

Pasnau on Category Realism

Author Meets Critics, Robert PASNAU, METAPHYSICAL THEMES 1274-1671

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From the perspective of a contemporary metaphysician, *Metaphysical Themes 1274-1671* is a fantastic book. It is an impressively rich, detailed, and thorough examination of a multitude of important metaphysical puzzles and arguments, written in a clear, engaging, lively, funny, and even on one occasion vulgar manner. The number of topics covered is astonishing: substance, attribute, form, matter, the metaphysics of predication, parts and wholes, the metaphysics of extension across space, persistence over time, the distinction between primary-secondary qualities, and many others. One of the disconcerting but exciting things about reading Pasnau's book was both the familiarity of so many of the metaphysical topics the medieval philosophers pursued as well as their divergent inclinations on how best to pursue them. This book is a metaphysical thriller, and I highly recommend it.

In what follows, I will engage as a metaphysician with Pasnau and through him some of the figures he discusses. The book is ridiculously rich, so I have narrowed my focus on one of the issues that Pasnau discusses that is directly relevant to my current work in contemporary metaphysics. Specifically, I'll focus on issues concerning various forms of category realism and related issues concerning being and existence. To give a sense of scale, my remarks focus on roughly 30 out of 730 pages of text.

We begin with the family of views that Pasnau calls 'category realism'. It's hard to precisely state what unifies this family, but what the various forms of category realism all have in common is that the categories – such as substance, attribute, action, relation, place, and so forth – must be treated as in some way metaphysically significant. It might be helpful to have at our disposal several different varieties of category realism. The names of these varieties are my own (and they are ugly), but most of them seem to have champions discussed by Pasnau. Suppose we have fixed on some specific set of categories about which we are to be some sort of realist. This set might not be the categories that Aristotle articulated. Nor need the set be the same for each author. Each view should be understood as a kind of realism about a specific contextually determined set of categories. The first view we will discuss is:

Ontological Univocal Category Realism [OUCR]: Each of the categories corresponds to a distinct type of entity; each of these types of entity is on a par with respect to how they exist, that is, there is no sense in which one type of entity enjoys a better form of existence than that of another type; and in fact, each type of entity exists in exactly the same way.

OUCR is a trivial view given that there is exactly one category. It is not a trivial view given that there is more than one category, though at least in contemporary circles it is a widely held view. OUCR is consistent with some types of entity having more power than others, or with having a different and less permissive modal profile than others. Friends of OUCR will caution us not to conflate differences in

causal potency or modal permissibility with differences in manner of being. OUCR seems to be the view of Scotus, at least with respect to the categories of substance and quality.¹ This is the kind of view that, according to Pasnau, champions of 'real accidents' must embrace.

Since I will gently contest the claim that champions of real accidents must embrace OUCR, let me briefly say something about the doctrine of real accidents. Here's a rough attempt at characterizing this doctrine: there are real accidents just in case there are properties that are capable of existing independently of inhering in any substance. (It will emerge that neither Pasnau nor I are happy with this characterization, but I'll postpone finessing it until later.) The main medieval motivation for this doctrine is that it is tricky to make sense of Eucharist without it. When the bread is replaced with the body of Jesus, it looks like the accidental properties of the bread do not go out of existence: you still can see the crustiness 'of the bread', taste 'its' flakiness, and so forth. But the substance that previously supported these attributes is longer with us at the time of the miracle. Instead, this substance has been replaced. Now does this replacement substance instantiate these accidental properties? No. In general, it would be weird if a mode of one substance could migrate to another substance, but in this particular case there are obvious religious reasons for denying that this can happen: one doesn't want to say that, for example, the body of Jesus is chewy or dry. So chewiness and dryness are still around, but don't inhere in any substance. So some accidents can enjoy a form of existence independently of being exemplified.

