

Grace A. de Laguna's Theory of Universals: A Powers Ontology of Properties and Modality

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Abstract: In this paper I examine Grace A. de Laguna's theory of universals in its historical context and in relation to contemporary debates in analytic metaphysics. I explain the central features of her theory, arguing that her theory should be classified as a form of immanent realism and as a powers ontology. I then show in what ways her theory affords a theory of modality in terms of potentialities and discuss some of its consequences along the way.

Keywords: ontology, powers, universals, possibility, potentialities

1. Introduction

Grace A. de Laguna was a twentieth century American philosopher who falls within the tradition of speculative philosophy. It is difficult to give a precise definition of speculative philosophy, let alone reach a consensus on it and its exact contrast with analytic or critical philosophy. One thing that is clear, as Joel Katzav [2022] explains, is that speculative philosophy encompasses the metaphysical project of constructing an ontology, that is, a theory of the nature and modes of being. de Laguna's speculative philosophy also goes hand in hand with some kind of naturalism. As Katzav writes: 'The speculative philosopher's attempt to provide a coherent ontology and epistemology must not only be an interpretation of experience, it must provide interpretations that are appropriately constrained by the special sciences' [ibid.: 22]. Katzav provides an illuminating account of her ontology, emphasising the fact that potentialities are a central kind of entity in her ontology. In my paper, I build off Katzav's account in two ways: first, by providing historical context that situates her ontology against the backdrop of A.N. Whitehead and Charles S. Peirce's metaphysics, and second, by relating it to contemporary debates in analytic metaphysics.

I argue that de Laguna defends a powers ontology [see e.g., Molnar 2003; Mumford and Anjum 2011].¹ On her view, universals are potentialities or powers. Potentialities are not ontically severed from concrete individuals. Instead they are constituents of individuals, although they are not the only constituents. Each individual has a particular enduring substrate (a discrete this) as well as potentialities, some of which are actualised, some of which are not and might never be. Thus an individual has two factors or constituents: a particular and its potentialities. Her view is a brand of immanent realism about universals, similar to D.M. Armstrong's ontology of states of affairs in some but not all respects [Armstrong 1997]. This is no surprise because their views are both broadly Aristotelian.

Two of her primary concerns are to explain the temporal flux of the concrete world and the evolutionary production in time of genuinely new individuals and new kinds of individuals. Hence her approach to the problem of universals is intertwined with issues in time and modality. She recognises that her theory of universals provides a theory of modality according to which possibility and necessity are grounded in potentialities. She thus anticipates modal dispositionalism, a theory of modality developed by Barbara Vetter [2015] and others [Borghini and Williams 2008; Jacobs 2010]; for discussion, see [Allen 2017].

In what follows, I explain the central features of de Laguna's immanent realism and outline her notion of powers. I then examine her critique of Platonist ontologies of modality, which motivates her view that possibilities are explained in terms of potentialities. Finally, I explore her proposal concerning the structuring of potentialities, concluding that her metaphysics should be recognised as one classic statement of a powers ontology of properties and modality in twentieth century metaphysics.

2. Universals and Powers

In de Laguna's ontology, properties and relations are universals. There are also individuals, which instantiate universals. An individual is a continuant. This covers both *things* such as my teapot and *events* such as Horace Walpole's last sneeze. An individual exists in time. It endures, it changes, it is in process. An event is an (individual) act of an individual. Acts are called 'occurrences' [de Laguna 1966: 58].

¹ For defences of powers from de Laguna's time, see [Broad 1933: 265-69; Ushenko 1946].

An individual has two constituents or factors: a particular and a universal or universals. If there were no individuals, there would be no universals. This commits her to a brand of immanent realism. She was not alone in holding this theory. Samuel Alexander also endorsed immanent realism [1920: 208].

In contemporary metaphysics, Armstrong is a well-known defender of immanent realism. Her theory resembles Armstrong's in some interesting ways. Her notion of an individual is close to Armstrong's notion of a state of affairs. An individual in Armstrong's terminology is the thick particular and a particular is the thin particular [Armstrong 1997: 124-25]. Also, Armstrong's states of affairs have an ontic primacy such that the thin particular (Lockean substrate) and its universals are 'aspects of, abstractions from, the state of affairs' [Armstrong 1989a: 43]. Her use of the word 'factor' is another way of saying 'aspect'. Universals and thin particulars are derivative features dependent on some state of affairs or individual. In reality, there is no Lockean substrate.

