Why There Are No Tropes

JERROLD LEVINSON

1. I begin with terminology. I am going to talk about two kinds of things that ordinary language and thought recognize as filling the role of what can be predicated monadically of objects. These things I call respectively *properties* and *qualities*.

Properties are exemplified by being red, being heavy, being wise, being vivacious, being a bachelor, and are standardly designated by gerundive expressions, most notably, 'being _____'. They are conceptualized as *conditions* objects can be in, and are not quantizable, that is, not things an object can have more or less of. In other words, they are indivisible, non-partitionable things. Properties can also be conceived, although awkwardly, as *being-a-certain-way*s, that is, as entities that have *ways of being*, or ways things can be, at their core.

Qualities, by contrast, are exemplified by redness, heaviness, wisdom, vivacity, and are standardly designated by abstract nouns.[1] They are conceptualized as *stuffs* of an abstract sort, and thus as a rule as quantizable, that is, as things an object can have more or less of. In other words, they are inherently divisible or partitionable things.[2]

Once we distinguish properties and qualities in this way we have need of a genus of monadic predicables to cover them both. I

[1] However, it seems that not all English abstract nouns designate qualities. In particular, those ending in 'hood', such as 'bachelorhood', arguably designate properties, what are usually called sortal properties. *Bachelorhood*, in other words, is simply equivalent to *being a bachelor*, and both are transparently conditions.

[2] What does being a *stuff* imply or require? Here is a rough proposal: a) a stuff S is a *kind of substance*, distinguished from other such substance kinds in terms of outer character and inner constitution; b) there can be *more or less* of S present at a given place and time; c) there is no such thing as *an* S, but only *some* S, that is, a *portion* or *amount* of S. No doubt this rough characterization could be usefully extended.

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conscript to that purpose the term 'attribute'. Hence, on my usage, properties and qualities are both *attributes*, but of different kinds.[3]

2. In an essay on these matters that appeared some twenty-five years ago I was willing to countenance tropes conceived as particularized qualities, qualities being stuff-like attributes and so partitionable, while rejecting tropes conceived as particularized properties, properties being condition-like attributes and so not partitionable.[4] But now, some twenty-five years later, I am inclined to view my brief for tropes as particularized qualities as containing a *reductio ad absurdum* of the very idea of tropes. The argument only needs inverting at a certain point.

In my earlier essay I argued that if there were tropes, then they could only be particularized qualities, not particularized properties. What I suggested was that particularized qualities, or more precisely, quality-bits—i.e., bits of the abstract stuffs that are qualities—could be what people who have invoked tropes as some sort of particularized attribute might have had in mind. Now, though, I would argue that, since the supposition of qualities, i.e. abstract stuffs, as distinct from properties, i.e. conditions, is ontologically extravagant and conceptually outlandish—one cannot seriously propose that there are abstract stuffs, things just like familiar material stuffs except that they are abstract—there are thus no qualities, and hence, no tropes. In short, tropes cannot be particularized qualities since there arguably are not in the world qualities in addition to properties, and tropes cannot be particularized properties, since the notion of a particularized property, or condition, is simply an oxymoron.[5] Hence there are no tropes.

My current position thus involves a sort of fictionalism about qualities, that is, items such as redness, vivacity, wisdom, and fortitude. Certainly we talk about them, in accord with rules for deploying abstract nouns, but our talk is to be construed as either oblique reference to the corresponding properties, or else as a colourful pretense of referring to entities whose existence, on sober reflection, we cannot embrace.

[3] This conception of properties, qualities, and ways of being is detailed in my 'Properties and Related Entities', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* **39**, (1978), 1–22.

[4] 'The Particularisation of Attributes', *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* **58**, (1980), 102–115.

[5] It is what Schopenhauer was fond of calling a 'sideroxylon', or 'iron-wood', a word coined by him from two Greek words in order to express the idea of an absurdity or contradiction.

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Am I proposing, then, that there just are no such familiar things as redness, vivacity, and the rest? In one sense, yes, in another sense, no. If these things are conceived as abstract stuffs—items that behave like stuffs but are non-material—then yes, I deny there are such things. If conceived as merely stylistic variants, so to speak, of their corresponding properties, then no, I do not deny there are things such as, say, vivacity, for that only means that there is such a thing as being vivacious, vivacious being a way persons can be.

