

"Powers, Essentialism and Agency: A Reply to Alexander Bird"  
Ruth Porter Groff, Saint Louis University  
AUB Conference, April 28-29, 2016

1. Here's the backstory.

A couple of years ago my friend Alexander Bird wrote a paper for a volume that I co-edited (A. Bird, "The Limitations of Power," in R. Groff and J. Greco, *Powers and Capacities in Philosophy: The New Aristotelianism*, Routledge, 2012), in which he expanded upon his 2007 claim that a powers ontology has no bearing on "the mysteries" of agency, as he put it.

In that same volume, I had a paper ("Whose Powers? Which Agency?") clarifying that Alexander holds what Brian Ellis calls a 'passivist' ontology, while many other powers theorists are 'anti-passivists.' Alexander came to agree with me that this is so.

- A quick way to capture the difference between the two positions is to say that Alexander, *qua* passivist, thinks that 'activity' is a metaphor (which he does say, in that paper). The anti-passivist denies this, believing activity to be an irreducible feature of the world.

I ended my paper with the observation that it was just those features of the anti-passivist ontology that Alexander rejects that an anti-passivist might point to as having a bearing upon the mysteries of agency.

Alexander was entirely right, I said, to insist that 'powers', as per his own definition of the term (and in conjunction with the rest of his own over-all view), would not help anyone to make a case for metaphysically free agency. But, I said, it doesn't follow from

this fact that a commitment to *anti-passivism* has no bearing on the issue.

Alexander countered that his argument holds even for the anti-passivist.

2. My reply is: "No it doesn't." That's the official thesis of my paper today.

I recognize that this is the kind of persnickety little paper that I often like to tease: papers with titles such as "Two Worries and a Complaint." Still, there are good reasons, it seems to me, to make the case.

- First (and most important), if I'm right, then Alexander has *not* established that anti-passivism has no bearing on the problem of free will.
- Second: it's a meta-theoretical point worth making over and over again that, at this moment in Anglo-analytic metaphysics, flat out contradictory alternative usages of the word 'power' are permitted, such that it's very easy for people to talk past each other without knowing it.
- Third: the competing metaphysics are really quite different. Alexander thinks that activity is a metaphor. Most well-known powers theorists deny this. In fact, most powers theorists think that to deny this is just what it is to *be* a powers theorist.

So it is imperative that we pay very close attention to the actual substance of a position, and not assume anything at

all based on the (mere) fact that the word "power" has been used.

3. Let me start out by summarizing the relevant parts of Alexander's overall view. I apologize for the time that it will take to do this, but it's crucial to my argument that you be able to see what Alexander means when he says the various things that he says.

### 3.1 Re: properties and pseudo-properties.

Alexander makes use of three categories: (i) powers (which he calls potencies), (ii) dispositions, (iii) compound universals.

(a) Powers (potencies) are "theoretical entities" or "theoretical concepts." They are (at least for now) explanatory posits that may or may not actually exist; their nature (accordingly) is what it is by stipulation, by definitional fiat.

(b) Powers (potencies), by definition, are:

- (i) real properties (rather than properties only in name or in a manner of speaking);
- (ii) which figure in projects of fundamental (rather than non-fundamental) metaphysics;
- (iii) the individual identities of which
  - are had by them essentially (i.e., are fixed or invariant); and
  - have the form of a subjunctive conditional.

(c) Dispositions (which are not "theoretical entities") are:

- (i) properties in name only;
- (ii) which obtain at the level of middle-sized dry goods and figure in projects of non-fundamental metaphysics;

(iii) the individual identities of which may be contingent, although their form (like that of potencies) is that of a subjunctive conditional.

(d) Compound universals are:

(i) real properties;

(ii) which figure only in projects of non-fundamental metaphysics;

(iii) the individual identities of which are essential or invariant, but do not have the form of a subjunctive conditional.

- Alexander is known for being a pan-dispositionalist about properties, but he's a dispositionalist only about non-compound properties that figure in projects of fundamental metaphysics, i.e., about 'potencies' as he defines them. ('Dispositions,' as Alexander defines them, are also dispositional, but they are properties in name only.)

### 3.2 Re: Causation

(a) Causal relations occur at the level of middle-sized dry goods, and are properly a topic of *non-fundamental* metaphysical inquiry; causation may not even obtain at the level at which potencies exist, if they do. It is thus a category mistake to talk of a powers theory of causation.

- Alexander cites Jon Jacobs, along with Stephen Mumford and Rani Anjum, as people who make this mistake. Presumably, Rom Harre and E. H. Madden; Roy Bhaskar; Nancy Cartwright; and Brian Ellis also do, as well as most (if not all) other anti-passivists.

(b) Causation does not (therefore) consist in the display of potencies.

- Note that potencies as Alexander defines them could not be displayed in the sense of 'display' that features in anti-passivist accounts of causation anyway, since Alexander maintains that activity is a purely metaphorical phenomenon.

### 3.3 Re: Laws

(a) Laws are real. They are part of the furniture of the universe, not simply statements about how the world is &/or about how things behave.