When it comes to the problem of universals she makes a striking move. The problem of universals rests on the mistaken assumption that for every predicate or term of discourse there corresponds a universal [de Laguna 1951a: 155]. Her response anticipates Armstrong's rejection of Plato's argument from meaning [Armstrong 1989b: 78-79], which is recognised as a distinctive mark of the ontological turn: ontology should not be read off language or logic. She thinks that there are other ways to discover whether universals exist and what they are like. One way is through science [de Laguna 1966: 64]. Armstrong's a posteriori realism echoes her suggestion here. Like Armstrong, she thinks universals are sparse, not abundant; 'they are not to be identified with universals as terms of logical discourse' [de Laguna 1951a: 162]. Because she believes that new kinds, individuals and potentialities are developed over time, she would reject the physicalist thesis that only physics discovers sparse universals. A genuinely new kind would be itself a sparse property. She would be more inclined to adopt the scientific conception of sparse properties [Schaffer 2004]. According to the scientific conception, sparse properties come from all levels of nature; higher-level sciences discover sparse universals just as much as physics.

A posteriori realism, from her perspective, indicates that science discovers that there are potentialities. The properties that science has uncovered must be instantiated in certain contexts relative to other properties the individual has and the relations it

stands in to other individuals as well as the properties of other individuals. The mass of object *O* is had by *O* in relation to certain conditions, like that of its velocity. Shape is an extrinsic property relative to a frame of reference. Hence she calls potentialities ‘conditional potentialities’. She says: ‘The shapes and sizes in some sense *are there* to be measured, but their being there is not independent of the conditional potentialities of behavior by which we test and identify them’ [1951a: 164, her italics].² She makes the stronger claim that science would be futile if universals were not potentialities. It is part and parcel of scientific inquiry that we conceive of properties as powers [de Laguna 1951a: 166; for a similar argument, see Cartwright and Pemberton 2013].

Science is not the only path to immanent potentialities. Metaphysics should agree with common sense as well. Following Peirce, she writes: ‘A metaphysical theory that does not conform to common sense and express the natural beliefs of human beings is thereby condemned’ [de Laguna 1951b: 15]. Common sense expresses the belief that this cube of sugar has the power to dissolve in a cup of tea. Therefore, our theory should say powers exist. As she claims: ‘That whatever exists contains potentialities is a deep-seated, if inarticulate, belief of our common sense’ [1951a: 160]. This appeal to common sense, and the previous argument from science, does not mean she is never critical of science or common sense. Speculative philosophy involves a critique of both common sense and science. At the same time she recognises that one’s philosophy should not flatly deny certain truths of science or common sense.

The alternative proposal that properties are categorical or actual (as she says) must be rejected.³ She is aware that an individual may have several potentialities and she admits that the manifestation of a potentiality can be complicated, because it involves other individuals and hence ‘reciprocal and correlative characters’ [de Laguna 1951a: 175]. Thus it is metaphysically impossible for an individual to exist on its own: ‘the reciprocal relatedness of individuals is a condition of their existence’ [de Laguna

² In her much earlier joint work with Theodore de Laguna, there is a gesture towards this view in their historical discussion about primary or observable qualities: such qualities exhibit a dynamical relativity [de Laguna and de Laguna 1910: 89-90].

³ She does not discuss the various ways that friends of categorical properties might develop their view, but part of her rejection of it stems from her interpretation of it as lacking any dynamism: a categorical or truly actual property is had by an object without any reference to time or to the object enjoying its reality in time. She is not surprised that Descartes must invoke God to continuously create the world at each moment [de Laguna 1951a: 160]. Later theories of categorical properties introduce laws, which might satisfy her demand for incorporating some sensitivity to temporality. But the plausibility of these views would depend on how a theory of laws is spelled out. If laws are eternal, she would consider the resultant view a form of Platonism and reject it on grounds of endorsing a problematic ontic dualism.

1966: 60]. For an individual to exist it must act, but in acting it is realising potentialities; realising potentialities involves the potentialities of other individuals.

