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ABSTRACT
Although contemporary powers metaphysics largely understands itself as a metaphysical realist undertaking, recently powers have come to the surface also within an idealist context. This paper aims to characterize and motivate an absolute idealist conception of powers. I compare realist and idealist powers metaphysics in their respective responses to Humean scepticism concerning powers, thereby motivating the claim that the very idea of a power is actually best understood as an idealist idea. I continue to characterize the absolute idealist's understanding of power, for which it is necessary to see that the content of her power notion is inseparable from the way in which she arrives at that notion. I close with a brief reflection on the absolute idealist's understanding of the power of thought, which is where idealist and realist powers metaphysics diverge most radically.

1. Introduction

Contemporary powers metaphysics is routinely taken to be a form of metaphysical realism; quite often explicitly so.[1] Realist defenders of powers take them to be among the ontologically basic entities that populate the 'mind-independent world'. They seek to thereby distinguish themselves primarily from other realists, and in particular from the neo-Humean mainstream that has dominated large parts of the analytic tradition—and that is, famously, sceptical of the very idea of a power.[2]

Yet the idea of a power has quite recently also surfaced within an *idealist* strand of contemporary analytic philosophy—'idealist', as this is understood by Kant and the German Idealists. Here, the idea of a power likewise figures in their opposition to Humeanism, albeit in a very different way.

This essay intends to characterize and motivate what may be called an *absolute idealist* conception of powers, inspired by Sebastian Rödl, Matthias Haase, Wolfram

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[1] See, e.g., Molnar [2003], Chakravartty [2007], Mumford and Anjum [2011], Anjum and Mumford [2018], and Neil Williams [2019].
[2] Is the neo-Humean orthodoxy within the analytic tradition 'realist'? Its roots in logical positivism, but also the pragmatic turn that it took in, for instance, Quine's writing, cast doubt on this claim. Yet, especially within the contemporary metaphysical discussion (on which, David Lewis's realist Humeanism has had an extensive influence), it is undeniable that 'neo-Humeanism' does qualify as realist in the sense that interests us here.

Gobsch, and Adrian Haddock (amongst others).[3] Absolute idealism is not an idealism of a Berkeleyan kind, in which the world is in some way said to be, or to depend on, something ('merely') subjective, mental, or phenomenal. Nor is it an idealism of the kind that results when one deletes the material side of a Cartesian dualism (if, indeed, that differs relevantly from the Berkeleyan variety). Rather, as I will explain, it is the idealism that properly develops the old Parmenidean insight that thinking and being are one (compare Rödl [2018, 2019] and Kimhi [2018]).

Conversely, realism may be characterized by the slogan that reality is 'mind-independent', or, similarly, that metaphysics is about the objective world as it is *anyway*.[4] Hence, thinking is, for the realist, not being, but instead an activity in which some of the 'beings' engage, *and others not*. And a realist powers metaphysician will spell this out in terms of those things' having the *power* of thought.

The mentioned power-wielding 'analytic German Idealists' differ most markedly from their realist counterparts on precisely this point. A realist considers the human being with her power for thought 'from sideways on', as an object that is 'out there' to be investigated, among various other objects. But, these idealists insist, this is a fantasy: there is no stepping outside thought; thought can be understood only 'from within'. Thought is not some power among others; nor does it fall under any other ontological category, because those categories are themselves categories *of thought*. Eventually, this recognition leads to the apparently paradoxical insight mentioned above—that thought is not *in* reality, because thought *is* reality. Thinking is being. And yet idealists see fit to speak of a 'power of thought', borne by concrete, living, mortal beings—by you and me. (This is, of course, just a pitch; I will return later to the idealist take on the power of thought.)

So far, it may seem that idealists and realists diverge *only* about the power of thought, while there can be peaceful convergence regarding other powers: both can understand powers of non-thinking beings simply as instances of the ontological category of power. However, the former divergence has consequences for the understanding of 'ontological categories' across the board. A realist has to distinguish *metaphysical* categories, which pertain to reality as such, from *rational* categories, which characterize the power of thought specifically. Of course, she will add that the latter correspond to the former, somehow. But, anyway, the powers of nature are elements of the natural order, and not of the rational order: they are ontological posits, and not grounded in the self-understanding of thought. And things look different indeed for the idealist. Compare Rödl's concise statement: 'a power is the concept, or nature, of something, considered as explaining it' [2018: 104]. Here, the nature of a thing is identified with its 'concept', and powers are positioned as being such concepts in their explanatory capacity. The realist, by contrast, keeps apart the conceptual/epistemological from the ontological dimensions.

