macdonald. Later in her thesis she again emphasises the metaphysical character of Lewis's view:

> What is most certain is that a theory of language cannot be accepted which leads to solipsism and the denial of communication. Nor are the metaphysical assumptions which are introduced to avoid this denial any more acceptable.
>
> (1934: 203)

Macdonald argues that an explanation which runs *from* a description of human nature *to* objective reality proceeds in the wrong direction. To the extent that the constitution of human beings and their social arrangements is viewed as prior in order of explanation to the nature of the world, our claim to possess *objective knowledge* of the world is, Macdonald says, thereby impugned.[15] Later in her thesis Macdonald asserts that "Knowledge always presupposes the independent existence of that which is known" (1934: 179). Lewis in particular, according to Macdonald, and the pragmatists in general "*substitute* for knowledge, the 'organising of experience for the satisfaction of biological needs'" (1934: 179, emphasis added). This conception of pragmatism as involving the substitution of knowledge for other notions is a conception on which epistemological questions are eliminated rather than solved.

The categories with which we think about the world, and which are explained in part by the existence of shared biosocial features, are correctly characterised, according to Lewis, by necessary and a priori truths.[16] In giving a further explanation of our categories and their origins, Lewis aims also to explain the nature of necessary and a priori truth. Here Lewis introduces the notion of *legislation*:

> The necessity of the a priori is its character as legislative act. It represents a constraint imposed by the mind, not a constraint imposed upon mind by something else.
>
> (Lewis, 1929: 197)

Macdonald therefore describes Lewisian necessary truths as instituted "by means of education and *convention*" (1934: 176, emphasis added), as well as representing "merely convenient *decisions* about the use of words" (1934: 177, emphasis added). It is central to Lewis's position that these conventions admit of alternatives:

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[15]See also letter 14 (Kremer and Misak, forth.).
[16]Lewis treats 'necessary' and 'a priori' as coextensive terms; see Lewis (1929: 196).

> That we elicit some formula as a principle means that we take it as forbidding something or denying something which in some sense has significance. That which is utterly incapable of any alternative is utterly devoid of meaning.
>
> (Lewis, 1929: 197)

And:

> The a priori has its origin in an act of mind; it has in some sense the character of fiat and is in some respects like deliberate choice. The a priori is a peculiar possession of mind because it bears the stamp of mind's creation. And the criterion of creativity is not inevitability but exactly its opposite, the absence of impulsion and the presence of at least conceivable alternatives.
>
> (1929: 213)

It plausibly follows from conventionalism with respect to a given set of claims that the claims in question figure as belonging to a range of alternatives, some of which are selected for adoption while others are not.[17] This at least is the view of Lewis, who clearly holds that a necessary condition for a principle's being 'created' is its not being inevitable, and moreover that a condition for something's not being inevitable is the possibility of conceivable alternatives. The position of Lewis then seems very clearly to constitute a case in which *limitations* are employed in explanation of those necessary truths concerning the categories with which we think and speak. The form of explanation given is, as Macdonald presents it, idealist-cum-conventionalist in character. It is important then, in the context of the overarching theme of this article, to appreciate the reasons Macdonald gives for rejecting Lewis's conception of necessary truths as admitting of conceivable alternatives. Macdonald admires in Lewis's view the absence of any appeal to Platonism, but she rejects his position insofar as it involves a commitment to the possibility of conceivable alternatives to fundamental principles of classical logic. She says that "In his conception of 'alternatives' Prof. Lewis has obviously been influenced by the discovery of 'alternative' geometries and 'alternative' logics" (1934: 170), and offers the following critical assessment:

> It seems clear that the same logical principles must determine the development of any logical or geometrical system which is to be consistent and though much of what Lewis says may be true concerning some propositions which may be called a priori it is not sense to say that logical principles can have 'alternatives'. [...] But he no-where, I think, suggests that the Principle of [non] Contradiction should have alternatives and the supposition seems obviously absurd. For if it could then it would be possible that the definitions, classifications etc. should both apply and not apply to experience at the same time and the result would not be the required order but chaos. Nor does this follow merely from a decision about the use of words for the principle must itself govern such decisions if they are to be consistent with themselves. It would seem then as though the principles of logic or at least the principle of non-contradiction [...] must be on a different level even from other necessary and a priori propositions and that it cannot have alternatives.
>
> (1934: 170–172, emphasis original)

Here Macdonald offers two related arguments against the conventionalism of Lewis. Her first objection is against the suggestion that we might have *rejected* the principle of non-contradiction. Rejecting that principle would vanquish any cognitive purchase we may have on the world, for the categories with which we gain that purchase both would and wouldn't apply to our experience.[18] Since we cannot understand a world in which the principle of

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[17]Quine (1960: 102) though argues that the *absence* of sensible alternatives to principles of classical logic counts, at first blush, in favour of conventionalism.

