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RESEARCH STATEMENT

My primary research project is to develop and defend a new way to make sense of non-reductive metaphysical explanation. My key thesis is that we can only make sense of certain explanations by clarifying other putative explanations of the same thing-to-be-explained and by saying why these explanations aren’t satisfactory.

My project has three components: (i) defending the key thesis, (ii) clarifying why certain sorts of explanations aren’t satisfactory, and (iii) using this to help explain my alternative conception of metaphysical explanation.

(i) Defending the key thesis

Metaphysics has a long history of positing new entities, features, facts, or notions in order to explain the world as we know it. Medieval “realists” for instance posited universals in order to explain predication and similarity.

There’s also a long history of challenging such explanations-by-posit as unnecessary and spurious. Nominalists thus argue that universals are neither required nor of any help for explaining facts about predication and similarity.

Do familiar facts stand in need of explanation? And if so, what sort of explanation?

On the one hand, nominalists claim that facts about predication and similarity don’t stand in need of explanation, and insofar as universals are posited as the things which would provide such an explanation, talk of universals is empty.

On the other hand, “realists” claim that there is explanatory work to be done, and universals can do the work of explaining why things are similar.

I argue that both are partially right and partially wrong. Yes, some familiar facts do stand in need of explanation. But it’s not the sort of explanation-why that universals would putatively provide.

In “Reduction and metaphysical immodesty” (the first chapter of my dissertation), I argue that there’s good reason to say that predication and similarity stand in need of explanation. Very briefly, I do this by arguing that most of us want to reject an extremely “deflationary” or “reductive” construal of the familiar facts, and there is a need to explain what makes this construal false.

In “An explanation of explicable arguments and why they only work in some cases” (my writing sample, currently under review), I argue that when things stand in need of explanation, the sort of explanation that’s required is one which makes them intelligible—not the sort of explanation which merely says why something is. (Along the way I use this to explain why a certain argument for the Principle of Sufficient Reason fails.)

What would it take to provide such an explanation?

Nominalists sometimes say universals are unintelligible—talk of universals is empty. Similar complaints can be made against other putatively explanatory posits. But how
do we tell whether something is intelligible? Arguments which appeal to intuitions about intelligibility or a criterion of intelligibility often simply beg the question.

In “Immodest, yet articulate, metaphysics” (the second chapter of my dissertation), I defend a criterion of intelligibility, and argue that explanations-by-posit fail to satisfy this criterion. In a nutshell: your explanation is intelligible only if the thing doing the explaining helps you articulate how the thing to be explained is different than the other things from which it is to be distinguished.

This criterion rules out explanation-by-posit. If you posit universals as “those things, whatever they are, which explain genuine similarity”, then this doesn’t help you articulate the difference between things which are genuinely similar and things which aren’t. It gives you a label for the difference, but it doesn’t help make the difference intelligible. Further, I argue that appeal to “primitives” isn’t any better in this respect.

In “Realism and ‘table-pounding’” (an expansion of parts of my second chapter—in progress), I argue that you also can’t simply pound the table and say that by (e.g.) “universal” you don’t mean any of the things the nominalist accepts. Your view isn’t sufficiently intelligible unless you can also say why the things accepted by the nominalist aren’t satisfactory.

In “Explanatory gaps and infinite descent” (draft mostly completed), I argue that an indefinitely descending explanation—one that never bottoms out—also doesn’t give us what we want. We’d need a notion of metaphysical explanation which leaves no “explanatory gaps”, and while I think there is such a notion, it doesn’t allow for explanations which lack foundations.

Taken together, these papers constitute an argument by elimination for my key thesis that there’s some $x$ that stands in need of a type of explanation you can give only by saying why other putative explanations of $x$ don’t succeed (or aren’t satisfactory).

(ii) Clarifying unsatisfactory explanations

The second component of my project is to further clarify the explanations with which I mean to contrast my conception of non-reductive metaphysical explanation. While I currently have papers which address reductive explanation understood as grounding (Kit Fine), metaphysical causation (Jonathan Schaffer), or metaphysical semantics (Ted Sider), there’s much more work to be done to explore other ways of thinking about metaphysical explanation.

In “Fundamentality and recombination” (draft mostly completed), I develop a maximally intelligible account of metaphysical explanation which provides the best motivation for saying that fundamental things are freely-recombinable. The basic idea is that on this account, fundamental things cannot have the sort of nature which would itself stand in need of explanation. It follows that fundamental things don’t place any modal constraints on each other. But it also follows that fundamental things are “simple”—mereologically and otherwise—and thus not very interesting.

In “Lewis vs Sider vs Antihumeans” (complete draft), I argue that there’s an important disagreement between David Lewis and Ted Sider. While they both say that funda-
mentality is “primitive”, they mean different things by this. On Sider’s view, the property of being fundamental is primitive. But on Lewis’ view, a property is fundamental just in case it’s “simple”—it doesn’t have the sort of nature which does any explanatory work. Crucially, this means that Lewis’ objection that non-Humean primitives are “unintelligible” doesn’t apply to his own view.

(iii) Developing the alternative

The third component of my project—making sense of my alternative conception—builds on the previous stages of the project, and I plan to give it more attention once I have further developed the earlier stages of the project.

In “Holism and metaphysical explanation” (the third chapter of my dissertation), I begin to develop an account of non-reductive explanation. I argue that once we rule out the things that don’t work, what remains is something like the Platonic notion of irreducibly imperfect similarity.

Our understanding of metaphysical explanation has ramifications for how we think about objectivity, the epistemology of metaphysics, and the relation between metaphysics and other areas of philosophy or inquiry more generally. I plan to explore these ramifications in future work.

Odds and Ends

There are other papers which don’t fit as neatly into my main research project.

In “On an argument from coincidence to plenitude” (complete draft), I argue that plenitude doesn’t help answer the “grounding problem” for coincident objects. Karen Bennett has argued that it’s easier to explain (e.g.) how there can be statues and lumps grounded in the same bits of clay if we say that coincident objects are plenitudinous: for every possible modal profile, there’s a distinct coincident object with that profile. I argue that she’s wrong.

In “A fallacy regarding the second definition of Charmides” (complete draft), I develop an interpretation of this Platonic dialogue which explains why Plato may have intentionally had Socrates commit a logical fallacy. The basic idea is that Plato thinks the ability to answer a question indicates σωφρόσυνη (temperance) only if the answer comes from “inside”. But Plato can’t simply tell you this because then you wouldn’t have come to this conclusion from “inside” yourself. On my interpretation, Plato helps us discover this by its conspicuous absence from the dialogue.

I also have various papers in earlier stages of development, including a paper exploring the advantages of Platonic Forms over Aristotelian essences for ethics, a paper contrasting Patristic and Medieval apophaticism with apophaticism as it’s now typically understood, and a paper arguing that John Duns Scotus’ argument for the univocity of “being” begs the question against Thomas Aquinas (and also misses the point of Thomas’ view).

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1Or as Thomas Aquinas puts it, the name of one thing can be applied to another quasi per similitudinem, “as if” on account of a similarity (ST I, q. 33, a. 3, c.).