To bring into focus this fundamental difference between realist and idealist powers, it is helpful to consider how they constitute themselves in opposition to Humeanism. To this end, I will, in section 2, contrast the contemporary realist's opposition to Hume

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[3] See, e.g., Rödl [2007, 2012, 2018, 2019], Haase [2013], Gobsch [2017], and Haddock [forthcoming]. One of the 'others' that I mention is Irad Kimhi [2018], even though he would probably object to being labelled an 'absolute idealist'.

[4] Bernard Williams [1978: 48–9] characterizes the search for an understanding of 'absolute reality', reality 'as it is *anyway*'. Similar characterizations can be found in, e.g., Stroud [2000, 2011], who describes it as the 'Quest for Reality', and Fine [2001: 2], who calls it the search for a distinctively '*metaphysical* conception of reality'.

with Kant's famous transcendental idealist answer to Hume (although I will do so in systematic rather than historical terms). There, we will see why the very idea of a power really is an idealist idea. And this recognition is the core of my current attempt to motivate an idealist conception of powers.

But Kant's idealism is insufficient. We need to move on to absolute idealism; and I do so in section 3, which provides a first articulation of the absolute idealist conception of powers, departing from the Kantian considerations discussed in section 2. Finally, I return in section 4 to the power of thought—where, as remarked, the divergence between absolute idealism and mainstream powers metaphysics is most pronounced. We will see there just how deep that difference runs.

2. From Hume to Kant: Why Power Is an Idealist Notion

At the core of neo-Humeanism lies the idea of a large mosaic of particular matters of fact, involving nothing but so-called 'categorical properties', whose instantiation at one specific time and location has no implications as to which properties are instantiated at other locations and times.[5] On this basis, the neo-Humean view attempts to account for causation, natural laws, etc., in terms of regularities—that is, in terms of quantification over such matters of fact.[6]

A familiar complaint against this picture, on the part of anti-Humeans, is that such quantificational generality is explanatorily impotent: no particular matter of fact is explained by a generalization that merely summarizes, amongst other things, that very matter of fact.[7] This complaint highlights two ideas that are crucial for the shift towards powers—*explanation* and *generality*. These ideas are connected, even on the neo-Humean picture: the explanation of a particular matter of fact rests on something general. But the only way for a neo-Humean to arrive at something general is by quantification over the elements of her mosaic, which she deems unproblematic because it is simply a convenient way of listing (potentially infinitely) many of the matters of fact that she endorses as the foundation of her world view. It is, indeed, no more than 'constant conjunction'.

And that is precisely what the familiar complaint registers: this sort of generality doesn't provide for an explanation. The generality is parasitic on its instances, instead of providing their ground. As Harjit Bhogal [2021: 330–1] aptly remarks, the Humean may insist that she can explain a given event by subsuming it under 'general patterns of the mosaic', yet 'this process of subsumption … has to end somewhere'—and there is, in the end, 'no explanation of the most general regularities of the world'.

Departing from this dissatisfaction with the neo-Humean account, all that we have to do, in order to appreciate the *prima facie* idealist character of the idea of a power, is to think through the conception of explanation against which the neo-Humean account is thus found wanting. Let us bring this out by briefly considering various metaphysical realist responses to this failure of neo-Humeanism.

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[5] Instantiation does not have to be 'local', point-like, in this way. What matters is that instantiations are mutually completely independent.
[6] Elsewhere, I critically trace out this fundamental Humean idea of a 'mosaic of matters of fact', and show why it really is most unfriendly to the sort of metaphysical realist use to which it is put by contemporary neo-Humeans (see Mulder [2018]).
[7] A nice exploration of this point can be found in Stroud [2011: ch. 2].

In order to arrive at a suitable anti-Humean view, a metaphysical realist will want to move away from the neo-Humean understanding of matters of fact as completely 'loose and separate'. And she will, guided by the realist slogan of a 'mind-independent reality', formulate her view in ontological terms (rather than in terms of requirements of thought, to which we turn shortly).

Consider, for concreteness, the causal explanation of some particular matter of fact by reference to a preceding matter of fact, its cause. Considering those matters of fact in isolation, this looks to be impossible (hence the Humean temptation to invoke regularities). A straightforward way of amending the situation is by simply positing an ontological connection between those particular matters of fact. However, simply *positing* such a 'causal glue' does not make the link between those matters of fact intelligible. To just claim that a relation of 'causal dependency' (or whatever label seems fitting) obtains is, on the face of it, just to add another particular matter of fact (not unlike the relations of spatial or temporal 'contiguity', entirely acceptable to neo-Humeans.) The point is that it is simply a brute fact, which fails to bring in anything general, and thus has no explanatory significance.[8] That the relation in question is endowed with the promising title 'causal dependence' then turns out to be merely a piece of rhetoric.

