

In Defence of Powerful Qualities

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Abstract The ontology of ‘powerful qualities’ is gaining an increasing amount of attention in the literature on properties. This is the view that the so-called categorical or qualitative properties are identical with ‘dispositional’ properties. The position is associated with C.B. Martin, John Heil, Galen Strawson and Jonathan Jacobs. Robert Schroer (2012) has recently mounted a number of criticisms against the powerful qualities view as conceived by these main adherents, and has also advanced his own (radically different) version of the view. In this paper I have three main aims: firstly, I shall defend the ontology from his critique, arguing that his criticisms do not damage the position. Secondly, I shall argue that Schroer’s own version of the view is untenable. Thirdly, the paper shall serve to clear up some conceptual confusions that often bedevil the powerful qualities view.

Keywords Powerful qualities · Categorical properties · Dispositional properties · Partial consideration · Phenomenal consciousness

1 Powerful Qualities

The powerful qualities view is situated in a vast debate over the ontology of dispositional properties. The main adherents of the view are Martin (1993, 2007) (see also Martin’s contribution to Armstrong et al. (1996)), Heil (2003, 2005 and 2010), see also Martin and Heil (1998 and 1999), Strawson (2008) and Jacobs (2011).¹ Adherents of the view often attribute it to Locke (1690/1978). The view consists of the main claim that ‘dispositional’ properties are identical with ‘categorical’ or ‘qualitative’ ones.²

¹Though Schroer does not mention Jacobs specifically in his critique.

²Martin calls the view ‘the limit view’, whereas Schroer refers to it as ‘the M/H/S position’. I prefer the more popular name of ‘the powerful qualities’ view. This is only a terminological matter.

As Schroer’s article has yet to appear in print, I have assigned it page numbers based upon those of the PDF available at the DOI stated in the index. This will be updated when Schroer’s article is printed.

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As I understand the term, a dispositional property is any property to which it is *essential* that it conveys upon the object that instantiates it the power to behave in a certain way given certain stimuli. The classic example of a dispositional property is fragility. The vase has the property of fragility because it has the power to shatter *if* it is struck with a hammer. Similarly, the property of ‘being disposed to strike’ is a dispositional property of a normal match.

Qualitative properties are often called ‘categorical’ properties.³ To save confusion, I shall call them ‘qualitative/categorical’ properties. We must be cautious in framing a definition of ‘qualitative/categorical’ when discussing the powerful qualities view because most definitions of ‘qualitative/categorical’ define it in opposition to dispositional properties. That is to say, dispositional properties are often defined, and then qualitative/categorical properties are defined as ‘properties that are not essentially dispositional.’ This would of course be a mistake in the present discussion, since the view I would like to examine amounts to the claim that the qualitative/categorical and the dispositional are in fact identical, so if we define qualitative/categorical properties as ‘properties that are not essentially dispositional’ this would make the view incorrect by fiat.⁴

A better way to understand the term is that qualitative/categorical properties essentially contribute to the overall makeup of how an object is now. Classic examples of qualitative/categorical properties include properties of shape and possibly colour (Schroer takes colour to be the prime example of a qualitative/categorical property). Sphericity, for example, is a qualitative/categorical property because it contributes to the overall makeup of how the object is *now*. Borrowing a useful idea from Lowe (2006), we can say that qualitative/categorical properties are *occurrent*.

The debate as it has normally been seen concerns whether properties are essentially qualitative/categorical (and non-dispositional) or essentially dispositional (and non-qualitative/categorical).⁵ The powerful qualities view, however, holds that to draw a fundamental ontological distinction between the two types of property is a mistake. The claim of the powerful qualities view is that dispositional and qualitative/categorical properties are *identical* and that each one is in turn identical with one single unitary property of the object. Heil’s definition of this view is especially clear:

‘If P is an intrinsic property of a concrete object, P is simultaneously dispositional and qualitative; P ’s dispositionality and quality are not aspects or properties of P ; P ’s dispositionality, P_d , is P ’s quality, P_q , and each of these is P : $P_d = P_q = P$.’ (2003, p. 111).⁶

An example will help us to make sense of this idea.⁷ Consider a rubber ball that has the property of sphericity. This property is a qualitative/categorical property (it contributes to the overall makeup of the ball now, and gives the ball a certain shape)

³ E.g. Armstrong (1997) uses the term ‘categorical’, Martin and Heil use ‘quality’.