Even though the manifestation of a power is relational due to causal interactions among existents it does not follow that the power itself is complex. The power can be simple and lead to relational manifestations as the temporal world unfolds in a process of becoming. She may not accept that some powers have other powers as constituents, but she admits cases where an individual has a power *in virtue of* having another power. Indeed, each individual has a basic or essential potentiality [de Laguna 1966: 62]. This basic potentiality is continually actualised in the individual and serves as the ground for other potentialities and their manifestations. Although potentialities can only be realised in an interrelated web of individuals over a period of time, potentialities are intrinsic properties of individuals [de Laguna 1966: 66]. A potentiality qua intrinsic property of an individual is a real potentiality. There are potentialities that have ‘correlative counterparts’ and those that do not. If potentiality *P* has no correlative counterparts c_1, c_2, \dots, c_n , then *P* is unrealisable. If *P* has correlative counterparts c_1, c_2, \dots, c_n , then *P* is realisable.

She does not consider whether dispositions (powers) are reducible to categorical properties. The natural way to interpret her is that she takes the notion of a power as primitive. Hence, she accepts pure powers. Because the notion of a power is primitive, she would not assert that a power has an essence over and above the power. Since de Laguna was familiar with Whitehead’s distinction between eternal objects and essences, she would have made it explicit that a power has an essence if she thought this was the case. Powers, on her view, play the role of essence, so powers do not have essences. Powers *are* essences [cf. Marmodoro 2010].

Independent of the success of her arguments for powers de Laguna must defend the metaphysical commitments of her theory. One controversial commitment is that individuals exhibit metaphysical complexity – because they have particulars and universals as factors – and yet they are metaphysically primitive. An individual is not built up from its constituents [cf. Armstrong 1989a: 43]. Her view implies that the individual is not subject to composition and decomposition talk. So in one sense a mereology of the inner structure of individuals is not required, but nonetheless some story must be given of this complexity; otherwise her theory collapses into nominalism.

3. Modality and Potentialities

de Laguna's target is a Platonistic theory that was a common position of her time inherited from Plato and Descartes. Plato's dualism consists of the realm of being (eternal forms) and becoming (temporal existents). On this view, the divide between these two realms expresses a modal division. Forms are *possibles*. Existents are *actual* objects. To say something is possible is to say that some uninstantiated form might be instantiated. Today this view is called magical ersatzism. It is defended by Peter Forrest [1986], Alvin Plantinga [1974], and Peter van Inwagen [1986]. In this family of views, transcendental entities (such as Platonic universals or Plantingian states of affairs) play the role of possibilities. A possible world is an abstract entity that represents the concrete world being thus and so. She says: 'The possibles are thus universals in that they may be indefinitely repeated, or exemplified, in existents, each existent representing a particular case of a universal or universals' [de Laguna 1951a: 159]. And that: 'Whatever exists is held to be in some sense a selection from this infinite realm of the possible' [de Laguna 1951a: 159]. A universal is actual if it is exemplified by a concrete existent. Magical ersatzers are actualists in a further sense: they think that all abstracta are actual since everything that exists is actual.

One of her objections against this sort of Platonism is remarkably similar to David Lewis's critique of magical ersatzism [Lewis 1986: 174-82]. According to this theory, certain possibles are instantiated in the actual concrete world. The concrete world is a maximal set of selected possibles. Necessarily, if the world is thus and so, then these possibles (and not those) must be selected. What is it about the selected possibles that ensures they are selected and not some other plurality of possibles? What grounds this necessary connection? After all, the concrete world is contingent. It could have instantiated or actualised other universals and may instantiate or actualise differing sets of universals in the future. Nothing in the intrinsic nature of the possibles guarantees that this temporal sequence of universals will be realised in the concrete world. She continues:

The sequence of events in time rests upon no ground in the essences they are thought to embody, or in the universals they exemplify. For universals, as ideal objects of thought, or as terms of discourse, bear only logical relations to one another. Since the being they have is nontemporal, out of time, the coexistence or sequential order of their temporal

actualization is contingent and indeterminate, wholly irrelevant to their nature as ideal [1951a: 159].

