BOOK REVIEWS

A World of States of Affairs. D. M. ARMSTRONG. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997. xiii + 285 p. Cloth $54.95.

In this wide-ranging book, D. M. Armstrong has woven together his various metaphysical doctrines into a systematic whole founded on the version of realism about properties for which he is justly famous. For him, properties are universals, not entities existing in some Platonic heaven, but contingent existents firmly rooted in the natural world, being wholly located wherever they are instantiated (and they do all have instances). His realism is doubled, since besides universals, he also admits states of affairs ('facts' in some mouths, where these are distinct from true propositions): if the particular *a* instantiates the universal *F*, there is a third entity, the state of affairs *a's being F*.

Armstrong's metaphysics is conducted within a naturalistic framework ("the world, the totality of entities, is nothing more than the spacetime system" (5)) which gives it the flavor of an open-ended research program. We would expect trouble trying to force the subject matters of mathematics, modality, and morality into the naturalistic mould. Armstrong offers us revisions of his previous accounts of the first two, but there is nothing on the third. Since he rejects regularity theories of singular causation and laws, in favor of something stronger, there are also three chapters explaining how a naturalistic account can be given of the very stuff of science. I shall concentrate on the ontological basics and, in passing, it will be noted how Armstrong's respect for the natural sciences, which underpins his naturalism, leads him to refashion metaphysics itself.

If it were not preposterous, it would be something of a scandal that Armstrong now advertises his conception of universals as *Fregean*:

> The universal is a gutted state of affairs; it is everything that is left in the state of affairs after the particular particulars involved in the state of affairs have been abstracted away in thought....
>
> This contention will at once recall Frege's doctrine of the unsaturatedness of his 'concepts'. I happily acknowledge the influence, and, indeed, think of his concepts as close relatives of my universals (28-29).

In one place, "Fregean" becomes "Fregean-Aristotelian" (202), an impossible metaphysical alliance, so we know something is up. Gottlob Frege's concepts, the referents of predicates, are abundant despite

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their extensional identity conditions. There are concepts that actually have instances, concepts that actually have none but might have had some, and even concepts that cannot have any. Thus the Fregean doctrine has nothing to do with Armstrong's claims that science discovers what universals there are and that every universal has an actual instance. Moreover, it is a mistake to impute an ontology of states of affairs to Frege. In the mature work in which the idea of the incompleteness of concepts appears, he can find no room in the realm of reference for states of affairs. Notoriously, in his semantics all true sentences name the same object—the true—and so the differentiation required by an ontology of states of affairs can only be found at the level of sense, namely, among the true propositions. No doubt there is much that is obscure in his projection of the incompleteness of predicates onto the concepts to which they refer. But this incompleteness has nothing to do with the idea that a universal is a "gutted state of affairs." Readers of Frank Ramsey's "Universals" [1] will know that the idea of universals as gutted states of affairs does nothing to distinguish them from particulars. For, adapting Armstrong's characterization of a universal (29), we may say that a particular is a state-of-affairs type, the constituent that is common to all states of affairs that contain that particular. Particulars are as unsaturated as universals in Armstrong's system, which is more evidence that it is not Fregean.

Armstrong also recommends that universals be thought of as ways things are, which is supposed to help us see that it is wrong to "*substantialize* universals" (30), to provide a motive for denying that universals are capable of independent existence ("How can ways exist by themselves...?" (99)) and to see that universals with no instances are peculiar ("For they will be ways that are ways nothing is. Can we take such ways with ontological seriousness?" (154)). Here, Armstrong's fondness for rhetorical questions is illustrated, combined with what seems like an ordinary-language argument appealing to our use of 'way'. But appearances are deceptive, since he has chosen to speak of ways so that he can get the right results. In response to Sydney Shoemaker, he admits that universals might be thought of as "ways things *can* be" (38), which characterization would allow independently existing and uninstantiated universals. So he rules it out on the ground that universals would then be necessary existents (not a transparent inference) and he is having none of those. Skeptics about the significance of the distinction between particular and universals will say that particulars are just as much ways universals are as

[1] Reprinted in his *Philosophical Papers,* D. H. Mellor, ed. (New York: Cambridge, 1990), pp. 8–30.

universals are ways particulars are, to which Armstrong will reply, in propagandist fashion, that this does not accord with his use of 'way'.