Let's be more careful about what the doctrine of real accidents requires. On Pasnau's view, a belief in real accidents requires holding that substances and real accidents exist in the same way. Pasnau writes that, 'On my taxonomy ... accidents are real only if they have their own proper existence, in the way that substances do'. [p. 192] One does not embrace the doctrine of real accidents simply by holding that it is metaphysically possible for an accident to exist independently of whether it is instantiated by a substance. For on Pasnau's way of thinking, one way to accept this metaphysical possibility is to hold the radical view that God can change the way in which an accident exists. I'll have more to say about this alleged possibility in a bit, but suffice it say that Pasnau does not accept that a view on which this is possible should count as a doctrine of real accidents and that Pasnau accordingly requires that a friend of the doctrine of real accidents hold that accidents always enjoy the same kind of existence as substances. I think that it is probably not correct that the doctrine of real accidents requires that accidents always enjoy the same kind of existence as substances, but in order to see this, it will be helpful to get a second view on the table:

Ontological Analogical Equality Category Realism [OAEER]: Each of the categories corresponds to a distinct type of entity; each of these types of entity is on a par with respect to how they exist, that is, there is no respect in which one type of entity enjoys a better form of existence than that of another type (this is however consistent with some types having more power than others, or have a different and less permissive modal profile than others); but the ways in which these different entities exist are not the same.

¹ See Pasnau, p. 131.

I am not sure if any character discussed by Pasnau accepts OAECR. It has more recent advocates, such as Moore, Russell, Stebbing, Meinong, and Husserl, all of whom distinguished between the way in which concrete particulars exist and the way in which universals exist. (The former of mode of being was called by some of these authors 'existence' while the latter mode of being was called by some of them 'subsistence'.) Some remarks by Pasnau suggest that it might be reasonable to attribute OAECR to Henry of Ghent [p. 232], at least with respect to the categories of substance, quality, and quantity, since (i) we are told that substance, quality, and quantity each corresponds to a *res* and (ii) even though 'being' is equivocal, accidents have their own existence. Pasnau suggests that, with respect to the remaining seven categories, Ghent endorses what I'll call Structural Category Realism. But he also notes that Ghent seems committed to the superiority of the mode of being of substance. So perhaps he merely endorses what I will call Ontological Analogical Priority Category Realism. That said, OAECR could be a view that is congenial to those who believe in 'real accidents' (at least of the categories of quality and quantity) but who still wish to distinguish their mode of being from the mode of being of substances.

As mentioned earlier, Pasnau claims that the doctrine of real accidents entails that substances and real accidents exist in the way. Pasnau writes that, 'On my taxonomy ... accidents are real only if they have their own proper existence, in the way that substances do' [p. 192] and 'Since Ghent denies that accidents exist in the same sense as substances do, he does not count as a proponent of real accidents, as I use the label' [p. 193]. This suggests that on OAECR, there aren't real accidents. But on OAECR, accidents have their own proper existence, just as substances have their own (different) proper existence. It seems to me that OAECR is consistent with the doctrine of real accidents provided that it is metaphysically possible that real accidents enjoy their form of being independently of being exemplified by a substance.

Pasnau describes Ghent's position on the being of accidents as a transitional stage on the path towards a doctrine of real accidents.² Perhaps Ghent's position is transitional because it does not condone the metaphysical possibility of an accident enjoying its mode of being independently of whether it inheres in a substance. Given how Pasnau reports Ghent's views, it seems that, for Ghent to accommodate the Eucharist, he must claim that accidents can change their mode of being. This surprising doctrine is discussed in detail by Pasnau, and I'll discuss it more in a bit. But for now the suggestion I offer is that embracing the metaphysical possibility of a quality's maintaining its mode of being independently of whether it is instantiated by something is what is necessary and sufficient for belief in real accidents; it is neither necessary nor sufficient to hold that the mode of being of accidents must be the same as the mode of being of substances. It is not necessary for the reasons just outlined – one could accept OAECR. And it is not sufficient, since one could claim that substances and attributes exist in the same way even though the latter necessarily inhere in the substances that they actually inhere in.

In the same vein, I mildly protest conflating two distinct claims: (i) the claim that substances and attributes have distinct modes of being and (ii) the claim that the mode of being of an attribute is in some way attenuated while the mode of being of a substance is not. In several places, Pasnau does not

² See Pasnau, p. 232.

distinguish these claims. On p. 190 Pasnau writes, ‘... what these deflationary views ... have in common is the denial that accidents have the same sort of being as substances have.’ But, although (ii) implies (i), (i) does not imply (ii). Keeping OAECR in mind helps one to see that (i) does not imply (ii), thus making conceptual space for a doctrine of real accidents according to which accidents do not enjoy the mode of being of substances.