Perhaps the solution is, then, for the realist, to invoke such causal connections, not on the 'material' level of the matters of fact themselves, but on a more general level. This is, in essence, the strategy of a more prominent variety of anti-Humeanism, which posits a 'necessitating link' between universals instantiated in the relevant matters of fact (see, for example, Armstrong [1978, 1993]). However, as has been pointed out, this link will be as unintelligible, and therefore provide as little explanation, as the insistence on a 'material' link between the matters of fact themselves. For example, as Lewis [1983: 366] notes, Armstrong cannot get the binding power that he is after, by simply labelling these links 'necessitating'.

In fact, the universals of which these realist philosophers speak look very much like particulars—albeit very queer ones, in that they can be literally present in many different matters of fact at the same time. And this is no coincidence: they, too, are ontological posits, populating the mind-independent realm of metaphysical reality. Despite their name, with its undeniably conceptual-historical ring, they are independent of our understanding and our concepts (that would, after all, make them 'mind-dependent' in some way).[9]

Of course, much more could be said on these various forms of realist anti-Humeanism, yet that it is not my ambition here (but see Mulder [2017, 2018, 2021]). Still, fragmentary as they might be, these considerations do point towards the core difficulty for arriving at a satisfactory anti-Humeanism. That difficulty resides in the idea of explanation involved, which requires that we not merely insist on, but can come to

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[8] The idea of such a 'brute' causal connection does regularly surface in the contemporary anti-Humean discourse, such as when it is claimed that causation is a 'primitive' relation. See, e.g., Rota [2009] and Schaffer [2016]. It also plays a prominent role within so-called 'singularist' conceptions of causality: see, e.g., Whittle [2003].

[9] What about the Fregean route of asserting *concepts* to be mind-independent entities of some sort, which may then be identified with the universals? This would not dissolve the difficulty gestured towards here: these 'concepts' are thereby turned into mind-independent posited objects—which are what they are, independently of being grasped in thought. And then the question is that of how *these* are supposed to relate to thought, understanding, and explanation: see Rödl [2018, 2019] for extensive discussion.

understand, the effect as deriving from, arising out of, or coming from its cause.[10] And I think that it is not unfair to say that this is precisely what advocates of powers are after —namely, to introduce features of things that are *of themselves* explanatory. The popular examples of powers or dispositions—fragility, inflammability, solubility, elasticity, etc.—carry this explanatory connotation on their sleeves. They point towards their own manifestations in actual episodes of breaking, burning, dissolving, or stretching. Molnar [2003: 60], for example, writes that 'having a direction to a particular manifestation is constitutive of the power property.' In a similar vein, Mumford and Anjum [2011: 3] state that 'a disposition must have a type of manifestation [which] determines the identity of the disposition.' No wonder that, properly situated, just the right manifestation comes about: powers are ontological posits *meant* to explain their own manifestations.

But this must be just figurative talk, for the realist. After all, the fragility of the glass is not *literally* explaining its own breaking. None of the features of the glass is in the business of explaining anything; explanation is a rational practice in which *we*, the thinkers, are engaged. '[T]he explanation works by naming one or more of the powers that produced the explanandum. Power[s] will thus be the explanans', Mumford and Anjum [2011: 132] confidently write—but that is just to label the issue. The explanatory rabbit that is here pulled out of the powerful hat was snuck into the very idea of a power that was posited just a moment earlier. In short, powers are ontologized explanations. Accordingly, anti-Humean realists frequently attempt to 'ontologize' the explanatory dimension. The powers are, for instance, portrayed as 'truthmakers' for certain explanatorily relevant claims (see, for example, Jacobs [2010] and Corry [2019]). Or the entire explanatory dimension is transposed into an ontological key, and further pursued under the heading of 'grounding'.[11]

But let us take a step back. If generality and explanation really are our primary concern here, we do well to remind ourselves of the traditional idea that generality is the mark of the intellect, of the understanding, of *nous* and *Geist*; and that explanation is one of its fundamental acts.[12] Thus, the realist is taking the wrong turn when she posits 'mind-independent' powers, or when she posits a 'mind-independent' relation holding between matters of fact or universals 'out there'—and nor should we be tempted into positing such mind-independent 'universals' in the first place. Instead, we should take seriously that we found neo-Humeanism wanting on the level of generality and explanation, and so we should seek to understand the sought-for causal dependence of one matter of fact on others *as* an explanatory requirement—that is, as a requirement of thought, a requirement that the very idea of such matters of fact can be seen to embody.