In sum, tropes as particularized properties is incoherent, while tropes as particularized qualities is coherent, but ultimately incredible. Hence, once again, there are no tropes.

3. It should be noted that logically particularized properties, such as *being the first person to climb Annapurna*, are entirely different from what claim to be tropes. For of a given such property it may be said, not that other objects *can* be that way or share that way of being, to be sure, but that they are the *sort* of thing, to wit, a condition, that many objects might possess. Unsurprisingly, the unshareability of a logically particularized property is logical, and not categorial, or based in the kind of entity it is. A logically particularized property could easily have been possessed by an object other than the one that does possess it, as a glance at neighbouring possible worlds confirms. But this is far from the case for tropes, especially if, as I suggest is the case, the identity of what are putatively tropes is ultimately dependent on the identity of their bearers.[6]

In contrast to attributes that are uniquely possessed for logical reasons, the reason of whose unique possessability is perfectly transparent, tropes are declared to be attributes and yet unshared and unshareable in a manner that, to say the least, lacks transparency. If tropes are thought of as properties, or conditions things can be in, then how such things can be essentially unshared and unshareable remains mysterious. For clearly nothing about the character of the condition involved in the usual property enforces any such unshareability. The only thing that could enforce unshareability in attributes of a non-logically particularized sort, it seems, is tropes being akin to portions-of-a-stuff, and thus bits of qualities, resident within individual objects. But the quality conception of tropes is, as I have already intimated, a conception that is very hard to swallow, even for the ontologically strong-stomached.

[6] See section 14 below.

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4. The following, it seems to me, are the fundamental, not entirely distinct, errors of trope thinking as a theory of attributes:

a) That a thing's attributes are literally *in* the thing that possesses them.[7]
b) That a thing's attributes are *located* where the thing is.
c) That a thing's attributes *compose* the thing, and are thus legitimately *parts* of it.
d) That a thing's attributes are *contained* in the thing, in the sense in which it contains what it is composed of, such as atoms or molecules.

To be fair, the traditional Platonic-Aristotelian conception of universal attributes, that is, as entities that are not only *possessed* (exemplified, instanced) by objects, but wholly *present* in them, inclines towards the same errors, especially the first two.[8] But whether advanced in the name of tropes or of universals, they are errors nonetheless. What they all reflect is a tendency to 'thingify' attributes, and so accord them spatial features that properly speaking only belong to the objects that possess those attributes and the events or states of affairs in which those attributes figure.[9]

Now it is plausibly when this tendency to think of attributes as locatable elements or ingredients in an object is conjoined with a

[7] This, of course, goes back to Aristotle's idea in the *Categories* of whiteness as something that is not only *said of* Socrates, but also, in some sense, *in* Socrates.

[8] Keith Campbell highlights well the unsatisfactory character of the traditional theory of universals in the following remarks: 'In the classic two-category ontology the properties that furnish the natures of things are universals: that is, items that can be literally fully shared by indefinitely many objects. A universal can be in many places at once *without being divided* ... there must be *something* dubious about items that can be simultaneously completely present in indefinitely many objects ...' (*Abstract Particulars*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1990, 12). The solution to this embarrassment for the theory of properties as universals, of course, is to entirely deny spatial location and containment to properties, whether exemplified or not.

[9] Since my primary objective here is the scourging of tropes as particularized attributes, I will not be overly meticulous about distinctions among some of the less controversial entities with which they are sometimes confused, or under whose cover they sometimes pass, namely events, states, and states of affairs. At any rate, my conception of a state of affairs, as an object having a property or several objects standing in a relation, is consonant with that of David Armstrong (*A World of States of Affairs*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) and many other

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conception of attributes as entirely particular and nonrepeatable that one ends up with the idea of tropes, whose only coherent realization, I have suggested, is as bits of abstract quality-stuff. Nothing else, it seems, could belong to an object in an unshareable way, be contained in it, partly compose it, be located wholly where the object is, and yet be some sort of attribute as well. But I submit that it is very hard to believe there is such a thing as abstract stuff—that is, something that is a stuff, and yet abstract—of which there might be bits.

If, on the other hand, attributes are understood, not as traditional universals, but as properties, and properties understood as conditions, closely related to ways of being or ways things can be, then the above errors cannot get a foothold. Take a green billiard ball. It can be said to have the property of *being green*—which is to say, *green* is a way that it is—but the property *being green* is not in the ball, nor is it located where the ball is, nor is it contained in the ball, nor does it compose the ball, even in part. Yet of course none of that prevents *the ball* from having a location, nor the state of affairs, *the ball's being green*, from having one either, if somewhat more loosely.

