

DISCUSSION

KÄTHE TRETTIN

New Literature on Tropes

- Anna-Sofia Maurin, *If Tropes*. Dordrecht: Kluwer (Synthese Library Vol.308), 2002.
- Arkadiusz Chrudzimski, “Two Concepts of Trope”, *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 64 (2002), 137-155.
- Donald Mertz (ed.), Symposium on “Nominalism and Realism: The Ontology of Unit Attributes”, *The Modern Schoolman* LXXIX, No. 2 & 3 (2002).
- Fredrik Stjernberg, “An Argument Against the Trope Theory”, *Erkenntnis* 59 (2003), 37-46.

Although tropes (particular properties, individual qualities) are not newcomers in general metaphysics, but, in fact, have a long history from Aristotle to Husserl, it is only quite recently that more and more philosophers have engaged in analysing the prospects of tropes or unit attributes as fundamental entities. Starting in the beginning of the nineteen nineties in a more or less programmatic way, discussions have now reached a stage of refinement. Arguments focus around the more intricate problems and have gained in subtlety. This, I think, is in itself a good development, for it shows that general metaphysics or ontology is a lively and fruitful area of philosophy.

In reviewing some of the recent literature on tropes I shall begin with a general characterisation of Maurin’s book and then turn to one of the vital problems discussed in the book and/or additionally in the papers mentioned above: Are tropes ‘simple’ or ‘complex’ entities?

If tropes

The approach of the Swedish philosopher Anna-Sophia Maurin may be characterised as both ambitious and humble. It is ambitious in that it embarks on constructing a general metaphysic based solely on the category of Trope. There is a great awareness of problems which such a “revisionary” undertaking should deal with which is rarely found in recent literature. Perhaps this cautious way of proceeding is at the same time responsible for the book’s humble and defensive outlook. It is humble in two aspects: first, in that it is hypothetical in a pronounced way. As indicated in the title, the whole thing rests on a presumption or assumption: “The existence of particular properties will [not be argued for, but] instead be *assumed* and in the context of this assumption we will ask: if there are particular properties, what problems will a theory incorporating such properties face and how are these problems to be solved? In this sense, the present work attempts to *construct* a theory that includes particular properties. It does not attempt to argue for, or defend, this theory.” (p. 2f.) Secondly, although the intention behind this work is “a wish to uncover the basic structural features of the world *in general*”, Maurin is quite aware of the fact that her theoretical construction will be incomplete, because neither mental phenomena nor mathematical objects are discussed; the subject matter is restricted to “the truncated world” (p. 30). There is also very little on trope alteration or change and the connected problems of causality, and construing time and space in a trope-theoretical way is only briefly touched upon. Surely, one cannot cover everything in one book, and so the incompleteness is not considered to be very grave. The pronounced hypothetical or even constructivist framework seems to be more problematic, because it can have an immunising function concerning critique: At times Maurin just reminds possible critics of their ‘obligation’ to respect the assumptions of her theory. Of course, some assumptions have to be laid down to start any theory, but these should be good enough to be respected by all without comment. If some of those belong to the core of controversial debates, it simply is not a good enough assumption or axiom of one’s theory, as is the case with whether tropes are simple or complex. Somehow one gets the impression that Maurin has, so to speak, a rather aloof affair with tropes. She doesn’t love them wholeheartedly. On

the other hand, she takes great care in defending her theoretical construction which may be summarised as follows.

