

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1. Particular properties

Imagine that we decide to take a relaxed walk in the woods. In a beautiful glade we pause and look around us. Suppose that the first thing we notice is how green everything is. There are all these little leaves and they are *all green*. Of course, if we look a little closer, we find that, although all the leaves are green, there still exists among them a myriad of distinctions in shade. Some leaves are a dark olive green, some a light pastel green; others again are a green colour in between. In fact the distinctions in shade are so numerous that it is unlikely that we will find two leaves sufficiently indistinguishable that we would choose to say that they are the *same* in any strict sense of the word.¹

Still, in looking around us, it is the similarities, the commonalties and the generalities that are striking. And I would go as far as to say that, at least if we are philosophically minded, we will *naturally* want to know how all these little leaves can have so much in common. That is, although differences in shade, in this situation, are just as prominent as sameness in shade, we cannot help but focus our attention on the similarities and samenesses. Philosophically, this natural inclination is reflected in the traditional expression of the so-called ‘problem of universals’. Basically, philosophers have asked themselves: how can distinct entities be *the same*? And since the emphasis here is on the sameness rather than the distinctness present in the situation, it is no wonder that the postulation of universals *in re* has been considered a strikingly adequate and simple answer to this question.² Universal-realism is, in this sense, an intuitively compelling position.

In this book a theory will be developed which, like universal-realism, acknowledges the existence of properties but which, unlike universal-realism, claims that these properties are particular. Given our natural inclination to provide an ontological ground for the world’s similarities, the notion of a

¹ This example was first suggested to me by Nils-Eric Sahlin.

² For some years I held seminars on properties for 3rd level philosophy-students. The students were given two papers to read and discuss: one paper by Armstrong, and another by D. C. Williams. One reaction was always the same. The students were more or less annoyed with William’s particular properties because they simply could not grasp what a particular property *was*. Armstrong’s universals, on the other hand, were taken to be unproblematic. Interestingly enough, when asked, they could never explain why the universal was graspable and the particular property was not. It was just that the notion of a universal was ‘intuitive’ and the notion of a particular property was not.

particular property might strike one as in some way incoherent. Normally, when we think of properties, we think of entities that serve to unite distinct objects. We think of properties as entities that, through their own universality, provide for the similarities and generalities we find all around us. From this perspective the very idea of a particular property seems unintuitive, and perhaps even impossible to conceive. As I will try to show, however, there is nothing strange or unnatural about the idea of particular properties. True, thinking of properties as universal entities is natural in a sense that thinking of them as particulars is not. But the reason for this is not that the notion of a particular property is especially *unintuitive*. It is, rather, that we are naturally disposed to wonder about the similarities in the world and take the world's distinctions (which are in fact at least as prominent) for granted.

To see this I believe we must re-think our walk in the woods. As pointed out by K. Campbell, but so far unrecognised by us, "colour occurs here both as type [...] and as token."³ The colour green is not only that greenness which all the leaves have in common. Nor is it merely that particular shade of green which some or a few leaves do, or at least might, share.⁴ It is also a *particular characteristic of each individual leaf*. And if we think about it, this circumstance is just as apparent in the situation as what struck us initially. Sameness and diversity are, as it turns out, two sides of the same coin. So why not expand on this insight, turn the traditional problem of universals on its head, and ask (somewhat ungrammatically): How can same entities be distinct? To *this* question any theory postulating particular properties will, I believe, provide an answer that is as adequate and simple as the universal-realist's answer to the traditional problem of universals.

So, the notion of a particular property is neither impossible nor unthinkable. But the fact that the notion of a particular property is not unthinkable is surely not an argument for the *existence* of particular properties. Such an argument would have to explain how the inclusion of particular properties in our ontology enhances its explanatory value and comprehensiveness in a way that makes it theoretically superior to existing alternatives.

In this book no such argument will be provided, although a theory according to which particular properties do exist will be developed. The existence of particular properties will instead be *assumed* and in the context of this assumption we will ask: if there are particular properties, what problems will a theory incorporating such properties face and how are these problems

³ Campbell, K.: 1990, *Abstract Particulars*, Blackwells: Oxford, p. 2.

⁴ It does not matter if a particular shade of green in fact characterises only one leaf. It is still *possible* for this particular shade to be something that two or more entities have in common. This is the difference between a particular shade of a certain colour, and a colour-particular. Colour-particulars (or, in general, particular properties) are in principle *unshareable*. The notion of a particular property will be further spelt out in Chapter Two below.

to be solved? In this sense, the present work attempts to *construct* a theory that includes particular properties. It does not attempt to argue for, or defend, this theory.

