

Simone Gozzano, Francesco Orilia (Eds.)

Tropes, Universals and the Philosophy of Mind

Essays at the Boundary of Ontology
and Philosophical Psychology



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Tropes, universals and the philosophy of mind: **editors' introduction**

In the current resurgence of interest in metaphysics that has followed the demise of logical positivism, the debate about the nature of properties has gained centre stage. There appear to be two main theoretical options, *universalism* and *tropism*, as we may say in short. According to the former, properties are viewed as *universals*, abstract entities that can be “shared” at various locations and moments, thereby characterizing different objects, while also accounting for their similarity. According to the latter, properties are *tropes*, abstract particulars that can characterize just one object at a time and can account for the similarity of distinct objects by their forming classes of “natural resemblance.” What does this have to do with the philosophy of mind?

The past few years have seen the publication of works suggesting that our theoretical decisions at this foundational level may have far-reaching consequences for issues in this discipline, including the contrast between reductive and nonreductive physicalism, multiple realizability and mental causation. To wit, there are recent papers, such as “The Properties of Mental Causation” by D. Robb (*Philosophical Quarterly*, 47, 1997, 178-94; *PMC* hereafter),¹ that show the existence of an ongoing controversy on whether one is better off resorting to tropism or rather to universalism in order to back up nonreductive physicalism; more specifically, in order to support the claim that nonreductive physicalism can supersede reductive physicalism in an effort to provide a materialist world-view that accommodates multiple realizability without presenting mental properties as causally irrelevant and mental events as causally inefficacious (thereby succumbing to epiphenomenalism). Moreover, since the 1970’s, the ontological controversy between Kim’s and Davidson’s conceptions of

¹ See also, e.g., “Mental Causation, Determinables and Property Instances” by D. Ehring (*Noûs*, 30, 1996, 461-480), “The Ontological Turn”, by C. B. Martin and J. Heil (*Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 23, 1999, 34-60), “Mental Properties” by J. Heil and D. Robb (*American Philosophical Quarterly*, 40, 2003, 175-196), “The Metaphysics of Mental Causation” by C. and G. MacDonald (*The Journal of Philosophy*, 103, 2006, 539-576).

events has always worked more or less explicitly behind the scenes of the debate on the nature of mental phenomena. In particular, Kim's apparent inclinations over the years toward forms of reductive physicalism is at least in part explainable by his adherence to his own conception of events. Similarly, Davidson's anomalous monism—a version of nonreductive physicalism—and the popularity of nonreductive physicalism in current philosophy of mind are hardly accountable without a Davidsonian view of events in the background. Although this is not often recognized, this dispute over events is tightly linked to the one between tropism and universalism, for, on the one hand, Kim's conceptions of events presupposes an ontology with properties viewed as universals, and, on the other hand, Davidsonian events may be viewed as tropes (as explained in Orilia's contribution to this volume).

The idea of a book that explores connections between basic ontological issues and topics in the philosophy of mind along the lines outlined above came to these editors at the Seventh Meeting of the Italian Society for Analytic Philosophy, when one of us discussed in his presentation possible applications of tropism to the philosophy of mind² and the other informed him that he had been working lately on similar topics. We thought that it could have been fun as well as rewarding to delve deeper into these matters together, by joining our efforts to those of other philosophers interested in exploring the repercussions in philosophy of mind of theoretical decisions at the level of basic ontology, where one discusses the nature of properties and events. The goal we set forth for ourselves was to provide a collection of essays that as a whole contributed to a deeper understanding of the extent to which theoretical decisions at the level of basic ontology—particularly about the nature of properties, whether they are tropes or universals, and the closely related issue of the nature of events—may have an impact on topics of interest to the philosopher of mind. We thus contacted some experts who have written very specifically on these issues and others whose works in either ontology or philosophy of mind indicated a potential interest in our project. We were happy to see that most of them warmly accepted our invitation to join this project. The result is the present collection of essays, each of which is briefly introduced below.

² F. Orilia, "Universals, Tropes and Philosophy of Mind", presented at *Cervelli, persone e Società, VII Congresso Nazionale, Società Italiana di Filosofia Analitica*, 28-30 September 2006, Università Vita-Salute S. Raffaele, Cesano Maderno (Milan).

John Heil's "Modes and Mind" discusses extensively the way in which Robb relies on tropism in his PMC, in order to accommodate both a non-epiphenomenalist account of the mental and multiple realizability within a version of nonreductive physicalism. Heil admits that Robb indeed presents a solution to the conundrum of the apparent incompatibility of reductive physicalism and the causal relevance and efficacy of the mental—one that nicely makes room for multiple realizability. Nevertheless, Heil argues that this solution is not essentially tropist, as we may put it, for its recourse to tropes may be "simulated" in a parallel approach based on a form of universalism that is willing to recognize that a (mental) predicate may correspond, rather than to a single universal, to a family of different but similar universals.

Anna-Sofia Maurin's "Does Ontology Matter?" compares and contrasts Robb's approach to the causal relevance and efficacy of the mental in PMC with another one based on tropism, namely the one defended by Martin and Heil in their "The Ontological Turn", cit. She argues, contrary, as we have just seen, to Heil, that the former approach indeed depends essentially on its appeal to tropes for its account of mental causation. She contends, however, that the latter does not, for in it the real argumentative work is done by the rejection of the view that "language pictures reality", the *Picture Theory*. According to Maurin, once the Picture Theory is set aside, it is immaterial whether one resorts to tropes or universals in trying to defuse the arguments that attempt to demonstrate that nonreductive physicalism leads to epiphenomenalism. Maurin then argues that the picture theory must indeed be replaced, but that this replacement cannot be of a radical variety. In order to preserve the possibility of doing ontology in a justified and not too speculative way, she concludes, ontological theorising must take place in a framework that preserves the possibility of drawing ontological conclusions from language. She ends her paper with a sketch of a "*new Picture Theory*".