Tropes are characterised as ‘simple’, ‘particular’, and ‘abstract’. Let’s postpone simplicity to the discussion below. Concerning the qualification of “being particular”, Maurin then, and I think, rightly, dismisses spatio-temporal location as the individuating or particularising ground, and takes particularity as primitive (p. 16-21). Her argument, however, is not very convincing. If a trope is conceived of as ‘a quality-at-a-place’, says Maurin, it would be complex – contrary to the assumption of being simple. Furthermore, she holds that individuation of tropes is a matter of epistemology rather than of metaphysics. She could have done better, or so I think, if she had given an explanation of how time and space figure in trope theory. A possible answer would be something along these lines: Since the seventeenth century, and prominently since Locke, it has been a very nice trick to keep people thinking that to ‘individuate’ things means to refer to their spatio-temporal positions without further arguing what time and space are. What might be plausible for a substance ontology combined with an absolute or container-like view of space is, however, not apt to serve as a general condition of individuation. Trope ontology shows that this conception is a worn-out myth, since tropes can occupy the same place at the same time. Therefore, the ontological container view should be replaced by a relativistic view which conceives of space-time as spatial and temporal modes dependent on what there is.¹ Once the metaphysical priority of space-time is rescinded and individuality (rather than particularity) is regarded as not being further analysable, there is no need to refer to epistemology here, and, more important, at least one defeating argument against the assumed simplicity of tropes is rebutted.

Concerning the qualification of tropes as ‘abstract’ particulars, Maurin, again rightly, points out the “conceptual confusion” due to the trope pioneers Donald Williams and Keith Campbell. “To my mind, the important trait here is what I would like to call the inherent ‘qualitativeness’ of the trope. The trope is, quite simply a ‘quality particularised’, and this serves to distinguish it both from the realist’s

¹ Also Mertz (TMS, p. 105) holds that “space-time no longer has ontic priority over the entities ‘in’ space-time”.

universal and the ordinary concrete particulars of everyday life” (p. 23f.). So the basic category to start with is a ‘simple particularised quality’. Before constructing any complex entities out of tropes thus characterised, Maurin offers two chapters concerning methods and goals of metaphysics, one general, the other more specific to trope theory. First, she takes up the well-known distinction made by Strawson between descriptive and revisionary metaphysics and opts for the latter (chap. 3), arguing that “the actual structure of our thoughts about the world need not provide us with the actual structure of the world” and “that additional information about the way the world is might lead us to correct the actual structure of our thoughts” (p. 28). The goal being an account of the structural features of reality in general, whereby, as already mentioned, the scope is limited to the physical world. Maurin points out that such an account is formal in the Husserlian sense, rather than substantial. More interesting is how she gets from her revisionary project around to a method which prohibits mere speculations. In general, the rational and empirical constraints laid down by Whitehead in the introductory chapter of his *Process and Reality* are adopted. More specifically, it’s truth-maker theory supplemented by a modified logical atomism which is chosen as a methodological guide. This is a reasonable move. If one holds that language is not a mirror of what there is, one has to turn to the non-linguistic side of the question and ask: what makes our propositions true. And doing so, a good starting point may be to investigate what makes an atomic proposition true. The modification of Russellian logical atomicity is that “it will not here be assumed to imply ontological atomicity in any corresponding truth-maker” (p. 43).

The result of the somewhat lengthy chapter on truth-makers is what trope theorists have thought all along, namely, that not all propositions can be made true by tropes alone but need at least trope structures equivalent to things or substances as well as something equivalent to universals as truth-makers. In a way, truth-maker theory – initially intended to be a mere methodological device for ontology – turns out to be some prior theory that somehow dictates which entities there are (should be), or, in this case, have to be constructed out of tropes. Although I do not object to truth-maker theory in principle, I believe that truth-making is a derivative function of reality and therefore, cannot, in a strict sense, prescribe ontological analyses.

The second part of the book is the constructive one. First, the ‘problem of universalisation’, as Maurin quite appropriately modifies the classical ‘problem of universals’, is solved by constructing strictly resembling trope classes, where trope resemblance is taken to be an internal relation. Secondly, a thorough analysis is dedicated to ‘thing-construction’, including fine arguments for circumventing Bradley’s (vicious) regress, and opting, in the end, for accepting a relational trope of ‘compresence’. This trope, being external to the terms in order to account for contingency, serves as the unifier of tropes bundled together in a thing, a trope which is conceived of as one-sidedly dependent on the tropes it relates. The original thought here is that these compresence- or relation-tropes have the sole quality of just relating: “relations necessarily relate” (p. 163ff.).

