

Trope Theory on the Mental/Physical Divide

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1. From naturalism to realism

In our everyday discourse, we distinguish without fail between minds and bodies or between the mental and the physical. Yet, in philosophy there is a tendency to get rid of this divide. Roughly, the naturalist wants to reduce or to identify the mental with the physical in order to provide a unified basis for scientific research. The idealist, in contrast, sticks to the mental as a precondition of grasping the physical. The physical then tends to turn into mere mental representations. These attempts to overcome the divide, however, are not very promising. While the first tries to assimilate the mental to the physical, the second takes the opposite approach with the result that either the mental or the physical goes by the board. Fortunately, there is a third option: the realist maintains that the mental exists along with the physical.

If one feels that a metaphysics of mind and body should be carried out in a realistic spirit, there are, of course, different possibilities, dualism of some kind being the most prevalent until now. I should like to explore, however, how far one can get to overcoming or at least smoothing the divide without falling back on naturalism or idealism. Before I start, a word or two might be said on preferring monism. Why avoid the divide in the first place? The only respectable reason I can think of is the desire to lay the groundwork for a unified and coherent theory of the phenomena concerned. Reduction is therefore a very respectable method, provided one does not thereby lose the most interesting part of the *explananda*. This is the danger with naturalism, because two essential features of the mental, namely, intentionality and qualitative sensations, apparently cannot be reduced to purely physical phenomena; thus, there are good reasons to try out realism.

2. Bergmann's Test

In his book *Realism*, Gustav Bergmann offered a test for realistic ontologies. Briefly, it goes as follows: Every ontology has a ground plan which is determined by an analysis of the "truncated world", i.e. the physical world. The decisive step for the test is to take a close look at what happens when "minds and knowing situations" come in. "If these further assays", Bergmann says, "require no additional categories, we say that they fit the ground plan. If they do, the ontology has passed the test. If it fails, it is either overtly idealist or at least structurally on the way toward idealism" (Bergmann 1967, 223). Hence, there are only two conditions to be satisfied in order to pass the test. *First*, start your ontology with an analysis of the most general entities of the physical world (and not with an analysis of knowing the physical world). *Second*, do not introduce brand-new categories when analysing the mental. *Prima facie* the test appears to be ridiculously easy to pass. Even Descartes would not fail, as in his metaphysics both the physical and the mental are subkinds of the basic category of substance or *res*. On closer inspection, however, Bergmann's test is not as simple as it looks. The implicit requirement of not introducing further categories is that "representations" are not allowed. A realist has to reconstruct cognitive, emotional and sensing activity as well as their "objects" or "contents" without

positing a third realm of representations which is supposed to mediate between the physical and the mental.

One could, of course, discuss at length the pros and cons of representationalism and the question of whether Bergmann's test is a good one in the first place. I cannot do this here, because it would go far beyond the scope of this paper, so I shall restrict myself to some brief remarks. First, Bergmann's test seems to be closely tied to his own ontology which needs universals such as properties and relations as well as a special binding relation called "nexus" in order to yield the basic category of "fact". Therefore, one might well ask whether only a fact-based ontology is sufficiently equipped to avoid representations. Or, to put it more pointedly, is Bergmann's anti-representationalism essentially dependent on his realism concerning universals and his special relations? Second, as Bergmann's construal of representationalism seems to be totally different from recent representationalist theories in the philosophy of mind, one might object that it is not an appropriate test model. While for Bergmann an ontology reveals itself as idealistic if it operates with representations, Fred Dretske, for instance, argues that mental facts are nothing other than functional representational facts, a theory which he calls himself "representational naturalism" (Dretske 1995). Hence representationalism seems to come in different brands. Nevertheless, it serves as a contrasting foil for the purposes of this paper, never mind whether it be marked as idealistic or as naturalistic. In order to deal ontologically with the divide or, to put it differently, the distinction between the mental and the physical, I shall not invoke representations.

3. On Doing without Representations

To start with my thesis is threefold:

- (i) Mental activities like perceiving, thinking and feeling are qualities of agents, such as animals, human beings and persons. They are neither qualities of minds or bodies nor parts of bodies such as brains or of states or events.
- (ii) Mental activities are not representational. What a thought or belief or hope "is about" or has as "its content" is a particular part of the world itself and not a particular representation of the world.
- (iii) Mental activities are qualities of some entities within the world and therefore as real as the entities which lack mental qualities. Moreover mental activities belong to the basic qualities, because they establish the access of agents to their own and many other qualities of the world.

Let me briefly comment on these claims. With (i) I reject theories which – implicitly or explicitly – are basically committed either to Cartesian substances or to an ontology of states or events. In contradistinction to Aristotelian substances, Cartesian substance is either *res extensa* or *res cogitans*, but neither can on its own be a thinking, perceiving and feeling entity. Nor can states or events. So,

one has to look for something more appropriate, a task which I shall undertake in due course. Statement (ii) is the core of the non-representationalist thesis. It asserts that mental activity connects the agent "directly" to the world and not via representations. Therefore it is also a statement in favour of epistemological realism. Of course, there is a standard problem involved, namely, that thoughts and beliefs obviously can be about non-existing as well as existing things or states of affairs. If one hesitates to endorse Meinong's solution and at the same time wants to reconstruct thoughts about non-existents in a realistic way, a dilemma lurks. How to get out of it remains to be seen. Finally, statement (iii) simply asserts that mental activities are real and basic qualities. They are right in the middle of what there is and not somehow "extra-mundane".

