

CHAPTER TWO

TROPES

1. What is it to be a trope?

To say anything about what it is to be a trope is difficult in several ways. First, it is difficult because we are now only at the beginning of our dealings with tropes and many terminological and other distinctions that will be explained in what follows are at this point unfamiliar. Second, and this a more persistent difficulty, spelling out what it is to be a trope brings out the fact that neither the way we think of the world nor the language we use to talk of it fit very well with tropes. Because of these difficulties, much of the present section will be devoted to trying to identify and discard the many misunderstandings that linguistic prejudices and preconceived philosophical views can introduce.

In order to close in on the notion of a trope, a good place to start is with an appropriate imagery. I began this book by referring to tropes as 'particular properties', but although there is something right about this characterisation, there is still reason to believe that thinking of tropes as we intuitively think of properties does not provide us with the 'appropriate imagery' we seek. The reason for this is that, as mentioned, we normally think of properties as entities that involve an element of sharing. But if sharing is the trademark of property-hood, then tropes (which are by nature unshareable) are not properties in this sense. Thus the notion of a trope ought not to be modelled on our intuitive notion of a property. But if tropes are unlike properties, intuitively conceived, then what are they like? What familiar, everyday and intuitively compelling phenomenon is appropriate for modelling tropes on?

In 'On the Elements of Being I', Williams asks us to imagine a situation in which there are three distinct, yet similar, lollipops.¹¹ Lollipop no: 1 has a red, round, peppermint head, Lollipop no: 2 has a brown, round, chocolate head; and Lollipop no: 3 has a red, square, peppermint head. Each lollipop, then, is both partially similar to and partially different from each other lollipop. And, according to Williams, "[i]f we can give a good account of this circumstance in this affair we shall have the instrument to expose the anatomy of everything, from an electron or an apple to archangels and the World All."¹²

¹¹ Williams, D. C.: 'On the Elements of Being I', pp. 4f.

¹² Ibid.

Williams proposes the following initial account of the 'lollipop-affair': "To say that *a* is partially similar to *b* is to say that a part of *a* is wholly or completely similar to a part of *b*."¹³ On this account, the reason why all three lollipops partially resemble each other is that they each contain some parts which are wholly or exactly similar to each other. For instance, Lollipop no: 1 and Lollipop no: 2 will bear a partial resemblance to each other because they each contain a part (the stick) that is exactly alike. And Williams notices that on this initial account the lollipops will possess features — quite apart from such (as he says) "gross" parts as the stick or head — that are just as important from the point of view of similarity and difference. Lollipop no: 1, for instance, is partially similar to Lollipop no: 2, not only because their sticks are exactly similar, but also because their *shapes* are exactly similar (they are both round). If we retain the idea that two entities are partially similar if they each possess a part which is wholly or completely similar to a part of the other, then it would seem that it is now the particular *shape* of each of the two lollipops that are the parts of interest here. Williams now proposes that in fact we should go on and treat such things as the shape or colour or flavour of each lollipop in the same way as we treated the stick or the head of each. He argues:¹⁴

Since we can not find more parts of the usual gross sort, like the stick, to be wholly similar from lollipop to lollipop, let us discriminate subtler and thinner or more diffuse parts till we find some of these which are wholly similar [...] Just as we can distinguish in the lollipops [...] the gross parts called "sticks" [...] so we can distinguish in each lollipop a finer part which we are used to call its "color" and another called its "shape" — not its kind of color or shape, mind you, but these particular cases, this reddening, this occurrence or occasion of roundness, each as uniquely itself as a man, an earthquake, or a yell.

This is the 'appropriate imagery' proposed by Williams: tropes are like the parts of an ordinary object. Or again a trope *is* (or can be) 'part' of an ordinary object. Obviously, this does not mean that the shape of Lollipop no: 1 is a part in exactly the same sense in which its head is a part of it. Comparing the particular shape of the lollipop with its head only gives us a starting-point from which we can then proceed to consider the exact way in which the two 'parts' are the same and the way in which they differ. Let us do just that and see whether the imagery provided by Williams tells us something about what it is to be a trope.

The part-imagery yields the following preliminary list of trope traits, traits that will subsequently be more extensively discussed and spelled out.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

(i) The trope is particular

Equating the colour of the lollipop with its stick emphasises the individuality or particularity of the trope. A trope, just like an ordinary part of an object, is as *particular* as the whole to which it belongs.

(ii) The trope is abstract

Although both the stick and the colour are said to be parts of the lollipop, it is clear that they are not parts of the same kind. The stick, says Williams, is a gross part of the object. It is easily detached from the rest of the lollipop and it has many different aspects (such as being brown, being made of wood, being five centimetres long etc.). In fact, if it is detached from the rest of the lollipop, the stick will be an *object* on an equal footing with the original lollipop. The same does not go for the colour-part of the lollipop. If the stick is a gross part, the colour is, "subtler, thinner or more diffuse."¹⁵ If it were at all imaginable that the colour of the lollipop could be detached from the rest of the lollipop, then the result of such detachment would probably not be an entity on an equal footing with the original lollipop. Given this difference between the gross and the thin parts of the lollipop, Williams argues that the trope is *abstract* whereas the stick (like the entire lollipop) is *concrete*.

(iii) The trope is simple

If we think of the lollipop from the perspective of its gross parts, it is a complex entity consisting of (at least) two simple parts: its stick and its head. Introducing the thin and more diffuse trope-parts makes it clear that *they* must, in turn, be simpler than the original gross parts. For instance, from the perspective of the thin parts, the stick (i.e. one of the lollipop's gross parts) can now be separately regarded as, in turn, a complex with its colour, length and material etc. as simple parts. Stretching the imagery provided by Williams (perhaps beyond what is advisable) we might say that, where the ordinary parts of the object are *simpler* than the whole to which they belong, the abstract (or thin) trope-parts are the *simplest* parts. Ultimately, the lollipop (or its stick) consists of simple, atomic abstract trope-parts.