To some extent the dispute over how to understand the doctrine of real accidents is terminological, and Pasnau is permitted to stipulate how he will understand the doctrine of real accidents. Insofar as this stipulation is partially due to a conflation of (i) and (ii) though, it is reasonable to suggest a different terminological choice. One methodological reason to be wary of conflating doctrines is that, when we approach a historical text, we run the risk of misinterpreting authors when we misunderstand the theoretical possibilities open to them. (I do not mean to suggest that Pasnau has done this.)

Let’s return to the classification of various forms of category realism. The next view to be considered is:

Ontological Analogical Priority Category Realism [OAPCR]: Each of the categories corresponds to a distinct type of entity; but the ways in which these different types of entity exist are not the same, and moreover some of these ways of existing are in some respect superior to others.

Ontological Analogical Category Priority Realism is seriously obscure absent some way of explaining what it means to say that a form of existence is superior to another. One intuitive way to account for ontological superiority is by appealing to the ‘logical form’ of the modes of existences in question.³ Consider the difference between the way a substance exists and the way an attribute exists: a substance exists *full stop*, that is, a complete attribution of existence to a substance need mention only the substance itself. But an attribute does not exist *full stop*, but rather only *exists in* something else. So a complete attribution of existence to a substance must mention something other than the attribute itself. The mode of being of a substance is a monadic mode; the mode of being of an attribute is a relational mode. This difference between having an absolute and having a relational mode of being does seem to track some intuitions about which form of being is better to have. And it provides a way to capture otherwise obscure intuitions. For example, Pasnau (p. 193) worries that, ‘it may be that, for Ghent, accidents have diminished existence simply because their existence ... depends on a substance, but it is not clear why a dependent entity should be regarded as any less of entity.’ I agree that dependence by itself does not imply a diminishment of being – but it is the converse implication that we should find of interest. For necessarily, anything that has this ‘diminished’ mode of being does exist in something else. (This claim is consistent with the possibility of something that actually has this diminished mode later coming to have an undiminished mode; I’ll say more about this in a bit.)

As queried above, perhaps Ghent endorsed OAPCR? Prior to reading Pasnau’s book, I was tentatively, fearfully, and probably foolishly inclined to attribute this view of the manner of being of

³ I suggest this strategy in McDaniel (2010a).

qualities to Aquinas. But at least with respect to many of the other categories, Pasnau suggests that Aquinas holds a different view, which I'll call:

Structural Category Realism [SCR]: It is not the case that each category corresponds to a distinct type of entity. Strictly, there are things only in the category of substance. (Plus God, but I'm setting the Lord aside, as He belongs to no category.) The remaining categories about which we are to be a realist represent ontologically innocent but nonetheless metaphysically important structures of reality.

Pasnau's discussion of an ontologically innocent but metaphysically important structure is probably the only part of the book that I found obscure, which is remarkable given how big the book is. Here are some things Pasnau says about structures: 'A structure is ... ontologically innocent: it is an attempt to account for how the world is organized, but without postulating any further items in the world.' [p. 231]. 'To say that there are ten categories of being is to say that there are ten fundamentally different ways in which the world may be arranged.' [p. 232] And with respect to examples of structures, we are told that the difference between *actio* and *passio* amounts to nothing more than a difference in the structures we choose to pick out, and that the relation of similarity might merely be a structure. [p. 237]

One way to try to sharpen the discussion of structures is to bring into discussion so-called beings of reason. Paradigmatic examples of what were called beings of reason are absences and privations, such as holes and blindness in an eye. Aquinas does not treat privations as full-fledged entities: they are not members of any category but are merely beings in the sense of being true. There is some sense of being in which holes have being, since there are innumerable many true sentences about holes, but this is not a fundamental sense of 'being'. Are claims about holes ontologically innocent in Pasnau's sense? One important way in which objects can be arranged is that one object can be wholly inside another, which of course requires that the containing object have a hole for the contained object to fit in. Of course holes are not metaphysically fundamental entities, but we would be crazy to eschew talk of holes.⁴

These observations suggest that Aquinas should be construed as endorsing Structural Category Realism about holes. I think that this would be a mistake – and if so we need at the minimum more information about how to distinguish between metaphysically important categories such as action and passion from the non-category of privation.