All in all, the project of trope ontology in a purist version is well argued for. Maurin’s book is especially strong in disentangling confused ideas about tropes. Even if there are too many ‘assumptions’ and the truth-maker theory seems to overwhelm the direction of investigation at times, the book’s spirit is admirably serious and straightforward. For further clarification, let us now turn to a specific problems by including more literature on tropes.

Are tropes ‘simple’ entities ?

Usually trope theorists hold that a trope is simple in the intuitive sense that it is not a composition or complex of different tropes, but just one singular quality instance or individual quality. In this sense of simplicity tropes are taken to be the basic ontological elements or atoms, the very building-blocks or ultimate constituents of everything complex. Surely, the architectural picture is quite appealing: Once the ‘ontological architects’ get hold of the irreducibly simple elements, they can start their construction work with the wonderful prospect of a wide range of combinatorial possibilities in order to account for the structural features of the world. But are tropes really ‘simple’? Isn’t the tripartite characterisation of tropes as ‘simple’, ‘particular’, and ‘qualitative’ – already to be found not only in Maurin, but in many others – a puzzling indication of non-simplicity? Unfortunately, trope theorists have done a lot

to give the impression that tropes are more than just one quality, especially by talking about ‘tropes and their natures’ or about the trope’s particularity on the one hand, and its quality, on the other. No wonder that critics take this loose talk as evidence for their objections.

Herbert Hochberg, one of the nicest, albeit severest critics of trope ontology for decades, once again ponders, for instance, Keith Campbell’s “bewildering version of the trope view”, because “Campbell speaks of ‘the trope’s being red’” (Hochberg, TMS, p. 115).² Therefore, the tropes advocated by Campbell³, Hochberg goes on, “are instances of ‘tropiness’, if I may so put it, as well as of redness” (TMS, p. 116). Taking trope advocates by their own words, tropes, or so it seems, are not at all simple, but rather complex entities, constituted at least by a sort of ‘bare particular’, *i.e.* a trope which grounds particularity, and additionally by an instance of a quality which implicitly refers to a universal kind, which makes (at least) two items on the list. Moreover, if one takes talk about the trope’s ‘existing at a place in time and space’ seriously, one can easily add a temporal trope and a spatial trope. Counting them one by one, we have meanwhile gained a balance of four items – and thereby demonstrated that the claim of simplicity is defeated without even taking into account all the relation-tropes which seem to be necessary for bundling these tropes into one.

Fredrik Stjernberg presents an argument against trope theory in a similar vein. If tropes are supposed to be the fundamental building-blocks, they cannot have properties. In fact, however, the officially propertiless tropes seem to have quite a few properties, at least those of being “elements in sets (the concurrence sets making up ordinary objects, and the resemblance sets making up the ersatz universals of trope theory)”. Moreover, “they are allowed to flank the identity sign, they are quantified over” (p. 39). Although this charge might already suffice for defeating the tropist’s claim, Stjernberg considers a possible way out: the distinction between ‘tropes of ordinary individuals’ (*1-tropes*) and ‘tropes of tropes’ (*2-tropes*). The rescue by way of trope-hierarchy, however, turns out to be

² To the literature listed above I shall refer by stating author’s name and page; in case of papers published in the above indicated issue of the journal *The Modern Schoolman* I shall use additionally the abbreviation TMS.

