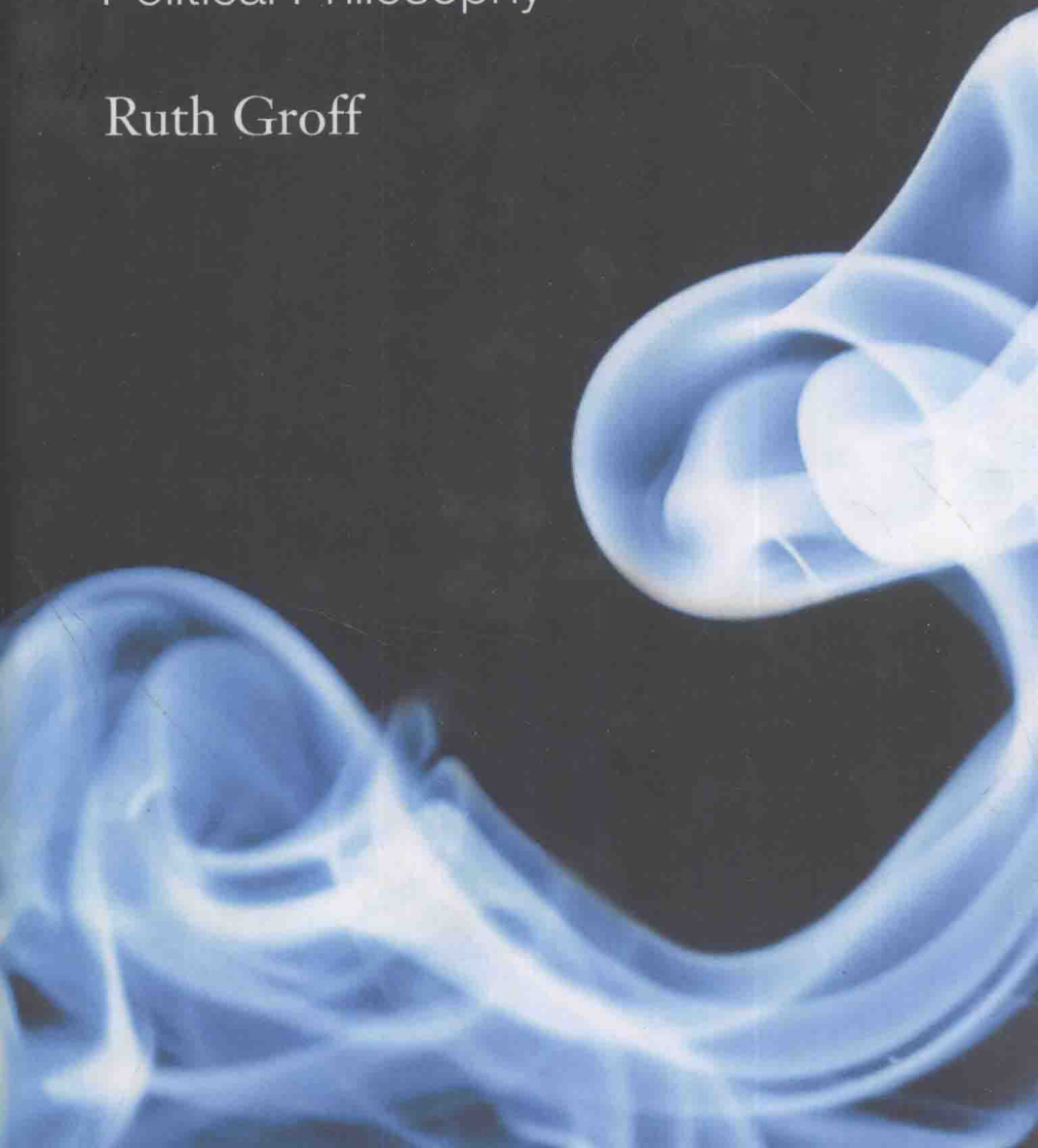# Ontology Revisited

Metaphysics in Social and
Political Philosophy

Ruth Groff

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Groff's argument cuts against a familiar anti-metaphysical grain. Social and political philosophy, she maintains, is not as metaphysically neutral as it may seem. Even the most deontological of theories connects up with a set of philosophical commitments regarding what kinds of things exist, as a fundamental ontological matter, and what they are like. These are topics of interest not just to social and political philosophers, but to social scientists and to philosophers of social science as well.