⁴ Schroer himself commits this very error when he defines his terms (2012, p. 2).

⁵ Those who hold the former view include Lewis (1986) and Armstrong (1997). Those who hold the latter include Mellor (1974), Shoemaker (1980) and Bird (2007). There is of course room for another view where there exists a mixture of these two types of property (Ellis and Lierse 1994).

⁶ Martin does state the position in different ways over the course of his career (see, e.g. in Armstrong et al. 1996). However, it is this contemporary version held by Heil and Strawson as well as Martin which I shall be examining, and which is the focus of Schroer’s critique (see Schroer 2012, p. 3).

⁷ The example is used several times in the literature (e.g. Heil 2003, p. 112).

but (so claims the powerful qualities view) it is also a dispositional property (it conveys upon the ball the power to roll in a certain way down a slope if it comes in contact with the slope, and to leave a certain impression upon plasticine when pressed against it). The dispositional property that conveys upon the ball certain powers is (to the powerful qualities theorist) *identical* with the qualitative/categorical property that gives the ball a certain shape and both of these are *identical* with the single unitary property of sphericity itself.

2 Partial Consideration

How can it be that qualitative/categorical properties and dispositional ones could be *identical*? After all, it seems clear that dispositional properties can be imagined as distinct from qualitative/categorical ones. Here proponents of the powerful qualities view have recourse to the Lockean idea of ‘partial consideration’. On this model, to think of a property as qualitative/categorical is to partially consider it, to think of it under one concept, whilst neglecting to think of it under another concept. Gibb (2012) helpfully makes sense of this idea using the concepts of *attending* and *ignoring*.⁸ On this view, to partially consider a property qua qualitative/categoricity or qua dispositionality is to attend to the property under one concept, whilst ignoring the possibility of considering it under another concept. In thinking of a property qua qualitative/categoricity, we attend to it under its qualitative/categorical description (as contributing to the overall occurrent makeup of the object that instantiates it), and ignore the possibility of considering it under its dispositional description (as bestowing upon its bearer certain dispositional powers).

There are three points about the powerful qualities view that will be important in this paper. The first is that partial consideration is an act of *mental abstraction* (cf. Strawson 2008, p. 271). That is to say, though we can think of the qualitative/categorical in isolation from the dispositional, they are not really distinct. To consider one without the other is merely a *mind-dependent* matter of abstraction.

The second point I would like to emphasise is that, in stating the powerful qualities view, there is a temptation to think of the qualitative/categorical and the dispositional as ‘parts’ or ‘aspects’ of the single underlying property, but this is a mistake. When we think of a property under a qualitative/categorical concept, we are *not* thinking of a part or an aspect of the property, but we are thinking of the *whole* property in a certain way. Equally, to think of the property under a dispositional concept is not to think of only an ‘aspect’ of the property but again is to consider the *whole* property in a certain different way.

A good intuitive way of getting a handle on these ideas (though one that should not be taken too literally) is the example of the famous duck–rabbit.⁹ This is an ambiguous figure which can be seen as a duck or a rabbit. When we consider the figure as a rabbit or a duck, we are not considering only a part of the figure, or an ‘aspect’ of it. Rather, we are considering the *whole* figure in a certain way. When we think of it as a duck we think of it under the concept of ‘duck’ and neglect the possibility of thinking

⁸ Though Gibb is not herself discussing the powerful qualities view.

⁹ Heil (2003, p. 120 and 2004, p. 200) uses different examples to make the same point.

of it under the concept ‘rabbit’ and vice versa. The figure is simultaneously one of a duck and a rabbit, and can be considered in these different ways. The idea of partial consideration is similar in the case of the qualitative/categorical and the dispositional, in that it claims that when we consider a property qua qualitativity/catgeoricality or qua dispositionality, we are considering the *whole property* in a certain way.

Thirdly, the powerful qualities view is sometimes interpreted as claiming that qualitative/categorical properties and dispositional properties are not ‘genuine’ properties. One interpretation of the view is that ‘really’ there are no qualitative/categorical properties *or* dispositional ones, and to think of a property as qualitative/categorical or dispositional is not to think of a ‘real’ property. However, it is a mistake to interpret the view in this way. The view claims that ‘dispositional’ and ‘qualitative/categorical’ are two distinct concepts under which we can think of one property, but it does not follow from that that somehow dispositional properties and qualitative/categorical ones are not ‘genuine’ properties. Recall that the qualitative/categorical and the dispositional are each *identical* with the single unitary property of the object itself. So in thinking of a property qua dispositionality, or qua qualitativity/categoricality we are thinking of this genuine underlying property, albeit in a certain way.

