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Why I Am Not A Tropist

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Abstract. A major division among ontologists has always been the one between those who believe that all entities are particular, and those who believe that at least some entities are universal. I find myself with the latter, and in this paper I offer part of the reasons why this is so. More precisely, I offer a reason why we ought to reject tropism, due to the failure of this view to account for the similarities we experience among entities. In the paper, two tentative accounts are considered and rejected: one postulating the existence of a relation of primitive resemblance; the other denying the existence of any similarity.

1 Introduction

A major division among ontologists has always been the one between those who believe that all entities are particular, and those who believe that at least some entities are universal. I find myself with the latter, and in this paper I offer part of the reasons why this is so. More precisely, I offer my reasons why we ought to reject tropism, due to the failure of this view to account for the similarities we experience among entities. (The rest of the reasons, that I shall not address here, would involve a criticism of nominalism and a theory of universals.)

Although the division among particular and universal entities is widely accepted, it is remarkable that, as of nowadays, there is large disagreement as to how such distinction ought to be explained.¹ For present purposes, I will assume that particular entities are those that do not repeat, in space or in time; every other entity that is capable of repeating is, thus, universal. I will leave unaddressed how repeatability ought to be explained.

Trope theorists (or, briefly, tropists) believe that all entities are particular, and that they have what I shall call a *qualitative character*; that is, for those philosophers each particular entity contributes to establish the *kind* of world we live in: the electrical charges we find at different regions, the gravitational forces, the solidity of some regions, the colors we experience, and so on. In other words, tropism can be defined as the view according to which:

Tropism: All denizens of reality are unrepeatable and each has a determinate qualitative aspect.²

¹ See, for example, the recent [McBride 1998], [McBride 2004], [McBride 2005], the discussion in [Westerhoff 2005], and the more classic discussion of the topic contained in [Strawson 1954], [Strawson 1959], and [Strawson 1974].

² This view, featuring among its supporters some first-class philosophers such as Locke, has more recently found the favor of several authors. A classical recent account is [Campbell 1990]. For a map of the various positions within contemporary trope theory, see [Bacon 2002].

For a tropist, ordinary properties, such as "redness," are construed as similarity classes/sets/mereological sums of unrepeatable qualities.³ Redness is the class/set/mereological sum of all tropes of redness. (Individuals are also construed as classes/sets/mereological sums of tropes; but, unlike ordinary properties, individuals are classes/sets/mereological sums of *compresent* tropes, where the compresence relation can be further analyzed, for instance, in terms of joint action or spatio-temporal proximity.) Clearly, however, such definition is not explanatory. When is a trope a trope of redness, as opposed to a trope of whiteness? In other words: in virtue of what two tropes belong to the same class/set/mereological sum that defines an ordinary property?

2 Explaining Similarities

One of the major difficulties that tropism faces is indeed to offer an account of the similarity between two tropes that allegedly belong to the same class/set/mereological sum. Suppose you have two white plastic spoons, both freshly out of the production line. For a tropist, the two spoons will be made out of two distinct tropes of white; but, the tropist also purports to claim that the two tropes belong to the same class/set/mereological sum: whiteness. This is because the two tropes resemble each other. Yet, if tropes are the only denizens of reality, the two tropes of whiteness cannot resemble in virtue of there being some entity – whiteness – that both share; indeed, that entity would be a universal, not a particular. In virtue of what, then, can the trope theorist claim that two tropes within the same class/set/mereological sum resemble each other?

3 Primitive Resemblance Rejected

3.1 Primitive Resemblance

Two answers can be envisaged. One is offered by what I shall call *Resemblance Particularism (RP)*, according to which similarities among the fundamental unrepeatable entities are primitive, brute facts.⁴ This is a forced conclusion if one maintains (as tropists do) that the fundamental entities are unrepeatable yet similar. It is forced because any explanation of the similarity of fundamental entities cannot appeal to repeatable entities; these not being fundamental, they will have to be construed (if existent at all) in terms of the fundamental ones; hence, similarity would be at best explained in terms of the fundamental unrepeatable entities. In other words: if the only primitive entities are tropes, every ontological category has to either contain tropes only or contain more complex entities that are construed out of tropes. But each trope is unrepeatable; therefore, no two tropes can be said to be similar in virtue of their sharing some part or aspect. Explanations of similarity would thus ultimately be of the form: "individuals *a* and *b* are similar because there are *a* and *b*."

