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## *The non-identity of the categorical and the dispositional*

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1. Consider a circle. It has both a radius and a circumference. There is obviously a real distinction between the properties *having a radius* and *having a circumference*. This is not because, when confining ourselves to circles,<sup>1</sup> *having a radius* can ever exist apart from *having a circumference*. A real distinction does not depend on that. Descartes thought that a real distinction between  $x$  and  $y$  meant that  $x$  could exist without  $y$  or vice versa, if only by the power of God. But Descartes was wrong. Separable existence is a sufficient but not necessary condition of there being a real distinction. The difference between a real and a conceptual distinction derives from medieval philosophy. Aquinas, for one, held that things can be really distinct even though not separable (the form and matter of a material substance or its essence and existence, for example).<sup>2</sup>

For a merely conceptual distinction between  $x$  and  $y$  to exist, it is necessary for the distinction to exist in thought only. There is only a conceptual distinction between an upward slope and a downward slope, or between a glass's being half empty and half full. Not only are the members of such pairs inseparable (whether by God or in any other way), but there is no real distinction between them. There is no numerical distinctness between the entities or qualities between which there is only a conceptual distinction. To this extent alone is Galen Strawson (2008) correct.<sup>3</sup> But when it comes to

1 We also speak of the radius of a polygon, but this is not the reason for speaking of a real distinction. I am speaking only of the radius of a circle and of the corresponding property *having a radius* as possessed only by circles.

2 For a useful brief discussion see Edwards 2002: 106.

3 All page numbers in parentheses, minus the year, refer to Strawson's original paper.

real distinctions, he is wrong that they essentially involve separability, and he is wrong that inseparability must be identity. For a real distinction to exist between  $x$  and  $y$ , it is both necessary and sufficient that there be numerical distinctness between  $x$  and  $y$  themselves, not merely between our concepts of  $x$  and  $y$  or the terms with which we refer to them. The radius of a circle is really distinct from its circumference, as proved by the fact that the latter is twice the former multiplied by  $\pi$ . Since the radius is *part* of the property *having a radius* and the circumference is part of the property *having a circumference*, the properties themselves are really distinct though inseparable. Contra Strawson, the same is true for triangularity and trilaterality.

Since inseparability need not be identity, we might ask for another explanation of the former. Strawson wonders what it could be other than identity. He dismisses the idea that there might be a ‘two-way, no-real-distinction necessary connection’ between  $x$  and  $y$  that did not involve identity (272). When it comes to conceptual distinctions, he is right. But since he is wrong to limit inseparability to conceptual distinctions, he misses the answer to the question of what explains inseparability in the case of real distinctions. When it comes to circles (and triangles) there are mathematical laws, expressing their natures, that ensure inseparability. More generally, where  $x$  and  $y$  are inseparable though there be a real distinction between them, it will either be in the *nature* of  $x$  and  $y$ , or in the nature of what they are true of (where  $x$  and  $y$  are qualities of a thing) that they are inseparable. In short, essences explain inseparability in the case of real distinctions, not identity.

2. With this background in mind, let us now examine Strawson’s main claims:

- (1) There is no real distinction between an object and its propertiedness.
- (2) There is no real distinction between an object’s categorical properties and its dispositional properties.

He asserts that both (1) and (2) are ‘obvious after reflection’ (275), though one might wonder how something can be obvious if one needs to reflect on it. In fact neither is obvious, as the voluminous debate (both contemporary and historical) over both theses illustrates. So what arguments does Strawson provide in favour of (1) and (2)? Taking (2) first, as he does, his first argument questions whether an object can change its dispositional properties across different ‘nomic environments’ while retaining its categorical properties. He cannot make sense of the idea, and maybe he is correct. But the argument is irrelevant because, as we have seen, the inseparability of categorical and dispositional properties – better, actualities and potentialities – does not entail their identity. Nevertheless, Strawson would have done well to consider a regularity theorist’s response. Even if we should not be regularity theorists – as neither I nor, I assume, Strawson contend we should