"Ruth Groff has broken new ground in demonstrating the connection between social and political thought and the ontology of causal powers. Her account of the structure of Humean thinking about agency is excellent. Especially significant is the role that she assigns to Kantianism in the analysis that she develops. She moves effortlessly between contemporary metaphysics, political theory, critical social theory, and the history of modern philosophy, offering trenchant insights along the way into the work of thinkers ranging from Hume himself to Mill, Adorno, and Martha Nussbaum, and into debates over agent causation and emergence. There is even a discussion, in the final chapter, of Spinoza. This is big-picture philosophy at its best: rigorous and exacting at the level of detail; original, compelling and systematic in the whole."
– Stephen Mumford, Professor of Metaphysics and Dean of the Faculty of Arts, University of Nottingham

Ruth Groff is Assistant Professor of political philosophy at Saint Louis University. She is a member of the Centre for Contemporary Aristotelian Studies in Ethics and Politics, and a former editor of the *Journal of Critical Realism*. She is the co-editor of *Powers and Capacities in Philosophy: The New Aristotelianism*.

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Ontology Revisited
Metaphysics in social and political philosophy
Ruth Groff

For my mom and dad.
And for Richard Schuldenfrei, who ignited my love of philosophy.

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Finally, I want to say thank you to my wonderful family, and more dear friends than anyone deserves.

Preface

This book grew out of my interest in causal powers in just the way that my argument suggests that it would have: once I was aware of my conviction that causation is not what Hume said it is, and instead involves the expression or display of the real dispositional properties of things, it was natural to think that people, who are manifestly efficacious after all, have such properties too. Moreover, it followed that if there are any sociological entities that cause things, there must be some sense, at least, in which those entities have powers also. Once I was clear about all of this, I couldn't help but be curious about how the issues were handled in the history of social and political philosophy. Were non-Humean ontological commitments generally presupposed in the modern and contemporary period? Evidently not.

At first I thought that the main point would pertain to the conception of freedom: from a dispositional realist perspective, freedom would have to be understood to be the expression of our own distinctively human causal powers, especially that of self-conscious self-determination. And if this were so, if free human agency is a species of what analytic philosophers call substance causation, I thought – and still do think – then the dichotomy between freedom and causal determination inherited from Kant would turn out to make no sense. Nor would Berlin's preoccupation with negative liberty. Efficacy is efficacy, be it effortless and unimpeded (negative liberty) or disciplined in accordance with some relevant standard of excellence (positive liberty). One might even want to say that the greater the degree of causal determination (by the agent) in relation to any given act, the greater the degree of freedom. One *should* say that, in fact, at least to begin. Admittedly, Kant too has it that freedom is a kind of necessity: we are subject to moral law, not just legislators of it. But free agency is precisely *not*, for Kant, a *causal* phenomenon. That realism about causal powers dissolves the dichotomy between freedom and causation seemed, as I say, to be the crucial point.

It soon became apparent to me, however, that there was a different way to tell the story, one in which the metaphysical confusion associated with the standard ways of thinking about freedom was only a chapter. The bigger story – or perhaps "deeper," or "prior," is a better way to put it – was a diagnostic one. It was not about powers, but rather about Hume's *rejection* of powers, and about the impact on modern and contemporary philosophy of this and other aspects of his ontology. That's the story that I resolved to tell, and which I have told.

But there was a complication. It is in the nature of the case that one can't tell such a story without presuming that there is an intimate relationship between social-political thought and metaphysics. Such a presumption has been out of fashion of late, in no small part because it runs counter to the Humean ontology in question. Thus to show how a set of ontological assumptions derived from Hume has issued in confusion at the level of social and political thought, I also needed to challenge what I've called the myth of metaphysical neutrality. Happily, the logic holds in both directions: just as I couldn't tell the story without assuming a connection between metaphysics and social-political thought, the story itself confirms it.

The elaboration of a positive, powers-based social-political theory I have set to the side, although I would note that Aristotle, Marx and even Mill have already made significant headway toward such an end, as have a number of contemporary authors working in the spirit of these thinkers. What contemporary proponents of such theories have lacked are the resources with which to defend their implicit metaphysical assumptions in the face of the Humean orthodoxy into which Kant's dichotomy figures. For now, then, I offer a meta-theoretical critique, coupled with a debunking of the myth of metaphysical neutrality.