Hence the relation between the existent and the possibles is unintelligible. If there were such a connection between the selected possibles and the concrete world, it would be by fiat that it holds and it would be magic that we understand this connection. In short, the Platonist admits necessary connections between a certain set of selected possibles and the concrete world. However, we have a vivid and clear intuition that these connections are not necessary. If the world is thus and so, some other possibles could have been selected because there is nothing distinctive about the first set of possibles that ensures the relation must hold. The theory just says it holds, and holds of absolute necessity. Therefore, to say they are necessary is unintelligible [cf. Lewis 1986: 180-81].

For de Laguna, then, what is possible is grounded in what is actual, grounded in the concrete world of becoming. Since universals are considered as possibles and she thinks universals are potentialities, it follows that possibles are potentialities. Moreover, potentialities are factors of concrete individuals, so possibilities as potentialities are immanent. This view is called modal dispositionalism in contemporary metaphysics. According to this theory, ‘It is possible that p just in case something has a potentiality for it to be the case that p ’ [Vetter 2015: 18; cf. Allen 2017: 28].⁴

de Laguna’s theory of modality is supported by common sense and science, provided that the arguments above are sound, because on those terms we have epistemic access to powers. However, if powers account for possibilities, we need epistemic access to the *modal* features of powers, but it is questionable whether this is the case. Ordinary experience only detects *manifestations* of powers. We apprehend the potentiality qua potentiality through some kind of abstraction. If potentialities are not epistemically familiar in the right sort of ways, key concepts of her theory remain mysterious.

⁴ Jacob Loewenberg similarly argued that ‘possible’ refers to *capacities* of actual existents. To capture the intuition that possibilities are real, unlike impossibilities, he says possibilities are ‘coactual’ with actual existents. He writes: ‘What I mean by the coactual is what the actual is capable of being. Capacity to realize alternative potencies or tendencies is an integral part of the actual. Capacity is immanent and not transcendent. It is the immanence of capacity which enables us to speak of the possible and the actual as “cohabiting” together in the same context’ [Loewenberg 1934: 92].

Sophie Allen – although no defender of modal dispositionalism – has argued that only an extreme empiricism would object that we have no evidence and justification for dispositional properties [Allen 2017: 29-30]. But even if we reject extreme empiricism we have to swallow the fact that we do not perceive, come into causal contact with, the modal nature of powers. The problem is exacerbated if the modal dispositionalist adds that powers do not require interesting, non-circular identity conditions [Vetter 2015: 35]. de Laguna would say that we individuate and classify powers in terms of their manifestations but that this does not yield an account of the *nature* of powers [de Laguna 1951a: 165]. So no informative identity conditions can be specified. It remains to be seen whether this breaks down the epistemological barrier.

For de Laguna, like Whitehead and Plato, becoming is an ontologically significant fact of reality. She thinks it is best understood in evolutionary terms. The universe obeys basic evolutionary principles that drive creative advance [de Laguna 1966: 1-23]. As becoming unfolds certain possibilities are no longer realisable and other possibilities are open to being realisable. Thus at each point in time there exists some plurality of existents that ground the possibility for certain potentialities to be realised. She says: ‘Each change in existence opens up fresh possibilities for becoming and shuts the door on what once was not excluded’ [1951a: 176]. However, she must account for *metaphysical* possibilities, not just causal and nomic ones. There are properties that existents instantiate that might never be realised. There are properties that are not had by any concrete existent and are not built out of simpler properties instantiated by existents. Lewis calls these entities ‘alien properties’ [1986: 159]. de Laguna cannot account for alien possibilities, if potentialities are immanent – or so the objection goes.

Interestingly, on her view, among possibles there is the ‘inner zone of imminent actualization’ and the ‘outer zone of mere latency and indeterminacy’ [1951a: 176; see also 1966: 60]. The inner zone of possibilities is modally relevant to the actual state of existents with respect to becoming in nature. The set of existents at one time fix the boundaries on the inner zone such that only potentialities in that zone can be actualised. When the global state of the concrete world fixes the inner zone other possibilities are pushed to the outer zone. Possibilities in the outer zone are eliminated with respect to actual facts of becoming. New simple potentialities could emerge if the

evolutionary track of the concrete world proceeds in a certain way. Alien possibilities are identified with possibilities in the outer zone. So it appears she can account for alien possibilities. You might question whether her account of metaphysical possibilities and alien properties is limited by reference to the active, organic unfolding of potentialities. To make the objection stick her opponent needs to show that our intuitions of an alien property clearly represent something that must have no trace to real individuals. However, our intuitions on such a distant point might not be stable enough to settle the dispute either way.