RP has been recently defended in [Rodriguez-Pereyra 2002]. But I believe that *RP* is untenable. Rodriguez-Pereyra has the merit to rebut one of the most formidable objections to *RP*, put forth by [Russell, 1911], according to whom *RP* is committed to accept the existence of at least one universal – namely *Resemblance*.⁵ I recognize, with Rodriguez-Pereyra, that no such commitment is imposed on the *RP* defender.⁶

My trouble with *RP* is simpler. According to *RP*, two things can be similar without *sharing* anything; that is, they are similar, although completely distinct. How is this possible? The defenders of *RP* teach us that to conceive ontological similarity in terms of sharing of some entity (an aspect or property) is wrong; similarity is a brute fact.

Now, I concede that brute facts can (perhaps have to) be sometimes admitted in philosophical argumentation. But, the concession ought to be limited to evident facts, such as the fact that if *a* is a proper part of *b*, *b* cannot be a proper part of *a*. Yet I do not see any compelling evidence for the brutality

³ This picture of trope theory – usually referred to as "trope-cluster theory" – is but the most ontologically parsimonious and most elegant version of trope theory. Other *Tropists* defend versions which include individuals, universals, or both individuals and universals as fundamental entities alongside tropes. I will limit my discussion to trope-cluster theory because it is the only pure form of *Tropism*; the other views all resort to fundamental entities other than tropes, often to circumvent the problem I will discuss. For a short but fairly complete panoramic of the varieties of trope theories see [Bacon 2002].

⁴ [Rodriguez-Pereyra 2002], [Rodriguez-Pereyra 2004], and [Martin 1980].

⁵ Cfr. [Russell 1940] and [Rodriguez-Pereyra 2004].

⁶ Cfr. [Rodriguez-Pereyra 2002].

of similarity facts. To the contrary of what *RP* entails, I take it to be a common opinion that to be similar is tantamount to share something (intrinsic or relational), as a glance at any dictionary can confirm.⁷

3.2 Primitive Quantitative Resemblance

Maybe the answer from primitive resemblance cannot be discarded so readily. There is a twist to it that ought to be considered. One could maintain that the resemblance among tropes defining an ordinary property is based on no additional fact other than the existence of each and all the relevant particular tropes; but, at the same time, one could deny that the resemblance is completely a brute fact.

To illustrate this point, I will use an analogy with numbers. Under a certain conception, each number is particular (perhaps, is a trope⁸). Still, numbers can allegedly be ordered on the basis of resemblance facts rooted only in numbers: for example, each number in the series of natural numbers is particular; yet every number in the series (but one) resembles any other in that it is obtained from its predecessor by adding one. Moreover, numbers in this series can be compared to each other as being more or less *similar* on the basis of their distance in the series. Thus, two is more similar to four than it is to seven. More generally, one could claim that quantitative comparisons are grounded solely on unrepeatable entities – and yet they are *comparisons*.

Tropes could resemble each other as two quantities resemble each other. In other words, the qualities of our world would be better understood as quantities. Indeed, the conception of quantities that is required here is the one according to which numbers are tropes. Under this twisted version of *RP*, then, tropes *are* quantities.

I believe this view is not tenable for two reasons. The first has to do with the concept of ordering, which is supposed to account for the similarity among tropes. Indeed, orderings are relative. One comes before two in the series of natural numbers, but it comes after two in the reverse series of natural numbers. One resembles four more than seven, if we look at their proximity in the series of natural numbers; but one is more similar to seven than to four if we look at the amount of numbers by which they are divisible. Hence, the twisted version of *RP* renders similarity relative; thus it renders the analysis of ordinary properties relative, which is undesirable.

