



Book Review

Powers: A Study in Metaphysics by George Molnar, edited by Stephen Mumford. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, pp.xiv+238.

Reviewed by Ann Whittle

Powers is an important contribution to the much discussed, but still murky, area of causal powers or dispositions. Unfortunately, due to the untimely death of the author, this work was not yet completed. But thankfully the editor, Mumford, has managed to preserve Molnar's metaphysical vision by piecing together his papers and notes, and helpfully sets the scene by situating Molnar's discussion in the wider debate.

Solubility, fragility and conductivity are all standard examples of powers. The nature of such powers (also referred to as dispositions, tendencies, potentialities and capacities) is a hotly disputed issue in contemporary metaphysics. Molnar's contribution to this debate provides us with a comprehensive characterisation of the nature of powers, underpinned by the realist metaphysics outlined in the first two chapters (chapters which illustrate the breadth and depth of Molnar's philosophy). The book is broad ranging, but I single out three main areas for discussion: tropes, intentionality and groundedness.

I begin with Molnar's discussion of the nature of tropes (property instances) and the use to which he puts them. Unlike most theorists in the analytic tradition, Molnar does not view tropes as independent, self-standing entities.

But rather, in the tradition of Husserl, as wholly dependent and immanent in the particulars that instantiate them. This means that objects cannot be viewed as bundles of tropes, but Molnar suggests that tropes aid the cause of ontological economy in another way. For, with them, we can resist a famous argument for facts or states of affairs. Armstrong and others claim that the existence of a particular, *a*, the relation of instantiation, and the universal *F* do not ensure the truth of the claim '*a* is *F*'. Something more, a fact or state of affairs, is required. But Molnar shows how we can resist this conclusion. For if we accept, as he urges we should, that tropes are ontologically dependent upon the particulars that instantiate them, then the existence of *a* and the trope of *F* which is ontologically dependent on *a* will ensure the truth of the claim that '*a* is *F*'.

No doubt some will object that the notion of truthmaking being invoked here by both Armstrong and Molnar is too strong. There is no need to accept the claim that truthmakers must guarantee (in all possible worlds) the truth of the corresponding sentence. If, for instance, we accept Lewis's weaker claim that the truth of a sentence in a world supervenes upon what there is at that world, then the need for states of affairs vanishes. Molnar does not consider such a

possibility, simply setting out his metaphysical system without providing it with anything like a full defence. But his discussion is still insightful, as it shows us how we can hang onto the view that the world is a totality of things rather than facts, even given the full-blooded, Australian conception of truthmaking that he assumes.

One of Molnar's central aims in *Powers* is to find "the deep characteristics, or marks of the family of dispositional properties" (p.57). A chapter is dedicated to each, but I shall confine the discussion to just one of these characteristics, that of intentionality, as Molnar clearly thinks that this is the most fundamental feature of powers or dispositions. Molnar's claim that there is physical intentionality runs counter to an influential thesis in the philosophy of mind. Brentano and his followers argue that intentionality is peculiar to psychological phenomena and thus provides the point of demarcation between the mental and physical. Molnar, however, argues that the definitive features of intentionality are found in the physical, as well as the mental, realm. The key ontological criteria identified by Molnar are summarised in this passage,

The fundamental feature of an intentional state or property is that it is directed to something beyond itself, to the so-called intentional object...The identity of the intentional state is defined in terms of this intentional object...The intentional object can be existent or non-existent (p.62).

These features, Molnar argues, are also characteristic of those physical properties which are powers. Physical powers, such as fragility or electromagnetic charge, are directed towards something outside themselves, namely their manifestations. These manifestations are said to be the intentional objects of powers, so the identity conditions of powers are given via their respective manifestations. But, as in the case of mental properties, the physical powers exist regardless of whether they are manifested.