Like contemporary modal dispositionalists, de Laguna's theory is unabashedly a non-reductive account of modality. A potentiality has modal features that are not further explained. It is an essential fact about each power that it realises certain causal processes if the conditions are right. It is an essential fact that a power points towards correlative counterpart powers. There is modal flexibility in the manifestation of potentialities but that pertains to their actualisation. She also posits higher-order modal features to characterise the larger structuring of potentialities, as we will see below. Ultimately, the issue cuts both ways: if we are accustomed to primitive modality, helping ourselves to more will not deter us; if we hope to explain modality or at least explain some modality, we should avoid the constant appeal to primitive modality.

4. The Ideal Continuum: Structuring Potentialities

de Laguna is compelled to say something about the structure and unity of potentialities. This is partly because she develops her theory through a rejection of George Santayana and Whitehead's Platonist alternatives. Another reason is that she hopes to explain how potentialities structure and give order to concrete individuals in a world of becoming. At the same time she maintains that the possible supervenes on the actual [de Laguna 1951a: 167].

Santayana posits an infinitely complex essence that contains all other essences [Santayana 1942]. This infinitely complex essence, however, is not the realm of essence unified as a whole because it too is an essence. Santayana's realm of essence is a chaotic collection of essences, detached from concrete existence. de Laguna objects that the disorder of his realm of essence is ill-equipped to explain the order we find in nature [de Laguna 1951a: 170]. Whitehead's Platonic forms are eternal objects and

each of them has an essence. In some places he claims that each eternal object has an individual (non-relational) essence *and* a relational essence [de Laguna 1951a: 171]. In *Process and Reality*, God plays the role of structuring and unifying eternal objects, so there is no need to appeal to relational essences [Whitehead 1929: 73]. She argues that Whitehead achieves at best a loose multiplicity of eternal objects. We need a more robust unity that can only come from a continuum [de Laguna 1951a: 173]. Continuity allows for seamless transition from one potentiality to another and permits an essential connectedness among the possibles.

Her hypothesis is that potentialities are involved in an ideal continuum. She develops the concept from Peirce's notion of a 'potential aggregate' [de Laguna 1951a: 173]. A potential aggregate is not a real aggregate. If it were real, it would be complete; but future potentialities are indeterminate; so the aggregate cannot be complete, so it cannot be real; it must be potential [Peirce 1935: 185; see also Peirce 1992: 247]. As a potential aggregate it does not have parts. It is not composed of distinct elements. Instead a potential aggregate 'contains' general conditions or principles that allow for entities (potentialities) to be thus and so. On her view, there is a potential aggregate of potentialities. She writes: 'It at once permits the determination of the particular potentialities which characterize the concrete existents of the temporal world and provides the general conditions for their relatedness to one another' [1951a: 173]. The potential aggregate is a continuum in the sense that it is a 'relational generality'. In other words, the potential aggregate is a complex, higher-order modal feature of potentialities.

Her use of a continuity hypothesis depends on the coherence of Peirce's notion of a continuum. We need further details about the unifying relation between the ideal continuum and its elements, especially when the ideal continuum does not, strictly speaking, have potentialities as constituents. The continuum is prior to its *potential* 'parts'. The continuum is not mathematically structured like a Cantorian multitude, because the elements of the continuum no longer retain their distinct identities but are rather 'welded into one another' [Peirce 1992: 159-60].⁵ She adds that it is an *ontological* continuum in that it is 'infinitely structurable' [1981: 175], which in turn allows us to specify the notion of a possible world. She says: 'There is, so to speak, an

⁵ Demetra Sfondoni-Mentzou argues that potentiality is a key concept in Peirce's metaphysics of continuity, which supports de Laguna's reading of Peirce [Sfondoni-Mentzou 1997].

infinite number and variety of possible worlds, and each one has a ground plan permitting infinite elaboration compatible with it, but never constituting a completed structure of Being' [1981: 175].

