
This book aims to provide a comprehensive presentation of various views that the author, Michael Jubien, has put forth in the past. It is directed towards advanced students and philosophers of metaphysics and the philosophy of language, especially those interested in such issues as objects, properties, names, and natural kind terms.

The book is influenced by the work of Quine in both content and argument style. Like Quine, Jubien examines how we think and speak about the world in order to justify a metaphysical account of it. Most of the conclusions are drawn from thought experiments appealing to our ordinary intuitions and everyday convictions, with the underlying assumption that the author’s intuitions are correct. Jubien sets out to show that talk of objects, names, and natural kinds is really just property-talk, and thus properties and their relations are the basis for our understanding of statements about objects and, in particular, our understanding of modal statements about them. As the title indicates, the central issue of the book is possibility. The account offered here is a theory of our ‘intuitive notion’ of possibility.

The book contains interesting and significant insights about the use of logic in philosophy, our understanding of objects, and the social determination of the meanings of natural kind terms. Jubien’s writing is clear and the thought experiments that he uses to support his claims are easy to follow and help to elucidate the point under consideration.

However, Jubien’s account of our ordinary thinking about possibility does not provide for genuine possibility. So, if the theory in the book is correct, there must be
a very strange disconnect between the author’s intuitions about possibility and
genuine possibility, which in turn seems to suggest that the author’s intuitions are
mistaken. Before I show how this problem arises, let me first provide an explanation
of some of the major elements of the book, focusing particular attention upon the
proposed theory of our intuitive notion of possibility.

According to Jubien, much of our ordinary object-talk is ultimately property-
talk, so properties are at the basis of our understanding of objects. To be an object is
to be a physical entity of a familiar kind, like piece of clay or dog, and familiar kinds
are just properties (87).

Since object-talk is ultimately property-talk, all statements about objects,
including modal statements, are ultimately about properties. Jubien rejects David
Lewis’s theory of possible worlds because it takes modal statements to be about
objects (chapter 3). He argues, instead, that statements about necessity and
possibility are about properties and their relations (chapter 4). Jubien defends
Platonism with respect to properties (chapter 2). Platonic properties are genuinely
existing entities, that have fixed, intrinsic natures. The intrinsic natures of
properties result in a variety of intrinsic relations that ‘automatically’ hold between
them and establish modal connections (93). In particular, properties are related by
entailment and compatibility. If one property entails another, then in the case that
one is instantiated, the other must be instantiated, as well. Two properties that are
compatible can be coinstantiated, but need not be. The necessary truth of
propositions is grounded in properties that are related by entailment. For example,
the necessary truth of the proposition, “Horses are animals,” is grounded in the fact
that being a horse entails being an animal. The contingent truth of propositions is
grounded in compatible properties. The proposition, “The horse is wild,” is
contingently true because the property being a horse is compatible with being
domesticated (94).

Other philosophers have defended property theories of modality, including
Unfortunately, Jubien does not consider any of these accounts in the development of
his own. In any case, like Jubien, such property theorists argue that the compatibility
relation can provide for contingency. For whereas the entailment of one property by the other determines that the two properties *have to be* coinstantiated, two properties that are compatible *can* be coinstantiated, but do not *have* to be. If *being a piece of clay* is compatible with *being flat*, a particular, spherical piece of clay *really could have* instantiated the property *being flat*, rather than the property *being spherical*. And so the proposition, “The piece of clay is flat,” is possibly true of a spherical piece of clay.

However, there is a general difficulty for any theory of modality on which contingent truth is ultimately grounded in properties and their compatibility. Because the compatibility relation must be primitive, there can be no prior, necessary conditions upon it. As a result, there can be no restrictions that determine which properties can be compatible, and so it seems that *any* two properties could be compatible. Armstrong accepts this consequence, maintaining that the combinations are ‘promiscuous’ (1997). But, Alexander Bird (2005), Scott Shalkowski (1994), and Chris Swoyer (1982) convincingly argue that if every combination is allowable, and if the combinations of simple properties determines what is possible, then anything is possible, and nothing is absolutely necessary. For, without any conditions upon compatibility, there is nothing to prevent the possible combination of seemingly contradictory properties like *being a triangle* and *having four sides*, and, consequently, it is not absolutely necessary that a triangle has three sides.