To take an analogy, it is commonly known in philosophy that Hesperus=Phosphorous, and that each is identical with Venus. The concept ‘Hesperus’ and the concept ‘Phosphorous’ are different concepts under which one entity can be thought of. It would, however, be a mistake to claim that ‘Hesperus’ and ‘Phosphorous’ were not ‘genuine’ entities. Rather, both Hesperus and Phosphorous *are* genuine entities (which are identical); and in thinking of them under these concepts we successfully think of these genuine entities. It is simply that we are thinking of the entity under a certain specific concept, when we could think of it under others. It is the same story in the case of the powerful qualities view: both dispositional properties *and* qualitative/categorical properties are genuine entities that are identical with each other and each is identical with a single property of the object, just as Hesperus and Phosphorous are genuine entities which are identical with each other and also with Venus.

3 The Argument

Schroer’s argument against the powerful qualities view is based upon the way that the concept of ‘partial consideration’ is deployed. Here is a summary of his argument (all page numbers refer to Schroer, 2012).

1. The relevant concept of ‘partial consideration’ at play in the powerful qualities view cannot usefully be applied to the case of the relationship between the physical world and phenomenal consciousness (pp. 6–11).¹⁰
2. Applying the concept of ‘partial consideration’ to the distinction between the dispositional and the qualitative/categorical has the same problems as when we

¹⁰ Both myself and Schroer define ‘phenomenal consciousness’ in the traditional way as the ‘what it is like-ness’ of certain mental events.

- applied it to the case of the physical world and phenomenal consciousness (pp. 11–13).
3. (Therefore) partial consideration cannot be usefully applied to the case of the dispositional and the qualitative/categorical.
 4. (Therefore) The powerful qualities view (as normally conceived) should be rejected (or at least treated as highly dubious) (pp. 12–13).

Most of Schroer's paper is dedicated to arguing for premise (1). I will argue that Schroer misinterprets the powerful qualities view in certain crucial ways, and that these mistakes recur throughout his argument. This shall give us reason to reject (1).

3.1 Premise (1) of Schroer's Argument

In order to demonstrate the truth of (1), Schroer sets up a (hypothetical) position in philosophy of mind concerning the relationship between phenomenal consciousness and the physical world.¹¹ He imagines a philosopher who tries to use the central concept of 'partial consideration' to argue that phenomenal consciousness and certain physical entities are identical. Schroer deploys this position to mirror the powerful qualities view itself, because in demonstrating the inadequacy of this position, he hopes to also demonstrate the inadequacy of the powerful qualities view.

Here is the position that Schroer takes as his target:

'[i]f we apply the Partial Consideration Strategy to the case of phenomenal properties, we end up with a (hypothetical) position where neither "phenomenal properties" nor "physical properties" are genuine stand-alone entities. Instead, our conception of each type of property is the result of partially considering a single, unified entity whose nature is irreducibly both phenomenal and physical' (2012, p. 7).

I think this position is misleading in several ways. In what follows shall show what I take to be wrong with Schroer's presentation, and explain how this weakens his argument.

3.2 Genuine Stand-Alone Entities

Firstly, Schroer claims that neither phenomenal properties nor physical properties are 'genuine stand-alone entities' on the hypothetical view. However, if we pay attention to the exposition of the powerful qualities view given in §§1–2 we will see that this is not correct. Upon the powerful qualities view (as I stated above); when we think of a property as 'dispositional' or 'qualitative/categorical' we *are* thinking of a genuine stand-alone entity (we are thinking of the single property of the object itself) but we are thinking of it in a particular way, when it could be thought of in another way. The case is similar with more familiar identity theories, in thinking of something as 'Hesperus' or 'Phosphorus' we *are* thinking of a genuine, stand-alone entity (we are thinking of Venus), but we are thinking of it in a certain way.

¹¹ Though Schroer claims that he is the first person to discuss this 'hypothetical' position (2012, p. 10), a very similar position is advanced in Heil (2003, chapters 18–20; 2004, chapters 14–15 and 2010).