Contents

1 The Myth of Metaphysical Neutrality

There is by now a well-entrenched habit of thinking, according to which social and political philosophy have nothing to do with metaphysics. The underlying thought is plausible enough: that one can ask certain kinds of questions without having asked, or implicitly answered, other kinds of questions. Even for Aristotle, *phronesis* was not the same as *sophia*, politics not a matter of philosophy. Indeed, it would seem to be a settled point, after the rise of modern science, that there are no normative injunctions regarding human arrangements built into the natural world. Or, at least, if there is anything to be learned from Rawls, belief to the contrary would seem to fall outside of the boundaries of acceptable public discourse in a liberal society – a foul play, equally likely to be called out by a postmodern critic of grand narratives as by a post-metaphysical political liberal. For these reasons alone, and no doubt there are others, it would seem to go without saying that whatever it is that we're doing when we do social and political philosophy, it doesn't hang on issues of concern to metaphysicians.

But – or so I shall argue – social and political philosophy is not metaphysically neutral at all. Received beliefs of the day notwithstanding, even the most deontological of theories connects up, in the end, with an attendant set of basic commitments regarding what kinds of things exist, what they are like and how they are or are not put together. Indeed, just as the once celebrated value-neutrality of liberalism proved to be an unselfconscious affirmation of a specific set of normative principles, the very idea of metaphysical neutrality turns out to be an unselfconscious affirmation of what is called Humeanism (or, less technically, mechanism): the presumptive, anti-essentialist ontology of the contemporary period. It is Humeanism that invites one to imagine that that which exists has no form of its own, and "without a form of its own" is just what the world would have to be like, in order for accounts of social and political phenomena to involve no metaphysical commitments. In this respect, the notion that social and political theory is metaphysically neutral can be seen to be something akin to a false but real appearance, to use the Marxist terminology. It is the meta-theory generated by the dominant philosophical position.

That, in the main, modern and contemporary social and political thought rests unreflectively upon a Humean metaphysics is hardly an insight that is original to me, even if I may be the first to put the particular fine point on it that I aim to do.

Charles Taylor comes immediately to mind as a contemporary thinker who has long advanced such a view.[1] Key members of the Frankfurt School, we might want to say, are others, as is Alasdair MacIntyre – and, of late, a grouping of critical theorists who have taken an interest in the concept of ontology, some via an appeal to Spinoza. Critical realists, too, have made the argument, although primarily in the context of sociological theory rather than that of political philosophy. Still, there is original work to be done in laying bare the infrastructure in question. Such is the present undertaking, the core thesis of which is that Humeanism has shaped and arguably distorted modern and contemporary thinking about agency broadly construed. This thesis is accompanied by two additional claims, one ancillary, the other implied: (a) that recent neo-Aristotelian work in analytic metaphysics allows the effects of Humeanism to come clearly into focus; and (b) that social and political thought is not, in fact, metaphysically neutral.

My intention in this introductory chapter is to lay out the competing metaphysical positions at the heart of the analysis. These are Humeanism and its emerging rival, variously labeled dispositional realism, scientific essentialism and/or, less formally, a powers-based ontology. To be clear: by metaphysics I mean something other than moral realism and/or considerations regarding free will (though I shall indeed address the influence of Humeanism on the free will problematic in Chapter 5). Rather, I use the term in its most traditional sense, to refer to a thinker's basic-level ontological commitments. The purpose of this chapter, as I say, is to articulate those that constitute Humeanism and dispositional realism respectively. The progression of the argument will then be as follows: in Chapters 2–4, I consider Hume, Mill and – via Kant – Marcuse, Horkheimer, and Adorno, in order to illustrate both the general point that social and political thought is shot through with metaphysics and the specific point that Humeanism in particular has configured social and political thought in the modern and contemporary period. In Chapter 5, I extend the discussion of the dichotomy between spontaneity and determinism in Kant to an analysis of the structure of the free will debate in contemporary analytic philosophy. In Chapter 6, I turn to the so-called capabilities approach associated with Martha Nussbaum (and Amartya Sen). I argue that just as Mill could not square a developmental, capacities-based liberalism with an overt commitment to Humeanism, Nussbaum's own version of the view requires a powers-based metaphysics. The upshot of these two chapters is that dispositional realism can underwrite our thinking in significant ways, ranging from a re-situation and elaboration of the concept of agent causation to a properly grounded normative appeal to human capabilities. Finally, I conclude in Chapter 7 by considering a recent turn to Spinoza, by continental political theorists, for the purpose of recovering talk of ontology in general and powers in particular.