The same problem arises for the theory offered here. On Jubien’s account, the compatibility relation is automatic and primitive (94). So, there cannot be any deeper, necessary criteria that determine which properties are compatible. It follows that the properties that are compatible *just happen to be so*. In other words, the compatibility of any two properties is merely arbitrary. But then the contingent truth of any proposition grounded in that compatibility is arbitrary, as well. Furthermore, in the absence of any prior, necessary conditions upon the compatibility of properties, *any* two properties could be compatible (even incompatible properties), in which case *any* proposition is possibly true. This result is not only absurd, it is contrary to Jubien’s claims about necessity (99-104).
Therefore, there must be some further necessary criteria that determine which properties are compatible with others, and so properties and their relations cannot be the *ultimate* basis for alethic modalities.

Part of the problem is that *compatibility is a modal notion* – it is the notion that two properties are *possibly* coinstantiated. If compatibility is primitive, there is no ultimate reason *why* two properties are compatible. Thus, any theory that posits the primacy of compatibility will fail to provide an ultimate explanation for contingent truth.

There is another problem that arises for property theories of modality that involves the relationship between the abstract level and particular level properties. Abstract properties involve necessary facts *only*. Platonic properties exist *necessarily*, have *necessarily* fixed intrinsic natures, and are in *necessary* relations with other abstract properties. Since what is ultimately grounded in necessity is thereby necessary, it appears that Platonic properties and their relations can ground only necessity and not contingency. Jubien claims that particular properties that are instantiated by individual objects are *governed* by the natures of their respective Platonic properties (77, fn. 15). But, if the natures of Platonic properties are necessary, and Platonic properties govern particular properties, it seems to follow that the properties that are instantiated by individuals are instantiated necessarily, in which case all properties of individuals would be necessary and in no way contingent.

Jubien explains that there are two types of special properties at the particular level: object-essences and k-essences. An object-essence is the property of *being a specific physical object* (89) and can only be instantiated by the specific physical object that does instantiate it, that is, by that very physical matter (90). A *k-essence* is the property of *being a specific kind* and can be instantiated by different physical objects (90). So, a specific dog has as an object-essence, the property of *being that specific physical object*, and it has a dog-essence, the property of *being that specific dog*. The object-essence cannot be instantiated by different physical matter, but the dog-essence could be: “It is ... clear that the object that in fact does instantiate the dog-essence need not have. It need not have been a dog at all, much less that dog,”
(90). In other words, *being that specific dog* is not only instantiated by different physical matter over the course of time, but it can also be instantiated by physical matter other than the matter that *actually* does instantiate it. The dog-essence is instantiated by different objects in different counterfactual situations, and so it is the property that is picked out in counterfactual statements. The differences between the object-essence and the k-essence is a reflection of what Jubien calls the ‘great divide’ (15) and can account for the fact that we ordinarily think that ‘the same dog’ might have been constituted by different stuff and that it could have been smarter. For, although the specific dog *qua* object-essence could not have been more intelligent, ‘the same dog’ *qua* dog-essence could have been (91).

However, Jubien’s claim that it is *possible* that a dog-essence could have been instantiated by different physical matter lacks sufficient grounding. It would seem that the possibility must be rooted in the compatibility between the properties *being that specific dog* and *being instantiated by different matter*. But, since that compatibility is primitive, there can be no further reason for it; the properties just happen to be compatible.