³ K. Campbell (1990), *Abstract Particulars*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, pp. 59-60.

an impasse, for as soon as we try to tell the difference between them, says Stjernberg, we are on our way to a vicious infinite regress, because “in order to explain what an n -trope is, we have to introduce an $n + 1$ -trope which in turn is explained by the introduction of $n + 2$ -tropes” (p. 42). Although Stjernberg concedes that it is at least possible that the difficulties can be overcome, he thinks that “the root of the difficulties for trope theory lies in its trying to accomplish too much” and, finally, recommends an attitude “of cautious moderate pragmatism” (p. 44). Tropes could be useful in explaining various phenomena, such as causation and perception, trope theory could be an “interesting approach” in ethics and aesthetics, but it shouldn’t be both a theory of predication and a theory of the ultimate building-blocks of the world (p. 44). Similarly, Arkadiusz Chrudzimski distinguishes between two concepts of trope. If tropes are apt for predication, they cannot be the fundamental unstructured building-blocks prior to concrete objects; if tropes are conceived of as the ultimate ontological elements, however, they cannot “function as semantically efficient truthmakers” (p. 137). Surely, Chrudzimski is right when he points out that only the concept of unstructured trope is the concept “that metaphysics needs” (p. 154).

What can trope philosophers offer in defence of tropes’ simplicity against these heavy charges? Maurin suggests two answers, while fighting with similar critiques (of Chris Daly and J. P. Moreland). The first one is an argument from parity. If properties taken as universals can have properties, and they do, so can tropes – period (p. 15). The second and final answer to the charge of a trope being complex is a negative one: “The sense in which the trope is *not* complex is, [...] best put as follows: it does not contain (is not constituted of) more than one kind of entity” (p. 15). Unfortunately, these replies, even if taken together, are not satisfactory, even though each of them covers a point. But it is simply not enough to claim simplicity by pointing to a trope-kind. Kinds are, at least in the classical sense, essential universals and at best are constructed out of salient tropes of trope complexes or as resemblance classes of tropes. What really is at stake here is the claim that a trope is supposed to be both, an individual and a quality as just ‘one’ – and as such a ‘simple’ entity. Therefore, the core question is how trope advocates of simplicity will have to bite the bullet. Either they fall back on the substrate view with a ‘bare’

trope which is supposed to be nothing other than a pure particular without any properties, a *haecceitas* in the sense of Duns Scotus. This option, however, would not be a solution for at least two reasons. First, the substrate view, *i.e.* the view of something particular which seems to be entirely without any qualities, has been one reason for trope theorists' pursuing the revisionary track, namely, for rejecting the classical substrate-*cum*-property view, simply because it is inconsistent. An entity claimed to be 'bare' of any qualifications simply cannot fulfil the function of a 'unifier' or 'bearer' of properties. If it is without properties, it cannot have the property of unifying; if it unifies, it is not without properties. Secondly, someone could easily turn up and hold that a pure substrate trope, even without taking into account the classical unifying property, has at least one negative property, namely, that of not-having-a-property, and by way of parity – a negative property is as good as a positive one.

If my explication so far is plausible, the 'bare-particular view' is a non-starter. The other bullet to bite would be, secondly, to just admit that the simple trope is, *in veritas*, a quite happy family of core tropes, all ready to get in touch with the great world, building fusions here, building clans there, and living happily ever after. But then, everything turns on the meaning of 'simplicity'. Even if, as Stjernberg tries to show, a core of *I*-tropes can be singled out, not only does a regress loom, but a clear-cut meaning of simplicity goes by the board. My own suggestion is that trope theorists should think about it and decide in favour of tropes being simple. Simplicity is – if it can be sustained – a vital feature of explicating the complex structure of reality. My favourite choice, until now, turns heavily on the intuitive evidence of examples: this redness (of this sofa), that roundness (of that ball), etc. – they are all simple tropes in that they are just the individual quality of redness or the individual quality of roundness. That the English language seems to refer to kinds by using the grammatical particle 'of' is not of the essence: an instance *of* red is one and not two. Generally, non-qualified individuality might be logically possible, but, at least to my mind, not possible in any sense of ontology. For, whatever there possibly is, it is some quality. Therefore, I think that ontological simplicity is just a corollary of primitive individual quality.