

Michael Jubien

Possibility.

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For many of us, modality and possible worlds are two sides of the same coin. We slide effortlessly from talk of necessity and possibility to talk of truth in all or some possible worlds. We assume not only that possible worlds exist, but that—whatever their true nature—they will furnish us with the one true analysis of modality. It is noteworthy, then, that if the central thesis of *Possibility* is correct, we are guilty of serious error. Not only is modality best understood without recourse to possible worlds, no possible worlds-based analysis could have succeeded in the first place. In raising this challenge to modal orthodoxy, *Possibility* poses difficult questions for those of us friendly to possible worlds, and provides welcome support for those troubled by the ubiquity of possible worlds theory.

Although its heart lies in Chapters 3 and 4, where Jubien makes his case against possible worlds, much of *Possibility* concerns topics outside the metaphysics of modality. In Chapter 1 Jubien weighs in on a number of debates regarding material objects, arguing that the source of much philosophical confusion is due to a ‘great divide’ in our thinking about objects. This divide separates two natural ways of thinking about the identity and persistence of material objects. On the one hand, we can consider them as mere parcels of matter within spacetime. And, on the other hand, we can consider them as ordinary objects, falling under familiar kinds like person, statue, or table. For Jubien, one of the primary aims of *Possibility* is to reconcile these two ways of thinking of objects and the intuitions that flow from them. To this end, he argues that, although material objects are merely perduring parcels of matter, a lavish ontology of individual essences can allow us to accommodate our intuitions from either side of the divide. This account of essences is supplemented in Chapter 2 with a sketch of a theory of properties. Unfortunately, Jubien’s studied neutrality about the metaphysical status of properties proves frustrating in light of his frequent appeals to essences and their ‘intrinsic natures’ later in *Possibility*.

Now, as Jubien is aware, the work done by possible worlds extends beyond the analysis of modality. Many notions in metaphysics and philosophy of language admit of profitable treatment through possible worlds. With this in mind, Chapters 5 through 7 address the topics of proper names, fictional entities, and natural kind terms, taking pains to show that notions like rigid designation and truth in fiction can be accommodated or replaced without appeal to possible worlds. As with his account of material objects, Jubien’s proposed account of names and kind terms relies on his rich metaphysics of properties. Perhaps most interestingly, Jubien’s account of fictional entities like Sherlock Holmes proceeds by using individual essences as ontological surrogates for genuine

fictional objects. This account is a natural extension of his view of proper names, according to which they express particular kind-essences (i.e., names of persons express particular person-essences, names of statues express particular statue-essences, and so on). On such a view, ‘Sherlock Holmes’ expresses a fictional character-essence unique to Sherlock Holmes—an essence that is necessarily uninstantiated—even while there is no object that is Sherlock Holmes. While these three chapters are uniformly interesting, they concern only a small number of the applications of possible worlds. Since many other areas remain—most notably, the analysis of conditionals—it should be clear that the burden of proof is still with those who would reject possible worlds.

The centerpiece of the book—Jubien’s case against possible worlds—begins with a familiar challenge to Lewisian modal realism and its exotic metaphysics of possible worlds. This challenge stems from the intuition that even if there were a plurality of spatiotemporally disconnected concrete objects, these objects would be irrelevant to the analysis of modality. Given that this concern and others like it have been voiced elsewhere in the literature, the most interesting portion of *Possibility* is its extension of the spirit of this challenge into a more general case against possible worlds theory *simpliciter*.

According to Jubien, possible worlds theory suffers from ‘deep and fundamental weirdness’. As he puts it, the fundamental problem with possible worlds theory is that ‘what passes for necessity is just a bunch of parallel “contingencies”. The theory provides no basis for understanding why these contingencies repeat unremittingly across the board (while others do not). As a result, it provides no genuine analysis of necessity.’ (75) Jubien also claims that, in considering any necessary truth ‘from the strictly internal point of view of any world, it’s *contingent*, a mere coincidence.’ (74) Now, while Jubien places considerable weight on these intuitions about this weirdness of possible worlds theory, it is unclear what kind of argument these rather murky intuitions might license. This is especially unfortunate, since he does not attempt to distill these intuitions into more direct, pointed challenges for possible worlds theorists. For my part, I believe Jubien’s worries about ‘parallel contingencies’ arise from a subtle yet fallacious appeal to advanced modalizing—the application of modal notions to the framework in terms of which modality itself is to be analyzed—and, since advanced modalizing presents trouble for both friends and foes of possible worlds, I’ll focus here on another concern.

In the absence of further clarifications, I take the primary problem with Jubien’s objection to be that it both over- and under-generalizes. It over-generalizes for the following reason: Jubien insists that the sources of necessity must be ‘intrinsic’ to worlds, but both the necessarily uninstantiated essence of Sherlock Holmes, and Platonic properties in general, seem very reasonably viewed as transcendent entities, existing in a manner extrinsic to worlds. So understood, Jubien’s own account, which holds such essences to be sources of necessity, as well as the popular Platonic account of properties, are unintended targets of this objection. (Jubien might take issue here with this gloss of

what it is to be ‘intrinsic to a world’, but he provides inadequate support for his own preferred understanding.) At the same time, Jubien’s objection under-generalizes once we consider the actualist who identifies possible worlds with uninstantiated maximal properties. An actualist of this stripe accepts merely one more variety of essence than Jubien, and, absent some reason to find these particular essences objectionable, her preferred possible worlds theory seems in keeping with the scruples of Jubien’s own metaphysics. In light of these problems, Jubien’s objection seems short of convincing.

Possibility is driven largely by Jubien’s philosophical intuitions. While I share few of these, it displays a philosophical integrity that makes for an engaging and rewarding piece of metaphysics. It will provide fertile ground for thinking about the philosopher’s paradise of possible worlds.

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