

Review of D.M. Armstrong, *Sketch of a Systematic Metaphysics*

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The opinionated introduction genre of philosophical writing knows no greater master than D.M. Armstrong. This little book is a *tour de force* of the genre, offering a succinct presentation of a global metaphysical worldview – a grand system in the early-modern style. Longtime Armstrong readers (or even those who just read his 1997 *A World of States of Affairs*) will be familiar with most of the material here, but bringing all of it into a concisely articulated stable equilibrium is a major philosophical achievement, one which ought to serve well an increasingly balkanized discipline. The book reminds us that, as Sellars once put it, ‘the aim of philosophy is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term.’

In Armstrong’s hands, the Sellarsian aim is reframed in terms of truthmaking: to understand what the world must be like to make true all and only true propositions. More specifically, since the sciences too are in the business of exploring what the world must be like, the proper mandate of metaphysics is to target notions so general that they are not targeted by any specific science (‘topic-neutral notions’): particular, property, causation, number, law, structure, fact, etc. These can be thought of as determinates of the two Sellarsian metaphysical determinables thing-in-the-broadest-sense and hanging-together-in-the-broadest-sense.

Many metaphysical debates about topic-neutral notions can be represented as Euthyphro dilemmas pitting a reductive, deflating position against a non-reductive, inflating one. Is some chunk of the world a particular because it is the site of a bundle of compresent properties, or is it the site of a bundle of compresent properties because it is a particular? Does a thing have a property because it holds a fund of causal powers, or does it hold a fund of causal powers because it has a property? Is the connection between two things causal because it is regular, or is it regular because causal? The book is divided roughly into two parts: the chapters leading up to Chapter 8 discuss topic-neutral notions on which Armstrong is non-reductive, and thus provide the fundamental furniture of the world as he sees it; the chapters succeeding Chapter 8 discuss topic-neutral notions on which Armstrong is generally reductive (modulo the occasional additional non-reductive concession), thus showcasing the explanatory power of the metaphysical machinery put in place in the first half of the book.

Chapter 8 itself concerns the linchpin notion of truthmaker. For Armstrong, all truthmakers are states of affairs whose constituents are spatio-temporal entities. His metaphysics is thus captured by Wittgenstein’s slogan: ‘the world is the totality of facts.’ (Note well: unlike most metaphysicians, who use the terms ‘state of affairs’ and ‘fact’ so that facts are a proper subset of states of affairs – namely, those that *obtain* – Armstrong uses the terms interchangeably.) However, there is an important distinction in play between fundamental and non-fundamental states of affairs. The latter necessarily supervene upon, and are therefore ‘no addition of being’ over, the former. The former constitute collectively the ‘minimal truthmaker’ of all and only truths. They and their

constituents are thus the fundamental furniture of the world. The constituents are of three varieties: particulars, universals, and the tie between them.

Armstrong's most developed account is of universals. They are potentially conjunctive and maximally determinate monadic properties, external relations, and structural properties that implicate some kind of strict identity among their instances; relational properties, internal relations, determinables, and non-universal ('second-rate') properties exist but are non-fundamental (they are constituents of states of affairs that supervene on states of affairs whose constituent universals are fundamental), while disjunctive and negative properties and relations do not exist at all. The fundamental universals are irreducible to funds-of-powers, instead involving intrinsic essences, 'quiddities' (such that two fundamental universals can differ numerically only). These are Aristotelian universals *in re* rather than Platonic universals *ante rem*, hence are spatiotemporal, contingent, and instantiated. All are to be identified by mature science – they are constituents of truthmakers for the truths of end-of-inquiry science (charm and spin perhaps, if they survive future scientific developments).

Presumably it follows that the particulars that are constituents of fundamental states of affairs have to be identified by mature science as well (e.g., be the sort of particulars that can bear charm or spin). These particulars are irreducible to bundles of compresent properties, instead involving individual essences ('haecceities'), but *are* reducible to bundles of succeeding, resembling, and (immanently rather than transeuntly) causally chained particular-stages. They are (small and short-lived) 'spacetime worms' in a block universe. Armstrong is not explicit on this, but all that suggests that the particular constituents of fundamental states of affairs are particle-stages (monadically propertied or externally related, including causally). Other particulars exist but are non-fundamental (they are constituents of states of affairs that supervene on fundamental ones).

The last type of state-of-affair constituent is the 'fundamental tie' between particulars and universals. Here Armstrong offers one of the few 'local' philosophical innovations of the book. He hypothesizes that the relevant tie is a rare exception to Hume's principle that there are no necessary connections between contingent beings. Since unpropertied particulars and uninstantiated universals are impossible, there is an objective, in-the-world necessity involved in the connection between a particular (or a plurality thereof) and a universal when they collectively compose a state of affairs.

With thus tied particulars and universals we have the basic furniture of the world in place. This narrow elite of entities suffices to produce truthmakers for all and only true propositions, notably modal, mathematical, and general and negative propositions.