5. One reason trope theory flourishes, even though, if I am right, it is fundamentally flawed, is that it often happens that those who invoke and discuss tropes are not really talking about particularized properties as such, but rather other metaphysically familiar items to which a new name has been deceptively appended. Thus in many cases the defender of tropes can be seen to really be talking about events or states of affairs, which are acknowledged, relatively unproblematic ontological categories. In other cases, what seems to be being talked about is in fact a spatial part of some concrete particular, such as a layer of paint on a billiard ball or a patch on a canvas or a quantity of pigment on a piece of cloth. Close examination of trope talk suggests that there is often a kind of shell game going on, and that when, at a moment of rest, one looks under the shell where the trope, as distinct from other items, is supposed to be, there is in fact nothing there.

Let me approach this point somewhat differently. Could the *how-this-is* in respect of color of A be distinct from the *how-this-is* in respect of color of B, if those *how-this-is*'s are indiscernible, that

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current writers. For a suggestive taxonomy of events, states, and states of affairs, see Anthony Galton, *The Logic of Aspect* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), chapter 2.

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is, identical in character? I say no. The idea of an essentially individualized how-something-is, or way of being, is deeply confused. We think we have a hold on it only by eliding, without noticing, *the way A is* (e.g. *green*) and *A's being the way it is* (e.g. *A's being green*), so that while thinking we have finally fixed a particularized property in our mental sights, say, a *being green* belonging only to A, it is really only a state of affairs involving that property and its possessor, namely, *A's being green*, that we have mentally before us.

What I have just said bears on the propensity of some defenders of tropes to posit tropes as primitives, more fundamental than either objects or properties in the ordinary sense.[10] The problem is that, always and inevitably, in the attempt to indicate what such things are, so as to allow us to have some kind of grip on them, objects and properties in the ordinary sense are obliquely presupposed. This is the case with the fused characterization of a trope as a 'this-way-here-now'. How can we understand what this is getting at unless we help ourselves to ways of being antecedently understood, that is, as implicitly shareable or repeatable things? And if so, how can we then fail to see in this attempted portrait of a trope merely the instancing of a universal way or attribute on a given occasion or at a particular place and time?[11]

Of course tropes are usually not just posited as primitive, but offered as alternative ontological building blocks, more fundamental than other entities in the metaphysical scheme, and from which those others can be constructed.[12] But such constructions seem to me have a value that is highly conditional.

[10] See, for instance, Keith Campbell, 'The Metaphysics of Abstract Particulars', *Properties*, D. H. Mellor and A. Oliver (eds.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), where we are told that '... quality-at-a-place is itself a single, particular reality' (478).

[11] The characterization of tropes just discussed may bring to mind Strawson's 'feature-placing' language in *Individuals*, which some have seen as presenting a version of trope theory. But does the intelligibility of that language, which might be held to implicate tropes, commit us to the possibility of tropes? Not if that language is understood, as I suggest it should be, as part of a speculative archeology of our current language, rather than as a real segment of it. Though we do not actually employ feature-placing language, postulating it as an earlier stage of our conceptual scheme may cast some light on the descriptive linguistic framework that we do employ. In any event, the commitments of that language need not be taken to be ours.

[12] See Alex Oliver, 'The Metaphysics of Properties', *Mind* **105**, (1996), 1–79, section 12.

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Consider a logical 'construction' of squares from a base of circles and square circles. One might in some sense construct squares, I suppose, as plane figures that are square circles but not circles. But given *square circle* is an impossible, hence nonexistent, entity, it is not clear what the 'construction' accomplishes; certainly it does little to illuminate the nature of circles or squares. The same can be said for constructions of properties, objects, states of affairs, or what have you, out of tropes, if in fact there are no tropes and could not be any tropes. Such 'constructions' are idle if the construction materials called upon are oxymoronic or chimerical.[13]

6. But perhaps qualities, which are needed for tropes to get off the ground, do some irreplaceable work for us in our effort to describe the world, and thus must be embraced despite their drawbacks from a believability point of view? This raises the question of paraphrasability from quality talk to property talk. Given a quantizable, stuff-like, quality term, can one always paraphrase that away in favour of a scalar, condition-like, property term? Without assuming that paraphrasability settles anything by itself in ontology,[14] still, if quality talk can be paraphrased away without apparent loss, then that seems at least a reason not to credit its ostensible ontological commitments.