According to Armstrong's use of 'universal', it is "a very simple but very illuminating analytic truth...that universals are strictly identical in their different instantiations" (27). But the evident power of the truth should make one suspicious of its alleged simplicity, for it is used to argue that a simple universal *could not* be complex (33) and to deliver the "Principle of Instantial Invariance" ("a particular universal can only have one -adicity" (85)). The latter principle is understood in a peculiar way, since it is held to rule out a binary relation which sometimes takes two different objects as its arguments and sometimes the same object twice over (208-09). How do we get this principle from the original analytic truth? By linguistic sleight of hand: "How could a three-term relation be strictly identical with a two-term relation?" (85). This does nothing to rule out so-called "multigrade universals," just as the question 'How can a universal located in one place be strictly identical with one in another?' does nothing to rule out universals being wholly present in more than one place.

Like Humpty-Dumpty, Armstrong is free to make 'universal' mean what he chooses and hence to create the analytic truths he needs to deliver the metaphysical principles he wants. The real question is whether what he says has any bearing on what exists. Distinguish three questions: Are there any universals? Which sorts of universals are there? Which universals of which sorts are there? We shall come to Armstrong's a priori answer to the first. His answer to the third has always been resolutely a posteriori: it is not for us armchair metaphysicians with our ordinary-language and a priori arguments to decide the exact composition of reality. No, that is a question for empirical science. This leaves the second question. Universals can be classified in various, orthogonal ways, one of which mirrors the complexity of predicates resulting from negation, disjunction, and conjunction. Twenty years ago, Armstrong[2] thought he had an a priori argument for rejecting the existence of disjunctive universals, such as *P or Q*, which used the analytic truth mentioned earlier:

> Suppose *a* has a property P but lacks Q, while *b* has Q but lacks P. It seems laughable to conclude from these premises that *a* and *b* are identical in some respect (*ibid.*, p. 20).

In this book, he tries the same argument but, realizing that it begs the question, falls back on the metaphysician's favorite, an appeal to

[2] *Universals and Scientific Realism*, Volume II (New York: Cambridge, 1978).

economy ("it is hard to see that there *has* to be one" (27)). Then he retreats once again claiming that selected disjunctive universals might be accepted "*if the development of the natural sciences appeared to demand this*" (28). This change of mind marks a distinct shift in emphasis in his metaphysical method. In earlier work, his naturalism, combined with the insistence that science discovers the catalogue of universals, were enough to make metaphysics empirically respectable, with plenty of room left for the metaphysical imagination. But now a bland appeal to the unknown results of the sciences is used time and time again to block in the argument where the metaphysics runs out. Just when to make the appeal seems arbitrary. For example, returning to the issue of multigrade universals, Armstrong has said nothing to rule out a scientific decision on their existence.

As I understand him, Armstrong argues for the existence of universals, the answer to the first question, by using what he rates "perhaps the fundamental argument of this book" (115), the truth-maker argument. In the first place, this argument creates a theoretical role which is best realized by his states of affairs but, since universals are constituents of these states of affairs, it is also an argument for their existence. The argument uses a principle, every truth has a truth maker, which embodies a version of the correspondence theory of truth but puts a particular spin on the underlying commonsense realism, according to which we are not the masters, representing does not make it so, and hence if our thoughts and utterances are to be true, the world must be a certain way. The latter condition is turned into the demand that there must be some *entity* in the world which will "ensure, make true, underlie, serve as the ontological ground for" (116) any given truth. And the truth-making relation is spelled out in terms of a noncausal relation of necessitation:

> ...the truthmaker for a truth must necessitate that truth. ...if a certain truthmaker makes a certain truth true, then there is no alternative world where that truthmaker exists but the truth is a false proposition (115).

