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## Property Possession, Identity, and the Nature of an Entity

### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In this paper I will defend an argument for an account of property possession and identity according to which property possession and identity are one and the same relation. Then I will consider an objection to that account. And out of my response to that objection will emerge the view according to which there is nothing more to any given entity than what is traditionally referred to in ontology as the nature of that entity.

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Property possession and identity are fundamental to philosophy. But they are also fundamentally misunderstood.

On the one hand, property possession has been referred to as “the fundamental tie”<sup>3</sup> that binds the entity to its property. It is the relation such that, for any entity whatsoever  $x$  and any entity whatsoever  $y$ ,  $x$  bears it to  $y$  just in case  $x$  possesses  $y$  as a property. And identity is the relation such that, for any entity whatsoever  $x$  and any entity whatsoever  $y$ ,  $x$  bears it to  $y$  just in case  $x$  is identical to  $y$ . In other words, identity is *the* relation any entity whatsoever bears to itself and nothing else.<sup>4</sup>

On the other hand, property possession and identity are also

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Phil Hanson and Jackie Wilwerding for discussing these ideas with me.

<sup>2</sup> In this paper I will require a technical term that can be used to refer to absolutely anything, regardless of its ontological category. For that purpose I will use ‘entity’ and I will use the individual variables ‘ $x$ ’ and ‘ $y$ ’ in like manner to quantify over any entities whatsoever.

<sup>3</sup> See Armstrong (1989, pp. 108-110).

<sup>4</sup> There is a worry that Bradley’s relation regress argument shows that there are no such things as relations at all. I will address this worry below.

fundamentally misunderstood. For whereas it is apparently very widely believed that there is a real distinction to be made between the relation of property possession and the relation of identity, that belief is mistaken.<sup>5</sup> Instead, there is only a merely conceptual distinction to me made between them. For property possession and identity are in fact numerically one and the same relation.

The purpose of this paper is to defend an argument for an account of property possession and identity according to which the relation of property possession (i.e. the relation such that, for any  $x$  and  $y$ ,  $x$  bears it to  $y$  just in case  $x$  possesses  $y$  as a property) *just is* the relation of identity (i.e. the relation such that, for any  $x$  and any  $y$ ,  $x$  bears it to  $y$  just in case  $x$  is identical to  $y$ ). Now it might also be said that according to this account, there is no relation of property possession other than the relation of identity, and there is no relation of identity other than the relation of property possession. And to be picturesque it might even be said that according to the account, there is no more difference between the relation of property possession and the relation of identity than there is between the Morning Star and the Evening Star. But for the sake of brevity from now on I will simply say instead that according to the account, property possession and identity are one and the same relation.

The plan of the paper is as follows. In the second section I will defend an account of property possession and identity according to which property possession and identity are one and the same relation. Then in the third section I will consider an objection to that account. And out of my response to that objection will emerge the view according to which there is nothing more to any given entity than what is traditionally referred to in ontology as the nature of that entity.

## II

In this section I will defend each of the premises of the following argument. Property possession is a relation. If property possession is a relation, however, then either property possession and identity are one and

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<sup>5</sup> So far as I can tell, property possession and identity are widely believed to be numerically two distinct relations because whereas identity is symmetric, transitive and reflexive, it is widely believed that property possession is asymmetric instead. To his credit, Newman is one who makes this belief explicit. See his (2002, p. 24, n. 40). But according to my account, property possession is not asymmetric. Rather, it's symmetric. It just is the symmetric, transitive and reflexive relation of identity.

the same relation, or else property possession is some relation other than identity. If property possession is some relation other than identity, then presumably there is at least one entity that bears the relation of property possession to a second entity to which the first is not identical. But the consequent of this latter claim faces two problems, which I refer to as the problems of relevance and contribution, and which seem to me to be insoluble. Thus it is not the case that there is at least one entity that bears the relation of property possession to a second entity to which the first is not identical. Hence property possession and identity are one and the same relation.