So, for example, 'that couch has a lot of redness' can be paraphrased as 'that couch is red, or possesses being red, to a certain degree'; and 'that scene is full of tranquility' as 'that scene is tranquil, or possesses being tranquil, to a high degree'; and 'this rod has more flexibility than that rod' as 'this rod is flexible to a higher degree than that rod'. If such paraphrases are readily available, as it seems they are, it is not clear that quality terms are doing any essential job in our conceptual scheme that property terms cannot do equally well. This should lessen any residual tendency to acquiesce in the existence of qualities in addition to properties.

7. The confused roots of trope-thinking are evident, to my mind, in the seminal modern texts of this vogue in metaphysics, those of

[13] What I am challenging, for example, is the worth of constructions such that as that invoked in the following: 'What, according to trope nominalism, are properties? According to the classic account, they are classes or sets of exactly similar or resembling tropes.' (Cynthia Macdonald, *Varieties of Things*, London: Blackwell, 2005, 234.)

[14] See William Alston, 'Ontological Commitments', *Philosophical Studies* **9** (1958), 8–17.

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D. C. Williams. In his 1953 essay 'On the Elements of Being',[15] Williams, speaking of a trio of lollipops, invites us to

> ... admit literally and seriously that 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*. That is a truism when we construe it with respect to ordinary concrete parts, for example, the sticks in the lollipops ... But what now of the rest of each lollipop and what of their more subtle similarities, of color, shape, and flavor? ... Since we cannot find more parts of the usual gross sort, like the stick, to be wholly similar from lollipop to lollipop, let us discriminate subtle and thinner or more diffuse parts till we find some of these which *are* wholly similar ... we can distinguish in each lollipop a finer part we are used to call its 'color' and another called its 'shape'...[16]

After some further discussion, wherein these newly discovered entities are also characterized as components of the lollipops in question, Williams sums up his proposal like this:

> To borrow now an old but pretty appropriate term, a gross part, like the stick, is 'concrete', as the whole lollipop is, while a fine or diffuse part, like the color component or shape component, is 'abstract'.[17]

But what, I ask, entitles us to posit 'subtle', 'fine', or 'diffuse' parts of the lollipop, where we evidently do not mean by this, parts merely too subtle, fine, or diffuse to be seen by eye or apprehended by touch? What entitles us to think of the lollipop, that individual substance, as having components, but *not* ones that could be isolated by any conceivable method of dissection, dismantlement, or decomposition? So far as I can see, nothing does.

8. Peter Simons, a recent trope theorist, recognizes to his credit that tropes should *not* be regarded as parts of the objects to which they allegedly belong:

> ... it seems to me quite implausible to think of tropes as *parts* of their substances. If ... tropes are individualized *ways* a thing is, it is surely wrong to think of them as parts. *How* something is is something about it, not a part of it. Examine all the parts of a complex artifact, like an airplane. You will find its wings, its

[15] In *Properties*, D. H. Mellor & A. Oliver, (eds.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 113.
[16] *Ibid.*, 113.
[17] *Ibid.*, 115.

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> radar systems, its engines, its ailerons, etc., down to smaller parts like bolts, rivets, transistors, and bits of cable. You will not find its being 10.5 tons in weight among them.[18]

As is evident from the preceding, Simons also embraces the idea that properties are, at least many of them, akin to ways of being. But he then goes on, without a blink, to invoke the idea of particularized ways of being, i.e. tropes.

> Levinson has argued, and Seargent and Armstrong have seconded him, that universals are best construed as not things at all, no matter how tenuous, but ways something can be. Now this is universal talk: a particularist cannot accept ways as such, but only instances of ways. But this ... is not an obstacle: we just talk of 'particularized ways'.[19]

I find this hard to fathom. If one really grasps what a way of being is, one will not find intelligible the proposal that there are ways of being that are *necessarily individual* in the sense of being unshareable in principle, such that two things, A and B, that appear to be precisely the *same* way, W, each in some sense has its *own*, unshareable, way of being W, which we must now label W1 and W2. This, I suggest, is deeply nonsensical. How, then, have so many been led recently to entertain and even affirm such proposals? Largely, I suspect, through not keeping their metaphysical eyes on what exactly is to be imagined, and so falsely thinking that they have succeeded in doing so, lulled by the imaginability of related entities that are easily confused with the putative particularized and inherently unshareable ways of being.