Now, if we apply these thoughts to the hypothetical position under consideration, we see that if this position is to mirror the powerful qualities view, then it would not be correct to say that ‘neither “phenomenal properties” nor “physical properties” are genuine, stand-alone entities’ as Schroer claims. Rather, if the hypothetical position is to mirror the powerful qualities view (as is Schroer’s intent); the claim would be that there exist certain genuine, stand-alone properties (presumably of brains) which can be thought of under two distinct concepts (they can be thought of under a ‘physical’ concept such as ‘nociceptors firing’ or under a phenomenal concept such as ‘pain’). To think of these properties under one particular concept does not, however, imply that one is not thinking of a ‘genuine, stand-alone’ property, as Schroer claims.

There are two plausible explanations for how Schroer may have misunderstood the powerful qualities view, which is mirrored in how he sets up the hypothetical position. Firstly, he could be tacitly assuming that ‘the dispositional’ and ‘the qualitative/categorical’ must be different *aspects* or *parts* of one property.¹² If this is how one thinks about the powerful qualities view, then of course it will strike one as obvious that dispositional and qualitative/categorical properties are not ‘genuine stand-alone’ properties. But of course, as I emphasised above, this is not the claim of the powerful qualities view. Rather, the claim is that in thinking of the dispositional, or of the qualitative/categorical, we are thinking of *the whole property* in a certain way, not a part of it.

Another explanation for how Schroer misinterprets the view could be that he assumes that if we can think of a property under more than one concept then this must mean that when we are thinking of it under one concept we are somehow not thinking of a ‘genuine stand-alone’ property. However, this is clearly not the case. As we saw above, the same entity can be thought of under the concept ‘Hesperus’ or ‘Phosphorous’ but it does not follow from this that Hesperus or Phosphorous are somehow not ‘genuine stand-alone’ entities.

3.3 The Hypothetical Position and Physicalism

It may be countered that when Schroer attributes to the hypothetical position the claim that phenomenal and physical properties are not ‘genuine, stand-alone’ entities, all he means is that the hypothetical position claims that phenomenal properties are identical with certain physical ones, and thus that phenomenal properties *cannot exist without also being physical* (just as we might claim that Hesperus cannot exist without also being Phosphorous). In this (weak) sense, phenomenal properties would be ontologically dependent upon physical ones, and perhaps this is what Schroer means when he says they are not ‘stand-alone’. If we interpreted Schroer’s argument in this manner, it would indeed make the hypothetical position that he sets up more faithful to the powerful qualities view. However, if that is what Schroer means, then the central claim of the hypothetical position would not be different from the central claim of any normal physicalism which claimed that phenomenal properties are identical with physical ones.

¹² In §3.4, we will examine some points where Schroer seems to hold this explicitly, though he explicitly claims not to (2012, p. 2).

This point picks up on a deep problem that Schroer faces in attacking the hypothetical position. He wants to argue that the hypothetical position is a bad one, but he does not wish to argue that standard physicalism about the mind (which identifies phenomenal and physical properties) is a bad position (such an argument would be far too ambitious). For this reason, he attempts to distance the hypothetical position from standard physicalism. One way he does this is to say that standard physicalism (unlike the hypothetical position in question) claims that phenomenal properties have ‘completely physical natures’ (2012, p. 7).

However, we can see that if the hypothetical position as applied to the physical/phenomenal case is to be faithful to the powerful qualities view that it is supposed to be mirroring, then the hypothetical view would *also* claim that the properties in question have ‘completely physical natures’. Recall that on the powerful qualities view, the qualitative/categorical and the dispositional are *identical*. So, a qualitative/categorical property just *is* a dispositional one, and vice versa. Applying this faithfully to the hypothetical position, we can see that such a position *would* claim that phenomenal properties have ‘entirely’ physical natures. The phenomenal property itself is identical with a physical one, it is just that this property can be thought of under a phenomenal concept (such as ‘pain’), or a physical one (such as ‘nociceptors firing’).

When we appreciate this, it is hard to see how the hypothetical position in question really differs from standard physicalism about phenomenal consciousness, particularly physicalism which uses the ‘phenomenal concept strategy’.¹³ The phenomenal concept strategy is a position which claims that phenomenal properties and physical ones are identical, but accepts that we cannot deduce facts about phenomenal consciousness from facts about the physical world. In order to explain why this is so, proponents of the phenomenal concept strategy claim that we have two different concepts that we can use in thinking of phenomenal properties, we can think of them under a ‘physical’ concept or a ‘phenomenal’ one. Contrary to what Schroer claims, the phenomenal concept strategy and the hypothetical position which takes its cue from the powerful qualities view seem to not only be compatible, but they seem to amount to the same claim: that really there is only one type of property and that we can think of it in different ways, under ‘phenomenal’ or ‘physical’ concepts.