[18]Here I should note that I do not defend Macdonald's positions against, e.g., those who reject the principle of non-contradiction and endorse dialethism. My aims are expository.

non-contradiction is false, it is not "*sense* to say that logical principles can have 'alternatives'" (1934: 171, emphasis added), according to Macdonald. Her second argument is aimed at the conventionalist view from which the claim that alternatives to logical principles are possible allegedly follows. Macdonald argues that the truth of such principles cannot be explained in terms of legislation or decision, for any decision concerning the truth of, e.g., the principle of non-contradiction must *itself* be 'governed' by that principle. If a decision of this kind were not so governed, then deciding that the principle of non-contradiction is true would not exclude our thereby deciding that it is *also false*.

In her PhD thesis, Macdonald allows that necessary truths other than fundamental principles of logic may admit of a conventionalist explanation and consequently that they may sensibly be viewed as having been selected from a range of alternatives. We shall see, below, that in 1940 Macdonald's conception of the statements to which her argument applies is extended beyond principles of logic such as those discussed in this section to a much broader variety of necessary truths. In 1934 Macdonald rejects the position of Lewis, which she interprets as both a form of idealist conventionalism and as incorrectly implying that necessary truths *as such* admit of possible alternatives. In her earliest available work, then, Macdonald identifies the criteria which must in her view be met by any adequate philosophical treatment of linguistic communication. Such treatments must avoid appeal to Platonism, while simultaneously rejecting, as Lewis's does not, any commitment to idealism or conventionalism. Finally, the conception of fundamental logical principles as bounded by limitations must not figure as a consequence of any satisfactory account. In 1934 Macdonald's own view is tentative; she suggests that a precondition of communication's possibility is the existence of a mind independent world, but she is hesitant to draw out the metaphysical implications of this position in detail.[19]

Macdonald's thesis was written prior to her studies with Wittgenstein, and we shall see, in the next section, how the influence of these studies led to the deepening of Macdonald's anti-metaphysical perspective, and of her view that intelligible thought is not bounded by limitations explicable in idealist-conventionalist terms.

3 | NECESSITY AND JUSTIFICATION

Macdonald's 1940 article 'Necessary Propositions' contains further discussion of conventionalism with respect to necessary truth and of the related claim that necessary truths admit of alternatives. 'Necessary Propositions' was written in response to Norman Malcolm's (1940) 'Are Necessary Propositions Really Verbal?', though Malcolm's position is described by Macdonald as representing a view which prevails quite broadly. Malcolm argues, first, that sentences which are necessarily true do not *express* decisions concerning word usage, but their truth does *depend* upon such decisions.[20] Second, sentences of the relevant kind are not used to make "*descriptive* statements" (Malcolm, 1940: 198, emphasis original) but rather play the role of rules employed in the performance of procedures such as *inference*.[21] The chief merit of this view, according to Macdonald, is its aiding us in the rejection of Platonist explanations of necessity. The fact that this view delivers us from metaphysical speculation of a Platonist kind though does not, Macdonald says, outweigh the confusion which it engenders in other respects.

Macdonald draws out the following implications of Malcolm's view, that necessary truths play an analogous role to that of rules:

> [T]he rules of chess, or of any game, obviously depend on a convention founded on free choice and might have been other than they are [...]. So the laws of logic [...] are capable of alternatives and their

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[19]See Macdonald (1934: 203).

[20]"But what *makes* the above a logical law, what makes the logician *right* in saying that it is a logical law, is that nearly all educated people use double negative expressions in the way they use affirmative expressions" (Malcolm, 1940: 198, emphasis original).

[21]See Malcolm (1940: 199).

necessity also derives from a convention, a convention about the uses of the words involved.