Not quite a definition of truth making, but nowhere is one explicitly provided. But everything Armstrong says suggests that the quoted passage states a necessary *and* sufficient condition: an entity makes a proposition true if and only if the existence of the entity entails that the proposition is true (I ignore Armstrong's naturalistic worries about propositions). States of affairs are needed as truth makers, since a sentence of the form 'a is F' can be false even if a and/or

Fness exist but not if the state of affairs *a's being F* exists. This does not mean that each truth has its own personal truth maker, since a posteriori realism about universals dictates the same for states of affairs: two or more sentences may have the same truth maker and one sentence may have more than one truth maker. Nor does it follow that truth makers are always states of affairs: for example, '*a* is identical to *a*' is made true by *a* alone.

There is much that ought to be said about truth making and the associated principle but, unfortunately, Armstrong does not say it. First, there are obvious gaps in the slide from simple realism to the heavy-duty metaphysics required by the truth-maker principle. For example, one might worry whether a way the world is need be an entity in the world and whether the explanation of truth making in terms of necessitation is richer and more controversial than anything supplied by common sense. Second, it is extraordinary that Armstrong does not consider an obvious version of the slingshot argument, which aims to show that every truth has the same truth maker (even more extraordinary when one notes that Armstrong has read a book on facts which devotes a chapter to slingshots[3]). Third, the application of the truth-maker principle to contingent *and* necessary truths needs justification. After all, the realist thought with which we started is only clearly applicable to contingent truths. We think: a contingent truth might have been false and so there must be some difference between the way things are and the way they might have been. But Armstrong does apply it across the board and runs into trouble. Anyone familiar with relevance in logic will spot trouble with his account of truth making. According to it, any entity will make every necessary truth true. So the search for the truth makers of mathematical truths rests on the misguided principle that "Different necessary truths have different truthmakers" (183). And his investigation of the *different* truth makers of modal truths is equally wrongheaded, since if 'Necessarily *P*' and 'Possibly *P*' are themselves necessarily true if true (and Armstrong hopes they are (170)), any entity will make every modal truth true.

I end with some remarks on style. In the Preface, Armstrong tells us that he is "no lover of footnotes" (xi) and hence none appears in the book. I share Armstrong's aversion to some extent, but not his therapy. Endless footnotes distract the reader, encourage hedging and pseudo-scholarship, and provide a dumping ground for scraps of research which one cannot bear to waste. It is their content, not

[3] Kenneth Olson, *An Essay on Facts* (Stanford: CSLI, 1987).

just their presence, which is pernicious. But Armstrong is only concerned with appearances, merely incorporating in the main text what would have been consigned to the foot. He thus finds it necessary to apologize to those readers who "feel that certain passages should have been relegated in this way" (xi): a master stroke of perversity.

I cannot help regretting that Armstrong has abnegated the freshness and vitality of his earliest work in metaphysics. He now thinks we need to know precisely who said what to whom, who told him what others had written, and when they all said it ("as an undergraduate at Sydney University" (16)). I am inclined to think that this is not a mere obsession with the intimate details of his philosophical biography but a sign that he has assumed the persona of the grandee with all the patronage which that entails.

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For the Sake of the Argument: Ramsey Test Conditionals, Inductive Inference, and Nonmonotonic Reasoning. ISAAC LEVI. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996. xv + 341 p. Cloth $64.95.

In the first half of his latest book, Isaac Levi expounds a theory of the revision of beliefs and suppositions, and elaborates on it to take into account bodies of belief and supposition that include inductive inferences. Induction has not recently had many friends among philosophers, but it has found some among logicians and computer scientists who study so-called nonmonotonic reasoning. The second half of the book is mainly taken up by a critical discussion, from the decision-theoretic perspective of the earlier chapters, of the merits of some of their proposals.

The account of belief revision of Carlos Alchourrón, Peter Gärdenfors, and David Makinson serves Levi as a foil. Arguing that it is not really an account of belief revision at all, insofar as it does not take up the question of when it is rational to adopt a belief, he notes that this objection disappears if we take the object of study to be not belief change, but instead the making of suppositions. Supposing is like pretending, or making believe, in that suppositions do not call for justification in the way that beliefs do. We can make them for the sake of the argument.

Beliefs and suppositions are studied indirectly, as represented in *corpora*, or sets of sentences. One can be said to believe or suppose every-

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