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[10] I am echoing Anscombe [1971: 136] here, who famously remarked that 'causality consists in the derivativeness of an effect from its causes. This is the core, the common feature, of causality in its various kinds. Effects derive from, arise out of, come of, their causes.'

[11] See Fine [2001, 2012]. Wallner (2021: 1256–7), who discusses the 'meta-grounding question' of 'what grounds grounding facts', with an eye to clarifying 'the relation between grounding and metaphysical explanation', provides the following telling quotation:

> While some grounding theorists … identify grounding with metaphysical explanation, others … maintain that grounding and metaphysical explanation come apart. On the latter view, however, grounding is still an explanatory notion in as much as it backs metaphysical explanation, much like causation backs causal explanation.

[12] See, e.g., Jonathan Lear's [1988: esp. sec. 4.3] presentation of Aristotle's relevant views. A recent example is Gareth Evans's [1982: esp. sec. 4.3] influential 'Generality Constraint'.

Famously, this is precisely what Kant attempted to do in response to Hume, in particular in his Analogies of Experience (Kant 1781/1787: B218–265/A176–218). On Rödl's [2012] reading thereof, Kant tried to show there that for something to be a 'matter of fact' in the first place is for it to be amenable to a causal explanation of the kind delineated, and, moreover, that the required generality is internal to the matter of fact itself—as its 'law'. (I will further develop this line of thought shortly.) So, we should think of the matters of fact *themselves* as including something general on which explanation may rest. This 'something general', Kant's 'law', may with equal right be called 'power' (at least, when we don't already attach too specific a view to that word).

This Kantian turn is a move away from metaphysical realism (which is what Kant would have called 'dogmatic' metaphysics), and towards idealism in the sense that interests us here. What was missing from the neo-Humean picture was something general that underlies causal explanation. In response, the realist endorses some sort of 'mind-independent' ontological connection—and thereby fails to capture the dimensions of generality and explanation that constituted the primary anti-Humean imperative. This can only result in a sort of 'brute fact' view of causation. Even the defenders of powers fail to see that the very idea of a power resists the realist framework with which they are trying to marry it.

The idea of a power, from its very inception in Aristotle's philosophy (his notion of *dunamis*), has always been precisely the idea of an *intelligible* order that is operative in the messy world of change. Kant recaptured this idea on the basis of his critical 'transcendental' project, in response to Humean scepticism. There is thus justice in the claim that the idea of a power is an idealist idea.

3. From Kant to Hegel: Powers and Absolute Idealism

To reach a conception of absolute idealist powers, we need to go beyond Kant. For him, causal connections come into view as soon as we think what is given to us in our intuitions—'matters of fact'. What is thus given is spatial and temporal, and what is spatial and temporal must be causally organized, he argued. Moreover, Kant held that it is only through receiving such 'matters of fact' in intuition that thought could aspire to have something real for its object, and could thus be knowledge of reality. On its own, thought (or, more precisely, the 'finite intellect') is incapable of reaching all the way to reality. It requires input from outside of thought. Now, this Kantian 'two-stem' doctrine restricts our knowledge to *reality as it is given to us by our form of intuition*, thus to spatio-temporal 'appearances'. For, since it is something given from outside of thought itself, our form of intuition is a brute fact. And thus intuition can, in principle, take many forms.

On this rendering, the Kantian position amounts to a form of 'transcendental dogmatism' (to coin a phrase). Kant *first* describes the forms of thought abstractly, as 'mere' forms, and *then* shows how these forms can come to represent something real and objective through being applied to independently given intuitions. By contrast, Rödl [2007, 2012] argues that we can take a different route, on which these two steps coincide. Describing the form of thought *as such* is describing it *as* relating to its object, to what is given in intuition. Such a description, if it can be given, is completely general and therefore rules out multiple 'forms of intuition': thought *is* its 'relating to the object'. This develops thought's relation to intuition from *inside* thought.

And thus what we know, when we think what is given in intuition, is not merely appearances that owe their character to a transcendental brute fact about ourselves (our form of intuition). What we thus know is genuine knowledge, knowledge of what is; the restriction to 'appearances' is lifted.

Most importantly, however, that restriction is *not* lifted by claiming, as a realist would, that our knowledge reaches *further* outward than appearances—namely, all the way to the objects 'themselves'. Rather, the problem of the Kantian transcendental idealist position is diagnosed to lie in its insistence on the form of intuition being a brute fact—which must therefore be opposed to thought—from the outset. Accordingly, Kant's restriction to appearances is lifted precisely by radicalizing his original idealist insight—namely, by *eliminating* this externality of the form of intuition from thought.[13] In a slogan: thought provides for its own object.[14] Reality, the object of our knowledge, is not *further* removed from thought than Kant's appearances are—no, thought itself *is* reality. Thinking is being. Thinking whatever is given in intuition, then, *just is* thought thinking itself. (This is, in a nutshell, how I shall here understand the shift from (Kantian) transcendental idealism to (Hegelian) absolute idealism.)