It seems undeniable that there is at least a passing resemblance between powers and intentional mental states. But the question arises: what should we draw from this? I am unsure what explanatory gain is to be had by insisting that there is such a close relationship between mental intentional states and powers. Perhaps if we had a clear understanding of what mental intentionality is, we could use this to illuminate the nature of powers. But, alas, such a clear and distinct view of mental intentionality still eludes philosophers of mind. Moreover, some of the most influential attempts to analyse mental intentionality have crucially involved an appeal to the notion of representation. The idea is that our mental properties are directed towards things in the world in virtue of representing them. But such an analysis seems inappropriate for the physical realm of powers. It is unclear how powers could be said to represent their manifestations. So there is some reason to doubt that this feature of intentionality can be usefully applied to both mental and physical properties.

What is the alternative? In the discussion of intentionality, Molnar states that a power's identity conditions are given in terms of its manifestations. Thus, as powers are defined by what they do, the manifestations that a power can give rise to are essential to it. This seems to capture the main thrust of Molnar's intentionality claim, but it does so without employing this problematic notion. In this way, we can avoid some difficult questions. For instance, directedness appears to be a relation, but often the intentional object the property is directed to doesn't exist. So what does it mean to say that this property is *directed* towards an intentional object? Molnar doesn't offer an answer to this, and we are left with the claim that, "Physical intentionality is an undefined primitive of the theory" (p.81). But I suspect that we may be able to avoid adding more obscure and undefined concepts to an already cluttered terrain, by cutting talk of intentionality and providing instead a criterion of identity for powers in

terms of their manifestations.

Probably the second most significant thesis in *Powers* is Molnar's claim that powers do not always require grounds. His defence of this view consists of three parts. First, he criticises arguments which are meant to establish the thesis that powers have grounds. Second, he argues that such an analysis cannot be applied to the powers of simple or unstructured particulars, as no causal grounds can be found at this level. Finally, Molnar attempts to defend his thesis by criticising those philosophers who have argued that it is deeply implausible to say that powers have no grounds.

How convincing is his case? The positive argument in favour of it is all too brief, and it is not quite clear what status this conclusion is supposed to have. The argument has an a priori feel to it, but Molnar continually draws upon scientific evidence that suggests that the most fundamental particulars have powers but no bases. This appeal to science, however, certainly is a powerful consideration in Molnar's favour. Fundamental properties such as charge and mass are characterised in terms of the powers they bestow upon their particulars, and so they fit the description of powers outlined by Molnar. But, depending on how one defines a power, there may be some room to manoeuvre on this issue. The same goes for Molnar's response to the arguments against ungrounded powers. This relies on a particular conception of a power, which isn't always shared by those proponents he criticises. Armstrong, for instance, whom he cites, thinks of powers as "congealed hypothetical facts or states of affairs" (1997 p.79). Now it seems reasonable to say that, given this notion of a power, it is highly counter-intuitive to claim that there could be powers without properties of objects grounding them. But Molnar rejects this conception, arguing instead that powers are actual, intrinsic properties of objects. This notion of a power brings us far closer to the traditional

characterisation of a categorical property, thereby enabling Molnar to fend off objections that this view is counter-intuitive.

So, despite the sketchiness of the positive argument for the existence of ungrounded powers, Molnar's discussion is valuable in drawing our attention to the fact that we can maintain an intuitive account of causal powers, even if some powers are ungrounded. All this comes at a price, however, one which no philosopher with Humean leanings will be prepared to pay. For powers are distinguished from non-powers by the fact that their identity is given via their manifestations, so we are left with necessary connections in nature. If science continues to uncover powers 'all the way down', however, some may be tempted to join the anti-Humean gang.

Molnar's vision was to show how his theory of powers could be profitably employed in various other areas of metaphysics and philosophy more generally. The last chapter of the book marks the start of this project but, unfortunately, as the editor warns us, it is rather sketchy. We're given a tantalising glimpse of Molnar's view on causality. He follows in the singularist tradition, arguing for the primacy of singular causal relations over causal laws. His theory of powers is central to this, as causation is said to be a natural relation holding in virtue of the powers of the participating particulars. But little in the way of detail is given. From the quality of the rest of the book, however, the reader feels a loss for the story not yet finished.

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Reference

Armstrong, D. M . 1997. *A World of States of Affairs*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.