(1940: 49)

In Macdonald's view, taking seriously the thought that necessary truths be conceived of as rules involves a commitment to the view that necessary truths depend upon conventions "founded on free choice" (1940: 49). Rules of games are, she argues, very clearly the result of choices freely made and which might have proceeded otherwise. Malcolm's position therefore involves, according to Macdonald, a view of necessary truths as selected from alternatives. To the extent that Macdonald identifies a connection between the conception of necessary truths as rule-like on the one hand, and conventionalism on the other, the relevant conception is plausibly vulnerable to those objections against conventionalism we saw her formulate in 1934. In 1940 Macdonald re-issues one of these objections:

> [A]lthough deductive processes enter into any intelligent playing of a game, the rules of no such game enter into the processes of deduction. Without processes of reasoning based on logical principles there could be no conclusions drawn even from conventions. Necessary propositions and rules of games, therefore, seem on such a very different level that comparison between them is almost unprofitable.
>
> (Macdonald, 1940: 50)

Logical principles are, Macdonald emphasises, *prior* to the drawing of conclusions from conventions. This argument is extraordinarily compressed as Macdonald presents it in 1940, but once seen in the light of her 1934 thesis we can identify in her remarks here a continuity of concern with the criticisms made of Lewis. If rules are those things about which we may make decisions, then principles of logic cannot in Macdonald's view be construed as a species of rule, for there is no such thing in her view as deciding to adopt such a principle. Decisions over which claims to accept as true occur, as it were, downstream of the logical principles with which one thinks, on the position Macdonald advances.

Macdonald says,

> For one uses the rules of chess in playing chess very much as one uses the principles of logic in making deductions. But one also uses them very differently. For this analogy leads to the false statements that every necessary proposition might have a significant contradictory just as the rules of chess might have been different. This remark is alleged to remove a great deal of mental cramp. It may do so, but at the expense of causing mental rickets. Why, it is asked, should there not be 'alternative' logics which do not depend on the law of [non] contradiction [...] [T]he rules of chess [...] might have been other than they are and similarly there *might* be situations in which we should be inclined to say that Orange is darker than crimson [...].
>
> (1940: 49, emphasis original)

Macdonald's use of the phrase 'mental cramp' in the description of philosophical confusion is borrowed directly from Wittgenstein.[22] Macdonald suggests, through an extension of the relevant metaphor, that Malcolm is himself in the grip of confusion no less severe than that which attends Platonist thinking. Strictly speaking, what admits of alternatives is the *practice* governed by a set of rules, as the issue is presented by Macdonald; *chess* might have had different rules, she argues, while remaining the game which it is. To say that necessary truths do not have alternatives is more precisely expressed by our saying that the practices in which those truths figure as constitutive elements may not have had different such elements while maintaining their identity as the practices which they are. Macdonald's 1934 rejection of alternative logical principles might now be expressed as the claim that *reasoning* could

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[22]See Wittgenstein (1979: 90). See also (letters 23; 26, Kremer and Misak).

not have alternative constitutive principles, for in that case we could not make sense of the world. Here Macdonald argues that the conception of necessary truths as admitting of alternatives is a false one, and is suggested only by an inappropriate comparison between necessary truths and rules such as that given by Malcolm. We might be tempted here to raise a query over Macdonald's suggestion that chess could have had different rules. It is not, at least, so obviously true a claim as Macdonald appears to assume.[23] Thankfully, I do not think we need to solve fundamental questions in the philosophy of chess in order to substantiate Macdonald's broader claim, that rule-governed practices may survive the substitution of their present rules for others. Those rules governing *association football*,[24] for instance, have varied considerably throughout its history.

In 1940 Macdonald argues against the claim that practices the constitutive elements of which are necessary truths (and not rules) admit of alternative such elements:

> Again, it is said, the rules of chess, or of any game, obviously depend on a convention [...] and similarly there *might* be situations in which we should be inclined to say that Orange is darker than crimson and lighter than lemon or that p and not-p are both true in the same context. So the laws of logic and the necessary proposition 'Orange is between lemon and crimson' are capable of alternatives [...] But no-one I think has succeeded in giving a convincing account of a situation in which orange might be called lighter than lemon and darker than crimson or in which something might be both red and green all over at the same time. Any attempt that I have ever seen or heard always depends on some totally unconvincing trick or fairy tale about mythical savage tribes who *might* have curious rites connected with their red and green sense perceptions which led them to say that something which was partly red and partly green was of one colour all over, etc. which, of course, proves nothing to the point. Nor has anyone, I think, even remotely been able to show that any language in which argument was possible [...] could contain propositions which were both true and false in the same context.
>
> (1940: 50)

