The Devil is in the Categories:
Metaphysics and Political Thought
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Ruth Groff, Saint Louis University

Introduction

Let me start with a caveat. It's obviously possible to act in ways that are at odds with one's philosophical views. Or in ways that aren't theoretically informed at all. And to the extent that that's the case, what I'm about to say doesn't make much of a difference.

But it's also the case that our fundamental assumptions do, if our views are coherent, shape our other beliefs -- and what we believe often **does** (even if it needn't necessarily) have a bearing upon how we act politically. Whether we know it or not. Thus it behooves us, I think, to attend to basic philosophical categories, including metaphysical ones, even if there is nothing to stop us from ignoring what we find when we do.

To be sure, the dominant metaphysics in Anglo-analytic corners has it that whatever we end up saying about the world of so-called "middle-sized dry goods" (that's us) – whatever it is, it will be equally compatible with any underlying ontology (the dominant one or any other). Political theorists tend to think this too. Functionally, it's another version of the idea that you don't have to care about fundamental categories unless you happen to have a thing for metaphysics. But the meta-theoretical claim in question only holds up, if it does, if the metaphysics that sustains it is true, and there's no particular reason to grant that it is.

My plan, therefore, is to look at three very basic metaphysical issues, and to say just a word about why they matter for what can be said about middle-sized dry goods and relations of power. I have maybe four minutes a piece, so I'm going to have to be extremely concise, telescopic even. But I'll be happy to elaborate in the Q&A, or in conversation later.

I. Atomism & the existence of social facts

The first issue concerns what are sometimes called 'emergent' phenomena -- though there are about 18 different definitions of the term 'emergence' in play in the contemporary literature.   What I mean by an emergent phenomenon in the context of social reality is a property or entity that, while it might be (a) composed of individuals [a union, say, or (depending upon what one thinks a society is) a society of a given kind, e.g., a capitalist one); or (b) had by individuals (a racialized gender identity, say) is not (c) metaphysically equivalent to a plurality of individuals or the properties thereof. Durkheim referred to such phenomena as 'social facts,' distinguishing them from 'psychological facts.' Sociology, he said, differs from psychology in that it is the study of the former rather than the latter. John Stuart Mill, defending the contrary position (i.e., atomism, or ontological individualism), denied the existence of such facts.

If, as a matter of ontology, you reject emergence, then you can't, at the level of social theory, refer meaningfully to corporate or relational sociological entities, or to their properties, or to social properties had by individuals (since you don't think that any of these phenomena exist). Conversely, if you want to count such phenomena as real in your social theory, then you can't be an atomist (or ontological individualist). For example, if you think that there is a difference between structural racism and racist acts by individuals, then you have to affirm emergence. An atomist, having claimed that only the latter exist, can't

make the distinction. I should note that there is a move that is countenanced by some Anglo-analytic philosophers, which allows one to say both (a) that a putative emergent entity – a corporation, for instance – really and truly exists and (b) that it really and truly is only its parts. (Those who make this move generally add the modifier '… duly arranged' to "its parts," but then stipulate that the while the arrangement is necessary for the entity to exist, there is no so-called addition of being that the arrangement adds. Thus I have used the word "only.") Sadly, one cannot have it both ways. If there is a disagreement about whether, in addition to Gus, Biff, Esmerelda, Buffy and Moe there exists The Bonzo Corporation, and the answer is "Yes, but the truthmaker for 'The Bonzo Corporation' is Gus, Biff, Esmerelda, Buffy and Moe (duly arranged, but the arrangement doesn't add anything)," then one has in fact answered "No."

II. Anti-essentialism & the possibility of falsehood

The second issue is whether or not there are ways that things ("thing" as a count noun only), or kinds of things, are or are not. For present purposes, this issue is connected with the third issue, which is the question of passivism, viz., whether or not things in the world are genuinely active, such that causation is about the productive display of their real powers-to-do. The dominant view with respect to both is "No; things ('things') have no substantial form. Accordingly, there are no properties, including distinctive powers-to-do, that are had by them essentially." Lacking any 'what-it-is,' to use the Aristotelian locution, any given thing can in principle come to be or to do anything.

There's a Hume-derived version of anti-essentialism and a Kant-derived version (and others, though these are the most common versions), but the upshot is the same: no internally ontologically-intact propertied objects – i.e., no things that are intrinsically what they are, metaphysically, and which, being what they are, necessarily are able to

do (or necessarily are unable to do) what things of their kind can and cannot potentially do (you might think that, for Kant, people are the exception, inasmuch as he seems to hold that we are the seats of pure reason independently of being cognized or being thought to be such).

The Humean version is the dominant one in Anglo-analytic quarters, and it allows one to say, as both Hume & contemporary Humeans do (but Kant does not), that any course of action that is logically possible is metaphysically possible. It also allows one to say – though it's really just the same claim, rearranged - that the world is such that it can potentially conform to any logically consistent narrative about it. Which in turn authorizes one to say that any logically consistent narrative can turn out to be true, even whilst affirming a robust, non-epistemic definition of 'true.'

Here the point is that if you think that what exists is entirely amorphous, ontologically - either no determinate way at all or all possible ways at once – then you forego recourse to the concept of falsehood. You will have to say that the meaning of "That claim about the world is false" is exhausted by "I don't like that claim" or "I don't want to believe that." I find it useful to call this position 'epistemic emotivism,' though it has also gone by the name 'perspectivism.' It is always dangerous to be unable, in principle, to say that a claim about the world is false (i.e., false for real; as in "to say of x that it is not x, is false"), but the current climate should make this prudential fact even more apparent than ever. If you want to be able to use the concept of falsehood in a non-emotivist manner, then you need a metaphysics according to which it is not the case that anything at all, at any given instant, is possible, the world being as it is.

III. Passivism and the concept of alienation

Finally, a separate word about causal powers. People who do not believe that things have real causal powers-to-do are at a disadvantage when it comes to conceptualizing agency because they think that the world is such that there is no difference between the ostensible animation of the figures in a child's flip-book and the activity of real people; in both cases, what appears to be activity is in reality (they claim) a sequence of static stills. The rejection of powers – and by extension substances that have agential powers – also makes it hard to defend free will, if by free will one means anything like a capacity for self-initiated sentient activity. If *nothing* has causal powers, then certainly agents don't.

I have written about powers and the free will debate and I'm happy to talk more about it. What I want to emphasize now is that the concept of alienation presupposes agents who are metaphysically free as per what in the literature is called an 'agent causal' account of free will. How so?

The concept of alienation refers to the experience of one's own efficacy as the efficacy of something other than oneself. Feuerbach, for example, has it that human beings mistake our own agential powers for those of a supernatural being. And Marx takes it further: we unknowingly turn our own powers against ourselves, such that not only do we mistake our own efficacy for that of reified market forces, but our options for acting really are constrained by those same fetishized processes. Moreover, the powers that we turn against ourselves are not simply the agential powers had by *any* sentient substance; they are precisely the powers that constitute distinctively human creativity.

The point in this case is as follows. If you think that there are no causal powers, not only will you have trouble conceptualizing agency, and (in addition) be pushed to adopt an account of causation that makes it difficult if impossible to defend free will, but – and by definition - you will not be in a position to refer to alienation, i.e., to diagnose

situations in which people do not recognize their own causal powers as being their own. (Indeed, one might think that the philosophical rejection of causal powers &/or of agent causation as itself an indicator of alienation.)

These are just three ways in which the devil is in the categories, but hopefully they are enough to show that it's so. We will be able to talk more in the Q&A.