

## BOOK REVIEW

*Powers and Capacities in Philosophy: The New Aristotelianism.* BY RUTH GROFF AND JOHN GRECO. (New York and London: Routledge, 2013. Pp. 360. Price £80.00 hardback.)

Metaphysical accounts of fundamental properties may be divided into two camps. The ‘Humean’ view holds that all fundamental properties are categorical properties (purely qualitative properties which possess no essential dispositional character). All dispositional properties are non-fundamental properties grounded in categorical properties (and the laws of nature). In contrast, the ‘Aristotelian’ view (often called ‘dispositional essentialism’ or ‘power-ontology’) holds that (at least some of) the fundamental metaphysical properties are essentially dispositional. The present volume is motivated by the thought that the recent resurgence of the latter view in metaphysics will challenge long-standing Humean assumptions in other areas. It aims to provide ‘a composite portrait of a neo-Aristotelian, powers-based approach to issues in contemporary analytic philosophy’ (p. 1), and offers seventeen original essays to this end.

Part I, ‘Metaphysics’ (four papers), opens with a piece by Stephen Mumford describing how his own thinking about powers developed over time. Next, Alexander Bird provides a cautionary note *against* overenthusiastic estimations of the significance of dispositional essentialism for other fields and argues that the success of dispositional accounts in other areas has no direct bearing on whether the fundamental properties are categorical properties. Eleonore Stump compares a fairly typical modern account of emergent causal properties with the account of Aquinas (for whom causal power depends upon functional organization) and Lynn Joy argues that Hume is not so ‘Humean’.

Part II, ‘Philosophy of Science’ (three papers), begins with a paper by Nancy Cartwright and John Pemberton. They suppose that powers make stable ‘contributions’ across different circumstances (rather than having different manifestation types depending upon their mutual manifestation partners) and argue that taking powers to be fundamental properties makes good sense of scientific practice. Next, Anjan Chakravartty proposes that a powers-based approach combines the pay-off of both entity realism (the view that the entities described

in science exist) and structural realism (the view that scientific theories accurately describe the relations between entities). Finally, Rom Harré offers a sketch of agentive concepts as they appear in social and natural sciences.

In Part III, 'Mind and Agency' (four papers), William Jaworski defends a hylomorphic account of mind against criticisms of emergence (his account of emergence differs markedly from Broadian emergentism) and charges of causal overdetermination (his account embraces 'causal pluralism'). Jonathan Lowe argues that the human will is a two-way power ['a power to will *or not to will* to do such-and-such' (p. 172)], the *exercise* of which is typically guided by reason and the *manifestations* of which (volitions to  $\varphi$ ) are *not* caused by prior events or 'outside forces' (it requires no stimulus). Brian Ellis describes so-called 'social agency realism' (a view that the causal powers of human individuals are heavily influenced by their societies) and discusses its underlying metaphysics. Finally, Ruth Groff aims to clarify the nature of the disagreement between Bird and some other power-ontologists (such as Mumford). Bird characterizes power-ontology much as I have above but Groff sees this as a poor man's power-ontology as it fails to attribute to powers the 'dynamism', 'active nature', etc. that they deserve. This, Groff claims, is why Bird fails to see the implications of power-ontology beyond fundamental metaphysics.

In Part IV, 'Ethics and Epistemology' (three papers), Rani Lill Anjum, Svein Anders Noer Lie, and Stephen Mumford jointly examine dispositional notions in ethics; Jesper Kallestrup and Duncan Pritchard offer a paper on the advantages and limitations of virtue epistemology; and Linda Zagzebski argues that reasons for belief derive from reflective use of epistemic powers. In Part V, 'Social and Political Philosophy' (three papers), Tony Lawson examines emergent social causal powers; Charlotte Witt contrasts Lockean and Aristotelian approaches to gender essentialism; and Kelvin Knight compares Searle and MacIntyre on social rules and power.

Each paper discusses interesting material. Jointly they cover an impressively wide range of topics and several make substantial contributions (to my mind, the papers by Bird, Jaworski, and Lowe stand out). However, this volume claims to offer a 'portrait' of a putatively novel approach and this reader has several concerns about the coherence of the approach (and, indeed, the volume) which deserve mention.

First, this volume assumes that dispositional essentialism will have implications in fields beyond fundamental metaphysics. However, only the papers by Bird and Groff directly address the plausibility of this assumption. To my mind, they form the core of this volume and both deserve careful reading, but since Bird offers strong reasons to reject the assumption upon which the volume is premised, further discussion on this topic is merited and would have been welcome here.

Secondly, it is not entirely clear to this reader exactly what the 'neo-Aristotelian, powers-based approach' that binds the volume together is

(a longer introduction might have helped). It *seems* that its defining slogan is or involves ‘taking dispositions seriously’ (pp. 49, 105, 119, 128, 148, etc.), but such talk is too vague. If taking dispositions seriously requires dispositional essentialism, then around half of the papers fail to explicitly take dispositions seriously. Often, even positions which fit the ‘neo-Aristotelian’ label well, such as Jaworski’s interesting hylomorphic account, neither require nor are required by dispositional essentialism.

If a more relaxed account of ‘taking dispositions seriously’ is given, then problems still remain. Some papers would struggle to meet even a very generous interpretation of ‘taking dispositions seriously’. For instance, Kallestrup and Pritchard offer a well-argued paper but do not discuss powers in any detail and simply go along with the assumption—common among virtue epistemologists—that dispositions are ‘causally inefficacious’ (p. 250). Further, a more relaxed account threatens the coherence of the approach and it is not clear that it offers ‘an alternative to entrenched neo-Humean positions’ (as the back cover promises). Humeans deny only the fundamentality of dispositions. Neither their hatred of dispositions nor their reductive zeal seems so great that they are precluded from employing dispositions in their philosophical analyses (and much of this volume would fail to offend Humean sensibilities).

Thirdly, Groff warns that ‘language can be deceptive’ (pp. 223 and 224) but crucial theses and arguments often require clearer and more precise articulation. For instance, if the so-called ‘active’ nature of powers (which Groff and others discuss) is to be more than metaphorical, then it requires greater elucidation. Equally, despite its precedent in the powers literature, the use of ‘real’—when ‘irreducible’ or ‘fundamental’ should be used—is slightly misleading (one may suppose that some properties are real but not fundamental). Last, given the importance of fundamentality and grounding to the relevant debates, it is striking that, beyond some brief remarks by Bird, we find no detailed discussion of either in this volume.

In sum, there is interesting material here but it is not always clear how it all fits together, and the ‘portrait of [...] [the] powers-based approach’ (p. 1) offered is somewhat fuzzy. However, the introduction notes that ‘the new Aristotelianism is a rubric for an emerging research agenda [...] [which] is in its early days still’ (p. 1), and this volume does succeed in effectively communicating the enthusiasm and ambition of said agenda in an accessible manner. Looking to the future, those keen on identifying with this approach may wish to address some of the issues mentioned above. In the meantime, these dynamic essays provide food for thought for those pondering the potential of the ‘powers-based approach’.