Recall Macdonald's [1934] view:

> It would seem then as though the principles of logic or at least the principle of non-contradiction [...] must be on a different level even from other necessary and a priori propositions and that it cannot have alternatives.
>
> (1934: 172)

Very few logical principles are viewed as incapable of being substituted for alternatives by Macdonald in 1934. In 1940 though Macdonald seems very clearly to have extended the application of her argument to sentences which do not express "laws of logic" (1940: 50) at all; claims concerning the relative darkness of colours, or of their mutual incompatibility, figure as prominent example cases. Macdonald is, moreover, unconvinced by imagined scenarios in which, e.g., the linguistic behaviour of a tribe is taken to constitute an intelligible alternative practice to our own. Macdonald very plausibly has a passage in mind here from *The Blue and Brown Books* (Wittgenstein, [1958]: 134). For reasons of space I will not assess the justice done to Wittgenstein by Macdonald's remark, though registering her opposition to his position as she interprets him is important for appreciating the extent to which Macdonald was not an uncritical 'disciple' of Wittgenstein, but was in fact prepared to challenge his views. Macdonald denies that such scenarios really do count as showing us that we might have rejected those necessary truths we presently accept. Macdonald gives no indication in 1940 of distinguishing between necessary truths which might be exchanged for others while the practices in which they figure survive, and those necessary truths which may not be so exchanged.

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[23]The example is traceable to a remark of Carnap's reported by Macdonald in a letter to Max Black; see (letter 19, Kremer and Misak, forth.).

[24]The 'back-pass' rule, for example, was introduced in 1992.

Macdonald's later position represents therefore a much more thoroughgoing rejection of any attempt to characterise the region of sensible thought as bounded by *limitations* than is expressed in her thesis.[25]

Macdonald identifies in the position to which she objects an attempt at *explaining*, or *justifying*, the status of necessary truths. She argues, though, that necessary truth does not admit of such treatment:

> One can give examples of such activities [as arithmetic and logic] and describe their principles but one cannot 'explain' them in other terms than their own.
>
> (1940: 48)

> There is no *reason* for the necessity of the ultimate principles of deduction as they are the reason for the necessity of conclusions drawn in accordance with them. [...] What is irrational is to ask for a reason and give an inappropriate one where none is required. And that is what philosophers from Plato to the Positivists have done. The principles of logic, one might say, are their own justification, which is to say that they need none.
>
> (1940: 49, emphasis original)

> [T]o know how to argue correctly is to know the nature of logical necessity in deduction. And similarly, for other necessary propositions, their necessary character is revealed in their use. But they are not necessary *because* they are used in this way. For to ask *why* they are necessary is senseless.
>
> (1940: 51, emphasis original)

Here Macdonald identifies as 'Positivist' the conception of logical truths as analogous to rules. What is common to Platonist and Positivist treatments of necessary truth is an attempt to explain its nature in further terms. The attempt at explanation here is conceived of by Macdonald also as a form of *justification* for the peculiar status of necessary truths which is otherwise liable to strike us as mysterious. The character of explanation given by each view is quite different, but in their starting from a conception of necessity as admitting of such a treatment they are equally guilty of seeking to solve a problem which is in Macdonald's view spurious. A *description* of the way in which necessary propositions are used shows us their role(s) in the process(es) of deduction, and helps us to see that the practice of reasoning *as such* involves treating the relevant propositions as playing the role(s) which that description reveals. This doesn't constitute a justification of the necessary character possessed by these truths, according to Macdonald, for the practice of justification has no application to the *means by which* we justify particular inferences. Here Macdonald's view is remindful of a remark from Wittgenstein's *The Big Typescript*:

> It is one thing to justify a thought on the basis of other thoughts – something else to justify thinking.
> It is this, I believe, that makes our investigation purely descriptive.
>
> (180e)

The Big Typescript was composed in 1933[26] and the ideas it contains were therefore plausibly available to Macdonald during her time at Cambridge. Here Wittgenstein emphasises the role played by justification *within* the context of thinking, and draws a sharp contrast between justification so described and the attempt at justifying thinking *itself*. He continues:

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[25]It is worth noting here that limitations may appear at different places. Plausibly, one attempts to draw limitations in conceiving of a given practice as constituted differently, but one also employs limitations in attempting to imagine a life *without that practice*. Macdonald does not discuss this second application, and so I shelve further discussion of it here.