Moreover, Jubien claims that the compatibility between *being that specific dog* and *being instantiated by different matter* is automatic and intuitive – we just ordinarily think that a dog could have been made of different matter and could have been smarter (91). But, it is not intuitive to me. It seems to me that there must have been a series of causes that resulted in that specific matter being instantiated by *that specific dog*. In order for some other matter to have instantiated that dog-essence, there would have had to have been a different causal series, and so a different origin, in which case it wouldn’t be *that specific dog*, but a different dog (since a dog of a different origin is a different dog). If the account is to provide for the genuine, unactualized possibility that this very dog could have been instantiated by different matter that was more intelligent, it must show that it is possible for a causal series to be different and possible that a thing can have a different origin.

Jubien seems to downplay the role that causal factors play in the instantiation of a property. He claims that the *greenness* of Fenway is the result of the activity of some painters, “But its now being green consists in this instantiation quite
independently of how it came to pass,” (56). So, he might maintain, the specific dog’s intelligence consists in the instantiation of the properties, quite independently of the causal factors that resulted in that instantiation.

But, instantiation of properties happens only at the particular level and what happens at the particular level does so as a result of physical causation. How the instantiation occurs is the way that the dog’s intelligence results, and without the causal factors that make it happen, the property cannot be instantiated. So, particular property instantiation is very much dependent upon the causal factors that result in it, and any account of instantiation must include them. It seems to follow that facts about particular level property instantiation cannot be explained by the corresponding abstract properties, alone. An account of genuine contingency that involves compatibility of properties only, without taking into account causal factors is either unfinished (since it will need to provide a further account of the contingency of causal factors and the genuine possibility that a k-essence can instantiate a different object) or it is circular (since it accounts for contingency by assuming that some causal factors are contingent and by assuming that it is a contingent fact that a k-essence instantiates the object that it does).

Similar problems arise with regard to Jubien’s account of the k-essences of particular individuals. According to Jubien, the k-essence of a particular individual is the conjunction of whatever properties an entity has to have in order to be that individual; the k-essence is “the ‘essence’ of that person, the totality of what is entailed by being that person,” (156-7). The statement, “George W. Bush is a Republican,” is merely contingently true because being a Republican is not a conjunct belonging to the conjunction of properties that is the person-essence, being George W. Bush. In other words, the property being a Republican is merely compatible with, and not entailed by, the property being George W. Bush.

However, the compatibility of the properties being George W. Bush and being a democrat is left unexplained. If being a democrat is compatible with being George W. Bush, it would seem that there must be some prior condition that determines that the two properties are compatible. For, in the absence of any further reason why the two properties are compatible, the compatibility is arbitrary and so, too, is the
possible truth of the proposition, “George W. Bush is a democrat.” But, if there is a deeper condition, it follows that the compatibility of the properties is not the ultimate basis for the alethic modality. Moreover, Jubien defends a social determination view with respect to proper names and natural kind terms. The meaning of the proper name George W. Bush and of the natural kind term being a democrat are determined by the community of speakers (138). Thus, we decided that the being George W. Bush is compatible with being a democrat and could have decided otherwise. It seems to follow that the possible truth of the proposition, “George W. bush is a democrat,” is not ultimately grounded in properties, but in the social determination of them. Now, there either is or there is not some further reason why we use the proper names and natural kind terms in the way that we do. If there is some further reason for our use, then that reason is the ultimate basis for contingent truth and not the properties. If there is no further reason, then it appears that we use the terms arbitrarily, in which case any such properties could be compatible and any proposition about them could be true. Either way, this account fails to adequately provide for the contingent truth of propositions about individuals.

Contrary to Jubien’s claims about our ordinary intuitions, I do not share the intuition that being George W. Bush and being a democrat are compatible. Being a democrat involves holding certain basic principles about public policy. But it seems to me that such fundamental beliefs make up a person’s core; they affect every decision that one makes, and they are not easily altered. I cannot imagine George W. Bush, that very person, as a democrat. Any time I entertain a thought experiment about George W. Bush, I can only imagine him as a republican. Thus, it is not intuitive to me that he could have been a democrat.