*Property possession is a relation.* The only objection to this premise of which I am aware is the one according to which Bradley's relational regress argument shows that property possession cannot be a relation. According to Bradley's relational regress argument, if entity  $x$  bears relation  $R$  to entity  $y$ , then relation  $R'$  (which may or may not be the same as  $R$ ) is required to relate  $x$  to  $R$ , in which case relation  $R''$  (which may or may not be the same as  $R'$ ) is required to relate  $x$  to  $R'$ , and so on and so forth. And of course the relation extends in the other direction, going from  $R$  to  $y$ .<sup>6</sup>

It is important to note, however, that the argument does *not* show that  $x$  fails to be related by  $R$  to  $y$  in the end, as some have thought.<sup>7</sup> Nor does it show that any contradiction is ever reached. All that it shows is that if one commits oneself to the existence of at least one relation -- and it need not be property possession -- then one thereby commits oneself to possibly many relations. But by itself this does not show that one *should not* commit oneself to the existence of relations.

If one wishes to reject the existence of relations, then one cannot justifiably do so on the basis of Bradley's relational regress argument alone. One must also appeal to some additional consideration, such as simplicity, ontological economy, or the like. But I doubt that the value gained in simplicity would be greater than the price paid. After all, relations in general pack tremendous explanatory power. In particular, it becomes very difficult to explain how an entity could possess a property, if one does not at least tacitly postulate the existence of a relation that obtains between them. And not just any relation, for an entity and a property could

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<sup>6</sup> This objection is found in Bradley's *Appearance and Reality* and is discussed by various authors. For example, see Armstrong (1997, p. 114) or Newman (2002, p. 25).

<sup>7</sup> This seems to be what Newman thinks. See his (2002, p. 26).

still be related to each other in such a way as to be located at opposite ends of the universe as each other, without the one possessing the other. What seems to be required to explain the possession of properties by entities is in fact is the relation of property possession.

Of course, there have been those who have tried to explain how an entity could still possess a property, even if it turns out that property possession is not a relation. Many of these philosophers have looked to Frege's notion of the unsaturatedness of concepts for inspiration. They have claimed that since properties are unsaturated, an entity and its property can combine with each other without the need of any intermediary.<sup>8</sup> But there is some reason to think that even Frege himself identified property possession as the relation of subsumption.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, one wonders whether the rather obscure<sup>10</sup> notion of an unsaturated entity is really a preferable alternative to a regress of orderly relations.

Of course, not all philosophers have taken their cue from Frege on this point. In *A World of States of Affairs* David Armstrong proposed a view influenced by the *Tractatus* of Wittgenstein according to which a particular possesses a property just in case there exists such a thing as the state of affairs of that particular's possessing that property.<sup>11</sup> On this view, property possession is identified just as the state of affairs in which the particular and its property are "brought together."<sup>12</sup> And so it might be thought that on this view property possession is something other than a relation. But I would argue that it is not. For I would argue that if property possession is a state of affairs, and if this state of affairs brings together an entity and its property, then since anything which brings together an entity with its property functions as a relation, and since anything that functions as a relation is a relation, property possession is therefore a relation, even if it is at the same time a state of affairs.

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<sup>8</sup> For commentary on such a view, see Newman (2002, pp. 20-26).

<sup>9</sup> See Frege (1891a) in Beaney (1997, p. 173).

<sup>10</sup> To my mind, Frege never really did clarify the notion of unsaturatedness. For there are some passages in which he seems to give a metaphysical analysis of the notion, as in his (1882) in Beaney (1997, p. 81). And there are other passages in which he seems to give a linguistic analysis of the notion, as in his (1891b) in Beaney (1997, p. 139).

<sup>11</sup> See his (1997, p. 1).

<sup>12</sup> See his (1997, p. 116).

*If property possession is a relation, then either property possession and identity are one and the same relation, or else property possession is some relation other than identity.* I take this claim to be uncontroversial, for it is a particular instance of the general claim that, for any relation R, either R is the relation of identity, or else R is not, in which case R is some relation other than identity.

*If property possession is some relation other than identity, then presumably there is at least one entity that bears the relation of property possession to a second entity to which the first is not identical.* Of course, it does not follow that that if property possession is some relation other than identity, then there is at least one entity that bears the relation of property possession to a second entity to which the first is not identical. For property possession could still be some relation other than identity, if it were the relation with the null extension, or if it were a relation that some but not all entities bear just to themselves. But each of these two options is much less plausible than the one according to which there is at least one entity that bears the relation of property possession to a second entity to which the first is not identical.<sup>13</sup> And so that is the option upon which I will concentrate in what follows.