[26]See Wittgenstein (2005: *viie*).

> I can justify 5^2 by means of x^2 if in so doing I contrast x^2 with x^3, or another sign in the system. The difficulty is obviously not to try to justify what admits of no justification. If one asks: "Why do you write 5^2?" and I answer "It says I'm to square", then that is a justification – and a *complete* one –. To demand a justification in the sense in which this isn't one is senseless.
>
> (219e)

It is intelligible in, e.g., the context of calculation to give the operations one has carried out in justification of the answer arrived at. Our justifying a choice of operation is made intelligible here in light of a comparison with unsuitable operations not employed. The word 'justify' has application in this context and that application is easily described in ways with which mathematicians are familiar. The word 'justify' though does not have unlimited application; having received justification of the relevant kind it is not intelligible simply to repeat one's request. No provision is made, in the practice of *giving justification*, for uses of the word 'justify' beyond those in which the relevant standard of justification for a given context is well-understood by competent participants. Macdonald's concerns are recognisably Wittgensteinian where she writes,[27]

> I believe it because it is a valid syllogistic conclusion from true premises. But suppose I am further asked, 'Why should this be a good reason for accepting it, why is it a valid argument?', [...] I could say 'Because it is of the form If p implies q and q implies r then p implies r [']. This would be considered adequate by most people. But suppose my enquirer is a philosopher and goes on 'And why do you accept the Principle of the Syllogism as necessarily true?'. I might try to deduce this principle from more primitive logical principles and perhaps 'ultimately' from the Principle of Contradiction. I should certainly not attempt to derive it from any other proposition than one belonging to logic. And suppose then it were asked, 'And why do you accept the Principle of Contradiction?'. Why is it logically necessary? I should say there is no answer to this question.
>
> (1940: 48–49)

Macdonald identifies in the practice of inference a number of justificatory statements each of which is intelligible to make in that context. Like Wittgenstein, though, she identifies a place at which requests for justification must give out, and like Wittgenstein she characterises requests for justification at this place as "senseless" (1940: 51). Macdonald aims to show us, through a description of cases in which justification may be intelligibly requested, just where those cases come to an end. In our coming to appreciate the role played by necessary truths in the process of justifying inferences, we may in Macdonald's view come to see that further explanations of the kind offered by traditional philosophical theories of necessity count as attempts at justifying "what admits of no justification" (Wittgenstein, 2005: 219e).

At the outset of this article I described Macdonald's position as involving a therapeutic approach to philosophical problems. One distinction between this approach and traditional views is the conception of philosophical theories as emerging from a felt need to explain what does not admit of explanation. The questions which drive theory construction require not an answer in their own terms but a diagnosis of the confusion from which they are issued; and the result of therapeutic philosophy will be, in the successful case, a dissolution of that confusion. It should be clear, from what we have seen, that Macdonald's 1940 approach counts as therapeutic in the relevant respect. Macdonald rejects the conception of intelligible thought as bounded by limitations separating our own practices from alternatives. Part of her strategy, first articulated in 1934, is to undermine the philosophical position from which that conception emerges. In 1940, and following her studies with Wittgenstein, Macdonald introduces into her view a therapeutic approach; her target is the source of our feeling that constructive philosophical theories of necessity are either required or, having been issued, count as intelligible. In giving a therapeutic treatment of these theories

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[27]In a 1936 letter to Max Black discussing intuitionism in mathematics Macdonald denies that a philosophical theory may justify the mathematical practice it is purported to illuminate: "Not that I think any such view 'justifies' the practice of mathematics in some superior and non-mathematical way or helps them to understand what they are doing any better, do you?" (letter 26, Kremer and Misak, Forthcoming).

Macdonald places great weight on the value of description in diagnosing philosophical confusion. Below, I shall argue that an apparent tension in Macdonald's views may be resolved through emphasising the descriptive character of her outlook.