Of course *A's being W* is distinct from *B's being W*—A's being that way is distinct from B's being that way—but then one has shifted attention from properties to states of affairs, in this case, property exemplifications. And of course A is distinct from B, as are normally all of A's parts from all of B's parts, but W cannot be construed as a part of either A or B. So far as I can see, no sense has been given to the idea of ways of being that are, not just highly singular or specific, but inherently particular and uniquely possessed.

9. Cynthia Macdonald has shown that trope theory, in order to do any metaphysical explanatory work, has to acknowledge certain

[18] See his 'Particulars in Particular Clothing: Three Trope Theories of Substance', *Readings in the Foundations of Contemporary Metaphysics*, S. Laurence and C. Macdonald (eds.) (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 373.

[19] *Ibid.*, 373.

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primitive relations that tropes bear to one another or to other things, either intrinsically or extrinsically, where such relations are not themselves plausibly reducible to or regardable as tropes.[20] Macdonald makes a good case that this is so for the compresence relation needed to bundle putative tropes into objects, and for the inherence relation needed to bind tropes to spatiotemporal locations.[21]

But then what can possibly be gained over standard, that is, universal attribute theory, even were tropes not to be either the oxymorons (if they are particularized properties) or chimeras (if they are particularized qualities) I have suggested that they are? The answer seems to be: Nothing. Standard attribute thought doesn't need tropes, whereas trope thought, assuming there were any good reasons to think there were tropes, would ultimately presuppose attribute thought. Thus tropes are not only either incoherent or unbelievable posits, but metaphysically otiose ones as well.

Chris Daly is another writer who, like Macdonald, is rightly sceptical of the claims of trope theory to explain anything beyond what can be readily handled by an ontology of substances and shareable attributes.[22] But he, like her, is rather too willing to grant the coherence of the idea of tropes as particularized properties, of tropes as anything more than misnomers for items that a substance-and-attribute ontology already comfortably recognizes in its own fashion:

> Two rival interpretations of tropes are available. On the first, tropes are taken to be both particularized properties and fundamental entities. On the second, tropes are taken to be particularized properties but not fundamental entities ... The second interpretation takes a trope to be a complex entity which

[20] See her 'Tropes and Other Things', *Readings in the Foundations of Contemporary Metaphysics*, S. Laurence and C. Macdonald (eds.) (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

[21] Perhaps that is putting her brief too strongly, in line with my own purposes here. But Macdonald at the least argues that trope theory, in needing to embrace compresence and inherence relations under some guise or other, is as vulnerable to regress arguments as the standard attribute theory it hopes to replace.

[22] See his essay 'Tropes', in *Properties*, D. H. Mellor and A. Oliver, (eds.) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

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> can be understood in other terms. For instance, on this interpretation it might be held that a trope is a substance having a universal.[23]

But that—a substance having a universal—is just a state of affairs, and not a *property*, particularized or otherwise. Daly goes on to show that the arguments offered by defenders of tropes do not establish the existence of tropes on the first interpretation, since the second interpretation of them is equally available. But what he should have said is that that second interpretation of tropes is tantamount to their *elimination*, since it is not one rightly described as committed to particularized attributes. Tropes, if they are to function as basic elements of an alternate ontology, must be particularized *attributes*, thus attributes of some stripe, and *not* states of affairs or exemplifications. Now attributes are, in my terminology, either properties or qualities. But particularized properties are simply impossible, while particularized qualities, like the qualities from which they would be derived, are impossibly extravagant. Hence once more, there are no tropes.

10. We may note a generally overlooked ambiguity in the expression 'a particularized property', one that may have fueled Daly's lenience in allowing his second interpretation of what tropes are to count as an interpretation of them at all. On one construal, the expression 'a particularized property' appears to designate a *type or variety* of property; on another construal, the expression appears to designate the *upshot of a process*, to wit, that of particularizing a property. But note that that second thing *need not be a property at all*, but might be something else, say, a state of affairs. The result of 'particularizing' a property, depending on how that process is conceived, might not be a property.