be – they would have something to say about his argument. The dispositional properties of an object  $x$  are its entering into certain regularities. A nomic environment, to use Strawson's term, just is the sum total of the regularities obtaining in that environment. If a nomic environment changes, so does at least one of its regularities. Call the nomic environment of the actual world  $R_t$  and that part of  $R_t$  which is the nomic environment of an object  $x$ ,  $R_x$ . Now  $R_x$  includes all and only the regularities into which  $x$  enters in the actual world. Suppose at least one of the regularities in  $R_x$  varies across worlds, so that the nomic environment of  $x$  in  $w_1$  is  $S_x$ . According to Strawson,  $x$  has among its dispositions the dispositions to behave in different ways in different nomic environments. But for the regularity theorist, this is false. In the actual world,  $x$  does *not* have the disposition to behave in way  $F$  in  $S_x$ . The dispositions of  $x$  in the actual world are all and only the properties it has of entering into the regularities contained in  $R_x$ , viz., its nomic environment in the actual world. One can hyphenate dispositions all one wants, or index them to worlds, but there will be no regularity into which  $x$  enters in the actual world that undergirds such hyphenated or world-indexed properties. Not even a modal realist will accept such properties, since there is no regularity in  $w_1$  into which  $x$  *itself* enters. Only  $x$ 's  $w_1$ -counterpart enters into regularities in  $w_1$ , *mutatis mutandis* for  $x$ . So Strawson's opening punch will slide past the regularity theorist. At the very least, he ought to have considered such a response.

Strawson goes on to consider the claims:

- (3) All being is dispositional being.
- (4) All being is categorical being.<sup>4</sup>

He dismisses (3) as 'refreshingly incoherent' when a real distinction between the dispositional and categorical is presupposed, countering it with the supposed truth of (4). There is no clear argument for (4), but there is an exclamation: 'All being is categorical being because that's what it is to be! That's what being is!' (278). Now I share Strawson's disquiet with the terminology used in contemporary debate. Just as he prefers to speak of potency rather than dispositionality, so I prefer to talk also of actuality rather than categoricity. The problem for him is that the claim:

- (5) All being is actual being.

looks even less plausible than (4). Consider Strawson's one and only example – 'energy whose nature can be positively characterized by us only in terms of what effects it has' (278). Well, at least *some* energy – namely, *potential*

4 I have altered some of the numbering from that in Strawson's original paper, to which the reader should refer.

energy – can only be characterized<sup>5</sup> in terms of its effects, or more precisely in terms of the kinetic energy into which it can be but is not *actually* converted. Keeping things simple, if we think of the measure of potential energy as the product of weight and height, then while height is an actuality, weight itself essentially involves potentiality, namely the gravitational force (arguably, weight is wholly a potentiality). But no property that has some potentiality as a part can itself be wholly actual. That is the whole point of the actuality/potentiality distinction: some things and properties can only be characterized in terms of real but actually non-existent phenomena – *manifestations*, as dispositionalists like to call them – which *become* actual when the thing or property is subjected to a certain stimulus (again, to use dispositionalist talk), force, or alteration. This is not to say that such characterizations of the real, yet merely potential, in terms of the non-actual do not raise important problems (some of which are ably discussed in Bird 2007: ch. 5). It is, rather, to say: that the actual/potential distinction is not merely conceptual; that (3) might be false but is not ‘refreshingly incoherent’; and that (4) is indeed false.

It is hard to know what Strawson means when he exclaims further that it is ‘[3]’s own fault’<sup>6</sup> that a dispositionalist would accuse him of begging the question by asserting that ‘[a]ll being is categorical being’, or in my preferred terminology, that all being is actual being. Dispositionalism affirms the existence of non-actual realities characterized by such things as: manifestations in response to stimuli and the like; relatively indeterminate ranges of response; and the possibility of change. Not even to consider the arguments for a dispositionalist metaphysic is not so much to beg the question as to ignore phenomena that cry out for an explanation, whether the phenomena have been ‘forcefully theorized’ (as he puts it) or not. Strawson can exclaim that it is all ‘real being: *being!*’ if he so wishes, and he would be correct without the exclamation mark. That it is all *actual* (categorical) being, however, simply does not follow, whatever the inseparability of the actual and the potential. It is, simply, an unfortunate development in contemporary philosophical terminology that ‘actual’ has come to be synonymous with ‘real’ and antonymous with ‘possible’. That modal realists have muddied the metaphysical waters even further by making ‘real’ synonymous with ‘actual or possible’ has made the reviving of an old and ineliminable real distinction even harder. Further, that Strawson has himself fallen for the same mistaken equivalences and distinctions is shown by his non-sequitur: ‘Power being is categorical being, like all being. Potency entails actuality, reality’. First, not all reality is actuality. Second, even though potency entails actuality it does not follow

5 Only be characterized in whole or in part? It does not matter, since even if potentiality can only be characterized partially in terms of its effects, the point is made: some things/properties are at least partly potential.