4 | TOLERANCE

In her 1936 article 'Language and Reference' Macdonald offers an extended defence of Carnap in the face of objections to *Logical Syntax*,[28] in which he articulates his well-known 'principle of tolerance':

> *Principle of Tolerance: It is not our business to set up prohibitions, but to arrive at conventions.* [...] *In logic there are no morals.* Everyone is at liberty to build up his own logic, i.e. his own form of language, as he wishes. All that is required of him is that, if he wishes to discuss it, he must state his methods clearly, and give syntactical rules instead of philosophical arguments.
>
> (Carnap, 1937: 51–52, emphasis original)

According to the attitude articulated by this principle it is practical considerations which may guide us in questions of language choice: "The choice of [conventions] is influenced [...] by certain practical methodological considerations (for instance, whether they make for simplicity, expedience, and fruitfulness in certain tasks)" (Carnap, 1937: 320). Answering the question of whether some language is expedient for certain purposes does not license our describing that language as 'correct' in any *absolute* sense; there is no 'right' language but only languages more simple, etc., than others relative to certain tasks. Crucially, for the purposes of this discussion, Carnap's principle of tolerance constitutes an explicit conception of language as capable of being *chosen* from a range of possible alternatives. It is important to note that my aim here is not to draw conclusions about Carnap *viz.* the issue of limits and limitations, but rather to assess Macdonald's relationship to the principle of tolerance as she understood it. Macdonald responds to criticisms of the principle given by a Daniel J. Bronstein (1936), though she plausibly had also the view of Stebbing in mind[29]:

> This is tolerance with a vengeance, perhaps too great tolerance. [...] If the Principle of Tolerance is to be accepted seriously and to be applied universally, then it becomes difficult to see by what criteria it can be decided whether one language-system is more appropriate than another. [...] It would seem to follow that the whole language of science is a conventional, if not a purely arbitrary, construction.
>
> (Stebbing, 1935: 509)

Avoiding the conclusion that language is wholly conventional, and therefore unhooked from any responsibility to reality requires, Stebbing suggests, a less radical tolerance than that described by Carnap.[30] Bronstein echoes Stebbing in his suggestion that our judging certain forms of expression as "adequate or more appropriate" (Bronstein, 1936: 56) than others serves to undermine Carnap's principle of tolerance. Macdonald writes,

> So the use of 'appropriate' in connection with language does not require us to regard symbolising as a triadic relation between a sign, an object and a system of reference such that there is one and only one form of expression which fits the facts perfectly. It seems rather that there are many linguistic possibilities of which we do make use of one though we might use others and may do so in the future.
>
> (1936: 41)

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[28]First published in German in 1934. All pages references are to the 1937 English translation.

[29]Macdonald was certainly aware of Stebbing's view here; see letter 18 (Misak and Kremer, Forthcoming).

[30]See Stebbing (1935: 509) for further details.

Macdonald's remarks may strike us as in tension with her deepening resistance to the view that our linguistic practices might have been constituted differently, for she appears to accept precisely this possibility in the second of the sentences just quoted. In order to understand Macdonald's view here we must note her interpretation of Bronstein, to whom she is in part responding. Bronstein argues that our treating of a linguistic expression *as such* involves, of necessity, the recognition of an object to which that expression refers; we may not, therefore, abstract away from any expression its semantic content and attempt a merely syntactic study of language. He argues, moreover, that "the reference to objects cannot be avoided; it is implicit, for example, every time we judge one symbolic expression to be more adequate or more appropriate than another" (1936: 56). The judgement that some expression is more appropriate than another is based upon an examination of the object referred to by the expression in question. On this view an essential characteristic of language, therefore, sets an absolute standard against which judgements of appropriateness may be made. The acceptance of Bronstein's view is consequently at odds with the attitude of tolerance enshrined in Carnap's principle.