(b) At least some laws (unlike causation) **are** directly connected to the existence of potencies, in that the determinate content of (the laws) is fixed by the essential natures of the relevant potencies.

### 3.4 Human Agency

(a) Human beings are **non-fundamental** entities, and therefore cannot be bearers of potencies, which - by stipulation - do not exist at the level of middle-sized dry goods;

(b) Agency, accordingly, is a topic of non-fundamental metaphysical inquiry.

4. The powers account of agency that Alexander takes himself to be refuting is:

"[A]gents are composed of objects whose properties are themselves active and so are active entities not passive ones. We are agents made up of components that themselves have agency."

- Rightly or wrongly, Alexander associates this position with John Heil and Brian Ellis.

5. The problem that the powers position, as formulated by Alexander, is supposed to solve, according to Alexander, is the following:

"[T]he possession by persons of intentionality/agency seems inconsistent with their being composed of parts that lack intentionality/agency. The mystery is solved by the metaphysics of powers, because then our parts do have intentionality/agency in virtue of the powers they possess."

6. Finally, here are the reasons that Alexander gives for thinking that a belief in powers (potencies), as he defines them, has no bearing on the problem of free agency, as he characterizes it:

(a) "[T]he intentionality or agency of a whole," he says, cannot be explained by the intentionality of its parts. "*A fortiori* the intentionality of mental states is not to be explained by the physical intentionality (i.e., dispositionality) or agency of fundamental physical properties."

(b) "The exact nature of agency is disputed, but no plausible view allows dispositions (or powers) to confer agency." Also, neither dispositions nor powers (potencies) are themselves active. ("A loaded, primed gun," Alexander observes, "is disposed to fire when the trigger is pulled. But that firing does not exhibit agency. ... If the gun was disposed to fire when the trigger is pulled it did not then have the capacity not to fire.")

(c) (Assuming that they exist), what is distinctive about potencies is their modal status. But:

(i) Heil and Ellis make no appeal to the "essentiality" of the identities of powers (potencies) in their powers-based discussions of agency (i.e., to the fact that the specific subjunctive conditional associated with any given type of potency cannot be replaced by any other subjunctive conditional); and

(ii) by stipulation, macro-entities have dispositions, not potencies.

Thus, even if Heil or Ellis *were* to make reference to the invariance of the specific identities had by relevant potencies, "... how do the modal features of basic universals bear upon mysteries that concern macro-entities such as persons and their intentionality/agency?"

(d) "If I am troubled by the problem of free will then I am troubled by the idea that the future locations of the physical components of my body are determined by the deterministic laws of nature governing the properties of those physical parts. Am I any the less troubled when I discover that the very same locations of my physical parts are determined by the essentially dispositional physical properties of those parts?"

7. My claim is that Alexander's argument does not extend to someone who does not already share his metaphysics.

First let's look the account of agency that Alexander ascribes to the powers theorist.

Here it is again: "[A]gents are composed of objects whose properties are themselves active and so are active entities not passive ones. We are agents made up of components that themselves have agency."

The anti-passivist will (or at least should) reject this representation on the following grounds.

(a) It's not the *properties* of propertied-things that are active. It is the propertied-things themselves.

(b) Agents may well have parts, or components (though the anti-passivist is free to deny this, and some do). But if we do have parts, there's no reason to think that our parts themselves have the powers that agents have. The only case that I can think of in which something like this might be true, and it's clearly an exception, would be if one were to count a full or close-to-full-term fetus as being a proper part of a pregnant agent; such a part might be thought to be a bearer of agential powers, or at least something very close to that.

(c) Nor, conversely, need the powers had by agents be exhausted by, or ontologically reducible to, the properties had by our parts (if one thinks that agents have parts). Agential powers, one might think, are emergent. They are properties had by the whole, precisely *not* by the parts thereof.

Alexander seems to grant that agential powers (if there were such a thing) *would* be had by the whole, but considers this to tell against wholes having such powers. But that conclusion only follows if one accepts from the outset the stipulation that middle-sized dry goods can't have powers (potencies), and so would have to inherit them from fundamental parts that could.

8. Next let's look at point #5: Alexander's statement of the problem that, in his view, the anti-passivist mistakenly thinks s/he can resolve.

Here it is again: "[T]he possession by persons of intentionality/agency seems inconsistent with their being composed of parts that lack intentionality/agency."

The anti-passivist will not, or at least ought not, accept that this is the problem upon which s/he thinks anti-passivism bears.

(a) One might even think that this isn't the problem of free will at all. Rather, it is a version of the mind-body problem.

And in any case, it is a problem that presumes that one has rejected an Aristotelian (or neo-Aristotelian) account of agents as unified, embodied, conscious substances. But there is no reason to think the anti-passivist has rejected that view.

(b) The threat to free will in relation to which the anti-passivist will - or ought to - think that s/he has something to say is the one that is supposedly posed by the fact of causation.