In summary, working with the imagery proposed by Williams, we are now in a position to tentatively express what it is we take to exist when we assume that tropes exist: when we assume that a trope exists we are assuming that something which is simultaneously *simple*, *abstract* and *particular* exists.

Neither of these characterisations is unproblematic in itself and their conjunction is highly problematic. For one thing, to say of a trope that it is

¹⁵ Ibid.

a 'simple abstract particular' is *not* to list its constituents. If it were, the list would be most peculiar since it would include the feature of being *simple*. Attempts to characterise the trope as both abstract and particular have even been considered by some philosophers to be not only problematic but impossible. Saying of the trope that it is abstract makes most philosophers think of universals (or numbers or sets). Saying of it that it is particular makes them think of particular substances. But surely nothing can be both particular and universal at the same time? To avoid such blatant contradictions it is necessary to rethink the traditional distinction between substance and attribute. As we shall see, this is partly what makes the theory of tropes a novel and interesting theory, but it is also what makes the expression of the theory so difficult since language, thought and, in general, our basic beliefs, seem to more or less take the distinction in question for granted.

For the remainder of this section I will try to expand on each of the trope-traits so far tentatively identified. When dealing with such matters we must never lose sight of the fact that these traits are here *postulated*, and that they are, in this sense, part of the basic set of assumptions from which the present work departs. That is, because 'trope' is a term of art we cannot *discover* the true nature of the trope. We cannot argue that one philosopher's conception of what it is to be a trope is *wrong* or in any other way a misconception. We can of course spell out the reasons why we believe that one conception of tropes is more interesting than another. We may even claim that some conceptions are impossible. But that is all. Basically, therefore, to say that we assume that tropes exist is, in the present work, just a shorthand way of saying that we assume that something that is simple, particular and abstract exists.

What we will have to do now is to try to get a firmer grip on these traits. Here this will mainly include characterising them negatively.

2. Simple

Most of the objections that have been raised against various characterisations of tropes have had one of two sources, each of which relates to the simplicity of the trope. The objections have either rested on a failure to appreciate and accept the simplicity of the trope, or been designed to show that every attempt at a meaningful characterisation of the trope will fail to preserve its supposed simplicity. In sections 3 and 4 below most of these objections will be considered.

But, simplicity must be dealt with first. That is, to be prepared to withstand critique of the kinds just mentioned we must first understand why we need to treat the trope as simple and also what it really means to so treat it.

So why should we regard the trope as a simple entity? As we shall see, the simplicity of the trope is the source of much trouble for anyone attempting to characterise it. It would therefore be nice if we could develop a theory of

tropes free of the assumption that tropes are simple entities. A glance at existing trope theories suggests that this is indeed possible. Many (perhaps most) trope theorists, when introducing tropes, tend to stress that what is interesting and novel about tropes is that they represent a breach with a persistent and traditional distinction. They point out that, normally, 'being abstract' is taken to be the mark of something universal and qualitative, whereas 'being particular' is taken to be the mark of something concrete, of what we call objects or things. Trope theory represents an alternative to the traditional outlook in that it introduces an entity that *combines* particularity and abstractness. This is, if you like, the novelty of the theory. In standard presentations, at least, simplicity is not its central attraction. It therefore seems *prima facie* possible for the trope to retain its interesting features (i.e. its combination of particularity and abstractness) while losing its simplicity.

But this is an initial impression. Looking more closely, we will see that an interesting, original and novel theory of tropes representing a true alternative to other metaphysical theories could not be developed unless the trope was taken to be simple. To see this, consider an argument of C. Daly's.¹⁶

According to Daly, the distinguishing mark of the trope is that it is an entity that is both abstract and particular. Given this basic characterisation of what it is to be a trope, Daly argues, at least two distinct kinds of thing could be tropes. In other words, two rival yet *equally valid* interpretations of what it is to be a trope are compatible with a characterisation of the trope as an abstract particular. On one interpretation the trope is simple (or, as Daly says, "fundamental") and on the other it is complex. In particular, Daly suggests that, on the interpretation according to which the trope is complex, the abstract particular in question might very well be a "substrate instantiating a universal" or, as such complexes are often called, a state of affairs.¹⁷

Let us begin by conceding that a complex consisting of a substrate instantiating a universal may be correctly characterised as an abstract particular. This concession makes sense for two reasons. First, it is undoubtedly true that 'particulars' such as 'the colour of Lollipop no: 1' have been assayed by some philosophers as states of affairs, and that states of affairs have in turn been assayed as complex entities consisting of a substrate suitably connected to a universal. Second, as pointed out by Armstrong, "particularity plus universality yields particularity," and hence even an Immanent Realist must succumb in the end to "the victory of particularity."¹⁸ This means that

¹⁶ Daly, C.: 1997, 'Tropes', in: *Properties*, Mellor, D. H. and Oliver, A., eds., Oxford University Press: Oxford, p. 141.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 141f. Daly does not refer to complex tropes as 'states of affairs' – I borrow this term from D. M. Armstrong.

¹⁸ Armstrong, D. M.: 1978, *Universals and Scientific Realism*, vol. I, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, p.115. According to Armstrong, this accounts for "the deep intellectual appeal of Nominalism. It shows why it is so easy to think of particulars as particulars whether or not we consider them in abstraction from their properties."



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