First, Macdonald rejects the model of language upon which the standard of appropriateness in question is based:

> Mr. Bronstein's analysis seems to overlook the fact that the word 'object' is itself part of our language and is used in accordance with certain rules which give it significance. We must know these before we can determine to what it is that a symbol refers. So that one term of the supposed symbolic relation presupposes that we know how to use a certain word or symbol though it was intended to explain the use of *all* symbols. The three-cornered relation looks neat and simple but it is perhaps doubtful whether any general rule based on such a device can help us very far in understanding the use of symbols.
>
> (1936: 34, emphasis original)

Macdonald casts doubt on the possibility of our identifying any *single* theory capable of illuminating a shared feature of linguistic expressions as such, for any such theory must be given through the use of words already saddled with the meanings which they possess in ordinary contexts of use. It is therefore "doubtful" (1936: 34), according to Macdonald, that the employment of such terms may serve to aid in the construction of a theory adequate to explaining the character of *all* expressions. The term 'object' is central to the specific theory offered by Bronstein. In Macdonald's view the word 'object' is ordinarily employed in the giving of ostensive definitions, where the relevant acts of ostension are directed towards items capable of being sensibly experienced, i.e., are empirically observable.[31] It is the fact that we can very often point to various items in response to questions of the form "which object does *X* refer to?" that leads us to (hastily) conceive of each and every expression as capable of the same treatment. Macdonald's objection to a theory of meaning aimed at illuminating a feature common to all expressions here is clearly Wittgensteinian in spirit, for in *The Blue and Brown Books* Wittgenstein (1958: 21–22) had famously rejected theories of that kind. Much later Macdonald would expressly endorse a 'family resemblance' conception of language,[32] according to which a myopic fixation on local similarities in the use of words is responsible for our wrongly concluding that those similarities must be underpinned by an essential feature invariant throughout the full spectrum of cases.

Second, Macdonald denies that our use of language is subject to a non-conventional standard, in the light of which we may judge our language correct in any absolute sense. She summarises the contrary view of Bronstein:

> It is said that our choice between the 'more appropriate' system and all others is determined for us by the facts. It is to these that the system is 'more appropriate' and not to our own convenience in

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[31]See Macdonald (1936: 34).
[32]See Macdonald (1950: 200).

the use of language. It cannot therefore be the result of a mere arbitrary, linguistic convenience as Carnap and others are understood to assert. (Macdonald, 1936: 37)[33]

Macdonald argues

> Is there indeed any sense in asking whether we are more justified by the facts in nodding to signify agreement [...]? We may give a psychological or historical cause for such behaviour as we may for wearing the appropriate clothes [...] at a funeral but we have no reason for believing that it expresses any facts more perfectly than precisely the opposite behaviour.

> [...] Then the fact that we regard one form of language as 'more appropriate' than another is also an historical accident due to many factors of training and education [...].

> (1936: 39)

And, consequently:

> So the use of 'appropriate' in connection with language does not require us to regard symbolising as a triadic relation between a sign, an object and a system of reference such that there is one and only one form of expression which fits the facts perfectly.

> (Macdonald, 1936: 40)

Bronstein had argued that an explanation of the basis upon which judgements of appropriateness are made involves appeal to the extra-linguistic entities referred to by the expressions judged appropriate. The appeal to extra-linguistic entities is, moreover, intended to supply an absolute, non-conventional standard governing the relevant class of judgements; and our tolerance for distinct forms of expression must be constrained by respect for that standard. Macdonald rejects the possibility of appealing to "the facts" (Macdonald, 1936: 39) in attempting to judge a form of expression appropriate, for our use of language is, she argues, a matter of "habit" (1936: 39), and an "historical accident due to many factors of training" (1936: 39). There are not then, in Macdonald's view, facts of the matter available independently of our linguistic behaviour which may be adduced in assessing the correctness of that behaviour. The fact that certain forms of expression are presently judged appropriate in given contexts is capable only of causal description; we cannot *justify* the language we use but may only *describe* it. There are no grounds such as Bronstein aims to give for rejecting a tolerant attitude, for those grounds involve a mistaken conception of language as capable of being *right* as such.

Here the influence of Wittgenstein can once again be felt. In *The Big Typescript* he says,[34]

> We would like to give reason after reason. Because we feel: so long as there is a reason, everything is all right. We don't want to stop explaining – and simply describe.
> [...] "Why do you call that colour 'red' that's on the same colour chip with the word 'red' on it?" *That's simply the way I act (and one can cite a cause for this, but not a reason).*

> (2005: 139e, emphasis added)

> Couldn't I look at language as a social institution that is subject to certain rules because otherwise it wouldn't be effective? But here's the problem: I cannot make this last claim; I cannot give any justification of the rules, not even like this. I can only describe them as a game that people play.