Compare this with, on the one hand, waxing a car and, on the other, mincing a steak. A car that is waxed remains a car—only then it is a waxed car—but a steak that is minced is no longer a steak, of any sort, but rather hamburger. If there is a process that deserves the label 'the particularizing of properties', it should be conceived along the lines of mincing a steak rather than waxing a car, for it can only be the *instancing or exemplifying* of a property, which results in a state of affairs, and not some new *variety or type* of the property in question.

Relatedly, we can distinguish between a *factive* and a *possessive* reading of 'X's being ϕ', but not between a factive and a possessive

[23] *Ibid.*, 141.

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reading of 'X's ϕ-ness'. This is symptomatic of the metaphysical difference between properties and qualities. On a factive reading of 'X's being ϕ', 'X's being ϕ' denotes a state of affairs or fact. On a possessive reading of 'X's being ϕ', 'X's being ϕ' denotes the property of being ϕ belonging to X. That the factive reading is possible reflects the intimate connection between states of affairs and properties understood as conditions or being-a-certain-way's.

By contrast, there is no factive reading of 'X's ϕ-ness', but only a possessive one, with 'X's ϕ-ness' understood as denoting an attribute belonging to X. Now, might that attribute, X's ϕ-ness, be either universal or particular? The second construal, which gives rise to tropes, is possible only if ϕ-ness is conceived as a quality or partitionable stuff, 'X's ϕ-ness' being then elliptical for 'X's bit of ϕ-ness'. But I have already sufficiently stressed the unpalatability of such a conception.

11. John Bigelow, in a helpful encyclopedia article,[24] attempts to explain to novices what tropes, or as he calls them, 'properties particularized', are supposed to be:

> According to some philosophers, then, the coldness of one block of ice is one thing, and the coldness of another block of ice is quite another thing. It is not just that the second block of ice is a second instance of a cold thing but, rather, the coldness of the second block of ice is a second instance of coldness.

But let us look at this last phrase, 'a second instance of coldness'. What can it mean, given it does not denote merely the second block of ice itself? If coldness is treated as a quality or abstract stuff, then 'a second instance of coldness' refers to what I call a *quality-bit*, or portion of abstract stuff. But who, as I am now inclined to say, can really believe in such things? If coldness is instead treated as a property, that is, as equivalent to being cold, then 'a second instance of coldness' can only refer to the property exemplification or state of affairs, the second block's being cold, which is indeed distinct from the first block's being cold, but cannot be regarded as any sort of *property*, particularized or otherwise.

Surely, the defender of tropes wants to object, at least the *cold* in one block is distinct from the *cold* in another? For can one not feel, or perceptually register, the one without feeling, or perceptually registering, the other? True enough, but note that once again there has been a subtle switch. The cold in a block of ice is an absence of

[24] 'Particulars', in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Edward Craig (ed.) (London: Routledge, 1988), 236–7.

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heat; absences, like holes, are spatially locatable; thus the absence of heat in one block is indeed something distinct from the absence of heat in the other, and can be interacted with independently. But this line of thought will not work for the quality *coldness*, unless quality-bits, those improbable entities, are countenanced, nor for the property *being cold*, which, being a condition, simply cannot particularize in the manner suggested.

12. E.J.Lowe, in his impressive study *The Possibility of Metaphysics*, at one point distinguishes *the shape of a statue* from the property of *being a statue of a certain shape* that the statue possesses, and proposes that the former might be a trope, even while the latter cannot be.[25] So far so good. But Lowe goes on to try to give content to the idea of an object's shape being a trope, and hence the unique possession of that statue, by glossing that shape as a particular or individual way of being of the statue. Once more we are given no explanation of how in fact a way *can* be inherently particularized or individualized in the manner required, while remaining a *way* that things can be. For such a way is, as such, not something that can be thought of as essentially the exclusive possession of a single object.

Now, how to think of an object's shape understood as something belonging just to that object and not all identically shaped objects, is perhaps a legitimate question, but not one whose answer is tropes of the universal shape involved. A possible answer is that by 'A's shape', when this is meant particularizingly, one means something like A's actual *contour*, located precisely where its surface is though not strictly identical to that surface.