Besides, orderings are defined on the basis of some operations or relations, such as addition or division. What are those if not universals? The distance between two members of a series is measured through a relation which is supposed to hold multiple times among different members of the series. This is a universal, a repeatable entity. Thus, orderings introduce universals into *RP*, making it a spurious version of tropism.

As for the second reason, if tropes are quantities, one might wonder what the difference between tropism and nominalism is. Both views hold that the fundamental entities are unrepeatable, but traditionally tropists maintain that these entities have a qualitative character. The twisted version eliminates this difference, as it conceives qualities as quantities, each of which is particular, although they can be ordered in various ways, and compared on the basis of such ordering.

4 No Similarities?

The second answer rejects that there is any similarity at all among different individuals: fundamental entities are all unrepeatable and they are not similar. The similarity is but an experience; it is a by-product of the way we represent the entities in question. The brownness of this shelf and of this chair *looks the same to me*. But, this is not in virtue of the fact that the shelf and the chair are identical under some respect; nor is it a brute fact; the similarity is a by-product of our perception of the shelf and the chair.⁹

This does not solve the problem, however. Even granting that the entities we experience are not similar, what explains the similarity of our experiences? And, more importantly, on what basis can we conclude that our experiences are similar? There have to be some repeatable entities explaining the similarity; else similarity of experiences is a brute fact. Thus, the same problems affecting *RP* affect also

⁷ The *Encarta English (North America) Dictionary*, for instance, defines "similarity" as: «1. *Likeness*: the possession of one or more qualities in common. 2. *Shared characteristic*: a quality of feature that two or more people have in common.»

⁸ See [Frege 1884], [Wright 1983], and [Lowe 1993].

⁹ This view was already popular among late medieval nominalists, such as Ockham or Buridan; see [Klima 200x: section 4.4] for a detailed reconstruction of their positions. For a contemporary discussion, see [Sainsbury 2005: 246-254].

the tropist's explanation of similarity in terms of experiential facts. (And note that it won't do to try and resist these problems by claiming that experiential facts are placed in the phenomenal world, outside of space-time. Even so, phenomenal experiences are entities; if similar, they will be such in virtue of their sharing something, or brutally.)

The only way out to this *impasse* is to deny the similarity of experiences as well.¹⁰ Experiences are completely distinct, but we feel (or judge) that they are similar by an unavoidable deception. To my knowledge, this position has never been fully developed; and, perhaps, understandably so: it seems hard to deny that when I listen to (what is ordinarily thought of as) the same CD twice or watch twice (what is ordinarily thought of as) the same painting, my experiences have something in common. Also, it would be quite surprising if similarities were the outcome of some kind of unavoidable mistake humans are subject to. If it were not for such a mistake humans would not even be capable of drawing inferences, make plans, produce scientific theories. That is, if it were not for such a mistake, the human species would have probably gone extinct long ago. If perceptions of similarity rest on a mistake, it is indeed a very lucky one we are bound to commit.

It is (also) for those reasons that I prefer to think otherwise than the tropist. That is, I prefer to believe that things *are* similar, that this brown shelf and this brown chair *do* indeed share something. And I refuse to leave this something unexplained, as the tropist *has* to do.

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¹⁰ There is actually another solution, which is due to Aquinas. According to Aquinas, the similarity is grounded in the individuals which are said to be similar, but this fact does not call for a metaphysical explanation. It is in the *nature* of the two entities to be similar. Although I recognize the strength of such a position, I believe that it is not a genuine *Particularist* account of similarity, rather it is a *Mild Particularist* account. For Aquinas, in fact, the aspects of individuals that render them similar (natures) are real, and this – I take – is what a *Particularist* wants to deny. I thus have no argument to offer here against Aquinas's view. For a discussion of this view, see [Klima 2000].