*But the claim that there is at least one entity x that bears the relation of property possession to a second entity y to which x is not identical faces two problems, which I refer to as the problems of relevance and contribution, and which seem to me to be insoluble.* These two problems will be easy to see if we have a good colorful example with which to work (but I assume that the same problems obtain in any less colorful example as well). So let x be any entity that bears the relation of property possession to y, let y be the property of being red, and let us assume that x is therefore red. Now either y bears the relation of property possession to itself (and is therefore red), or else y does not (and is therefore not red).

Let us assume, first, that x is red but that y is not. Now the problem of relevance is easy to see. It is the problem of explaining how the fact that y is not red is at all relevant to the fact that x is red. In other words, it is the problem of explaining how x is red, even though y is not. Of course, one might think that the explanation is obvious. After all, it has been assumed that x bears *none other* than the relation of property possession to y. So it might be suggested that x is red, even though y is not, simply

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<sup>13</sup> They also seem to me to be less plausible than the option according to which property possession and identity are one and the same relation.

because *x* bears the relation of property possession to *y*. But I don't find this suggestion to be an obvious explanation at all. For I ask: will *x* still be red, even if it does not bear that relation to *y*, but instead bears it to some other non-red entity? And if not, why not? In other words, what's so special about the non-red *y*, as opposed to these other non-red entities? Of course, it might be suggested that what's so special about *y* is obvious too. After all, *y* just is the property of being red. But this suggestion brings us to the problem of contribution.

The problem of contribution is easy to see if we consider the converse of the relation of property possession, which *y* bears to *x*. It is the problem of explaining how the non-red *y* *makes* *x* red. In other words, it is the problem of explaining how the non-red *y* can be related to *x* in such a way that *x* comes to be red. It is the problem of explaining how the non-red *y* contributes redness to *x*. And it is a problem that seems wholly mysterious to me. After all, even if one insists that *y* does somehow succeed in contributing redness to *x*, I will simply ask: What then is the relation that obtains between *x* and this redness? Is it the relation of identity? And if not, then how does this redness make *x* *in and of itself* red? We face the problem of contribution all over again.<sup>14</sup>

One might attempt to get away from these problems by asserting that *y* does bear the relation of property possession to itself after all, and that *y* is therefore red. But I don't think that one succeeds in escaping from these problems in this way. For even if *x* is red and *y* is red, doesn't it still seem that *x* could still be red, even if *y* ceased to exist, or if nothing else existed that resembled *x* with respect to its redness? Why should we think that the fact that *y* is red is at all relevant to the fact that *x* is red? Don't the two facts just seem to be independent of each other? Thus, the problem of relevance rears its ugly head again. And so does the problem of contribution. How can *y* be related to *x* in such a way that *x* comes to resemble *y* with respect to redness? How does *y* contribute redness to *x*? It seems mysterious that it could.

Of course, one option remaining is simply to embrace the mystery. And perhaps that seems a plausible option, when compared to the account of property possession and identity I accept. But in the following section there will emerge from this account the view that there is nothing more to

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<sup>14</sup> The problem of contribution can be raised even if we do not consider the converse relation of property possession. In general it is the problem of explaining how *x* becomes red just by being related to *y*.

any given entity than what is traditionally referred to in ontology as the nature of that entity. And this view is, I submit, a far more plausible alternative than an insoluble mystery.

### III

In this section I will consider an objection to the account of property possession and identity for which I argued above. And out of my response to that objection will emerge the view according to which there is nothing more to any given entity than what is traditionally referred to in ontology as the nature of that entity.

One might raise the following objection to my account of property possession and identity. There is at least one entity that bears the relation of property possession to two or more properties. However, if there is at least one entity that bears the relation of property possession to two or more properties, and if the relation of property possession just is the relation of identity, then there is at least one entity that bears the relation of identity to two or more entities. But nothing can bear the relation of identity to two or more entities. Hence it is not the case that the relation of property possession just is the relation of identity.

My response to this objection is that it is based upon a mistaken identity of the relation of property possession. Property possession is not a “one-many” relation that at least one entity can bear to many properties. Rather, property possession is the “one-one” relation of identity. It is the relation that any entity whatsoever bears to itself and nothing else.