4. On Doing with Tropes

What does a metaphysics of mind and body look like, if one has only tropes, i.e. property instances or individual qualities, in one's ontology? A rough picture can be sketched as follows: All there is and possibly can be are individual qualities, hence the world is bursting with tropes to start with. Tropes are such that they assemble in two different ways. On the one hand, they constitute *trope complexes* in virtue of internal dependence relations; on the other they constitute *trope classes* in virtue of their similarity. This is, in a nutshell, the ground plan of trope ontology.

The interesting part is now to find good answers to (at least) the following questions: How are perceiving, thinking and feeling entities to be reconstructed against the background of trope theory? What are mental activities? What are the "objects" of mental activities? Is a special relation required in order to connect a mental activity to the object it is "about"? How can thoughts about imaginary or fictitious "objects" or other non-existents be explicated in a realistic way? There might be further interesting questions and surely the ones stated could be tuned in such a way that more and more subtleties come to the fore. I shall leave it at that and try to outline how the most pressing problems might be solved against the background of trope theory.

5. Mental Activity I

A mental activity such as a perceiving, believing, thinking, or knowing is an individual quality, i.e. a trope. Consider the statement

(1) Andrew is thinking about the Golden Gate Bridge.

If the activity of thinking is reconstructed as a trope, it seems to have two features. The thinking belongs to Andrew, and it is about the Golden Gate Bridge. Now, "belonging to" and "being about" can be ontologically grounded in the nature of tropes themselves. A trope *per se* is a dependent entity. It is dependent on other tropes or trope complexes. In the case of the above example, the respective think-trope is dependent on a trope complex called Andrew (A) and a trope complex called Golden Gate Bridge (B). Notice that on this reconstruction, the think-trope is neither "in" A nor necessarily "caused" by B. Inherence and causality, however prominently they might figure in some ontological theories, are not the primary resources of explication within trope theory. Ontological dependence is the primary resource. Although this feature

has been marginalized since Aristotle, it has a great advantage, namely, that of providing a smooth account of connectedness (cf. Trettin 2001). So, if there is the individual thinking as stated in (1), the think-trope connects A to B in virtue of being ontologically dependent on both. Consider now the statement

(2) Andrew is thinking of a golden mountain.

If one applies the reconstruction of (1) to this case, everything seems all right as long as it concerns the dependence of the think-trope on the complex called Andrew. The problem lies on the other side of that dependence. How can golden mountains, square circles, Pegasus, the mermaids and the whole lot of fictitious objects figure in that scheme of intra-world-dependency? My proposal for a realistic answer is twofold: Either the "object" of that thinking is impossible like a square circle. In that case the thinking will be "about" impossible things and therefore void. Whoever thinks about square circles, thinks about different possible tropes which taken together result, however, in impossible things. The trope of squareness and the trope of circularity are, to borrow a Leibnizian expression, not compossible. In other words, such a thought is grounded in something which cannot exist. Or the "object" of that thinking is fictitious like golden mountains, mermaids and the like. In this case the thinking would be "about" imaginary things. On a broad construal fictions and their objects belong to the world, on a narrow reading they don't. Before deciding what the appropriate answer will be, I should like to have a brief look at mental activities which apparently have no specific "objects".

6. Mental Activity II

Consider the statement

(3) Andrew is sad.

When Andrew is sad, deplorable as it is, then against the background of trope ontology, he cannot hope to participate in one grand idea of sadness, as it would be the case with Plato. All he can do is to cope with his individual little trope of being sad. This might, however, be a relief, because one does not have the burden of shouldering somehow the whole sadness of the world. The interesting point about Andrew's sadness or about anyone's feelings is that these mental activities apparently exist without having a determinate object. Although Andrew himself or some experts might find out the relevant cause of his temporary depression or melancholy, this feeling seems to exist even before anybody knows its presumable causes. In order to account for this sort of mental activity, often described as *qualia*, which are ubiquitous manifestations not only on their own but also as accompanying qualities of almost all mental activities, one should simply acknowledge them. If Andrew is sad, there is a trope of sadness which – for a time – constitutes the trope complex called Andrew. Notice that on trope ontology the so called hard problem of qualia is very easily resolved. This is due to the fact that tropes are individual qualities. Andrew's sadness is grounded without any fiddling with instantiation or exemplification in a straight forward way. It simply is the individual quality of sadness that it is.

Qualia can teach one a lesson or two about non-existents. The first is that there are beliefs or thoughts even if they apparently have no existing objects. In that case I should say that they "miss" real objects and that

assertions thereof are void or “false”, as is the case with impossible intentional objects like square circles or golden mountains. Although they fail to dock onto something which exists, they are nevertheless respectable mental activities. Their reality is grounded in being dependent on the trope complex which is the agent of that thought. Notice that one of Jerry Fodor’s prominent concerns has been to explicate misrepresentations within his representational theory of the mind. On trope theory, “misrepresentation” is not a problem at all. The second lesson to be learned is that thoughts about fictitious or imaginary objects are such that there are objects all right, but – as some philosophers would say – in the very deplorable ontological state of being merely abstract. Abstract objects, however, are not at all deplorable. On my version of trope theory, they are tropes or trope complexes which are a-temporal and/or non-spatial. Although they lack the existential mode of time and space, they belong to world, as long as there are trope complexes capable of abstractions. The same goes for numbers and logical concepts.

References

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