Certain features of Armstrong's world remain unclear, at least to this reader. Consider the reductive treatment of modality. For Armstrong, the truthmaker of 'merely-possibly, the moon is not spherical' is just the truthmaker of 'the moon is spherical' plus the contingency of that truthmaker. That is, it is the state of affairs of the moon being spherical plus that state of affair's contingency. What is unclear to me is the status of the requirement 'plus the state of affair's contingency.' On the one hand, if the state of affairs of the moon being spherical is not taken to make true 'possibly, the moon is not spherical' by itself, but only in conjunction with the (second-order) state of affairs of the-moon-being-spherical being contingent, then it seems we are introducing the universal of contingency – a modal universal – into the fundamental furniture of the world. On the other hand, if the state of affairs of the moon being spherical is taken to make true

‘possibly, the moon is not spherical’ all by itself, then we are owed an explanation of why it does not also make true something like ‘possibly, the moon is both spherical and square.’

Another difficulty concerns the reductive treatment of negation. Armstrong claims, first, that negative propositions (e.g., ‘the moon is not square’) have ‘totality states of affairs’ (e.g., the fact that everything that is the moon is spherical) as truthmakers, and secondly, that totality states of affairs, while not amenable to reductive treatment, are no addition of being but only limits on being. What is unclear to me is how an item, such as a certain state of affairs *S*, can exist and be irreducible to any other existent yet involve no addition of being. Perhaps totality states of affairs involve no addition of particulars or universals, but they certainly involve addition of *states of affairs*. The only way this would be ‘no addition of being’ is if Armstrong meant only the *constituents* of states of affairs to be genuine beings, with talk of whole states of affairs being merely a useful fiction of sorts – an odd place to end up for a metaphysics of states of affairs.

A third and related difficulty concerns the ontological primacy relations between fundamental states of affairs and their constituents. Armstrong emphasizes that states of affairs are the ‘fundamental structures in reality’ in the sense that they are the most basic independent existents. Clearly, all particulars and universals supervene on the totality of states of affairs. This could suggest treating states of affairs as the fundamental building blocks of reality in a stronger sense than Armstrong’s: that of being ontological simples that do not decompose into separate constituents. Rather than analyzing states of affairs in terms of the suitable coming-together of particulars and universals, one could analyze particulars and universals as (two different kinds of) state-of-affair types. In *describing* or *representing* states of affairs we may need to use expressions denoting particulars and universals, which expressions therefore enjoy representational primacy; but the ontological primacy goes to the state of affairs, particulars and universals being merely supervenient structures and ‘no addition of being’ over the primitive, partless states of affairs. This would be a more thoroughgoing metaphysics of states of affairs, one not without precedent (see Brian Skyrms’ 1981 paper ‘Tractarian Nominalism’). It would also dissolve the problem of the ‘fundamental tie,’ as it would cast ready-made states of affairs as unstructured simples. What is unclear to me is on what grounds Armstrong might reject this more radical alternative, since he does not entertain it.

Indeed, at one point Armstrong discusses the ‘one big fact’ whose constituents are the world as a whole, *w*, the ‘biggest structural property,’ *W*, and the fundamental tie between them. Presumably all other states of affairs supervene on this one. If one was driven by considerations of parsimony, one could therefore also hold, in a starkly monistic vein, that there is only one fundamental entity, namely, the single state of affairs most naturally denoted by the nominal ‘*w*’s being *W*.’ One may resist this worldview on the grounds of its intuitive implausibility, its austerity, or its non-conservatism. But this leads me to a final complaint, concerning the absence of clearly articulated standards for theory evaluation. In the preface, Armstrong claims that metaphysics inherently lacks decision procedures for theory choice. Yet some heuristics are operative throughout the book (supervenience, indispensability, the Eleatic principle), and a systematic account of metaphysical methodology need not be beyond grasp, as the recent flurry of discussions of ‘metametaphysics’ makes clear.

Regardless of these local question marks, this book is both enjoyable and important. It is enjoyable, insofar as Armstrong's light and straightforward treatment of some of the most elusive matters of metaphysics, vehicled by his breezy conversational prose and served with a dose of characteristic intellectual candor, humility, and charming tentativeness make for something approximating a philosophical page-turner. It is important, insofar as its appearance might counter some of the more unfortunate trends of current metaphysical practice. When Armstrong started his career, ordinary-language philosophy ruled the day and discussion of the nature of reality in the material mode of speech was considered all but vulgar, the mark of philosophical naïveté. It is a tribute to the intellectual rigor and excitement brought forth by Armstrong and Lewis, among others, that metaphysics – real metaphysics – is now a flourishing discipline again. But the same malaise that had bedeviled metaphysics in the mid-twentieth century, whereby the deep philosophic nexus of the perennial problems of metaphysics was often taken to be beyond intellectually respectable treatment, is often operative today as well, albeit yielding new symptoms. In particular, current-day metaphysics is awash with a curious technophilia that all too often focuses the mind on the comfortingly tractable details of apparatus and minute scholastic debates of unclear consequence for our understanding of how things in the broadest sense of the term hang together in the broadest sense of the term. It is to be hoped that the appearance of this little masterpiece would remind students of metaphysics young and old what pursuit of the aim of philosophy looks like.