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# Metaphysical Themes 1274-1671, by Robert Pasnau

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Pasnau, Robert, *Metaphysical Themes 1274–1671*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. xiv + 796, £80 (hardback).

In his original and stimulating book, Pasnau advances the thesis that there is a common body of ideas about *substance* that is uniquely distinctive of a four-century period never looked at as a whole before. On the basis of this continuity of ideas over a period in the history of philosophy traditionally separated into two, Pasnau proposes a new periodization. Assuming that Bonaventure's and Aquinas' scholasticism still belongs to the 'classical' period, Pasnau posits the year in which they died, 1274, as a conventional date for the end of classical philosophy. On Pasnau's view, the medieval period begins then; and conventionally ends with the first draft of Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, in 1671. Within these newly established chronological boundaries, Pasnau aims at understanding what is distinctive of the medieval inquiry into the metaphysics of substance; and what, from within that inquiry, caused its demise and marked the beginning of new philosophical programs.

In addition to offering an original way of thinking about medieval metaphysics in the light of this new periodization, a second major merit of the book is that it is a unique resource for the advancement of our knowledge of the four centuries under consideration. It makes accessible texts almost none of which have been translated into English or any other modern language. (Most have not even been edited in modern times.) The material is presented thematically, not chronologically, with headings and subheadings well chosen by Pasnau to facilitate connections with the contemporary parlance.

The book begins with the study of medieval views on change, crucial to the understanding of nature since the birth of Western philosophy. All changes require an enduring substratum, thus part I of Pasnau's book is about *matter*. Part II is about how matter, suitably informed, yields *substance*, addressing the distinction between *subject* and substance, and the nature of the subject. While substances persist, some of their properties come and go, so part III is about *accidents*. It looks at real accidents, the relation of inherence, the categories, and the nature of modes. Parts IV and V are about two principal kinds of accidents: quantity (including extension) and quality (including real qualities, primary and secondary qualities, dispositional properties etc.). Finally, part VI considers the question of how substances persist as unified beings through time and discusses the unity and identity of substance with reference to issues such as substantial forms, mereology, identity criteria, persistence and corruption.

Doing justice to the book as a whole is of course an impossible task within the present space limits. I will here engage with a relatively narrow section in the book, which well exemplifies the general strategy in Pasnau's work, and focus on the topic of powers and dispositions. In line with his general views about the period under consideration, Pasnau advances the thesis that the medieval views regarding powers and dispositions are very homogeneous [519, 522, 535, 538], and distinctive in relation to (at least) later periods of the history of philosophy [525, 531, 535]. In arguing for this thesis, Pasnau makes particular reference to Ockham, Zabarella, Suárez, Boyle, and Locke, in addition to the non-classical scholastics more generally. The variety of authors and the temporal span are both quite wide. The common view that Pasnau claims characterizes the period under consideration is that 'powers or dispositions are not part of the ontology . . . only categorical properties are' [519]. Pasnau argues for his continuity thesis by looking for *absence of commitment* to dispositional properties: 'What I seek to show is that the authors of our four centuries cannot be found postulating . . . properties that are nothing more than bare dispositions' [519]. One might wonder whether the absence of a commitment to a particular thesis might

really justify intellectual continuity between a variety of otherwise quite different metaphysical positions.

The terminology Pasnau uses may differ from the one the reader is familiar with, so it might be helpful to clarify how Pasnau draws the contrast between bare dispositions and categorical properties. Dispositions are such that 'they are merely conditionally actual; their essential nature is manifested only under certain conditions' [519], and, 'if causally efficacious at all, their efficacy is borrowed or derivative from other, more basic properties' [519]. By contrast, categorical properties are such that they are 'categorically actual' [519], and they 'have intrinsic causal powers' [519]. I take it that the contrast between 'conditionally' versus 'categorically' actual indicates that while both kinds of properties are always real, the 'conditionally actual' ones can also manifest. (On this understanding, sphericity for example would be a categorically actual property, while fragility would be a conditionally actual one.)

Pasnau further develops the distinction between categorical properties and bare dispositions thus: categorical properties are always real and actual; they are not powers but *have* powers (e.g. causal efficacy); they bestow power on the bare dispositions. By contrast, bare dispositions are such that all there is to their nature is what they enable their bearer to do or suffer. They are not intrinsically powerful; rather they derive their powerfulness from the categorical properties. One concern that might be raised is, how do dispositional properties derive their efficacy from categorical properties? More importantly, where would the categorical properties themselves find causal efficacy, if not in dispositions/powers? But if they did, a regress would ensue. (Or else, we should understand medieval power ontology to be have anticipated C. B. Martin's [2008] and John Heil's [2003] 'surprising identity' of the categorical and the dispositional.)

