1 Dissertation: Truthmaking and Modality

My research agenda begins with the metaphysics modality. Talk of possible worlds has become immensely popular, such that nowadays we find reference to them in almost every area of philosophical study. In light of this, I believe that understanding the nature of possible worlds and the implications of a possible worlds semantics is of the utmost importance—not just for metaphysicians, but for all philosophers.

In my dissertation, I began my search for a better understanding of possible worlds by investigating modal truthmakers. There, I asked, ‘What makes modal truths—i.e., truths about possibility and necessity—true?’ For instance, you could be going for a walk right now. This seems true. But, what makes it true? A popular answer has been to suggest that the possible worlds themselves (or, parts of them) are the modal truthmakers. For instance, on one view, the proposition above is said to be true in virtue of the existence of some world where your counterpart is presently going for a walk. I argue that such truths are, rather, true in virtue of your abilities; i.e., some dispositional properties of yours.

2 Consequences of Our Metaphysics

My initial pursuit into the metaphysics of modality (and the related issues of causation, transworld identity, and truthmaking) has shaped the sorts of questions that I have asked since then, and how I have asked them. The conclusions that we come to in each of these areas of metaphysics can have important implications for other disciplines within philosophy. My research goals are in large part devoted toward exploring these implications. For example:

2.1 In Ethics

It is typically thought that there is a moral duty to not cause harm. But, this verdict faces certain problems, depending upon how events are individuated—particularly, how they are individuated across possible worlds. It seems that events can undergo minor changes without jeopardizing their identity. For example, we commonly say things like, ‘If the explosion had occurred any sooner, there would have been more casualties.’ But, should we take this to mean that it would have been the same explosion, had the bomb gone off sooner? This is a natural interpretation of the claim. However, it is no easy task providing a modally ‘non-fragile’ account of event individuation, where events are individuated in such a way that they can survive minor variations across possibilities. I argue (in Erkenntnis) that all such non-fragile accounts of event individuation fail. The moral implications are problematic. For, now, it turns out that I cannot delay an explosion. Rather, I can merely prevent one explosion and cause another (numerically distinct) one. This is troubling. However, I am currently (in a follow-up paper) exploring the potential for an alternative, de dicto account of events to capture our ordinary intuitions about moral responsibility and modal (non)fragility.

Determining the relationship between moral responsibility, causation, and harm also has important implications for the ethics of individual omissions (failures to prevent a harm) and collective actions. For instance, some have argued that it is morally wrong to fail to donate to famine relief, since omissions are causes, and causal responsibility confers moral responsibility. In one recent work (under review), I begin by pointing out that, even if some failures count as causes (e.g., the failure of a smoke detector might count as a cause of a fire), clearly others do not (e.g., the failure of a dam to break ten miles upstream—which would have flooded the home where the fire occurred—does not count as a cause of the fire). I then argue, by way of a possible worlds analysis of the causal relevance of omissions, that a failure to donate to famine relief is not causally relevant to any harms in a way that confers moral responsibility. In short, such a failure is more like the dam’s failure than the smoke detector’s.

Elsewhere, in matters of collective action, we often find philosophers arguing that, because our individual actions do not cause particular harms, we are therefore not morally responsible for them. For instance, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong famously argues that there is no moral obligation to reduce individual greenhouse gas emissions for this reason. Recently, I have argued (in the Journal of Moral Philosophy) that this verdict is mistaken, by way of analyzing the moral distinction between intending and foreseeing harm in the context of group causation.
2.2 In Philosophy of Religion

We commonly view each way things could have been for individuals as a branching timeline which diverges from their actual timeline. But, a dispositionalist view of modal truthmakers entails that all of the metaphysical possibilities have this branching structure. The (somewhat surprising) implication (as I argue in Philosophy) is that all of the metaphysical possibilities must share some causally potent initial portion in common such that, either there exists at least one causally potent necessary being (e.g., God), or else there necessarily exists an infinite, beginningless series of contingent causes.

In another essay (in Religious Studies), I demonstrate that a Lewisian view of possible worlds (where all worlds are concrete objects, just like the actual world) is incompatible with classical theism, which understands God as a necessary being. My conclusion is that one cannot be both a theist and a modal realist.

In short, our views concerning modality and modal truthmaking can have strong implications either for or against the existence of God.

2.3 In Epistemology

Several epistemologists have recently attempted to put truthmaker theory to work in order to solve the Gettier problem. This ‘truthmaker solution’ proposes that knowledge is a justified, true belief, where the source of one’s justification is either identical to, or else causally related to, the state of affairs which makes the believed proposition true. I argue (in Ratio) that this solution will not work for standard Gettier cases—though it does provide a clear verdict for the so-called ‘Stopped Clock’ and ‘Fake Barn’ cases.

3 Continued Work in Metaphysics

While much of my work has been devoted to identifying the implications that our metaphysics has for other areas of philosophy, I have also continued to explore issues in metaphysics proper. For example, in one recent work (in Acta Analytica) I argue that we have largely failed to properly appreciate the distinction between three closely related concepts: Truthmakers, truth conditions, and analyses. This has led to a good deal of confusion in the metaphysics of modality. I argue that possible worlds are (at best) suited to play the role of the truth conditions, but not the truthmakers or analyses, of true modal propositions. On this understanding, it turns out that we can avoid the most damaging objections to the possible worlds framework (the famous ‘Humphrey objection’), while preserving worlds in their most important role (namely, as the foundation of our modal logic).

There has also been some confusion, I believe, regarding identity and individuation across worlds. One surprising discovery I have made is that, given transworld identity and a handful of plausible assumptions, metaphysical possibility turns out to itself be a species of de re possibility; i.e., possibility for an individual. In my most recent essay (under review), I argue that, just as all of the metaphysical possibilities involving Humphrey represent numerically one and the very same man (namely, our Humphrey, the actual man), so too do they represent numerically one and the same world (namely, our world, the actual world—i.e., this enormous scattered object which you and I are parts of).

4 Summary

My interests extend over a wide range of issues, from environmental ethics to epistemology. Yet, underlying each of my explorations, there is a singular motive. Namely, a desire for a proper understanding of the metaphysics of modality, truthmaker theory, causation, identity, individuation, and essentialism, and how our verdicts in these arenas might affect and inform the discourse for issues beyond metaphysics; and this overarching goal will continue to inform my philosophical endeavors for the foreseeable future.