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0521580641 - A World of States of Affairs - D. M. Armstrong

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In this important study David Armstrong offers a comprehensive system of analytical metaphysics that synthesizes but also develops his thinking over the last twenty years. Armstrong's analysis, which acknowledges the 'logical atomism' of Russell and Wittgenstein, makes facts (or states of affairs, as the author calls them) the fundamental constituents of the world, examining properties, relations, numbers, classes, possibility and necessity, dispositions, causes and laws. All these, it is argued, find their place and can be understood inside a scheme of states of affairs. This is a comprehensive and rigorously this-worldly account of the most general features of reality, argued from a distinctive philosophical perspective, and it will appeal to a wide readership in analytical philosophy.

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A world of states of affairs

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FOR JENNY

The nature of the enterprise
'grubbing about in the roots of being'

Donald Williams

The hypothesis
'The universe consists of objects having
various qualities and standing in various
relations.'

Whitehead and Russell

A warning
'it is the mark of an educated man to
look for certainty in each class of
things just so far as the nature of the
subject admits'

Taken from Aristotle, but with 'certainty' substituted for his 'precision'

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Preface

During the past twenty years or so, I have been working on ontological questions. What are universals, laws of nature, dispositions and powers, possibilities and necessities, classes, numbers? The present essay tries to bring all these topics together in a unified metaphysical scheme, an ontology. As a result, there is a certain amount of recapitulation of earlier writing. But putting the pieces together turned out to be quite difficult. A good deal of further work was necessary. Many mistakes, as I now think of them, had to be corrected. So what follows is not a mere sum of past thinking.

It has proved very hard to decide upon an order of exposition. Exposition must be serial, but I have continually felt hampered by this. It has often seemed that I could not discuss A without first having discussed B, but that to reverse the order would produce an equal and opposite problem. As a result, I do not know whether the chapters are in the best order. In particular, some readers may find it convenient to read the central chapter 8 at the beginning, or perhaps immediately after chapter 1, and then go back. Again, chapter 5, on Powers, is put in early because it is part of the theory of properties, and properties are discussed in chapters 3 and 4. But the topic of Powers is very closely linked with the discussion of Cause, and of Law, discussed in chapters 14 to 16. Chapters 5 plus 14 to 16 are a natural package.

A briefer presentation of much of the material to be found in chapters 14 to 15 will be found in my article 'Singular Causation and Laws of Nature', in *The Cosmos of Science*, edited by John Earman, published by the University of Pittsburgh Press. That article, however, was written in 1993, antedating the present chapters.

I am no lover of footnotes, and have not used any in the book. Some readers will feel that certain passages should have been relegated in this way. I apologize to them in advance.

There is no certainty in philosophy. No philosopher can *know* that his

Preface

or her arguments are true. This makes it important, I think, that philosophers should be prepared to explore, and bring into their discussions, positions for which they have sympathy but which differ from the views that they actually take. 'Fall-back' positions are particularly important to specify, that is, positions which one would adopt if forced out of one's actual position. (An example from my own views on the mind: if forced out of a physicalist view of the mental, I would retreat to a Dualistic rather than an Eliminativist view.) I have therefore included a certain amount of this sort of discussion. Some readers may wish to go lightly over this material.

Philosophy, or at any rate analytic philosophy, has changed greatly during the time that I have been a student of the subject. For the most part, it has been changed for the better. One of the changes for the better has been the way philosophers have increasingly found it possible to cooperate with each other. Of course, they argue and criticize each other just as much as they ever did. But often today they find colleagues who they can agree with quite closely about the general approach in some area. Sometimes they even 'get the same result', for all the world as if they were scientists! It seems that our unruly discipline is becoming a little more of a *discipline*.

At any rate, while writing this book I have solicited and received comment and criticism of drafts from a great many people. They have given me invaluable help. I list them, with apologies to anybody inadvertently omitted: Peter Anstey, John Bacon, John Bigelow, Michael Bradley, Keith Campbell, John Carroll, Evan Fales, Peter Forrest, Jim Franklin, Reinhardt Grossmann, Herb Hochberg, Frank Jackson, David Lewis, Bill Lycan, Michael McDermott, Storrs McCall, Daniel Nolan, John O'Leary-Hawthorne, Charlie Martin, George Molnar, James Moulder, Michael Murray, Michael Pendlebury, Gideon Rosen, Glen Ross, Scott Shalkowski, Brian Skyrms, Jack Smart, Chris Swoyer, Bill Tarrant, Michael Tooley, Peter van Inwagen, Kevin Wilkinson and Peter Woodruff. Sydney Shoemaker was one of the readers for Cambridge University Press, but besides sending valuable detailed comments he asked that I be given his name.

A very preliminary draft of the material was presented to a graduate class, attended by a number of faculty, at the University of California at Irvine in the Fall Term of 1992. The exercise was repeated for a faculty seminar at Franklin and Marshall College in the Fall Semester of 1993. I thank all who participated in these seminars. During May, 1994, I was a

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Visiting Fellow in the Philosophy Program of the Research School of the Social Sciences, at the Australian National University. During that time a greatly advanced draft of the book was produced. I thank Professor Frank Jackson and others who made me so welcome and discussed issues with me. Some of the material was presented in seminars at the University of Graz in October–November 1995. Many thanks are due to Rudolf Haller and Johannes Marek. During this time I also gave three seminars on the book in the lively Philosophy department at the University of Maribor in Slovenia. I thank, in particular, Bojan Borstner and Nenad Miscevic.

Bill Tarrant and Peter Anstey were, in turn, invaluable research assistants. Their work was financed by a grant by the Australian Research Council (Small Grants Scheme) for which I am very grateful. Keith Campbell as Challis Professor of Philosophy at Sydney University, together with Anthea Bankoff and Veronica Leahy as Administrative Assistants in the Department of Traditional and Modern Philosophy, provided invaluable support. Special thanks go to Anthea. My wife Jenny put up with it all, and has even encouraged the enterprise. I dedicate the book to her.

Sydney