

## WORLDS OF POWERS: THE BEDROCK OF REALITY IN ANCIENT THOUGHT

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**W**hat is there, at the bedrock of reality? What are the ultimate building blocks out of which everything else is constituted? Are they things (objects, particles), or activities of some sort? Or is there something else, even more fundamental than they are?

These questions fascinated and challenged the ancients, as much as they challenge and fascinate us. Yet, there is evidence that the ancients conceived of the building blocks of reality very differently than we have so far thought they did. If that is correct, it will revolutionise the way we understand ancient cosmologies, and the explanations that the philosophers of nature offered about the world around them.

Dr Marmodoro (University of Oxford, Corpus Christi College) received a £ 1 million research award from the European Research Council to explore a new hypothesis about how the ancients conceived of the universe and their contents, during the first millennium of Western civilization. The ramifications of this hypothesis, if it will be proved, are very far reaching with respect to our understanding of ancient thought.

The traditional view is that the ancients thought of the universe either as built out of objects (whether concrete or abstract) or as built

out of processes; on that view Plato and Aristotle for example stand on one side and Heraclitus stands on the other.

Making a radical departure from this traditional interpretation, the hypothesis Dr Marmodoro wants to explore is that nearly all ancient ontologies account for all there is in the cosmos by positing a sole elementary building block: not objects or processes, but powers. Powers underlie both objects and processes, and are more fundamental than either of them. Powers are properties directed towards an end (e.g. the power to heat). They dispose their possessor to be or act in a certain way, which is manifested in appropriate circumstances (e.g. something with the power to heat is disposed to heat something cooler). A world built solely out of powers is structured in a web of ontological dependencies between powers. This metaphysical position is, for brevity, Power Structuralism. The primary goal of the Project will be to investigate which ancient ontologies are power-structuralist ones.

But what is the world like, for the ancients, if all there is are powers? How are all entities derived from structures of powers? Are there objects over and above the relations that relate them? If not, how are objects constituted of just relations? If there are objects, do they have natures over and above their intrinsic/extrinsic relations? If not, what grounds the distinctness and identity of objects?

To explore these and other related questions, Dr Marmodoro will use the European Research Council award to create a research team based in the Philosophy Faculty at Oxford and comprising five post-doctoral fellows, each specializing in a different area of ancient philosophy (Pre-Socratics; Plato; Aristotle;

Hellenistic and Latin philosophy; Plotinus) and one specializing in contemporary metaphysics.

The contribution of the fellow specializing in contemporary metaphysics will be to help investigate the question of what, if anything, is distinctive of ancient power structuralism. One of the aims of the project will be to compare and contrast the position of the ancient thinkers under consideration

with the basic tenets of causal structuralism in contemporary metaphysics and physics – that is, not to offer a contemporary structuralist rendering of the ancient ontologies under consideration; but rather, to illuminate the past through its differences as well as similarities with the present, and where possible, bring out insights that might be unique to ancient varieties of structuralism.

A three year PhD studentship will also be made available for a graduate student interested in pursuing research in an area of relevance to the Project.

The Project has an international Advisory Board including over twenty academics from various international institutions. There will also be Academic visitors affiliated with the Project; and external collaborators working on other, thematically related, projects of their own .

The Project team will work in close collaboration with members of the Faculty of Philosophy, within which its research activities will be embedded. Such research activities (seminars, conferences etc.), will run for five years and will be open to anyone interested.

More information about the project and its forthcoming research activities can be found at:

<http://www.power-structuralism.ox.ac.uk/>  
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