6 (6) in his original numbering. All the quotations from Strawson in this paragraph are at 278.

that potency *is* actuality (or categoricity),<sup>7</sup> nor that all being is actual/categorical being. Terminological confusions abound. If Strawson wants to allocate fault for this, it is not the believers in real potentiality that he should have in his sights.

For Strawson, then, propositions (3) and (4) are both true when understood in his way – that there is only a conceptual distinction between the facts that make them true. My reply is that both (3) and (4) are false, and further that if either were true, there *would* be a real distinction between its truth-making fact and the fact that *would* obtain were the other proposition to be true instead. (I have argued for the falsity of both claims in my 2007: ch. 6.) Hence there is, to Strawson's likely disappointment, no possibility for a 'great festival of reconciliation' (278) between those who argue for a real distinction between actuality and potentiality and those who do not.

3. Nor is reconciliation to be found in the way Strawson addresses proposition (1) above, that there is no real distinction between an object and what he calls its 'propertiedness', which term presumably should be cashed out as an object's having the properties it has. After proof-texting Kant, his opening salvo is the assertion that there is no existential dependence of an object's properties on the object that has them (and vice versa). There is no argument behind the claim. For the proponent of a real distinction between an object and its properties (which in this context, can only mean its property instances, tropes, or in more traditional parlance modes), the immediate question is: what are the individuation conditions for intrinsically qualitatively identical properties? If properties are ontologically dependent on their bearers, we have a ready answer: the greenness of *x* and the greenness of *y* are distinguished numerically precisely by the fact that one belongs necessarily to *x* and the other necessarily to *y*. Note, however:

(6) *x*'s greenness necessarily belong to *x*.

does not entail

(7) *x* is necessarily green.

The 'necessarily' in (6) should be read as 'in any world in which *x*'s greenness exists'. In other words, the particular greenness trope belonging to *x* must, if it exists at all, belong to *x* and only *x*. And this is compatible with *x*'s having no greenness trope.

So we can individuate properties (more precisely, property instances) by their bearers – but only if the properties are really distinct from, and

7 As I argue in my (2007), there is no potentiality without actuality. If an object has certain powers, there must be some actualities that give shape to, delimit, or circumscribe those powers. No material object or quality is a mere potentiality any more than it is a pure actuality. Hence potentiality entails actuality, but it does not follow that they are one and the same.

ontologically dependent upon, those bearers. Moreover, the ontological dependence explains why we never find free tropes, i.e. property instances existing apart from any bearer whatsoever (flashes and bangs notwithstanding). Strawson, I assume, would counter that we never find free tropes because an object just *is* (really) its tropes. But he does not go so far as to deny a real distinction *among* an object's tropes, e.g. between *x*'s greenness and *x*'s roundness. If he accepts such a distinction, then by his own lights (and mine) this will be because one can exist without the other. But why, by his lights, can one not *migrate* from *x* to *y*? And if so, how is it to be individuated? He owes us an account. Yet if there is no real distinction among an object's tropes, does he want to say that no object has more than one property – the One Big Property? The metaphysical waters would then prove too deep even for his jejune ontology.

One of the key objections to (1) is, of course, that it is inconsistent with:

- (8) An object's properties might have been different from what they are while it remained the same object.

Strawson's first line of attack is the claim that the defender of (8) risks 'building into' it a 'whole metaphysics of object and property' (279) that does not belong there and is incorrect anyway. This is, however, a tendentious way of looking at the matter. The person who appeals to (8) in denial of (1) does not build anything into (8). Rather, he asks the defender of (1) simply to take the phenomenon appealed to in (8) at face value: an object can vary in its properties both across times and worlds whilst remaining numerically the same. No object/property distinction is built into such a recognition; rather, there is no way of interpreting (8) such that it both comes out true and does not *entail* an object/property distinction.

