

Against Tropes

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Why are they particular?

Tropes are particularised qualities which depend ontologically on their bearer.¹

Is “particularised property” not just a contradiction in terms?² Tropes, it is said, are simple, qualitative particulars. What does their particularity consist in? It is at this point that trope theorists are led into epicycles.³

Tropes are plausibly taken to be both temporally and spatially extended. A temporally extended trope is e.g. the first wrinkling of John’s brow, which is a part of his frown.⁴ Spatially extended tropes are more questionable, defended by Husserl in the Third Logical Investigation (§4) and by Mulligan and Smith (1983). They include e.g. the redness of one half of a glass cube, which is a part of the redness of the whole cube.

If F tropes are individuated by their spatio-temporal position (Campbell 1981), they must have such a position. If they are simple, their position and their being F is one and the same thing (Moreland 1985). In response, Campbell (1990: 66, 68) gave up the claim that tropes are individuated by spatio-temporal position and rather claimed that compresence is “more abstract, more formal” than occupancy of the same spatio-temporal region and that the “individuation [of tropes] is basic and unanalysable” (Campbell 1990: 69):

“That is, to the question: what is it about one F trope that makes it the F trope it is and not some other F trope? there can be only the non-informative, but true, answer: (not any feature, aspect or constituent of that F trope but) just being that F trope rather than any other.” (Campbell 1990: 69)

The dissection problem is usefully discussed by Aquinas in *Summa Theologiae* I q 76 a 8. Suppose that the individual accident a inheres in x and x is decomposed into x_1 and x_2 . At least in some cases (in the cases of what Goodman calls “dissective” qualities, a will be decomposed as well. Because $x_1 \neq x_2$, a cannot inhere in both of them – so where does it go? If the maximality solution is adopted, the identity-conditions of ordinary tropes become extrinsic. If, instead, we opt for some minimum extension for F tropes, we are still unable to single out particular tropes, for they can come in different shapes (cf. Campbell 1990: 137).

The dissection problem for trope theory may be seen to be a special case of the ‘Multiple Instance Objection’ of Armstrong (1978: 86) and Moreland (1985: ??) (cf. Campbell 1990: 66). If a is F , the objection runs, what right has the tropeist to postulate just one (rather than two or any other number)

¹Tropes were called “individual accidents” in Aristotle’s classification in the *Categories*: they are not said of a subject (hence particular), but in a subject, hence accidental.

²This has been argued by Levinson (2004: 372): “...les tropes sont présentés comme des attributs qui ne sont ni partagés ni partageables, ce qui – c’est le moins qu’on puisse dire – n’est pas très clair. Si les tropes sont conçus comme des propriétés ou comme des états dans lesquels les choses peuvent être, alors la façon dont de telles choses peuvent être, qui seraient essentiellement non partagées et non partageables, reste mystérieuse.” (2004: 373) He thinks that the very notion is unintelligible: “La revendication des théoriciens des tropes qui affirment l’existence de propriétés ou de manières d’être particularisées et im-partageables, celles qui n’appartiennent nécessairement qu’à une seule chose, devient une sorte d’incantation propre à induire une croyance chez ses adeptes par sa simple répétition.” (2004: 376)

³Campbell (1990: 57), for example, calls the particularity of tropes a “hyper-abstract, incapable of distinct and independent existence” and says that they are “particular *just by being particular*” (his emphasis).

⁴This is explicit in (Mulligan et al. 1984: 292), Campbell (1990: 3), Bacon (1995: 94) and Mertz (1996: 4).

of F tropes ‘in’ a ? Campbell (1990: 67) considers two ways of avoiding the second (and any other) trope: lack of causal power and general Occamist grounds. While the second begs the question,⁵ the first response is impotent against a version of the objection where both tropes, alternatively, are responsible for the causal powers of a ’s being F .

Why are they qualitative?

If we want to avoid higher-order tropes, we are bound to give two-tiered truth-conditions for atomic statements. First, we have, for ‘ordinary’ atomic predications (cf. Campbell 1990: 61):

(1) “ a is F ” is true $:\Leftrightarrow$ a contains an F trope.

But unfortunately, things are not so simple: to avoid higher-order tropes, we have to require that “ a ” does not stand for a trope. For predications about tropes t we will have instead:

(2) “ t is F ” is true $:\Leftrightarrow$ t is F .

How are they individuated?

With respect to the individuation of tropes, we have to distinguish three different questions:

- what distinguishes one F trope from another F trope?
- what distinguishes it from a G trope?
- what distinguishes it from Julius Caesar?

It is the first answer that Moreland raised. But it is the third question the unanswerability of which makes trope theory unacceptable.

Why is this particular trope an F trope rather than, say, a G trope? It is of no help at this point to invoke, with Campbell (1990: 30), the Ostrich’s reply “it’s being what it is”. This is the answer Plato, Phaedon 105c called “safe, but stupid”. It is not made more acceptable, as Campbell (1990: 20) seems to think, that all explanations have to end somewhere: the problem is not that there is bound to be rock-bottom, but rather whether the rock-bottom invoked can bear the explanatory weight put on it.

Why believe in them in the first place?

Trope theory does not fare much better with respect to Campbell’s ‘B question’, what is it about two similar things in virtue of which they resemble each other? The tropist’s answer is that they “include” tropes that resemble each other in virtue of being of the same kind. But this ‘explains’ facts of resemblance by just such facts of resemblance, the latter taken to be an “inexplicable primitive of the system” (Campbell 1990: 15). Membership in the same natural kind can do nothing to explain this resemblance, for kinds in term are nothing but collection of (similar, or even perfectly similar) tropes (Campbell 1990: 32).⁶ These kinds do not bestow anything on the tropes that instantiate them, they only mark resemblances that are already there. These kinds, therefore, are very different

⁵So does the ‘assumption of nonredundancy’ made by Mertz (1996: 10) and codified in his ‘Principle of instance uniqueness’.

⁶Cf. also Wolterstorff (1970: 136) properties are types of tropes. Campbell (1990) calls this view “painless realism” (about universals).

from those encountered before, for they do not come with corresponding properties: adherence to them is primitive and this is why I do not find it intelligible.

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