3.4 Schroer’s Three Arguments Against the Hypothetical Position

I have argued that Schroer sets up the hypothetical position in a misleading way, which misunderstands some of the core claims of the powerful qualities view. I have also argued that, when we generate a version of the hypothetical position which more closely mirrors the powerful qualities view, we find that the position is no worse off

¹³ Proponents of this strategy include Loar (1990/1997), Papineau (2002) and Balog (2008) though they differ in their precise account of how ‘phenomenal concepts’ work. The strategy does, of course, have its critics (e.g. Goff 2011 and Hill 2009, chapter 2) but it is probably the most popular view of phenomenal consciousness at the moment. The phenomenal concept strategy as I have presented it here is a version of what Chalmers (1996) calls ‘type-B physicalism’ though similar ideas have been employed by Chalmers (who is of course a dualist) in his account of the epistemology of consciousness (2010, chapters 8–9). This subtlety will not matter for present purposes.

than normal physicalism, and indeed can be considered a variant of normal physicalism.

Schroer levels three arguments against the hypothetical position, I shall analyse and rebut each in turn. I shall conclude in each case that the hypothetical position is *at least* no worse off than normal physicalism.

Argument 1 Firstly, Schroer uses an argument from introspection:

‘our introspective grasp of phenomenal properties provides a *prima facie* reason for thinking that they are *stand-alone* entities, *qua* properties. In introspecting phenomenal red... you seem to be aware of complete, stand-alone property; [sic.] there is nothing about the manner in which this entity is presented before the mind that suggests that there must be more to its nature. This in turn, speaks against the [hypothetical position], for according to this position there is supposed to be *more* to the nature of the entity than just this phenomenality—there is also supposed to be its physicality’ (pp. 7–8).

Again, in the above quotation we see a misunderstanding of the view. The claim of the hypothetical position (if it is to mirror the powerful qualities view) is not that there is ‘more’ to a property than its phenomenality. Recall that ‘phenomenality’ is not a *part* of the property. The claim, as I have been stressing, is that ‘phenomenality’ and ‘physicality’ are concepts used to think of the *entire* property, in different ways. The hypothetical position need not claim that there is ‘more’ to the property in question than its phenomenality.

As I mentioned above, perhaps Schroer’s argument from introspection against the hypothetical view could be reinterpreted simply as the claim that, when we introspect, we become aware of a property which is wholly phenomenal and is also *not physical*.¹⁴ This would tell against the hypothetical view which identifies phenomenal and physical properties. However, if this is Schroer’s argument, then it would be rather crude, and also not specifically an argument against the hypothetical position we are discussing, but against *any* form of standard physicalism which claimed that phenomenal and physical properties are identical. Thus it would fail to show why the hypothetical position is especially weak.

Argument 2 Similar things go for Schroer’s two other arguments against the hypothetical position. For example, he claims that, when describing a physical property:

‘the physical sciences are describing a complete, stand-alone property; there is nothing about the scientific description of this and other “physical” properties that suggests that there must be more to their nature’ (2012, p. 8).

Schroer’s argument seems to be that we have good reason to think that the physical sciences give us a complete description of the properties they are describing, and this tells against the view that there is ‘more’ to their nature. Again, this is a confusion, the claim of the hypothetical position (if it is to be faithful to the powerful qualities view) is not that the physical sciences are only describing a part of the property or an aspect

¹⁴ Perhaps this is what Schroer could mean by saying that the hypothetical position claims that phenomenal properties are not ‘stand-alone’.

of it, and that there is ‘more’ to be discovered, but rather that they are describing the *entire property* in a certain way, under a certain set of concepts, though it could be described in other ways, using other concepts (such as phenomenal concepts like ‘pain’).

We can very clearly see this confusion when Schroer attempts to show that the hypothetical position he is criticising is different from normal physicalism:

‘the Physicalist can allow that our grasp of physical properties, the grasp facilitated by the physical sciences, in, in fact, a grasp of an entity that is rich to be a stand-alone entity, qua property. The defender of the [hypothetical position], in contrast, must *deny* that our grasp of physical properties is accurate in that regard; he must say that “physical properties” really do not have a substantial enough nature to be genuine stand-alone entities, qua properties’ (2012, p. 9).

