

Marmodoro, Anna and Mayr, Erasmus, *Metaphysics: An Introduction to Contemporary Debates and Their History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019, pp. xii + 221.

What are the ultimate constituents of reality? Might things in the world be different from the way they actually are? How do they interact causally? Is there any chance for human beings to have free will and moral responsibility? These are among the more fundamental questions metaphysicians have been considering from antiquity to the present time. In their book *Metaphysics*,<sup>1</sup> Anna Marmodoro and Erasmus Mayr present an interesting and accessible reconstruction of the debates on these and related issues; and aim to show that the metaphysics of powers offers a unified framework for answering these different questions. The proposal is attractive and definitely worth a close examination.

The metaphysics of powers has a long history, its origin goes back to Aristotle, and the authors' proposal is explicitly neo-Aristotelian. They acknowledge the origin of the conceptual apparatus they embrace and propose an interpretation of it, which is not a scholarly reconstruction of what Aristotle may have thought, but rather a development of his ideas into a theory sound and suitable to serve as an alternative within the philosophical debates of today, and the problems they raise.

What are powers? Powers are dispositional properties, i.e. properties characterizing what the objects would do or how they would behave in certain circumstances. Examples of powers are fragility or water-solubility, i.e. properties which may never be manifested, but whose existence as properties of objects 'conditions' the interaction of such objects with other objects with other powers. For example, we handle a fragile object with care even if its fragility is not manifested (usually, we handle it with care in order to avoid the manifestation of fragility); or we put sugar in the coffee only if we want it to be sweetened by the manifestation of the sugar's powers.

Now, powers have been suffering a widespread philosophical rejection from the eighteenth century onward, especially because of empiricist worries about them, as powers cannot be observed directly in the objects having them, while categorical properties (as for example 'being white' or 'being square') may be. These considerations made powers seem mysterious, and philosophers have been suspicious about their reality for a long time.

But – and this is one main tenet of the book – there are good reasons for rehabilitating them. First of all, the main strategies adopted in order to reduce powers to other properties or relations (the conditional analysis and the causal analysis) are subject to many problems that are difficult to overcome and, second, there are reasons to doubt the correctness of arguments against the thesis that powers are the fundamental constituents of reality, such that everything else is derived from them. These considerations may be found in chapter 2 of the book where the ontology of powers is examined and defended.

In chapter 1 the notion of substance is considered. In an Aristotelian perspective, substances are individual objects without which there would be no properties in the world. Hylomorphism, the view according to which a substance is a compound of matter and form, is defended; the interpretation of it being that the 'substantial form' is a principle of unity (or power) without which a substance cannot exist. It is moreover argued that the hylomorphic notion is better suited than others to define the identity and persistence through change of any substance. It is therefore claimed that while properties/powers cannot exist without substances, substances themselves cannot exist without properties/powers. Even if it is not already clear when the reader comes across it in the first chapter, it is quite evident by the end of the second that powers are considered to be constitutive of substances and therefore that the metaphysics of powers is already present in the first chapter.

The last three chapters are devoted to the application of the metaphysics of powers to philosophical concerns such as modality, causality and free will. It is in them, the authors argue, that the metaphysics of powers may

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<sup>1</sup> The Italian reader may be interested to know that this book is an expanded and developed version of a previous book in Italian: Marmodoro, A. and Mayr, E. 2017, *Breve introduzione alla metafisica*, Roma: Carocci.

offer new and promising ways to address some of the more pressing metaphysical questions. Their approach is balanced: they clearly draw attention to the advantages of the metaphysics of powers, but they are also aware of the difficulties and problems still open, which they do not hide. This is a reasonable attitude, adopted in the spirit of “critiquing existing views and developing better ones” (209).

Chapter 3 is dedicated to modality and essence. The philosophical problem addressed in this chapter is how to explain that certain objects might have been different from the way they are now in certain respects (for example I might have had a different hair color) and why they might not be different in other respects (for example, I might not be a cat). The authors present the arguments offered by Quine in order to discredit the notions of essence and modality, and the possible world semantics introduced by Kripke, which rehabilitates them.