That is, for the anti-passivist who has something to say about the problem of free will in virtue of her metaphysics, the apparent contradiction of free will is best expressed not as per Alexander's formulation, but rather as the question: "How can we be free agents if causation is what event-causal passivists say it is (be they defenders of nomological necessitation, nomological contingency, or nomological probabilities)? If any of these accounts of causation are assumed, it looks as though the very best that we can do is engage in agent-causalist metaphysical special pleading."

9. Now to the crux of the matter: Alexander's claim that his argument for why potencies have no bearing on agency holds even if one conceives of powers in terms of real activity.

I'll run through each of the points of the argument, in order.

(a) Point #1 (6a) - The agency of the whole can't be explained by the agency of the parts.

As I've already noted, there is no reason to assume that the anti-passivist *does* think that the agency of the whole is explained by the agency of its parts - let alone that it is inherited from its parts' purported agential powers.

On the contrary, the anti-passivist is free (as it were) to respond to this point by saying that the agential powers of the agent are emergent powers of the agent-*qua*-agent; they do not require that her spleen also be an agent. (Feel equally free to insert light-hearted, off-color reference here to body parts that might have greater *prima facie* plausibility to being free agents than does the spleen.)

Also, the anti-passivist will, or at least ought to, say that it is the agent who is intentional, not the agent's mental states [see quoted text in 6(a)].

(b) Point #2 (6b) - Powers aren't active; no one thinks that powers confer agency; guns can't decide not to fire.

(i) The anti-passivist will (or ought to) agree that properties themselves are neither active nor conscious.

(ii) However, if one thinks that consciousness, for example, *is* a complex power - one that, among other things, involves second-order powers to exercise or refrain from exercising various first-order powers - then one will indeed have every reason to connect the having of such a power (or powers) with agency. One might think that to be an agent just *is* to have such a power (or powers).

(iii) Alexander is correct to say that guns, lacking the relevant power(s), are not agents.

(c) Point #3 (6c) - What matters is the "essentiality" of the identities of powers (potencies); powers (potencies) are fundamental, whereas agency is not.

(i) re: the modal status of the identities of powers.

The anti-passivist does not *equate* a belief in powers with a belief about the invariance of the identities of a certain class of properties. Whether or not s/he appeals to the latter in her or his discussion of the powers had by agents is therefore not pertinent, *for the anti-passivist*, to the question of whether or not anti-passivism is relevant for agency.

Moreover, for the anti-passivist, what is (or ought to be) of primary interest with respect to the modal features of powers is not the "essentiality" or invariance of their specific natures, but rather that they are properties that can be had, by propertyed things (with this or that capacity), even when the associated capacity is not actualized.

(ii) re: the distinction between the domains of "fundamental" and "non-fundamental" metaphysics.

The anti-passivist need not accept Alexander's stipulated conceptual topography. Certainly it is not obvious that powers, as conceived by the anti-passivist, cannot be had by middle-sized dry goods. Nor is it obvious that powers (as conceived by the anti-passivist) are only tangentially related to causation (as conceived by the anti-passivist).

On the contrary, most (if not all) anti-passivists, so long as they grant the *existence* of middle-sized dry goods, assume that such entities are powerful particulars; with respect to properties rather than propertied-things, most (if not all) pan-dispositionalists think that *all* properties are powers, not that only a domain-specific sub-class of properties are powers. And those thinkers who do hold that only some properties are powers, e.g., Brian Ellis, do not restrict powers to one or another metaphysical domain.

Similarly, most (if not all) anti-passivists explicitly connect the phenomenon of causation to the display of powers.

(d) Point #4. If I am worried about my parts being subject to deterministic causal laws, the fact that powers (potencies), if they exist, have invariant natures won't help me.

As per 8(a) above (albeit for other reasons as well) the identified trouble is not a trouble that the anti-passivist necessarily has, or is even likely to have. Some anti-passivists deny the very existence of laws. And, in appealing to powers in relation to agency, the anti-passivist is not appealing to 'potencies' as per Alexander's theoretical apparatus.

If one did have this trouble, *and* one shared Alexander's passivism; Alexander's domain typography; Alexander's account of

laws; Alexander's view of causation; and the implicit account of the composition of agents that figures in the reported trouble, then it *would* follow, as I said in my original reply, that one would not be reassured to know that agents' parts are governed by laws that are fixed by the identities of potencies as Alexander has defined them.

But a commitment to anti-passivism entails none of these other commitments.

10. I have not undertaken to argue here that adopting an anti-passivist metaphysics does too have a bearing on problems related agency or free will. I have made that case in more than one place elsewhere, and am glad to share.

Here, I wanted to show only that Alexander is mistaken to think that his own argument to the contrary holds even if one does not accept his starting metaphysical assumptions and definitions.

A final thought: while anti-passivism is not the same issue as that of essentialism (be it essentialism about the nature of properties or the nature of anything else), I do think that a commitment to kind essences secures the conviction, if one has it, that someone who is an agent today will continue to be one tomorrow, assuming that the agent is a substance of the same kind tomorrow as they are today.