For familiar reasons, Schroer is incorrect to claim that the holder of the hypothetical position must claim that physical properties do not have a ‘substantial enough nature’ or that a physical property is not ‘rich to be a stand-alone entity’. As we have seen before, to think that the hypothetical position must be committed to this is to misinterpret the powerful qualities view upon which it is based. The hypothetical position *would* claim that a physical property is ‘rich to be a stand-alone entity’ it is just that they are stand-alone properties of objects that can be thought of in different ways.

As with Schroer’s other arguments, this one can be reinterpreted as the claim that the physical sciences give us a *complete and exhaustive* description of the properties they investigate, and since the physical sciences do not tell us that the physical properties of brains are identical with phenomenal properties, then these brain properties must not be identical with phenomenal ones. However, if this is Schroer’s argument, then it is simply a crude version of the ‘explanatory gap’ argument¹⁵ and clearly applies to any normal physicalism that claims that physical properties and phenomenal ones are identical. It thus fails to show why the hypothetical position is any weaker than normal physicalism, which is Schroer’s aim.

Argument 3 Similar considerations apply to Schroer’s final argument against the hypothetical position. He argues that it is (at least *prima facie*) conceivable that the physical world could exist in the absence of phenomenal consciousness.¹⁶ Schroer claims that the conceivability of such a situation gives us reason to doubt that phenomenal properties and some physical ones are really identical, and thus gives us reason to doubt the hypothetical position that we are considering. However, yet again it is clear that this argument applies also to any normal physicalism that claims that phenomenal consciousness is identical with certain things in the physical world, and thus does not serve to expose the hypothetical position as especially weak.

Schroer argues that the conceivability arguments he puts forward are *not* as damaging to normal physicalism as to the hypothetical position. Here is what he says:

¹⁵ See e.g. Levine (2001). Though Levine himself rejects the conclusion that brain properties cannot be identical with phenomenal ones.

¹⁶ Schroer is employing the famous ‘zombie’ arguments of Chalmers (1996 and 2010).

‘[i]n virtue of being a well established position, there are plenty of extant counter-arguments for the Physicalist to appeal to in order to defeat (or at least undermine) the *prima facie* case, based on the aforementioned conceivability arguments, against her position’ (2012, p.9).

Schroer’s argument is that (unlike the hypothetical view) normal physicalism is a respectable position that has been around for a very long time, so the physicalist has plenty of arguments that are designed to rebut the arguments that dualists have put against physicalism. The hypothetical position, by contrast, does not have recourse to these arguments. Schroer points out two counterarguments that are available to the normal physicalist:

‘the Physicalist can attempt to undercut conceivability arguments using well-known versions of the “Phenomenal Concept Strategy” or challenge her Dualists [sic.] rivals more generally by appealing to the causal efficacy of physical properties’ (2012, p. 9).

The main response that can be given to Schroer here is that it seems clear that our hypothetical position *can* make use of the physicalist strategies that Schroer mentions. As I pointed out in §3.3, not only does it seem possible for the hypothetical position to make use of the phenomenal concept strategy, but (when stated carefully) it seems simply to be a *version* of that strategy.

Schroer also claims that a normal physicalist (unlike the adherent of the hypothetical position) can appeal to the causal efficacy of phenomenal properties in order to challenge her dualist rivals, and thus defend her own position.¹⁷ However, once again, it seems clear that the hypothetical position can do this as well. Our hypothetical position is, after all an identity theory (it identifies the physical and the phenomenal, just as the powerful qualities view identifies the dispositional and the qualitative/categorical). So it seems perfectly legitimate for someone who holds the hypothetical position to appeal to the causal efficacy of phenomenal properties in order to motivate her identification of the phenomenal with the physical.

With all of this in mind, it seems clear that Schroer’s three arguments fail to show that the hypothetical position faces difficulties greater than standard physicalism. Indeed, I find it hard to see how the view even *differs* from many forms of physicalism. As such, we should reject premise (1) of Schroer’s argument.

4 Schroer’s Argument and Powerful Qualities

In this section I shall examine how Schroer applies his arguments to the powerful qualities view, and argue that (as with the case of the hypothetical view) they are no problem.