More helpful than such a very condensed and abstract statement, perhaps, is a sketch of how all of this is supposed to work. I will formulate such a sketch on the basis of Rödl's [2012] extended development of the 'categories of the temporal'. I will focus on one part of that Rödlian progression—the part that can be connected with the idea of a power. Specifically, I will start from the point in Rödl's argument where he has already developed something analogous to the neo-Humean's 'matters of fact'. From there, I will proceed to show in more argumentative detail how this leads to the idea of a power.

The point at which we enter Rödl's dialectic is the following.[15] Thought can be knowledge, can be *of something real*, only if it has an object; and it relates to its object, in that it is, as Rödl calls it, *situational*: it finds various objects in various situations. The manifold of these situations may be called 'time'.[16] As we progress from one situation to the next, things either change, or remain the same. This is possible because the situations, the elements of this manifold, are not unstructured, but are articulated into *substance* and *state*. When I first see a substance S being A, and then see that S is still A, things have remained the same; whereas, if S turns out to be B instead of A, things have changed.

What is given in intuition *as such*, the basic 'matters of fact', thus displays the bipolar form 'S is A'–'S was A'. For that is what is involved in the thought of (non)-change: colloquially stated, 'S was A, and it is still A' or 'S was A, but now it is B.' The contrast of tense, *is/was*, is crucial here. It signifies not some element of thought; rather, it is a form of predication. What flanks this tensed copula, 'S' and 'A', are variables representing two of Rödl's categories of the temporal—*substance*

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[13] Rödl [2007] is especially helpful for understanding how what appear as distinct steps in Kant are merged into one 'progression' in Hegel.

[14] To be sure, this slogan cannot be taken to encourage simply *rejecting* Kant's requirement that thought must be linked to intuition in order for it to have an object. Rather, it expresses the imperative to develop the forms of intuition *from within thought itself*. See also note 22.

[15] This paragraph brutally summarizes the first four chapters of Rödl [2012].

[16] It is crucial, for Rödl, that time is nothing more than the *name* for this manifold. For only then will what he develops be true for thought relating to intuition *as such*, without being restricted to a particular 'form of intuition', as it is for Kant. See Rödl [2012: 63f].

and *state*. These categories and the tensed form of predication are two sides of the same coin.

Here we can enter into Rödl's dialectic. Every situation affords 'matters of fact' of the form 'S is A'. But on what grounds can I take the S in 'S was A' to be the same as the S in 'S now is B'? No amount of *further* 'matters of fact' of the form *S is/was A* can underwrite that sameness: every such matter of fact is restricted to its own situation (its own point in time).[17] Yet these very matters of fact *require* sameness of substance over time: it is only *through* that sameness that they can be seen to embody (non)change, and thus can be considered elements of the manifold of intuitions at all. So, a 'matter of fact' of this form, 'S is A', requires a determination of the relevant substance that is as simple and undivided as a state, and yet that holds it together with different states. At first sight, that looks like a contradictory requirement.

Yet such determinations exist. Kant calls them 'action' (*Handlung*).[18] Rödl calls them *movements*, in line with Aristotle's term *kinesis*, and characterizes them through a new form of predication—the threefold contrast of aspect. Examples: the cat *is jumping* to the ground (present progressive); the ice on the lake *was melting* (past progressive); the train *has stopped* (perfective). Here the substance (cat, ice, train) is characterized, not by a mere state, but by a certain activity or process (jumping, melting, stopping): this is Rödl's 'movement'. It holds together contrary states: in the cat's case, for instance, it holds together the cat's being on the table with her being on the ground. In this way, a movement is indeed a *single* determination of a substance that holds together *different* states.

This, however, leads directly to the next step in the dialectic. Movements connect a substance over contrary states, yet it is crucial that movements can be interrupted.[19] That is the import of the contrast of aspect: what something *is doing* might very well remain unfinished. The cat *was jumping* (progressive) to the ground—yet I caught it in mid-air and thus prevented it from *having jumped* (perfective) to the ground. Still, the very distinction between completion and interruption is one that is internal to the movement itself: it is because of the sort of movement that jumping is, that catching the cat half-way is not a completion but is instead an interruption.[20] And so we come to realize that movements, for their possibility, require a further determination, one that reveals the movement's completion to be present without being actually present. At first sight, that, again, looks like a contradictory requirement.