Furthermore, on Jubien’s account, the property being George W. Bush can be instantiated by different physical matter than the matter that actually instantiates it over time. According to him, being George W. Bush could have been instantiated by some physical matter other than the matter that was actually instantiated by the property, and that other matter could also have instantiated the property being a democrat. Thus, the possible truth of the proposition, “George W. Bush is a
democrat," is grounded, not only in the compatibility of the properties being George W. Bush and being a democrat, but also in the possibility that the property being George W. Bush could have been instantiated by matter other than the matter that is actually instantiated by that property. But, once again there is nothing in the account, other than an appeal to mere intuition, that shows that it is genuinely possible that different matter can be instantiated by being George W. Bush. And I don't share that intuition.

One might suggest that because being George W. Bush instantiates different matter over the course of time, being George W. Bush could also instantiate different matter than it actually does. But, matter and its various combinations are determined by natural laws that govern the causal series of it. In order for it to be possible that some other matter instantiated George W. Bush, it would have to be possible for the causal series to be altered, and so possible for the natural laws to be different. Moreover, Bush’s political affiliation would seem to be the outcome of some biological and physical factors in addition to some sociological and experiential influences. So, being George W. Bush could be coinstantiated with being a democrat only if some of these factors did not occur or if some of them resulted in different effects. Thus, and once again, even if object-talk is really just property-talk, something more than mere compatibility must be included in the account at the particular level; the account must include a consideration of the causal factors that result in the instantiation of the properties, as well as the relationships between the corresponding abstract properties.

The lack of consideration of causal factors that are involved in particular level property instantiation affects one of the central ideas of this book, namely, the 'great divide'. Jubien uses the great divide to help to solve a certain puzzle that arises concerning some of our statements about objects: Sometimes two statements about the same object might have different truth values. For example, we might say the following about an object that is a spherical piece of clay: (a) “The object could have been flat,” and we might say, (b) “The piece of clay could have been flat.” Jubien explains that although both statements are about the same object, they have different truth values: (a) is false, but (b) is true. He then shows that the puzzle
evaporates when we come to see that there is a ‘great divide’ between different ways of thinking about the object that the statements are about (15). One side of the divide involves thinking of the object purely as a physical object; the other side results from thinking of the object as an object of the familiar kind, piece of clay (15).

With regard to (a) and (b), all we need to do is to recognize that the two statements are about the same object, but each statement is about the object as it is on different sides of the great divide: (a) is about the object qua physical object, while (b) is about the object qua the kind piece of clay. Since a physical object cannot be otherwise and remain the same object, (a) is false; since a piece of clay can have different properties and remain the same piece of clay, (b) is true.

However, consider, again, a particular, spherical piece of clay. According to Jubien’s account, the spherical piece of clay is possibly flat. But, part of what it is to be that piece of clay is to be the result of a certain series of causes, none of which resulted in its being flat. Even if the properties being a piece of clay and being flat are compatible, that is not enough to guarantee the genuine possibility that this very piece of clay could have been flat. In addition to the compatibility of the abstract level properties, the causal factors that result in the instantiation of the particular level property being flat by this very piece of clay must be possible, as well.

In other words, if the statement, “The piece of clay could have been flat,” is taken to be about the object qua familiar kind, then it is not really about the object, at all; it is only about the general properties, being a piece of clay and being flat. The statement merely expresses the compatibility of those properties, which in turn entails that some pieces of clay are flat. But, the compatibility of abstract properties and the fact that some other pieces of clay are flat do not entail the genuine possibility that this very piece of clay could have been flat, and so do not entail the genuine possible truth of the proposition, “This piece of clay could have been flat.”

Although Jubien does not specifically discuss causal chains in the book, there are several places where he claims that they can be altered. The justification for such claims appeals to intuition and ordinary thinking. For example, he writes:
We ordinarily think an object could have been elsewhere because we think the physical forces acting upon it might have been different. We think a sudden gust of wind might have altered the path of a bird in flight (34).