Can one feel the shape of one of two indiscernible billiard balls without feeling the shape of the other? It would seem so, and that observation does seem to implicate particularized shapes. But perhaps one should not, after all, allow that one feels an object's *shape*, strictly speaking, that is, the way of occupying space that it exhibits, but only that one feels the *object*, feels the *surface*, feels the *contour* of the object, and thus feels, now in a more epistemic sense, *that* it has a certain shape.[26]

[25] *The Possibility of Metaphysics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 196–198. Lowe, underlining a connection to medieval thought, prefers to call such things *modes* rather than *tropes*.

[26] Nicholas Wolterstorff, in his *On Universals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), offered a similar argument, turning on the fact that in attending to the circularity of a tire and attending to the circularity of a steering wheel I appear to be attending to two different things, hence

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Lowe offers another argument on behalf of tropes, one involving a green leaf changing colour. In such a case, he claims, you see *the leaf's particular greenness* disappear.

> When I see a green leaf, do I not see the very greenness of the leaf, rather than just the leaf itself? When I see the leaf *change* in color—perhaps as it is turned brown by a flame—I seem to see something *cease to exist* in the location of the leaf, namely, its greenness ... My opponent must say that really what I see is not something's ceasing to exist, but merely the leaf's ceasing to instantiate greenness ...[27]

So, do I see something cease to exist when the leaf turns from green to brown? Certainly, but this need not be a greenness trope of the leaf, if I am right that we should not countenance any such thing. What, then? Two things. First, on a physical plane there is the leaf's green pigment, which in the process described indeed ceases to exist. Second, on a metaphysical plane, there is the leaf's exemplifying or exhibiting of the colour green or the colour property being green, which again, ceases to exist or comes to an end. Put otherwise, the leaf changes from being one way, green, to being another way, brown.

If greenness is conceived in stuff-like fashion, so that by *the leaf's particular greenness* we mean a particular quality-bit of greenness, then I grant that, were such things to exist, one might see them, and might see them go out of existence. But I have already sufficiently underlined the extravagance of the conception of qualities as abstract stuffs distinct from the corresponding properties. If, then, the stuff conception is declined, what is one here left with? One is left with green pigment that is seen and then seen to disappear, or with a state of affairs, the leaf's being green, that gives way to another, the leaf's being brown, or with the leaf's colour, green, first seen and then not seen. In addition, one surely sees that the leaf is green, and then subsequently, that it is another

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suggesting that the circularities in question are distinct and particular, and thus particularized attributes. I discuss and defuse that argument in 'The Particularisation of Attributes', 105.

[27] *The Possibility of Metaphysics*, 205.

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colour. But none of these latter admissions implicate anything that is both an attribute and a particular.[28]

13. Consider some of the more exotic tropes that trope theorists must inevitably have dealings with, if trope philosophy is to be made good. Relation tropes, which trope theorists need to appeal to in a number of connections, have an even more tenuous purchase on intelligibility than property tropes, as even trope theorists usually concede. I suggest that that is because we find it even harder to accept the idea of 'betweenness' stuff or 'resemblance' stuff than that of 'redness' or 'wisdom' stuff, which is what the conception of such relation tropes would seem to call for, if modelled on attribute tropes understood as particularized qualities. A similar point might be made about tropes of extension, which are especially indispensable items in the trope theorist's armory. Can we really buy the idea of extension as a stuff that gets doled out in appropriate amounts, conveniently sized so as to give spatial concreteness to waiting sets of tropes of a more qualitative sort? I doubt it.

Next, as is often observed, properties themselves have properties.[29] Thus, being circular may be said to be a geometric property, and also a simple one. Being kind may be said to be a moral property, and also an admirable one. Now even those who do not blanch at the idea of tropes of circularity or kindness attaching to or composing certain plane figures or persons, must be made to blanch at the idea of tropes of geometricality, simplicity, moralness, and admirability belonging to such properties, and as in any way making them up or being their metaphysical constituents. *Geometrical* is a way that the property *being triangular* is, as *admirable* is a way that the property *being kind* is, but can anyone seriously think that there are metaphysical building blocks, or ontological units, of geometricality and admirability out of which

[28] I should note that there is a more extensive discussion of tropes earlier in Lowe's book, 78–83. That discussion is designed to show that modes are *non-objects*, one of the consolation prize categories of existent that Lowe devises to cover entities that do not qualify as proper *individual objects*; non-objects are entities that 'possess neither determinate identity nor determinate countability' (*The Possibility of Metaphysics,* 78). To my mind what is shown by that discussion, and especially the examination of the insoluble puzzles of identity and individuation presented by modes belonging to coinciding or partially coinciding objects, is that there simply are no such things as modes. Though not intended to be, Lowe's discussion is virtually a *reductio ad absurdum* of its subject.