Yet the movement's completion in fact *is* present in the movement without being actually present. For it is present in the form of what Kant calls its 'law', in the Second Analogy. With this 'law', we finally arrive at what is general and explanatory. Rödl explains that such a law is a *generic thought*. These thoughts are time-general (namely, general with respect to both tense and aspect), and, correspondingly, their elements are not particular substances with their particular states and movements, but are instead *substance forms* and *movement forms*. For our earlier examples, we

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[17] Recall the insufficiency (discussed earlier) of the neo-Humean appeal to quantificational generalizations.

[18] See Kant [1781/1787: A250/B205] and Rödl [2012: 148f].

[19] As Anscombe remarks, '[t]he most neglected of the key topics in this subject are: interference and prevention' [1971: 147].

[20] An obvious objection here would insist that this distinction, between completion and interruption, lies not in the movement itself but rather in the 'eye of the beholder'. Rödl [2012: ch. 6] shows how such an 'anticipatory theory' dissolves the very idea of aspect on which the idea of a movement rests, and therewith dissolves the very idea of substance and state: in other words, it destroys the very idea of a 'matter of fact'.

thus gain the generic thoughts 'cats jump', 'ice melts', 'trains stop.' The movement form, being a general concept, captures the full development of movements that instantiate it, and thus functions as the standard that differentiates completion from interruption (which was the requirement at which we arrived above). When no interruption ensues, it is the movement form that explains the movement's progression towards completion; recourse to an additional explanatory element is needed *only* when the movement deviates from that progression because of some interruption. Moreover, as it encompasses the full development of its instantiating movements, the movement form also specifies their starting point—what in contemporary jargon is called the 'stimulus condition'. Thereby, every movement points towards its own cause.

This, in very brief outline, is how Rödl develops his categories of the temporal. Nowhere does he talk of powers, yet it is clear that his generic thoughts may with equal right be called 'power ascriptions'.[21] For generic thoughts express what substances are capable of doing, what they have the power to do.[22]

It is important to stress the difference between the idea of power that I have just attributed to Rödl (who, in turn, develops it on the basis of his Hegelian 'radicalization' of Kant's Analogies), and the standard way of thinking about powers in the contemporary realist arena.

There, the only question is that of whether there really are such things as powers, and, if so, of how they are best fitted into an overarching metaphysical theory. The result is that there are various rival ontologies, such as Lowe's [2006] four-category ontology, or Heil's [2012] two-category ontology, or even Marmodoro's [2010] powers-only ontology, which are all taken to be intelligible apart from the question whether they are actual: in this sense, the relevant metaphysical notions are *taken for granted*.[23] Here, by contrast, the idea of power is *not* taken for granted; it falls out of a transcendental reflection on the very possibility of thought's having an object. That very possibility turns out to require, on Rödl's analysis, the categories of substance, state, and movement, on the one hand, and substance form and movement form, on the other hand.

The idea of a power with which we ended up is indeed the idea of something general. For powers take the shape of generic thoughts that connect substance forms with movement forms—and the function of the term 'form' here is precisely to signify something general. We also already saw that it is explanatory, too. A 'matter of fact' may paradigmatically be taken to involve the determination of some particular substance as being in a certain state or movement. And such a 'matter of fact' always exemplifies a generic thought. The cat's jumping manifests the generic *cats jump*; and,

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[21] Rödl [2018] does make explicit use of the term 'power'. See Mulder [2021] for a more elaborate articulation of this power notion.

[22] We can now comprehend Rödl's previously statement: 'a power is the concept, or nature, of something, considered as explaining it' [2018: 104]. A substance form is the nature of the substances instantiating it; generic thoughts articulate that nature—the powers that it embodies. And these, in turn, are called upon to explain everything that substances of that form do.

[23] This is not to say that all realists *agree* on what the idea of power involves. They evidently do not. There is disagreement over whether all properties are to be thought of as powers, or only some are; and there is even debate over the question of whether powers are to be thought of along the lines of properties at all. Molnar [2003], for instance, proposes to understand them as particulars ('tropes').

generally, the cat will be doing *what cats do*.[24] In this way, grasping a 'matter of fact' is always, and already, grasping its explanatory ground—the generic thought on which it rests (however dim that grasp might initially be).

