

**Douglas Ehring**

*Tropes; Properties, Objects and Mental Causation.*

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Douglas Ehring's new book *Tropes; Properties, Objects and Mental Causation* defends nominalism regarding the nature of properties. Properties, Ehring argues, are individual things, and since a theory of tropes can account for the nature of properties, we may dispense with universals. *Tropes* is full of detailed discussion of an enormous number of metaphysical theses regarding properties, causation, identity, change and objecthood. Ehring's discussion and handling of the bewildering number of possible theories and alternate conceptions is certainly impressive.

Ehring's favorite theory of tropes is Natural Class Nominalism (properties are natural classes of tropes) and his favorite theory of individual objects is a trope bundle theory according to which "tables and chairs are wholly constituted by and are identical to complete bundles of compresent properties" (14). In Chapter One, Ehring addresses the distinction between universals and particulars: in it, he argues that the standard exemplification accounts fail. The proper distinction, following D. C. Williams, is that the identity of indiscernibles applies to universals but not to individuals. In Chapter Two, Ehring reviews the standard reasons for believing in tropes (such as offering an account of similarity) and offers his own. According to Ehring, we cannot distinguish between same property persistence and property replacement in pairs of indeterministic homogenous spinning orbs, without tropes. Ehring suggests that "the only viable account of property persistence, in light of the indeterministic Sphere Case, is in terms of enduring tropes" (66) The argument offered is non-demonstrative but with other "reasonably inferred entities" such as electrons, we have experiments to guide us, or with abstract entities, we have proofs. Ehring's concept of metaphysical "best explanation" appears divorced both from "abductive causal explanation" and from "proof".

In Chapter Three, Ehring argues that trope individuation is a primitive; he also argues for the possibility of medium-size tropes like the redness of one's shirt. Ehring denies that tropes are individuated by their actual spatio-temporal properties, since he believes in *enduring* tropes. In Chapter Four he defends a bundle theory of individual objects and offers replies to the major objections against bundle theories. Ehring argues that bundles of tropes avoid the problems inherited by bundles of universals and replies to the regress objection of relations by positing compresence as a self-relating relation. Since objects are identical to their bundles, Ehring appeals to counterpart theory to allow objects to have distinct elements in their bundles in counterfactual scenarios.

Regarding mental causation and reduction Ehring defends the token identity theory of mental events but, unlike Davidson, conceives of events as property exemplifications. Ehring officially wishes to remain a nonreductivist about properties (138) since he supports multiple realizability arguments, but he takes the sensible view that there is no exclusion or competition between parts and wholes regarding causal efficacy, even for properties. Each trope, being a part

of the property, does not compete with the property. And some physical properties, being parts of mental properties, do not compete with the whole of which they are parts. John's foot blocks the door, but we need not choose between John and his foot as cause, since John blocks the door with his foot. Thus properties are identical to the natural class of tropes, each trope being a part of the property. And classes of tropes (properties) are then parts of other classes of tropes.

To permit the possibility of more instances of a property than there are actual instances, the property must then be considered under a counterpart relation to the natural class of tropes. This is analogous to the four-dimensionalist need to invoke counterpart relations to permit a four-dimensional object to have more or less temporal parts than it has in the actual world. This view can be contrasted with the constitution view that allows properties to be constituted without being identical to their constituents. Such a nonreductive view appears to face the problem of causal exclusion but mereology does not, since there is nothing irreducible in the part-whole relation. I was thus surprised to see this reductive mereological approach to property relations claimed as support for *nonreductivism*.

If an object just *is* its actual bundle of tropes (or temporal parts) then it could not have had more or less of these, which seems false for typical continuants. Mereology requires counterpart theory to account for the modal flexibility of objects and properties. However, Ehring's frequent use of counterpart theory puzzled me, since it is typically invoked in contexts where one wishes to account for possibilities while *denying the existence of cross-world individuals*. I saw no reason, however, why the very same enduring tropes cannot exist in another possibility if one denies the existence of Lewisian concrete worlds, as Ehring does. So the appeal to counterpart theory seemed an *ad hoc* response to an unfortunate desire to identify properties with classes of actual individuals or to identify objects with their actual bundles. If this and that trope can "exist in many possible worlds", we can determine what is possible for them (and for classes they are parts of) by following them through the worlds; no counterpart substitutes are required.

Something is also not quite right about Ehring's picture of predication. An object (a bundle of tropes) possesses a property by possessing a trope which is part of that property, i.e., one of the tropes in the natural class of tropes. But for the object to possess a property because a part of it possesses the property (John is blocking the door because a part of him, say his foot, is blocking the door) it is required that the part possess the *whole* property, not some lesser portion of it. John's foot does not have a part of the property of blocking the door. This objection is analogous to the complaint against four-dimensionalism that objects are not fully present at any particular time since they are alleged to be identical with a class of temporal parts. Since properties have only their parts present in a bundle, it looks as if John has only part of the property of blocking the door, the whole property being spread out among the tropes that are its parts, themselves parts of other bundles. Ehring will object, reminding us of his theory that if a trope is a member of a natural class then it is called an instance of the property. But if class membership holds only if one is a part of the other (Ehring following Lewis) then the problem seems to remain. *Whole* properties aren't present in any particular bundle.

Those already convinced of the existence of tropes will begin with part two of *Tropes*, where Ehring defends natural class nominalism over its rivals. The standard view is that a trope's

nature and its particularity explains its similarity relations or its class, but Ehring reverses the dependence. The nature of a trope depends on the natural class it belongs to and its natural class therefore is not itself dependent on the individual tropes' "nature". Since the nature of a trope depends on the class it belongs to, and this "belonging" is of a part to a whole, Ehring appears to believe that the whole determines the nature of its parts, a view as venerable as it is mysterious.

Ehring's tropes naturally take on a life of their own but in reading the book, I sometimes lost sight of how they were intended to be the reductive base for properties. What features from old-fashioned property-talk must be retained and what features are fairly expendable? No reduction occurs without collateral damage: when light became a physical wave it lost its "essential visibility". Perhaps properties are incomplete, requiring some other things to exist: yet particulars do not. If we make this distinction, then properties cannot be tropes since tropes would be incomplete particulars, and there are no such things. Ehring's response to this reasoning seems odd to me. He writes: "Thus, if there are tropes even the proponent of this view [of distinguishing universals from particulars] should treat them as gappy and hence, abandon the claim that gappy entities are restricted to universals. In short, one must avoid taking a possible feature of properties, their gappiness, as a feature restricted to universals, but not particulars." (22). Now, I have not come across a "gappy" dog, one that requires some other animal to exist, like red seems gappy, requiring some other thing for *its* existence or instantiation. So must we preserve gappiness in the reductive base? In this passage Ehring appears to be arguing as follows: *whatever I find in property-talk I'll pass on to tropes, since my thesis is that they are identical*. But he offers no argument against the claim that properties are gappy, only that gappiness might not distinguish universals from particulars, assuming properties are tropes. So unless gappiness is not something to be preserved in the reduction, Ehring believes in gappy particulars, which sounds rather desperate.

All in all, *Tropes* is a challenging and rewarding read, one that offers us a number of interesting and novel solutions to an age-old problem.

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