

D. M. ARMSTRONG, 2010.  
*SKETCH FOR A SYSTEMATIC METAPHYSICS.*  
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The environment in which metaphysics is respectable once more has been filled with a burst of deep and intricate new works on ontology. Armstrong, on this regard, is now a classic writer who went through a new process recovering the necessity of doing metaphysics seriously; in spite and beyond the harsh unwelcoming fashions of the logical empiricism of the former epoch.

His most famous account is traced back to 1989 with his famous *Universals, An opinionated introduction*. Armstrong presented a long and complete version of his system in metaphysics in *A World of States of Affairs* (1993) and ever since he has not changed substantively his views on the topic (some overtones, though, are quite nuanced in a mature account). *A Sketch in Systematic Metaphysics* comes to summarise those efforts by putting them in a concise and easy-going way.

Why engaging in Metaphysics at all? Why should we care again? After all, Science seems to give a more accurate view of the general problems of how things hang together. The justification to engage with Metaphysics comes from a challenge. We feel challenged when meeting the necessity of engaging in topic neutral notions, i.e., treating problems from a general viewpoint regardless of a particular discipline. This kind of challenge is a justification to engage in Metaphysics. We feel the need to give sense of the world as we conceive it through common sense, also known as 'manifest view' of reality thanks to the expression coined by Willfried Sellars. Armstrong thinks in the need to tackle the utterly complicated issue against the *manifest view*, i.e., the common sense view of the world. The problem occurs because that view seems overthrown, among many other traits, by challenges coming from Special Theory of Relativity and many of the breakthrough insights of contemporary scientific inquiry. Quite the contrary, Armstrong always believed that any substantive account of ontological inquiry needs to attend, more than anything else, to a scientific match with scientific predicates; as opposed

to traditional ways of interpretation of purely linguistic nature when we talk about ontological items.

However, Gilbert Ryle and J. J. C. Smart's *topic neutral* set of notions (the long list of concepts assumed in metaphysical inquiries) for scientific realism are exhausted by people of all areas, so, therefore, philosophers must go on to explain how they get on systematically with metaphysics. For philosophical analysis of causation is widely different, then it ought to be debated what exact position a particular analysis displays: "It is a philosophical debate about the nature of causality. Science does not settle the matter, though we have noted that it makes a large contribution. To debate the matter is to engage in metaphysics. The same difficult situation can be reproduced for the other topic neutral notions mentioned above" (p. 4). Armstrong, thus, takes seriously what is known as 'excluders of abstract objects'. Armstrong rejects the excluders found in Quine's purely linguistic predicative excluders.

Indeed, Armstrong casts a decisive objection against Quine with regards to entities: "I see no reason to think that classes are abstract entities, provided their members exist" (p.8). Armstrong maintains, too, that all properties are instantiated (p. 15) and does not think that very special properties like the mathematical or logical ones are necessary. He deflates them to the level of particulars. Yet, for Armstrong, universals are contingent beings: they must be instantiated somewhere and somewhen (p.18). But in this economical reduction of universals sparse universals count only in those cases which are best postulated in the context of total Science and so "universals and scientific realism need no quarrel" (p.19). Second rate properties, are a case of the latter kind, and, therefore, expendable. Secondary properties seem to be subjected to the distinction of determinates and determinables.

Relations can also be considered as universals, as long as they fit the bill for the *Principle of Instantial Invariance*. Consider the next formulation by Armstrong:

"[F]or each universals U, if it has n terms in one instantiation, then it has the same number (n) in all its instantiations" (p. 24).

The core idea here is that the number of terms a universal holds is part of what the universal is. Armstrong recognises MacBride's objection that adicity does not change the essential property of a universal. Relations, thence, can vary across instantiations. Armstrong's proposal is that there can be second rate relations too.

The chief ontological items in Armstrong's account are the "States of affairs". He writes: "The instantiation of a property universal is the simplest type of instantiation. With  $a$  as a particular and  $F$  a monadic universal we have the state of affairs  $a$  is  $F$ . With  $R$  as a two-term relation we have the state of affairs  $a R b$ ." (p. 26). States of affairs are particulars composed by universals and particulars in turn, he calls this "victory of particularity" (p. 27). Kinds supervene on state of affairs and universals. Armstrong recognises that the world is the sum of facts as states of affairs, these state of affairs might be composed into universals which are monadic or polyadic in nature, but he emphasises that there is nothing beyond the particularity of these states of affairs:

The world is the space-time world. Its ultimate nature is a structure of contingent state of affairs (Russell's facts); and these states of affairs have as constituents particulars and universals, the latter monadic, dyadic, triadic, etc. with the details of this adicity determined empirically. The universals are linked (non-superveniently) by connections between states of affairs *types* p. 115).

A contended topic interestingly (though extremely briefly) discussed is that of absences and its metaphysical nature: it looks a bit as though they cannot be grasped, as it were, so long as they are defined for their not *being*. He concludes that absences are important to characterise limitation, and then limits are the proper way to understand them.

Mind, and the problems related, might have a grip towards an answer: they should be understood as dispositions. Thus, *qualia*, intentionality and responsiveness are part of a bigger understanding of the metaphysics of dispositions. This means, for Armstrong, that the

concept of disposition is enough to deal with a materialistic theory of the mind.

Concerning the philosophy of time, Armstrong presents both the “presentist” and the “growing blocks” approaches to time. He decides, after considering the complications of the presentist picture, that the growing block approach renders us a more coherent image of how we deal with the non-existence of the future without denying the bounties of determinates and determinables playing a role in understanding temporal causation:

I am not saying that here cannot be truth-makers that the Presentist can suggest. All I contend for is that implausible and complex truth-makers will have to be postulated instead of the straightforward truth-makers that the omni-temporal theorist can give (p. 103).

It is hard to evaluate such a set of very concise chapters, but the lively aspects of that short account make the task of dealing with metaphysics truly exciting. A very remarkable aspect of a sketch in the foundations of metaphysics in general, lies in the ability to engage the reader with the relevance of the topic; indeed, this is a great success in the times where interdisciplinary impact seems to be so demanded. Armstrong says in the preface: “philosophy is best digested if you take it in small bites”.

As Armstrong’s purpose is to provide a sketch, though, some critical remarks might be relevant too: it is not clear how we are supposed to surpass, with the victory of particularity, the problems set by the predicates and regularities in terms of predictions. Let me explain myself here: as Catherine Legg (2008) pointed out, Armstrong’s account offers the same profit as rival theories such as *Trope Theory*. It is hard to accept his account, arguably, if the other enjoys conceptual economy. Armstrong’s theory still lacks an explanation of how predictions are a *projectible* confirmation of the reality of regularities: in order to do such, we need to reconsider, among other things, a distinction between reality and existence. In Armstrong’s account reality and existence are only coextensive terms. Armstrong

sees “semantic” questions as concerning the extensions of predicates, and “ontological” questions as concerning the existence of entities. Therefore, for Armstrong, the answer to the problem of universals ultimately lies within ontology: insofar as the problem is whether universals are included amongst the things that exist. I will offer a hint here: Peirce, for example, thought that the business of “logic” in this context is to ask what the fundamental modes of being are. The problem of universals, then, receives its answer. For Peirce, this is answered within logic. He would suggest to Armstrong that real generality is affirmed as a mode of being alongside existent particularity. Armstrong gave us, indeed, plenty of interesting excuses to engage in further discussion.

Paniel Osberto Reyes Cárdenas  
The University of Sheffield, United Kingdom  
p.reyescardenas@sheffield.ac.uk

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