That aside, what else does Strawson offer in the way of argument for (1)? Little, it appears. We can, he proposes, accept both (1) and:

- (9) An object might not have had the properties it does now have.

Why? Because 'whatever happens, everything in which the being of [the object] consists at any time is identical to everything in which the being of [the object's] propertiedness consists at that time' (279). It is difficult to interpret this remark. One might take it to mean that the being of the object consists in *all* of the properties that the object has throughout its existence. But that cannot be right, since among all of those properties will be both contradictory and contrary pairs, which would make the being of the object a logical impossibility. So much for Strawson's appeal to a 'block-universe account of reality [with] a single object and a single propertiedness' (279). (Time-indexing those properties brings a whole slew of problems of its own, one of which involves denying the existence of any intrinsic properties, which Strawson rightly does not want to do.)

Or the remark could involve covert support for temporal parts theory, the idea being that we can retain both the thought that the same object can undergo a change of propertiedness and that the being of the object just is the being of its propertiedness if we accept the following. Strictly speaking, at any time, only a temporal part of the object is identical to its propertiedness at that same time, whilst the object itself is the space-time worm that possesses different sets of properties at different times *in virtue* of having parts that are identical to those different sets of properties at different times. Perhaps this is how we should take Strawson's parting shot to the effect that we might give up on 'strict' identity through time, and hence on the idea that there is any real change, 'so that [the object] at  $t_1$  is not *strictly* identical to [the object] at  $t_2$ ' (281).

Yet this will not do. To the extent that this view of things denies the reality of change, we do better to accept (8) and deny the view (as argued in my 2004). In any case, the view does make a distinction between the worm and its different properties across time. Identifying its temporal parts with their properties (if even this were possible) does not militate against the fact that temporal parts theory, at least as a possible interpretation of Strawson's rather cryptic claim, does *not* identify the four-dimensional entity itself with its propertiedness, whether at a time or over time. It cannot be identified with its propertiedness over time because the latter contains logically incompatible pairs of properties. It cannot be identified with its propertiedness at a time because the latter is not the worm, it is one of its slices. Hence there is no way in which the space-time worm can be identified with its propertiedness, and the appeal to temporal parts in defence of (1) falls away.<sup>8</sup>

In philosophy as in life, debunking is not new. The use of 'shock and awe' in the misguided attempt to disabuse people of deeply held, traditional convictions about the way the world is can certainly generate debate, but less often does it produce real results in the form of progress in our understanding of reality. Object and property (far better and more accurate – substance and accident), the dispositional and the categorical (far better and more accurate – act and potency): these are distinctions over which large amounts of ink have been spilt. Yet no matter how much metaphysicians will try to make your flesh creep by denying them, they will never desert the ontological landscape.

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8 For this sort of four-dimensionalist view of change – minus the identification of a temporal part with its propertiedness – see Heller 1992; and see the critique in my (2004).

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## *Truth-conditions and the nature of truth: re-solving mixed conjunctions*

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Alethic pluralism, on one version of the view (Wright 1992, 2003), is the idea that truth is to be identified with different properties in different domains of discourse.<sup>1</sup> Whilst we operate with a univocal concept of truth, and a uniform truth predicate, the thought is that the truth property changes from one domain to the next. So the truth property for talk about the nature and state of the material world (perhaps correspondence to fact) may be different from the truth property for moral discourse (perhaps coherence or superassertibility).

Tappolet (2000) challenged alethic pluralism by asking how it can account for the truth of mixed compounds, such as a mixed conjunction like ‘this cat is wet and funny’, where each of the conjuncts are from different domains of discourse, and thus assessable in terms of different truth properties. She argues that the alethic pluralist is left in a dilemma: either admit of a ‘generic’ truth property, which can be possessed by propositions from all domains, thus rendering the plural ways of being true obsolete, or deny the truth of mixed conjunctions.

In Edwards 2008, I argued that there is route out of Tappolet’s dilemma. Briefly, I suggested that we acknowledge that the truth of a mixed conjunction

1 Wright 1992, 2003. Different versions, such as Lynch 2001, 2004, hold that there is a single truth property, but that different domains of discourse still have significant theoretical input.