Let me begin with Humeanism, or mechanism, terms that I join Brian Ellis and others in using to refer to a set of interrelated claims endorsed in part or in whole by a range of modern and contemporary thinkers.[2] As Taylor has noted with respect to the family of views that he calls naturalism, some of the thinkers who fall under the heading of Humeanism disagree with one another profoundly, over crucial issues – e.g., Hume and Kant. There is, however, a shared core account of

the nature of things that can be used to define, or at least to pick out instances of, the position in question. Thus, by Humeanism I mean: (i) a rejection of the idea that objects (however they be defined) have causal powers; (ii) an attendant anti-naturalism about causality; and (iii) anti-essentialism. Ellis himself offers a longer, more fine-grained list, characterizing what he calls mechanism as the composite view that:

(a) inanimate matter is essentially passive, never intrinsically active;
(b) things behave as they are required to by the laws of nature;
(c) the dispositional properties of things (including their causal powers) are not real properties, and are never intrinsic to the things that have them;
(d) the essential properties of things never include any dispositional ones;
(e) causal relations are always between logically independent events;
(f) the laws of nature are universal regularities imposed on things whose identities are independent of the laws; and
(g) the laws of nature are contingent, not necessary.[3]

Principle (g) draws a line between Humeans and Kantians that I do not want to draw (though let me state unequivocally that there are points of irreconcilable difference between empiricists and Kantians, and that most of the time these differences are what is most salient); Kantians show up as Humeans, on my pared down model.[4]

For the purposes of explication, it will make sense to consider the three basic tenets out of order, beginning with anti-essentialism rather than with the rejection of powers. Anti-essentialism is the view that the things that exist do not have essences. Loosely speaking, an essence may be thought of as a property or set of properties, the bearing of which makes something be the kind of thing that it is, rather than something else.[5] To say that there are no such things as essences, then, is to say that what things are is not based upon something inherent in them: identity as a this or a that, the anti-essentialist will say, derives instead from an external source, e.g., God, the laws of nature, language. Descartes, for instance, held that the only property that matter has intrinsically is that of extension, presence in space. Belief in the existence of generic, inherently indeterminate "stuff" may not seem unusual to us post-Cartesian moderns, but it's worth noting that Aristotle found it to be unintelligible, concluding by contrast that matter is always already something, even if what it is not always fully actualized.

Social and political theorists often equate anti-essentialism with postmodernity. But it is important to get the timing right. The break with Aristotelian physics was simultaneously a break with Scholasticism. The new, essence-less view of nature associated with the science of mechanics was quickly interpreted and reinforced philosophically – early on by Descartes, later through the rise of British empiricism, which ruled out form or essence on epistemic grounds. Locke, for example, took care to distinguish between the concepts of nominal essence and real essence.[6] He defined real essences as the internal structures of things. Nominal essences, by contrast, are the observable features of things. Things are sorted into kinds on the

basis of their nominal essences, Locke said, because real essences cannot be observed (or at least couldn't be at the time of his writing),[7] and therefore cannot be known. Eventually the category of real essence dropped out of the (non-Hegelian) modern picture altogether. From Hume onward, the predominant view has been that there are only categories that we impose, onto a substrate of one sort or another. And given that essentialists had thought that things act as they do in virtue of what they are, the concept of causal necessity, too, had to be rejected, asserted dogmatically or somehow re-grounded, once anti-essentialism took hold as the default metaphysics.

Anti-essentialism made it into social and political philosophy almost immediately. *Leviathan*, published in 1651, opens with the brazenly modern assertion that objects only seem to bear intrinsically the qualitative features of them that we perceive. In reality, Hobbes says, what we take to be qualitative properties are merely subjective "fancies" – misinterpretations of the sensations that are produced by the fact of matter impinging upon our bodies. Similarly, universals are nothing other than names that we give to like sensory input. Granted, the argument is that people do, or at least should, naturally seek peace through the institution of a Sovereign. But that this is so isn't, for Hobbes, a function of a posited human form or essence. Rather, it is simply an analytically derived implication of the reality of instrumental reason.