As we saw, Schroer’s main problem with the hypothetical view was that he (mistakenly) thinks that it implies that physical properties or phenomenal ones are

¹⁷ This canonical argument in favour of physicalism can be found in many places (e.g. Papineau 2002, chapter 1 and Levine 2001, chapter 1).

not ‘genuine’. Schroer commits this same error when he criticises the powerful qualities view itself:

‘[j]ust as in the phenomenal/physical properties case, our grasp of dispositional properties and of categorical properties seems to reveal each type of entity as having a rich and substantial nature in its own right... [i]n short, our grasps of dispositional properties and of categorical properties provide a *prima facie* case for thinking of each as being a stand-alone property in its own right. This parallels the phenomenal/physical case’ (2012, pp. 11–12).

However, the problem with this will now be apparent. Schroer is incorrect to say that the powerful qualities view claims that the dispositional and the qualitative/categorical do not have a ‘rich and substantial nature’. As will be clear by now, to consider a property as qualitative/categorical or dispositional *is* to consider a ‘genuine’, ‘rich and substantial’ property (a single unitary property of an object); but in thinking of this property under one particular concept one will be thinking of it in a certain *way*. So, as with Schroer’s objections to the hypothetical position, we can lay these worries aside for now.

As with Schroer’s other arguments, we could reinterpret this one as the claim that qualitative/categorical properties can exist *without also being dispositional*, and that dispositional properties can exist *without also being categorical/qualitative*. However, this will not carry much weight. The defender of the powerful qualities view is perfectly happy to accept that the dispositional and the qualitative/categorical *appear* distinct (just as a physicalist is happy to say that the brain and phenomenal consciousness *appear* distinct). In fact, the proponent of powerful qualities has already got a structure in place to explain *why* they appear distinct, which is the claim that we can think of a property under more than one kind of concept. Indeed, this reinterpretation of Schroer’s argument, stated so baldly, makes the argument appear very weak. It is clearly not conclusive to state that the qualitative/categorical appears not to be dispositional and thus it must not be, any more than it is conclusive to say that phenomenal consciousness appears not to be physical and thus it must not be.

Schroer’s other objections to the powerful qualities view mirror his objections to the hypothetical position considered above, and equally do not hit the mark. He argues that it is conceivable that qualitative/categorical properties and dispositional ones could come apart (it is conceivable that a ball could have all of the same qualitative/categorical properties as a normal rubber ball and yet not be disposed to roll at all, perhaps when placed upon a slope, it will simply stay there, or explode, or shoot off into the air). Just as the conceivability of zombies gives us reason to think that the physical and the phenomenal are distinct, so the conceivability of an object that has the same qualitative/categorical properties as a normal rubber ball, but differs in terms of its dispositionality, gives us reason to think that the qualitative/categorical and the dispositional must be distinct, or so Schroer claims (2012, p. 12).

However, as we saw in the previous section, this argument puts the powerful qualities view in no worse a position than other contentious identity theories, such as the identity of phenomenal consciousness with things in the physical world. Indeed, there are many different responses that the powerful qualities theorist can give to this argument, which mirror physicalist responses to Chalmers’ zombie arguments. The powerful qualities theorist could deny that conceivability of the relevant type implies

possibility. Or she could borrow a technique from Kripke (1980) and claim that when one supposedly imagines a ball with all of the same qualitative/categorical properties as a normal rubber ball, but which has none of its dispositional properties, one *is* imagining something possible, but simply misdescribing it.¹⁸ The powerful qualities view is in no worse shape than normal physicalism here.

The final point against the powerful qualities view that Schroer makes is that the view is still in its infancy, and as such, responses to the case that he levels against it have not been produced yet (2012, p. 12). However, I hope that here I have provided an adequate defence of the view from Schroer's critique.

5 Schroer's Positive Proposal

One interesting point about Schroer's argument is that he does not reject the view of powerful qualities out of hand, but attempts to reconstruct it so as to avoid his own arguments. I have argued that the view does not need to be reconstructed, because Schroer's arguments do not succeed, but it will be interesting to look at Schroer's own position.