Even supposing that the distinction between categorical properties and bare dispositions, as Pasnau draws it, would be helpful in understanding medieval ontology, we need to consider whether the extant textual evidence quoted by Pasnau is compatible with the interpretation he is proposing. Locke and Boyle, for example, do talk about powers; Pasnau claims that we should understand them as talking about 'nominal powers', without making any ontological claim that powers are real properties in their ontology.

As Pasnau accounts for them, bare dispositions and nominal powers differ in that bare dispositions are 'pure' powers that have no causal efficacy of their own (they derive it from the primary properties) while nominal powers are a shorthand description of primary or categorical properties. Thus, Pasnau writes [520, my emphasis]:

> When Boyle and Locke talk about bodies, they use 'power' and 'disposition' in an utterly reductive sense, so that for a body to have a power or disposition is nothing more than for it to have a certain sort of corpuscularian structure ... This is not to make the more modest claim that these powers or dispositions supervene [non-reductively or non-eliminatively] on the strictly corpuscularian facts.

Pasnau attributes to Boyle and Locke an ontology that includes primary properties, relations and laws of nature only. The secondary properties (i.e. the bare dispositions) reduce to their holistic combination. The problem with the position that Pasnau attributes to Locke and Boyle is that it does not account for an important part of reality, namely what things *can* do; it accounts only for what things do, or how they are.

I will look in some more detail at the case that Pasnau makes for Boyle and Locke, in turn. Regarding Boyle, Pasnau writes [523]:

> Boyle does not think that sensible qualities (and in general other powers) are to be reduced merely to the texture of the body that we speak of as having the quality. The lock 'obtain[s] a new capacity' . . . once the key comes into existence, but since the lock itself changes not at all, this capacity cannot be identified with the texture of the lock.

But Boyle does indeed take the reductive view about powers and dispositions that Pasnau denies him; and even Pasnau seems to acknowledge that

> [Boyle himself says that] qualities for the most part consist in *relations,* upon whose account one body is fitted to act upon others, or disposed to be acted on by them, and receive impressions by them . . . Many commentators [think that] Boyle is embracing an ontology of relations . . . *Boyle means only that the reductive base for qualities and powers is the texture of the body that is said to have the power, together with the textures of the relevant surrounding bodies, and the laws of nature that govern those bodies.*
>
> [522–3, my emphasis]

Boyle is saying that, whereas a sensible quality is not reducible to the texture of the body, because it is a *relation*, it is reducible to the texture of the body plus the surrounding bodies and laws of nature. But this, *pace* Pasnau, is not to deny that powers and dispositions are part of the ontology.

Turning now to Locke, Pasnau quotes him as saying that 'powers are relations, not agents' and powers 'depend on those real and primary qualities'. Pasnau adds [531, my emphasis]:

> The powers might be said to be in bodies, but they are there as relations. As such *their existence depends on other factors*, and cannot be identified with the primary qualities of *any particular body* . . . Locke tells us explicitly that he is not a realist about relations: they have 'no other reality but what they have in the minds of men' . . . [Boyle's and Locke's] view is one that has no modern counterpart . . . They are reductivists about color (and other sensible qualities) but, unlike modern physicalists, they do not assume that a body's having a color reduces simply to facts about that particular body . . . The theory's sensitivity to environmental factors does not preclude it from being *reductive*, provided that the reduction is *holistic*.

But, from this, it does not follow that

> We can avoid having to suppose that Locke harbours an ontology of myriad powers, all grounded in an unknowable substratum, which all together comprises the familiar things we call horses and gold. This would go far beyond the most extravagant metaphysical systems of the scholastic era.
>
> [534]

Pasnau has not shown us what is 'extravagant' about a power ontology, which need not endorse his characterization of bare dispositions and categorical properties. Secondly, if the view were so extravagant, there would be nothing surprising in the fact that no one holds it during the four centuries under consideration. Finally, even if Pasnau had shown us that there is lack of commitment to such a view throughout the

period under his consideration, this hardly makes it a compelling case for a common body of ideas that would justify a new periodization in the history of philosophy.

In conclusion: Pasnau's book is a wealth of primary sources and reflective discussion, spanning four centuries of philosophy. There is much new material that he brings to the fore with his own translations, which is of great value for the scholars of this period. I am not convinced about the periodization he tries to establish, but this did not stop me from finding the book highly stimulating, and useful.

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