In saying that anti-essentialism is paradigmatically modern, I do not want to be misunderstood. While I take the claim to be uncontroversial, I do not mean to suggest that anti-essentialism itself was uncontroversial. Anti-essentialism did become the default position, but it didn't become so without opposition. Nor, as I've stressed, do I mean to suggest that it was only empiricists who repudiated the classical view of entities as being determined from within, via their form. Kant too assumes an anti-essentialist stance towards the physical world (in that form is thought to be given via the unity of apperception, rather than being an inherent feature of that which provides content to phenomenal experience) — as did Descartes. The point that I want to make is simply that there is nothing new about anti-essentialism. It is a hallmark of modernity, not of post-modernity.[8]

Modernity also brought with it the rejection of powers. Analytic metaphysicians often talk about powers via the concept of a dispositional property.[9] A dispositional property can be thought of as a property of being able to do or act – though it may be that there is no such thing as a generic disposition, that there are only properties of being able to do this or that, to engage in this or that kind of activity. Abilities do not have to be exercised, however. Nor, exercised, do they necessarily issue in those phenomena that (nevertheless) figure in their definition and individuation. Thus a power can be thought of as a not-necessarily-manifest capacity to potentially effect a change of some kind. Humeans deny the existence of powers, regarding belief in them as a kind of pre-scientific animism, a vestige of imagining the world to be suffused with magical, or at the very least teleologically directed, forces. From a Humean perspective, the material world is not potent. It is, on the contrary, inert; it is "the dead world of mechanism," as Ellis has called it.[10]

The disavowal of powers is related to anti-essentialism, if only because the Aristotelian essences that were expelled from the modern conception were, fundamentally, identity-constituting capacities to do certain kinds of things, viz., to engage in the activity, or "work," that is characteristic of a given kind of thing. From an Aristotelian perspective, it is an essential property of water, for example, that – all things being equal – it can, in its liquid state, dissolve substances such as sugar. In doing away with form and replacing it with mere extension, then, moderns can be seen to have dismissed powers simply as a function of rejecting essentialism.

But the embrace of anti-essentialism is only one part of the story.[11] There is also the claim – analytically distinguishable from a commitment to anti-essentialism – that powers, *just like* essences, do not exist. There is simply no such thing as a dispositional property, say many moderns, be such purported properties essential or not. Or, as Hume would have it, the idea of a power or disposition has no meaning. The next move is to make a distinction between those (non-dispositional) properties that are taken to exist objectively, or externally, and those that are conceived as existing only subjectively, in the form of phenomenal experience, e.g., color. Locke refers to the former as "primary" qualities, the latter as "secondary." After this comes the final, reductive-materialist move – that of concluding that, even amongst only non-dispositional properties, the subjectively constituted ones are ultimately not real. This set of claims, and the relationships between them, are useful for thinking about how Humeans view powers. For example, it is clear that dispositional properties have met with greater animosity from Humeans than have secondary qualities. Secondary qualities may be thought not to exist in any objective sense, but reference to them is treated with a degree of forbearance. Dispositional properties, by contrast, are apt to be renounced as occult. Belief in the reality of redness is charming; belief in the reality of powers is – or was until very recently – thought to be irrational, at odds with science and philosophy alike. As D. H. Mellor puts it, "(d)ispositions are as shameful in many eyes as pregnant spinsters used to be – ideally to be explained away, or entitled by a shotgun wedding to take the name of some decently real categorical property."[12]

The third tenet of Humeanism, having to do with what causality is believed to be, is related both to the issue of powers and to questions about metaphysical necessity that arise once there is a ban on essence, or form. When we think of x as being the cause of y, our natural inclination is to think that x has the wherewithal to *bring about* y, albeit under specified conditions. For example, if we say "The fire is the cause of the toasted marshmallow," we are likely to regard ourselves as saying that the fire is what *made it be* that the marshmallow is now so nicely browned; the fire *did* it. Fire, we are implicitly affirming, has a power, viz., the power to roast marshmallows. Causality itself, we will no doubt want to say, is something like the exercise or display of powers in general. In one way or another it is about activity, about the production of outcomes. But Humeans, because they do not believe in powers, cannot agree to such an account.

What sense can be made of causing, then, if it doesn't involve anything *doing* anything? Humeans – beginning with Hume himself and continuing to the