I have a suggestion about how to flesh out the distinction between those categories that we treat as structures and non-categories. We begin by considering what kind of expressions we must employ in order to provide a complete description of reality. To be clear, a complete description of reality needn't be a maximally explicit description: provided that the complete description accounts for all of the basic truths concerning reality, it is enough that the maximally explicit description be entailed by the complete description. Some types of expressions we need in order to provide a maximally explicit description of reality might not appear in the complete description of reality. Think, for example, of the

⁴ In fact, I think something stronger – we are not metaphysically capable of paraphrasing away talk of holes. I discuss why in McDaniel (2010b).

dream language of a contemporary Quinean, according to which the only types of expressions appearing in the complete description are those that can be represented using first-order logic plus set theory. In this Quinean language, there is no distinction between ‘the passive voice’ and ‘the active voice’, and there are no adverbs. (If the complete description of fundamental reality is given to us in the language of physics, there is no need for either the distinction between ‘the passive voice’ and ‘the active voice’ or adverbs.) But in order to express the difference between action and passion, arguably we can’t get by only with using non-symmetric relational predicates but must have recourse to adverbs as well, at least given that we are eschewing commitment to actions and events. (That is, given that we are eschewing the idea that the categories of action and passion corresponding to distinct kinds of entities.) This Quinean would not be a structural realist about the categories of action and passion. Talk of actions and passions would not correspond to ontologically innocent but metaphysically important structures. Such talk would rather be dispensable altogether.

We could understand Structural Category Realism as the view that, although the categories do not correspond to entities of certain types, they do correspond to metaphysically important ‘aspects of reality’, and my gloss on this is that they correspond to *kinds* of expressions that a language must have in order to completely characterize reality. So a structural category realist might hold that speaking with metaphysical rigor there are no attributes but the category of attribute is nonetheless to be taken with metaphysical seriousness – since we cannot completely describe reality without employing predicates, that is, without making attributions to substances. Similarly, there are no actions or passions, but a structural category realist could hold that these two categories do mark important kinds of linguistic constructions (perhaps ‘the active voice’ and ‘the passive voice’, or perhaps adverbs) that we need in order to account for the difference between when substances are active and when they are passive – and this is a difference that must be accounted for in the complete description of reality.

Now this way of articulating structural category realism does feel anachronistic since it stresses the importance of certain kinds of linguistic categories, albeit for the purposes of providing descriptions of fundamental reality. Maybe a less anachronistic story would focus on what kind of representations (construed more generally so as to include mental acts or their products) we must have in order to completely characterize the world. But one nice feature of this way of articulating structural category realism is that we can in principle distinguish between a non-ontologically committing metaphysically important structure and the non-category of privations. If the world requires the language of privation for its fundamental description, we must at least be structural category realists about the category of privation – but if it does not, we must not. In my view, it is our cognitive deficiencies rather than the world that require us to speak in terms of absence and privation.⁵

While we are on the subject of structural categorical realism, a clarificatory question I would ask Pasnau is where, on his view, Aquinas stands on the existence of accidents in the category of quality. I wasn’t clear on whether Pasnau has a settled view on this question, so let me mention some passages from his book that generated this question in me.

⁵ This view is spelled out more in McDaniel (2010b).

First, on the side of the view that ‘all accidents are mere structures’, we have sentences like these: ‘In a sense, the only basic entities are substances. Given his deflationary theory of accidents, accidental forms do not properly exist at all, but exist only in the derivative sense that their subjects exist in a certain way.’ [p. 231] This sentence suggests that to say that redness exists is to say nothing more than that there are red substances. And much later in a passage in which he is not referring to Aquinas, but is instead discussing very reductive views of modes, Pasnau says of some authors that talk of modes that their talk, ‘seems to be wholly reductive: just a way of signaling that all there really are in the world are substances, variously modified.’ [p. 244] This is the view that seems suggested by Pasnau’s remark on p. 231. So some texts in Pasnau suggest that Aquinas is a structural category realist with respect to the category of attributes, rather than (as I was inclined to hold) an advocate of OAPCR.