Of course, one might judge this response to be simply unacceptable, if one *presupposes* that my account of property possession and identity cannot make room for the existence of qualitatively complex entities, such as tables and chairs, of which we can predicate many different properties, such as the property of being a table, the property of being a table, the property of being wooden, and so on and so forth. Moreover, it is easy to see how room for such entities can be made on an account of property possession as a “one-many” relation that at least one entity bears to many different properties. On such an account, qualitatively complex entities are qualitatively complex precisely because they bear the “one-many” relation of property possession to many different properties. Furthermore, perhaps it is not easy to see at first how room for such entities can be made on my account of property possession and identity as the “one-one” relation that any entity bears just to itself. But I think that such room can be made, if

the traditional notion of the nature of an entity is invoked.<sup>15</sup>

What I would like to suggest at this point is that any entity whatsoever bears the relation of property possession to the nature of that entity. The nature of an entity is a property, which that entity possesses, and which is complete in the sense that, for any property whatsoever, that property is a constituent part of that nature just in case that property can be truly predicated of that entity.

It is important to note that my account of the nature of an entity differs in an important respect from the accounts given by other authors. According to some,<sup>16</sup> an entity will bear the relation of property possession to each property that is a constituent part of its nature. But this I deny. I understand the relations that obtain between an entity, its nature and the properties that are constituent parts of that nature to be the relations of extensional mereology.<sup>17</sup> In extensional mereology there is a distinction made between an entity's proper parts and its non-proper part. The proper parts of an entity are the (intuitively speaking, smaller) parts to which it is not identical. And the non-proper part of any entity is the part to which it is identical. The non-proper part of any entity, in other words, just is that entity itself. Now according to my view, for any given entity and any given property, that entity bears the relation of property possession to that property just in case that property is the non-proper part of that entity's nature. So no entity ever bears the relation of property possession to any one of the proper parts of that entity's nature. Thus, it is not necessarily the case that an entity will bear the relation of property possession to all properties that can be truly predicated of it. For, again, it will not bear the relation of property possession to the proper parts of its nature.

At this point, one might raise the following objection to my suggestion that any entity whatsoever bears the relation of property possession to its nature. If any entity whatsoever bears the relation of property possession to its nature, then since the relation of property possession just is the relation of identity, any entity whatsoever will be identical to its nature, in which case it will turn out that there is nothing more to any given entity than the nature of that entity. But it cannot be true

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<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of the traditional notion of the nature of an entity, see Gracia (1988, pp. 2-3, 9-10 and 118-121).

<sup>16</sup> See Armstrong (1978, p. 114) or his (1997, p. 125).

<sup>17</sup> For more on extensional mereology, see Simons (2000, especially chapters 1 and 2).



that there is nothing more to any given entity than the nature of that entity, on account of the following traditional argument, which is supposed to show that there is something more to any given entity than its nature.<sup>18</sup> There is at least one property to which two or more entities bear the relation of property possession. But if there is at least one property to which two or more entities bear the relation of property possession, then it is at least in principle possible for there to be two or more entities that possess all of the same properties as each other. Now if it is at least in principle possible for there to be two or more entities that possess all of the same properties as each other, then it is likewise in principle possible for there to be two or more entities that share one and the same nature. And if it is in principle possible for there to be two or more entities that share one and the same nature, then there must be something more to each of those entities than its nature, which individuates them from each other. But if there is something more to each of these entities than its nature, then it is false that there is nothing more to any given entity than its nature.

This objection is also based upon a mistaken identity of the relation of property possession, however. Just as property possession is not a “one-many” relation that at least one entity can bear to two or more properties, it is not a “many-one” relation that two or more entities can bear to one and the same property. Rather, property possession is the “one-one” relation of identity. In further response to this objection, nothing is needed to individuate any two entities from each other than the natures of those entities, i.e. other than those entities themselves. Since the nature of any entity is a mereological entity, any entity *x* and any entity *y* are identical to each other just in case all of the parts of the nature of *x* are parts of the nature of *y*, and vice versa.

### **Conclusion**

In this paper I have defended an argument for an account of property possession and identity according to which property possession and identity are one and the same relation. I also considered an objection to that account. And out of my response to that objection emerged the view that there is nothing more to any given entity than what is traditionally referred to in ontology as the nature of that entity. As I see it, this view constitutes the basis of an ontological system that rivals the traditional

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<sup>18</sup> This argument is suggested in Adams (1982, p. 411).

dualistic ontology of objects and properties. And while there remains much to be said to make this ontological system of mine seem more plausible than its competitor, I hope that this paper is seen to be a good start.

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