The authors themselves incline towards a different characterization from the one proposed by Kripke, a more Aristotelian one, which anchors essence and modalities in the way existing ordinary objects are (in the style of Barbara Vetter<sup>2</sup>), without adopting possible world semantics. The idea is that if we allow objects to have essential powers, their modal properties may be explained in such terms. As the authors acknowledge, not every modality may easily be accounted for in such a way; for example in order to justify the truth of “The laws of nature could have been very different”, it is difficult to suppose that the modal property (i.e. ‘to be possibly very different’) is anchored in a power characterizing something in our world. This observation may be used either in support of a restricted range of applications for modality anchored in powers or for a new and yet-to-come analysis of modality.

The metaphysics of powers is adopted to account for causality in chapter 4. As is well known, causality is not only subject to different philosophical analyses, but has also undergone skeptical considerations from the eighteenth century onward (of a particularly influential sort by David Hume). After a critical examination of Hume’s and Lewis’s reductive accounts of causality, the authors present Aristotle’s theory of causation. According to this theory, “all causes are (related to) powers, and causation, of all kinds, is the exercise or manifestation of mutually dependent causal powers” (147), the idea being that in a causal interaction there is an agent that transmits a form and a patient that receives it. This analysis allows for the cause to occur simultaneously with the effect (for example sounding and hearing may happen at the same time) and for the actual causing to be one and the same with the effect (for example there is a single activity grounding both teaching and learning, but there are two different powers involved: the power of the agent to teach and the power of the patient to learn).

An interesting claim is that power-based causality may offer a useful solution for the problem of mental causation. The philosophical problem is to explain how a mental event (as for example entertaining a question as ‘what is 246+874?’) may cause another mental event (as for example ‘ah, it’s 1120!’) or how a mental event (as for example the desire to drink a glass of water) may cause an action (as for example bringing a glass of water to the mouth). This is a problem both for substance dualists, who have to explain how the non-physical mind interacts with itself or with the physical world, and for physicalists, according to whom the only causation is between physical substances and any mental event is superfluous in order to explain the physical reality.

The authors observe that physicalists have reasons to revise their assumption of causal closure (i.e. the assumption that all causation is only among physical substances) for two reasons: first, physical reductionism which characterized science in the twentieth century may be revised because science is nowadays more pluralistic, and second, as Yablo<sup>3</sup> argued, in a causal interaction the factor that “makes the difference” is not always the micro-physical one (for example, the bull’s anger may depend on the red color of the T-shirt instead of its micro-physical structure). This shows that macro-physical properties may sometimes have a better role in

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Vetter, B. 2015, *Potentiality: From Dispositions to Modality*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Yablo, S. 1992, “Mental Causation”, *Philosophical Review* 101, 245-80.

a causal explanation and that mental powers ,as they involve intentionality (and being not necessarily physical), may be an option in order to account for mental causation.

The problem of free will is considered in the last chapter (i.e. chapter 5). The main problem of free will is to combine it with the deterministic laws of nature. It is well known that philosophers are divided between compatibilists (i.e. philosophers who argue that free will is compatible with the laws of nature) and incompatibilists (i.e. philosophers who argue that free will is incompatible with the laws of nature and therefore that one of the two is to be sacrificed).

Marmodoro and Mayr claim that the new realism about powers “has had a notable impact on the free-will debate in the last twenty years” (199) in support of both compatibilism and incompatibilism. In support of compatibilism, it may be argued that freedom is connected to the power to do otherwise, even if the power is not manifested; for example, I may be free to go out for a walk because I have the power to do so, even if I do not manifest it. This compatibilist solution may leave the incompatibilist unsatisfied because, according to her, freedom requires the responsibility of the agent and not simple the ability to behave differently. And the incompatibilist has therefore to give a different account of the powers involved in free will.

As is probably evident even from this short report, the metaphysics of powers is a highly pervasive issue and an important trend in current metaphysical debate. For this reason, I strongly recommend reading the book, which is written with competence, clarity and depth.

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