> (2005: 145e)

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[33]Macdonald questions the accuracy with which Carnap is interpreted here by Bronstein; see Macdonald (1936: 37–38).
[34]See also Wittgenstein (2005: 187e; 308e; 386e).

One can't give the 'games' we play a justification because there is no such thing as it's being *right* to play any particular game; we may describe the features of these games as well as the history of their development but we may not, according to Wittgenstein, intelligibly attempt to view those games as having an overarching *telos* which is capable of articulation from a perspective external to the games in question. Questions of justification are, as noted above, internal to certain specifiable linguistic practices. Questions of appropriateness, conceived of as questions over the *success* of some practice in meeting an external standard, must therefore be viewed as similarly inapt. Macdonald, as we have seen, denies that a conception of linguistic practices as modelled on games is satisfactory. This point notwithstanding, her view clearly shares with that of Wittgenstein a commitment to *description* as the only treatment we may give of the linguistic practices in which we are engaged. Wittgenstein and Macdonald both therefore hold that questions of justification or evaluation, within which questions of appropriateness are included, fail to count as legitimate where they are aimed at the relevant kind of practice.

It may strike us now that Macdonald reintroduces into her position elements of the view we saw her reject in Lewis.[35] A conception of our shared form of language as depending on natural features of human beings was, as observed above, a central component of Lewis's outlook to which Macdonald objected. What separates Macdonald's position from the conventionalist view we have seen her criticise is her rejection of the conception of causal description as contributing an *explanation* in which *reasons* for our behaviour are given:

> But we might equally well have *defined* 'same in colour' in such a way that strawberries and their leaves would always be given the same colour name. There is no *reason* why we should not, but *in fact* we do not and we should regard anyone who did as either colour blind or stupid.
>
> (Macdonald, 1936: 39, emphasis original)

Macdonald's denies that we may justify our behaviour by appeal to, e.g., decisions over the use of terminology through the giving of reasons. Since the decisions, habits, or training which bear upon that behaviour do not count as correct or incorrect, no such justification can be given. We have seen that in 1940 Macdonald objects at length to the conception of necessary truth as requiring, and capable of being given, justification of the relevant kind. Macdonald's 1936 view here is then consistent with the subsequent treatment I have discussed.

Macdonald's view counts as a defence of Carnap's principle of tolerance in the following limited respect. Insofar as rejecting Carnap's principle involves holding that our language is sufficiently unified to admit of a single theoretical treatment, or that it is capable of being assessed in evaluative terms in the light of that treatment, Macdonald views that rejection as misconceived. This does not imply that Macdonald endorses a conception of tolerance on which we may intelligibly conceive of alternative practices in which necessary truths of the kind discussed above figure as false. Instead, Macdonald's criticisms should be interpreted as efforts at diagnosing various kinds of philosophical confusion in which objections to the principle of tolerance are rooted. In formulating these criticisms Macdonald aims to show that statements such as those issued by Bronstein peter out into nonsense as they approach the *limits* of intelligible expression.

5 | CONCLUSION

I have argued that Macdonald's attitude towards the question of idealism or conventionalism develops, from a rejection of that position as applied to certain principles of logic, to a more radical conception of explanation in the context of necessary truth as issued only under the influence of philosophical confusion. Macdonald's early dissatisfaction with the views of Lewis was not in 1934 accompanied by a clear positive conception of necessity. The result of her considerations however provided Macdonald with a set of desiderata which, in retrospect, explain

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[35]My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this point.

her amenability to the influence of Wittgenstein. Macdonald's rejecting various explanations of necessity in 1934, whether Platonist *or* idealist, contributed to her enthusiastic adoption of an approach according to which necessary truth requires no such justification as the relevant theories purport to provide. A constant concern throughout the works I have discussed is the extent to which those necessary truths which figure as constitutive of various practices admit of substitution for alternatives. Conceiving of such truths as capable of substitution is partially constitutive, I have said, of an attempt to draw limitations to thought and language in a fashion conducive to idealism. Macdonald, I have argued, continually resists that conception and instead aims to chart the *limits* of intelligible expression and to identify the source of philosophical confusion responsible for stimulating theoretical approaches of the kind she rejects.[36]

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