On the other hand, Pasnau awrites, ‘For Aquinas and Ghent, the concept [of structure] plays a role only at the margins of their categorical scheme, as a way to defend the scheme’s reality all the way down the list. At the critical points—Substance, Quality, Quantity—the metaphysical commitments of the theory are not in doubt, and are solidly Aristotelian (albeit in rather different ways, given Aquinas’s more deflationary stance).’ [p. 234] This passage suggests that qualities are not mere structures, but the parenthetical remark also muddies things up a bit.

One reason why the ontological status of qualities matters is that one needs to have something sensible to say about the Eucharist. In this context, I’ll now more fully discuss one of the most fascinating metaphysical doctrines discussed in Pasnau’s book, specifically the doctrine that God has the power to change the mode of being of a mere ‘inhering accident’ – something that in its current manner of being can exist only in something else – to a mode of being such that this very same entity can then exist as a free standing being existing in its own right.⁶ Pasnau rightfully finds the idea that objects could undergo a change of their manner of existing to be incredible, and suggests that there is no good precedent or analogy for this view. As mentioned earlier, the main motivation for this view is the problem of the Eucharist. Although I have no particular interest in saving doctrines of faith of this sort, in my own metaphysical explorations I have toyed with views in which an analogous change of manner of being can or does occur. So in the interest of finding some plausible partners in crime for this medieval doctrine, I’ll briefly mention them.

To find partners in crime, we need to look at views according to which either (i) things could have had a different mode of being than they actually have or (ii) the mode of being of a thing at one time needn’t be the same mode that it enjoys at a later time. With respect to the first kind of view, I’ve explored a variant of possibilism according to which the difference between the actual and the possible is a difference in mode of being: the possible and the actual both exist, but in different ways. But of course any merely possible thing could have been actual, and many actual things could have been merely possible. It’s built into this ontological framework that things could have had a different mode of being than the mode they actually have.⁷ With respect to the second kind of view, I’ve explored versions of the A-theory of time according to which merely past or merely future objects have a different mode

⁶ See Pasnau, pp. 188-190.

⁷ See McDaniel (2009).

of being than present ones. Moreover, on one of these versions, only presently existing things enjoy an absolute form of existence – they just plain exist – whereas merely past and merely future things enjoy a relative kind of existence – they always exist *at* some time or other. Not only is it built into this ontological framework that things can change their mode of being, this change of mode literally happens all the time. Moreover, it's a change from a kind of polyadic mode – existing at – to a kind of absolute existence – existence simpliciter – which, in this respect, mirrors the change of being that a mode can undergo in miraculous situations: the mode ceases to enjoy existence-in and comes to enjoy existence full-stop.⁸ So although I have little interest in defending this particular doctrine of faith, I am less inclined to find it completely without precedent or analogue to other doctrines in metaphysics.

So in order to accommodate the Eucharist, one has three views about qualities to entertain – the view that qualities enjoy the same manner of being as substances, the view that accidents have their own distinctive manner of being which in principle accidents can maintain without inhering in a substance, and finally the view that accidents can by virtue of God's power come to enjoy an altogether different mode of being. Can Structural Category Realism about accidents accommodate the miracle of the Eucharist? I'm not sure, but if talk of accidents of the category of quality is really a puffed up way of talking about structures, how could it? Perhaps God can make an accident change its mode of being – but in order for God to do this, the accident needed to have some genuine mode of being to begin with. However, something that exists merely in a manner of speaking doesn't really exist in any way at all, and nothing that exists in no way at all can come to enjoy some manner of being.

This analogy is a little strained, but useful: consider the average man. The average man exists only in a manner of speaking – there is no manner of being enjoyed by an entity referred to by 'the average man'. So it makes no sense to even entertain the hypothesis that God has the power to create an individual that is definitely described by 'the average man'. It doesn't make sense to entertain the hypothesis that the average man could change his mode of being to the mode of, for example, substances. For a less strained but still imperfect analogy, consider a hole. Can God change the mode of being of a hole to that of a substance? If talk of accidents of a certain sort is really a puffed allusion to an ontologically innocent structure, then not even God could make it that such 'accidents' enjoy a genuine form of existence. I suggest that this fact puts pressure against attributing to Aquinas too deflationary a view about the ontological status of qualities. Insofar as one is inclined to think that accidents corresponding to the remaining categories can persist during the miracle of the Eucharist, one should also hesitate to be a Structural Category Realist about those categories.

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⁸ See McDaniel (ms).

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