There is of course a sense in which the success of such theory construction may in itself serve as an argument for the existence of particular properties. For if a consistent, theoretically interesting and fruitful theory that presupposes the existence of particular properties can be developed, this will serve as an indirect argument for the existence of particular properties. In other words, if it turns out that a theory of particular properties can be developed in a manner that accords with criteria governing the quality of a metaphysical theory, then this will, in itself, serve as some justification for the theory and, thereby, for its basic assumptions. However, in the present work there are virtually no comparisons with rival views, and this means that even such an indirect argument will be far from conclusive — both when it comes to deciding whether the theory is adequate, and with regards to the issue whether the theory is better than familiar alternatives. It is of course possible to develop a more or less complete theory even when that theory is not the best theory available.

1.1 Theoretical background

Perusing the literature on particular properties, one finds both that the list of names for such entities is quite extensive and that the matter of naming has given rise to some controversy. To these grievances I think the best response is a laconic: “What’s in a name?” Today consensus on the matter of naming (at least) seems to have been reached and ‘tropes’, although it is perhaps not an ideal label, is the term most people use. Tropes were first mentioned by D. C. Williams in his 1953 articles, but similar theories (i.e. theories postulating particular properties but under a different name) can be found earlier in the works of E. Husserl at the turn of the century, G. F. Stout in the 1920s and I. Segelberg in the 1940s.⁵

Over the last twenty years, interest in tropes has surged, and today trope theory is considered by most philosophers to be a serious alternative, on a par with other metaphysical theories in the field. With the growing interest

⁵ Williams, D. C.: 1953, ‘On the Elements of Being I–II’, *The Review of Metaphysics*, vol. 7, nos. 1–2; Husserl, E.: 1970, *Logical Investigations*, vol. 2, (‘On the theory of Wholes and Parts’), Routledge and Kegan Paul: London; Stout, G. F.: 1923, ‘Are the Characteristics of Particular things Universal or Particular?’, *Relativity, Logic and Mysticism, Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, supp. vol. 3, Williams and Norgate: London; Stout, G. F.: 1921–3, ‘The Nature of Universals and Propositions’, *Proceedings of the British Academy*, vol. 10; Segelberg, I.: 1947, *Begreppet egenskap — några synpunkter*, Svenska Tryckeriaktiebolaget: Stockholm (this book now exists in translation: 1999, *Three Essays in Phenomenology and Ontology*, Hochberg, H. and Ringström Hochberg, S., trans., Thales: Stockholm).

in, and respectability of, the theory, many classical philosophers have also been re-evaluated. These philosophers, although not previously so recognised, are now regarded by many as very early developers of trope theory.⁶

Modern philosophers who adopt a theory of tropes, or at least seriously discuss such theories, now abound. The most important for the present work have been the following: K. Campbell, K. Mulligan and P. Simons.⁷ Along with these proponents of tropes, D. M. Armstrong and H. Hochberg (neither of whom believes in the existence of tropes) have, through their thoughtful criticisms, contributed greatly to discussion of the theory. Other philosophers will be referred to as we proceed.

To earn the title 'trope theorist' it is enough to believe that at least some of the basic constituents of the world are particular properties. But beyond this minimal shared commitment metaphysical theories that include tropes may very well be founded on extremely dissimilar or even incompatible methodological presuppositions. Such theories may also be further developed in extremely different directions. This means that to say of some theory that it is a trope theory, is to say very little. It also means that overall comparisons of distinct trope theories may be extremely difficult or in some cases more or less impossible.

⁶ A few examples: To many, Aristotle's "individual accidents" are now considered to be a clear example of tropes (see e.g. Aristotle: *Categories*, Ackrill, J. L., trans., The Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1963, 1a16–1b9). Another example is to be found in the medieval scholastics. Ockham especially is often mentioned (medieval "tropists" are discussed in Gosselin, M.: 1990, *Nominalism and Contemporary Nominalism – Ontological and Epistemological Implications of the Work of V.W. Quine and of N. Goodman*, Kluwer Academic Publishers: Dordrecht). A third illustration of the 'tropification' of historical figures is provided by those who now think that the modes of Locke and the monads of Leibniz qualify as tropes. More examples abound (for further exemplifications see Simons, P.: 1994, 'Particulars in Particular Clothing: Three Trope Theories of Substance', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 54, no. 3, pp. 553–556; Macdonald, C.: 1998, 'Tropes and Other Things', *Contemporary Readings in the Foundations of Metaphysics*, Blackwell: Oxford, p. 334; Bacon, J.: 'Tropes', *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, (Fall 2001 edition), Zalta, E. N., ed., URL: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2001/entries/tropes/>).