As I stressed, the above merely sketches an absolute idealist understanding of power. My aim is not to discuss or defend it in more detail, but rather to bring into relief the fundamental difference between realist and absolute idealist powers. For an idealist, the idea of a power must be shown to be at work in the very idea of something being an object of thought, which idea just is, the absolute idealist insists, the idea of something objective, or real. This immediately gives the resulting idea of a power its proper generality and its proper explanatory role. For a realist, powers are theoretical posits, taken to populate the metaphysical realist's 'mind-independent' reality; how these relate to the way that our thinking mind functions is then another matter.

4. The Power of Thought

If a realist wants to endorse powers, she must posit them, along with an attempt to portray this ontological practice as justified with the help of arguments. The absolute idealist, by contrast, develops the very idea of a power *by* showing it to be necessary and actual; in the previous section, I have attempted to illustrate how this might be parsed.

This way of 'doing metaphysics', of articulating the basic metaphysical categories, starts from the very idea of an object of thought, we saw. But, as Rödl never tires of stressing, that idea is also expressed by the following, more familiar, labels—reality, the facts, nature, what is. It is also, arguably, what the ancients were concerned with under the heading of 'being'. Thus viewed, this understanding of metaphysics is true to the original definition by Aristotle, who called it 'the science of being *qua* being'.[25] And it is also true (albeit in a different way) to Hegel's *Science of Logic*, which starts with 'being, pure being—without any further determination'.[26] Now, logic is, traditionally, the science of thought.[27] And so we may come to realize that logic, the science of thought, and metaphysics, the science of being, are one and the same. Thinking is being.

The contemporary analytical metaphysician who routinely adopts the realist commitment to a 'mind-independent reality' will find this unacceptable: to her, thinking is an activity in which only some of the beings engage—for instance, those possessing the relevant power. And so, pending some guarantee that connects insights into this particular power to universal metaphysical principles, she will want to keep apart logic, the science of thought, and metaphysics, the science of being; equivalently, she will want to

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[24] In case of a state, *S is A*, this state will be understandable as the product of some movement (either completed or interrupted), and via that route indirectly manifest the corresponding generic thought as well. (In case of interruption, this movement may be connected with some other substance(s), the one(s) responsible for the interference.)

[25] See *Metaphysics* 1003a21–31 [Aristotle 1998: 79–80]. Rödl [2012: ch. 1] defends this way of reading Aristotle's term 'being'. See also Rödl [2018: sec. 4.1] and Kimhi [2018].

[26] See Hegel [1812: 66, my translation]. Rödl [2019] interprets the opening paragraphs of Hegel's *Science of Logic* along these lines. See also Gobsch [2017]. Note that contemporary neo-Aristotelians view themselves as realists (although Wiggins's [2001] 'conceptual realism' may be counted as an exception). Still, as Mure [1940] and, more recently, Ferrarin [2001: intro., sec. 1] have argued at length, no philosopher is more important to Hegel than Aristotle is—which should at least give one pause.

[27] For historical pointers, see Lear [1988: sec. 6.1], Kimhi [2018: intro.], and Ferrarin [2001: sec. 2.2.2]. The conception of logic as the science of thought is also prominent in Frege [1893: Part I, XV, 1918–19: 30, 50].

keep apart the very idea of an object of thought and the idea of a fact, of something's being the case.

Now, as I remarked in section 1, this realist construal of the power of thought will be unacceptable to the idealist. Here is one way to bring out that point. A power, as we saw, is the explanatory ground for its manifestation in a corresponding movement: when no interference occurs, it is the *sole* explanatory principle for that movement's progression. The power of gravity, for instance, implies that two masses will eventually collide, and if nothing interferes (no other forces, etc.) then this power is the sole ground of what happens. The movement then conforms solely to *its own* principle —the power of gravity. If this is how we should think of the power of thought, then we must say that, if nothing interferes, thoughts will conform to *the power of thought*. However, in the case of thought, arguably this principle is *truth*. That is, thought is objective: it is as it should be—it conforms to its power—just if it conforms *only* to *what it thinks*, and reflects nothing that does not belong to what it thinks. Thought conforms to its own principle only if it conforms to its object: for instance, the principle of my thought about the colliding masses *just is* the principle of gravity. Thus, thought has *no* principle of its own in the way that gravitational attraction has, a principle that is distinct from other principles. The power of thought is not *a particular* power among other powers. Given that its principle is to think what is objectively the case, in accordance with *its* principle, thought is *all* powers.[28]

Although the objectivity of thought merits much further reflection, I mention it here only to bring into sharper focus the following realist objection to absolute idealism:

> Thinking is being, you say, and not one among the various elements of being. But, evidently, being is not just one individual inhabitant of the world. And so you must say that there are no *individual thinkers*. But aren't we ourselves, in debating this, precisely such individual thinkers?