As we have seen, Schroer's main point of contention with the powerful qualities view is that he (mistakenly) thinks that it implies that qualitative/categorical and dispositional properties are not 'genuine' properties. Schroer reasons that, so long as we are working with a concept of the qualitative/categorical and the dispositional that makes them appear 'genuine' and 'stand-alone' then they will always appear separable, and this will tell against the powerful qualities view. However, if we reject the idea that the qualitative/categorical is a 'genuine stand-alone' property, then it will not appear separable from the dispositional, and thus the powerful qualities view will appear more stable.¹⁹

Schroer therefore rejects the idea that 'the concept of categoricity is a concept of something that has a 'rich or substantial nature in its own right' (2012, p. 14). Schroer's new idea of categoricity would go like this:

[t]he idea would be that every object instantiates the same, fully determinate type of categorical property, a property that makes *all* of its bearers "substantial space occupants". The various differences between those substantial space occupants, in turn, would be determined exclusively by their respective dispositional properties' (2012, p. 14).

Schroer claims that this idea leads us on to 'a conception of categoricity where it *does not admit of multiple determinate types*' (2012, p. 14) and which would be 'a primitive something in common to all substantial space occupants that makes them different from empty space' (2012, p. 14).

Schroer's idea, then, would be that we adopt this very 'thin' concept of a qualitative/categorical property, and then this will make it far more plausible that a qualitative/categorical property cannot exist when separated from a

¹⁸ Arguments along these lines are present in Shoemaker (1998) and Heil (2010, esp. p. 69).

¹⁹ Schroer in part motivates this by a discussion of the Lockean concept of substratum (see Martin 1980 and Lowe 2000).

dispositional one. Schroer takes this to be a new version of the powerful qualities view, which rejects the traditional conception of qualitativity/categoricity, thus avoiding the problems he thinks apply to the Martin/Heil/Strawson version of the view.

Schroer's discussion is interesting, but his new version of the powerful qualities view cannot work. Recall that part of Schroer's new view is that all qualitative/categorical properties are *exactly alike*.²⁰ To Schroer, all that *any* qualitative/categorical properties do is set objects apart from empty space (and no qualitative/categorical property does anything else). To Schroer, all objects have the same set of qualitative/categorical properties and what differentiates different objects from each other is a difference in their *dispositional* properties.

The problem is that on the powerful qualities view, the dispositional and the qualitative/categorical are *identical*. So if all qualitative/categorical properties are entirely alike (as Schroer claims that they are) then it seems that all dispositional properties must also be entirely alike.

So:

- (1*). All categorical properties are exactly alike.
- (2*). All categorical properties are identical with dispositional ones.
- (3*). (Therefore) All dispositional properties are exactly alike.

Now, (2*) is simply a statement of the powerful qualities view,²¹ and (3*) follows from (1*) and (2*) simply by the indiscernibility of identicals.

Now, (3*) strikes me as absurd, it seems clear that there are many different kinds of dispositional properties (the fragility of a vase seems clearly to be distinct in *at least some way* from the dispositional property of 'being disposed to strike' that a match has). What's more, (3*) seems to contradict one of Schroer's key claims, which is that the differences between different space occupants is determined exclusively by their dispositional properties. If all qualitative/categorical properties are alike, and they are identical to dispositional ones, how is it that the dispositional ones could fail to be alike, and thus serve to differentiate different space occupants? It seems clear that they could not perform this function consistently with the powerful qualities view.

I take this to be a *reductio* of Schroer's positive view. In watering down the nature of qualitative/categorical properties so much, he has lost all ability to account for the wide range of dispositional properties consistently with the powerful qualities view. As I have argued, Schroer's arguments against the normal version of the powerful qualities view (as argued for by Martin, Heil and Strawson) do not work, so I conclude that *if* one wishes to hold the powerful qualities view, it is better to hold the 'normal' version, rather than Schroer's.

²⁰ How one interprets 'alike' will depend upon one's theory of properties. A universalist (Armstrong 1997) would interpret it as meaning 'identical'. A trope theorist (Ehring 2011) would interpret it as 'exactly similar'. This subtlety will not affect my argument.

²¹ Of course, Schroer could reject (2*) but this would be a large departure from the powerful qualities view as we have been examining it. It is questionable whether the resultant position would really be a version of the view at all. Certainly it would be nothing like what Heil and Strawson have in mind.

6 Conclusion

To some (Strawson 2008) the powerful qualities view is so obvious as to be trivial. To others (Armstrong 2005, p. 315) it is ‘totally incredible’. Clearly if we are to make progress in understanding and assessing the view we need more arguments both in favour of it and against it.

Schroer’s interesting and varied arguments go some way toward fulfilling this much neglected need. Even though I think they ultimately fail, I am hopeful that this is one of the first steps toward the thorough examination that the powerful qualities view deserves.

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