⁷ Some relevant publications by these philosophers are, by Peter Simons: 'Particulars in Particular Clothing: Three Trope Theories of Substance'; 1998, 'How the World Can Make Propositions True: A Celebration of Logical Atomism', in: Onyma, M., ed., *Sklonnosci Metafizyczna*, Warsaw University: Warsaw, pp. 113–135; 1995, 'New Categories for Formal Ontology', in: Haller, R., ed., *Investigating Hintikka*, (Grazer Philosophische Studien 49), Rodopi : Amsterdam; 1998, 'Metaphysical Systematics: A Lesson from Whitehead', *Erkenntnis*, vol. 48, nos. 2/3; 1992, 'Logical Atomism and its Ontological Refinement: A Defence', in: Mulligan, K., ed., *Language, Truth and Ontology*, Kluwer: Dordrecht; 2000, 'Continuants and Occurrents', *The Aristotelian Society*, supp. vol. 74, no. 1; 2000, 'How to exist at a time when you have no temporal parts', *The Monist*, vol. 83, no. 3; 2000, 'Identity Through Time and Trope Bundles', *Topoi*, nos. 19/20. By Keith Campbell: *Abstract Particulars*. By Mulligan, K., Simons, P. and Smith, B.: 1984, 'Truth-Makers', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 44. By Kevin Mulligan: 1998, 'Relations – Through Thick and Thin', *Erkenntnis*, vol. 48, nos. 2/3; 1992, *Language, Truth and Ontology*, Kluwer: Dordrecht.

1.2 Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework in which the theory here to be developed is set includes the following three fundamental features:

(i) An ontological assumption: *there are tropes*⁸

As I have already explained, the theory-construction here to be attempted is hypothetical in the sense that it assumes rather than defends the existence of tropes. In chapter two of this book this assumption is spelt out in more detail.

(ii) A theoretical ideal: *there are only tropes*⁹

In saying that tropes are the only entities that exist we are not saying that there are no tables or that there is no universal colour redness. All we are saying is that all entities that exist besides tropes are constructed from tropes. Another way of saying that there is nothing but tropes is to say that tropes are the only metaphysically *fundamental* entities.

There are at least two reasons why one should attempt to develop a one-category version of trope theory. The first is simply that known difficulties have been encountered by those trying to formulate many-category ontologies. These difficulties motivate the search for an alternative.⁹ This is, I believe, not a very strong reason for considering tropes to be the only fundamental category. As we shall see, attempts to develop a metaphysical theory based only on tropes are not exactly unproblematic. So, if the effort involved in constructing a theory is what decides whether it is worth developing, this is no real reason to eschew many-category versions of trope theory in favour of a one-category version. If we could prove that the problems facing the many-category metaphysician are insurmountable, whereas those facing the one-category metaphysician are not, this would serve as an excellent reason for developing trope theory as a one-category theory. But, from our present perspective (that is, from a perspective where a fully developed theory remains to be constructed) we are in no position to decide whether or not this is so.

A second reason for aiming to develop a one-category version of trope theory is the well-known ‘Ockhamist’ reason according to which it is always better to *postulate as few fundamental entities as possible* (where ‘few’ refers to the number of *kinds* of entities, and *not* to the actual number of entities of each kind).¹⁰ Naturally, Ockham’s razor does not prescribe *one-category*

⁸ This is a theoretical ideal shared by most trope theorists. One exception is Martin, C. B.: 1980, ‘Substance Substantiated’, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 58, no: 1, pp. 3–10. Martin holds that, besides tropes there are substrates. Also, many of the historical figures now referred to as trope theorists did not hold that there was only tropes. An example is Aristotle.

⁹ Campbell: *Abstract Particulars*, p. 17.

¹⁰ Since the proviso that what ought to be shaved off are *kinds* of entities and not particular instances of each kind, may be thought to tamper with Ockham’s original imperative, let us call



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