According to this example we ordinarily think that the direction of a bird’s flight is contingent because we think that the causal series that involves the physical forces could have been different; we think that a sudden gust of wind could have altered the causal series that resulted in the bird’s path.

Now, the mere fact that some people think that physical forces can be different is not adequate justification for the claim that the physical forces can be different. Moreover, it is not evident that we do think the way that Jubien claims that we do. Many philosophers hold that physical forces could not have been different because the natural laws that govern them cannot be different. Alexander Bird (2007), Crawford Elder (1994), Brian Ellis (1999), (2001), and Chris Swoyer (1982) have successfully shown that the natural laws must be necessary, otherwise Humeanism would be true. In fact, given that the property being a physical force entails moving in a direction determined by the physical laws, the property being a physical force must be incompatible with moving in a direction other than that determined by the physical laws. Thus, it seems that Jubien’s account cannot provide for the possible truth of the proposition, “The physical forces might have been different,” and so cannot provide for the possible truth of the statement, “An object might have been elsewhere.”

A case can be made that we do not ordinarily think that a sudden gust of wind might have altered the path of a bird in flight. Consider an actual bird flying on an actual path that is not affected by any sudden gust of wind. We ordinarily think that the actual path is the result of the causal influences of the bird’s physical make-up and the outside elements. To think that a sudden gust of wind is possible, we would have to think that it is possible that the climatic factors were different – that the atmospheric pressure, the temperature, the wind speed, the wind direction, and so on could be different than what they actually are. And since we think that these factors are all determined by natural laws, the only way that we could think that such factors could have been different is by thinking that the laws determining them
could be different; but we don’t think that the laws could be different (otherwise we think that Humeanism is true, which we don’t think). Therefore, we don’t really think that there could have been a sudden gust of wind, for we certainly don’t think that a gust of wind could be suddenly caused by nothing.

We might and sometimes do think that because we can’t know all of the factors, the future is open, and so there is a possibility that some of them could have been different. However, our limited knowledge of the facts entails neither metaphysical nor even physical possibility. The mere fact that we cannot know with absolute certainty the various causal factors and what will result from them is merely a reflection of our limited knowledge of the actual facts and not a genuine contingency with respect to them.

We might and sometimes do think that because some actual birds’ paths are affected by gusts of wind, it is genuinely possible that a gust of wind could affect any bird’s path. But the mere fact that some birds’ paths are affected by wind does not entail that the direction of any particular bird’s path is contingent. It merely entails that the actual paths of some actual birds are affected by wind.

And if it is maintained that we think that this bird’s path can be affected by a gust of wind because being a bird’s path is compatible with being affected by a gust of wind, then we’re right back to where we started from. But, since the compatibility of these properties has not yet been explained, and since it has not yet been shown that the compatibility of abstract properties determines the contingency of the instantiation of particular properties, the mere fact that we think that the abstract properties are compatible does not entail that we think that the particular properties are contingently instantiated. And if we do think so, it has just been shown that our belief may be unjustified and that it could very well be false.

In other words, although it might seem that we can think of an alteration in a bird’s path, after further reflection upon the relationship between being that specific bird’s path and being affected by a gust of wind, we will find that we are not really thinking about that very bird and that very path; instead, we are merely in a state of limited knowledge concerning the facts, or we are thinking about some other birds and other paths, or we are thinking about the general properties being a bird’s path
and *being affected by a gust of wind.* But none of these thoughts is enough
to adequately ground the genuine possibility, nor even the thought of the possibility,
that *this very bird's path might have been altered.* Therefore, abstract property
compatibility cannot entail genuine contingency at the level of particular property
instantiation.