Francesco Orilia's "Basic Ontology, Multiple Realizability and Mental Causation" can be subdivided into two parts. The first one provides an outline of the ontological contrasts between universals and tropes on the one hand and Kim's and Davidson's conceptions of events on the other hand and explains how these contrasts are connected. Moreover, it discusses the opposition between reductive and nonreductive physicalism, how multiple realizability militates in favour of the latter and how epiphenomenalism constitutes a threat for it. This first part could thus be read as an introduction to the themes in ontology and the philosophy of

mind that play a crucial role in the more specific arguments in the rest of the paper and in the other papers. This is especially so if one adds to it section 2 of Gozzano's contribution, which provides additional details on the nature of tropes. A reader who is not particularly expert in these topics may want to consult the first part of Orilia's paper and section 2 of Gozzano's paper before dealing with the rest of the book.

The second part of Orilia's essay compares and contrasts three versions of nonreductive physicalism: one centred on tropism along the lines suggested by Robb in his PMC, one based on the version of universalism considered by Heil in his contribution to this volume ("Heil universalism") and one that relies on a version of universalism that acknowledges "higher-order" universals and revises Kim's identity condition for events ("monist universalism"). It is admitted that—pretty much as Heil urges—the choice between tropism and Heil universalism is immaterial for philosophy of mind in that both doctrines accommodate multiple realizability and the causal efficacy and relevance of the mental in perfectly parallel ways. Nevertheless, it is argued that choosing universals rather than tropes may still matter for philosophy of mind, since monist universalism—as opposed to tropism and Heil universalism—makes room for multiple realizability and the efficacy and relevance of the mental in a palpably different way, a way consistent with the contention that creatures with significant physical differences can still be in identical mental states. Moreover, monist universalism appears to invite a positive answer when it comes to the question of whether one has a special acquaintance with oneself in the way admitted by philosophers such as Chisholm or Russell (at some point of his career).

Ausonio Marras' and Juhani Yli-Vakkuri's paper, "The 'Supervenience Argument': Kim's Challenge to Nonreductive Physicalism", addresses Jaegwon Kim's most recent attempt—in his *Physicalism or Something Near Enough* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005)—to show that nonreductive physicalism is committed to epiphenomenalism. The authors point out that Kim's argument relies on an unstated assumption about the identity condition of events as "property instances", and argue that this assumption could be seen as by itself implying that nonreductive physicalism—or at least a classic, "token-identity" version of it—is false. This paper thus provides a further illustration of how Kim's hostility towards nonreductive physicalism presupposes certain commitments at the level of basic ontology. Marras and Yli-Vakkuri also consider how Kim could modify these

presuppositions by adopting a different identity condition for events, which the reader could usefully compare and contrast with the one underlying the “monist universalism” discussed in Orilia’s paper.

Simone Gozzano’s “Tropes’ Simplicity and Mental Causation” provides a detailed account of how tropes are viewed by their supporters, an account which highlights in particular that tropes are taken to be essentially simple entities. Gozzano then argues that tropes, because of their simplicity, can hardly vindicate the causal efficacy of mental properties in the way implicitly suggested in a number of papers by Davidson’s anomalous monism and explicitly voiced by Robb in his PMC. The conclusion is that an ontology based on tropes is of no help in solving the problem of mental causation. The overall recommendation is to stay with a universalist conception of properties when facing the problem of the causal efficacy of the mental.

David Robb’s “Zombies from Below” explores the possibility of zombies—creatures pretty much like us, except that they fully lack consciousness—from the point of view of the tropist ontology defended by him in previous works and much discussed, as can be seen from the above, in other papers of this collection. Robb however dwells on a feature of his approach that is neglected in such papers (as they focus on other matters), namely the idea that tropes can be at the same time qualitative and dispositional. In the light of this, after having distinguished different kinds of zombie, Robb argues that only some of them are possible, whereas others should be ruled out. As is well-known, whether zombies are possible or not is a hot issue nowadays in the philosophy of mind, as many arguments pro or against physicalism depend on it. Robb’s paper suggests that tropism (or at least a certain form of it) invites its own specific answers with respect to this issue. It remains to be investigated whether a supporter of universals may come up with similar results or not.

Finally, E. Jonathan Lowe’s “Tropes and Perception” presents an Aristotelian four-category ontology wherein both tropes and universals find their place. Lowe defends his approach against recent attacks by Jerrold Levinson to the very idea of tropes and in particular responds to Levinson’s criticism to an argument from perception for the existence of tropes previously proposed by Lowe himself. Perception is of course a crucial topic for the philosophy of mind and Lowe’s paper argues that it is best accounted for by appealing to tropes.

In sum, if we consider this collection as a whole, we see arguments in favour of the idea that certain stands taken at the level of basic ontology

make a difference for philosophy of mind, and arguments that militate against this idea, or at least that are meant to minimize its import. We leave to the reader the task of evaluating them. Whatever the judgement may be, we hope to have contributed to strengthen the conviction that, as Heil puts it in his essay for this volume, “we must pursue philosophy of mind in a metaphysically self-conscious way”.³

³ We wish to thank J. Heil, A. Marras and A.-S. Maurin for their suggestions regarding this introduction.