One way to *understand* the concept of an ideal continuum is to see it at work in the context of modal epistemology. The ideal continuum is an infinite 'collection' drained of any specificity. In epistemic terms, it only affords general knowledge of modal beliefs. The potential aggregate offers general principles that we can use in lines of reasoning to acquire modal beliefs [cf. Lewis 1986: 114]. This epistemological suggestion can be grafted on to the thesis that the potential aggregate of potentialities is inherently indeterminate but determinable in the sense that posterior, derivative aspects of the continuum are capable of becoming determinate and yet in their ideal mode remain general (for discussion of Peirce's modal epistemology, see [Legg 2012]).

The concept of an ideal continuum has some explanatory mileage. Potentialities do not exist in a separate realm. However, the potential aggregate of potentialities is in one sense independent of the concrete world. Given that potentialities are immanent, a certain set of potentialities is contingent because individuals are contingent. If a different set of individuals unfolded in the world of becoming, a different set of specific potentialities would have existed. Therefore, the ideal continuum is not 'exhausted' by the contingent set of potentialities [de Laguna 1951a: 174; 1981: 175]. She thereby avoids a Platonic realm of essence and accounts for modal variation of the existence of potentialities. It gives meaning to the idea that a potentiality need not exist but might exist, plus it explains the larger relational structure of potentialities as we conceive of them as a realm of essences. Put differently, the metaphysical *source* of possibility (and necessity) is the ideal continuum but the *being* of this continuum is grounded in actual individuals. When we look at some world, then, across time in its becoming, we see that it:

involves a primordial structuring of the ideal continuum, a determining of the general conditions, not merely of any world, but of such a world as this. Such structuring is not, however, complete. It is rather the determination of such general potentialities as set the pattern of this world. Whatever comes into existence and whatever changes occur are such as conform to this general pattern and are compossible with what already exists. But neither the particular individuals, nor even the specific kinds which arise in the actual course of nature, are determined by this primordial pattern of the world [1951a: 175].

Becoming grounds the manifold existence of potentialities. Although individuals in becoming are not bound to the primordial structuring of potentialities, what is possible for individuals must conform to this structuring or patterning. This solution shows us how important it is for de Laguna to recognise the fact of becoming as fundamental and to recognise that modality is inseparable from temporality. Talk of potentialities that might exist is understood in terms of how individuals live out their lives in a vast web of becoming. Becoming opens up and restricts what potentialities there are and explains the fact that some potentialities and some individuals do not exist but might. Becoming also fixes the inner and outer zones of possibility and thereby solves the long-standing problem of accounting for alien possibilities.

The appeal to a higher-order modal category of a potential aggregate shows us how deep the primitive modality goes in de Laguna's theory. The concept of a possible world and of a plurality of worlds falls out of her notion of an ideal continuum, but her understanding of the being of the continuum is construed in counterfactual terms. This fits with her presupposition that possibility is first and foremost about *our* world and how it *becomes*. This presupposition rests on the intuition that the actual is prior to the possible. New versions of actualism such as modal dispositionalism hold on to this foundational insight as much as it can. de Laguna's metaphysics lends plausibility to this approach to modality.

5. Conclusion

de Laguna's theory of universals should be recognised as a classic statement of a powers ontology and modal dispositionalism in twentieth century metaphysics. Both of these theories are live options in debates about properties and modality. Her work should really be studied by analytic metaphysicians, in particular, 'Existence and Potentiality'. The hallmarks of speculative philosophy are the source of the differences between her modal metaphysics and its analytic counterparts. The Whiteheadian preoccupation with becoming couches her philosophy in language that is foreign to analytic philosophers, but, as I have shown, her work is not completely alien to contemporary metaphysicians. I agree with Katzav that a study of de Laguna's work will improve our understanding of the history of twentieth century philosophy, especially of the rise of analytic philosophy. However, to execute this task properly we need a rigorous treatment of the distinction between analytic and speculative

philosophy, both as de Laguna drew it and as others drew it. Since there appear to be several ways to draw the distinction, we – as historians of philosophy – need to be mindful of drawing it in such a way that it aids us in explaining the development of twentieth century philosophy.⁶

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