That objection fails to appreciate that thought might be both—being as such, *and* individual thinkers among other beings. In fact, we have no choice but to say this, once we agree that thinking is being. For if this is taken to imply, as the objection has it, that thought cannot descend from this absolute generality to specific thinkers, then the same should hold for being, so that there can be no determinate specific beings *at all*. And then we end up with a completely empty idea—with nothing, really.

But let us now return to the starting point of our dialectical exercise—the very idea of an object of thought. By starting there, we start with what thought knows its own object to be by just thinking it *as an object of thought* (by just thinking being *qua* being, that is). This, as we saw in section 3, brings to light the various logico-metaphysical categories. But these categories do not hang 'in the air'; it is only in thoughts of *particular* substances and their states and movements that we find operative substance forms and movement forms. Such particular 'matters of fact' are *given* to thinking: they confront—in the context of a concrete situation—thought, which there takes the shape of an individual thinker, equipped with suitable perceptual abilities. The thinker apprehends, as an individual, the matters of fact with which she is confronted. Here, the object of thought appears in opposition to thought. But in apprehending what she is

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[28] Might one not argue that it is precisely the nature of the power of thought to *represent* what is the case, thereby singling out something specific to thought after all—viz. representation? This is a fine characterization of the power of thought; however, thinking it through will reveal the impossibility of combining this with the idea of the power of thought as one power among many others. See Rödl [2018, esp. sec. 8.2].

confronted with, the thinker indeed *thinks* what is the case: she grasps its ground, which, as we saw, is thought itself.

And so thought *can* indeed be thought of as power: individual thinkers have this power, and they find themselves with their power of thought among each other, as well as among non-rational inhabitants of nature. But we should take care *not* thereby to construe the power of thought as just one power among many others (and nor should we think of thinkers as just objects among other objects). Thinkers and their thoughts resist subsumption under metaphysical categories.

Let me briefly sketch another way of appreciating this point. We can think about many things—about cats, about gold, etc. We can also think about thought. But we do not thereby focus on just another topic among many possible topics for thought. For, although I can think of cats without thinking of gold, I can think of neither without *thereby* already thinking of thought. The point is that thought is, as Rödl [2018] puts it, *self-conscious*: in thinking about cats, I know myself to think just that. For suppose that I did not. In that event, I would have no idea of what I was thinking, which is just to say that I would not be thinking at all. Hence, *in* thinking about cats, I comprehend myself to be thinking. And these are not two different thoughts: I am not, on the one hand, thinking about cats and their powers, and, in a second (perhaps meta-) thought, thinking myself to think just that. In this attempt to separate these two alleged thoughts, both fall apart. Such a separation portrays my thought about cats as distinct from my thought about my own thought; but then, as we saw just now, it is not think-ing at all. On the other hand, it portrays my thought about my thought about cats as distinct from my thought about cats. Yet my thought about my thought about cats *already is* my thought about cats: thinking 'I think *cats jump*', I already think 'cats jump.' My thought-thought *just is* my cat-thought: thinking the principles or powers of cat life *just is* thinking the principle or power of thought—precisely in the curious ('speculative') way in which thinking *just is* being.[29] So, when I turn my atten-tion away from cats and towards thought, I do not turn my attention from one topic to another. Rather, I turn my attention from one specific topic to thought itself, to the very idea of thinking about a topic. Instead of thinking some specific topic, I now think: *topic*. Or, equivalently, I think: *thought*. Or, again equivalently, I think: *power*. (This is why Rödl remarks that the power of thought is not *a* power among others, but rather is '*the* power, the power *überhaupt*' [ibid.: 60].)

This is all that I can do here by way of an attempt to sketch what the power of thought is, on an absolute idealist understanding thereof. As should be obvious by now, absolute idealist powers metaphysics differs in a rather peculiar way from other brands of powers metaphysics currently on the market. It cannot be presented as a *rival* understanding of power, to be taken up in the general metaphysical discourse as another more or less promising or unlikely candidate view, to be weighed against others on its merits and drawbacks, its theoretical 'virtues'. Taking the absolute idealist proposal seriously requires giving up that entire discourse. It means abandoning the very project of 'doing metaphysics' as a theoretical exercise aimed at, say, 'the funda-mental nature of reality' [Mumford 2012: 29], considered as a topic *about* which we must form theories. For the absolute idealist, metaphysics starts where thought

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[29] Obviously, this implies a rather radical departure from mainstream contemporary conceptions of thought, of content, and of 'propositional attitudes' generally. I cannot discuss this here, but see Rödl [2018].

turns onto itself, in full awareness that this is *not* a turn towards a topic in the usual sense. That topic-less topic is where philosophy is at home.[30]

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