[29] See, for instance, Oliver, 'The Metaphysics of Properties', 20.

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being triangular and *being kind* are in some sense composed? And yet that is what understanding the properties of properties to be tropes seems to entail.

14. Even were the case against tropes so far not compelling, the many grounds for scepticism regarding coherent identity and individuation conditions for what are putatively tropes must give defenders of tropes pause.

1. The swapping of qualitatively identical tropes. Is it conceivable that a particular black cloth, containing a trope of blackness, might have its trope replaced by an identical trope of blackness, without there being any alteration in the underlying matter, that is, the atoms of which the cloth is composed? Presumably we would say 'no'. But if bearer-independence of tropes were really acceptable, we would have to say 'yes'.
2. Tropes and spatial position. Tropes can't be said to attach to or be identified through their spatial locations, since tropes evidently stay the same while moving through space over time. Even if one considers the whole perduring four-dimensional object, presumably those tropes—the ones belonging to such a 'space-time worm'—might have had different space-time coordinates in another possible world than they in fact do have.
3. Tropes and near-identical objects. The relationship of tropes, such as those of color or shape or density, possessed by 'near-identical' objects, e.g. a statue and the hunk of bronze that composes it, appears to be problematic. Is the relationship identity or difference? If it is identity, then tropes seem to be being thought of as ontological shadows of material stuff, rather than as belonging to and constituting individual objects as such. If it is difference, then the tropes in question must be being individuated by bearers, yet that seems wildly unintuitive, implying as it does that the brownness, angularity, and heaviness tropes of a statue, for example, are distinct from those of the hunk of bronze that makes it up.
4. Tropes and proper parts. Part-whole relations also make trouble for tropes. What is the relationship of tropes possessed by objects to tropes possessed by their proper parts? Take, for example, a black cloth and the quasi-infinity of partitions of it. If it is either identity or partial identity, then it seems we will need to countenance parts and sizes of tropes. That is not an attractive prospect. On the other hand, if it is difference, then what is operative is trope individuation by bearers, yet it seems very odd that the blackness tropes of a cloth and the left

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half of the cloth would have no relation more intimate than that of being possessed by objects that stand in a part-whole relation.

15. I wish to underline, in concluding, that the argument of this paper has been directed exclusively against tropes understood as *particularized attributes*, hence as *attributes* of some kind. If that understanding is not kept in mind, the argument of the paper will not be properly grasped. Thus, if tropes are proposed as *non-attribute-like abstract particulars* of some sort, their claim to recognition is not touched by what I have said here. Similarly, if tropes are proposed as *property instantiations* or *property exemplifications*, then since these are simply varieties of states of affairs, they too are unaffected by the brief I have presented.[30] But in the sense of tropes as originally introduced into modern philosophical discussion, that is, as *particularized, necessarily unshareable, attributes*, able to serve as the primitive building blocks of a coherent alternative ontology,[31] there are, I maintain, no tropes.[32]

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[30] Sometimes, in an attempt to render the idea of tropes palatable, tropes are said to be both instantiations and instances of properties: 'The property, red, could have failed to have been instantiated in or exemplified by this apple, in which case this apple would have failed to be red. That is to say, it would have failed to instantiate or exemplify the property, red. What this amounts to is that this apple would have failed to *be*, amongst other things, an instantiation or exemplification of the property, red. What this suggests is not that individual substances, such as apples, are literally constituted by abstract entities such as the property, red. Rather, it suggests that they are constituted by the particular instantiations, or instances, of those properties—what we might call "particularized properties'', or tropes, such as redness-in-place-*p*-at time-*t*.' (Cynthia Macdonald, *Varieties of Things*, London: Blackwell, 2005, 89.)

But *instantiations* (of redness) and *instances* (of red) should not be conflated. The former are states of affairs, e.g., apples being red, whereas the latter are just objects, e.g. red apples. Of course neither an instantiation of redness nor an instance of red can be identified with a *particularized attribute* of redness, that is, a trope robustly understood, but given the relative familiarity of the term 'instance', using 'instance' and 'instantiation' interchangeably lends a specious plausibility to the idea of tropes as property instantiations.

[31] Alternative, of course, to that of objects, properties, and states of affairs.

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