As mentioned above, Jubien thinks that a causal series can be altered, and in
general, that some things in the world could have been otherwise, because he holds
that we *ordinarily think* that there is genuine contingency in the world and that it is
*intuitive* that some things could have gone differently. The claim that it is intuitive
that there is genuine contingency in the world appears on about one out of every six
pages of the book. It is claimed that a given thing might have been somewhere else
(24)(29)(31)(34), might have had a different spatiotemporal history (27)(28), and
might have been made of entirely different matter (91)(116)(118)(120)(121)(128).
An entity that “merely *happens* to be a statue,” very easily might not have been a
statue, it “might have been a birdbath or a planter, or just a blob having no
significant shape or artifactual status,” (86). While, 'the same dog’ “could have been
smarter or better trained or born a little earlier, or in a different place, etc.,” (91). All
such cases of contingency are uncontroversial (90)(125) and such that no ordinary
person would deny them (116)(124); they are all in accordance with our everyday
convictions (24)(86), our ordinary thinking (34)(36)(61)(91)(128), and our

Furthermore, Jubien maintains that one main goal of the book is to account for
our intuitions about necessity and possibility and that those intuitions are based
upon our thoughts about relations among properties (104): “I believe that the
incompatibility of these properties is built into our ordinary thoughts about them
and the things that have them,” (107). The great divide that results from different
ways of thinking about objects results in modal differences (86).

Part of the reason why intuition and convictions are used as a source of
justification is because Jubien writes from the epistemic position that we do not get
at the world *as it is,* “there is a fact of the matter, but one that we’re epistemically
incapable of discerning, and ... for this reason we’re forced into the realm of
convention,” (13). According to Jubien, there are no objective, mind-independent objects that have intrinsic properties. To be an object is to be intentional, to be spoken of and thought of under a given convention (9).

Yet, Jubien defends Platonism. He holds that there are necessary, mind-independent abstract entities that we can get at, even though we cannot get at the world as it is. It is not immediately clear how Jubien can reconcile the view that there are no mind-independent objects with the view that there are mind-independent properties.

It is also questionable whether intuition is adequate justification for genuine contingency. Sydney Shoemaker (1980) and Bird (2007) show that intuitions cannot be used as adequate justification for genuine contingency. Furthermore, as may be clear from many of the objections that I’ve raised here, I do not share the intuitions that Jubien describes as ‘everyday’ and ‘ordinary’. In particular, I do not share the intuition that there is genuine contingency. So, our intuitions conflict. But how are we to determine which of our two competing intuitions is correct? On what basis can Jubien assert that his intuition is right and mine is wrong?

According to Jubien:

If we are to erect a theory on the foundation of our considered intuitions about cases, then we should strive to find one that accounts for as many as possible, and we should not let a tentative theory trump an incompatible intuition unless there seems nowhere else to turn (116).

Granted, most philosophers do share Jubien’s intuitions about genuine contingency, and not mine, thus his theory is an attempt to account for as many intuitions about contingency as possible.

However, any theory that uses intuition and ordinary thinking as justification cuts short the search for truth. For, sometimes our intuitions are mistaken and sometimes our thoughts inadequately express what is in fact the case. Although Jubien claims that we cannot get at the world as it is, our intuitions and thoughts must be about something, and what else could that something be than the world (as it is)? Rather than halting the investigation of the world by accepting all of our
intuitions as true, we ought to continue to examine those intuitions to see whether they correctly reflect the aspects of the world that are the objects of those intuitions.

Finally, it seems that there is a good reason for thinking that Jubien's intuitions are at least doubtful: As Jubien recognizes, many of his own intuitions are incompatible. The intuition that the statue (which is the object) could have been otherwise is incompatible with the intuition that the object could have been otherwise. The intuition that a dog could have been instantiated by different matter is incompatible with the intuition that the dog could not have had a different origin. Rather than considering the possibility that one of these intuitions is mistaken, Jubien sets out to solve the puzzle by accommodating for all of his intuitions with the 'great divide' (the statue qua familiar kind being a statue can be otherwise; the statue qua object cannot)(the dog qua dog-essence could have instantiated different matter; the dog qua physical object could not). But, there is a second option: He could merely reject the intuition that the statue and the dog could have been otherwise. Then there would be no incompatibility between intuitions and no need to develop a complex theory to attempt to account for statements about the same object that appear to have different truth values.

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