

## PLAIN PARTICULARS

Ernâni MAGALHÃES  
Fishers, Indiana

### *Abstract*

Are concrete objects in some sense made up of the properties they exemplify? A distinguished tradition holds they are. I begin by defending the distinction: there is a real and not just semantic distinction between asserting and denying that concrete objects have their properties as parts. I then argue in favor of the view that concrete objects are not made up of their parts. First, this view has less ontological baggage than its opponent. Next, the supposed advantages of the alternative view—its superiority in understanding persistence, exemplification, or the possibility of diverse duplicates—dissipate under analysis.

*Keywords:* Concrete object, properties, bare particulars, metaphysics, persistence, indiscernibility

Are particular objects in some sense made up of the properties they exemplify? According to a distinguished tradition, concrete particulars<sup>1</sup> are composites, bundles, or states of affairs that have their properties as constituents, elements, or parts (Sider 2006, 387; Benovsky 2008; Allaire 1963; Alston 1954; Russell 1948, 97; van Inwagen 2011). For now, let's set aside possible differences between composition, constituency, elementhood, and other allied relations and refer to properties on this conception as constituents of their particulars. And let us call a theory according to which particulars have their properties as constituents a Constituency Theory.<sup>2</sup> Opponents of the Constituency Theory deny that particulars

---

1. That is, tables, chairs, horses, electrons, and so on.

2. To use Peter van Inwagen's (2011, 390) terminology, Constituency Theorists advocate a constituent ontology. That is, they hold that concrete particulars have ontological structure insofar as there are non-particular objects that have quasi-merelogical relations to them. Constituency Theorists as I understand them, unlike van Inwagen's constituent ontologists, hold that the properties that constitute particulars are exemplified by those particulars. The constituent

have their properties as constituents. Mostly for ease of reference, I will call the denial of Constituency Theory Plain Particularism.<sup>3</sup> In addition to its denial of the Constituency Thesis, I will associate Plain Particularism with a few other theses about particulars and their relationship to their properties. These theses will be explained momentarily.

Both Constituency Theorists and Plain Particularists of course agree that particulars are usually complex in an ordinary sense: cars are made up of wheels and engines, human beings have arms and legs, trees have branches and leaves, and so on. But advocates of the Constituency Thesis believe that particulars are complex along an additional dimension. They are made up of properties. According to Plain Particularists, particulars are simple along this qualitative dimension.

Both Constituency Theorists and Plain Particularists also agree that particulars exemplify properties,<sup>4</sup> change, that there could be distinct indiscernible particulars, and that there cannot be particulars that don't exemplify properties. They disagree in that Constituency Theorists believe they can explain what it is for a particular to exemplify a property, to change, to be distinct yet indiscernible, and why it is that particulars must exemplify properties. Plain Particularists deny these explanations. In fact, Plain Particularists deny the need for any explanation for these phenomena. While a Plain Particularist will agree that there are many informative things to be said about particulars as an ontological category, on the view, particulars are not ontologically analyzable in the way suggested by Constituency Theory. Instead, particulars should be admitted as an ultimate, not further analyzable, ontological category.

In this paper I will argue that Plain Particularism is superior to a specific version of Constituency Theory. According to one kind of Constituency Theory, the bundle theory, particulars are bundles of properties (Benovsky

---

ontologist is neutral on this point, although each of the constituent ontologies van Inwagen discusses holds the same.

3. Van Inwagen's label for the rejection of constituency theory, "relational ontology," is unfortunate because it suggests some relation is at the core of the view. Because the main items at issue in the debate about whether properties constitute particulars are particulars and their properties, the natural inference is that on a relational ontology particulars exemplify properties by having some relation to them. E. J. Lowe (2012, 234) understands the view this way. But as van Inwagen himself recognizes, it is better to think of exemplification not as a relation, but as unanalyzable.

4. It seems to me that nothing I say in this paper precludes a Plain Particularist from rejecting the existence of properties. He might paraphrase apparent reference to properties in some nominalist way. The Plain Particularist writing this paper happens to think the paraphrasing project will not be successful.

2008).<sup>5</sup> The properties in the bundle make up a particular because they are compresent.<sup>6</sup> A particular object exemplifies a property because that property is a constituent of the bundle in which it is compresent with some other properties. According to the substratum theory, the version of Constituency Theory that will be the concern of this paper,<sup>7</sup> particulars are constituted not only by the properties they exemplify but by a substratum. A particular object exemplifies a property because that property is a constituent that inheres in the substratum along with whatever other properties also inhere in the same substratum.

Plain Particularists and substratum theorists agree on the truth of certain propositions, but they disagree on their status. While the Plain Particularist holds that these propositions are not susceptible to further analysis or informative metaphysical reduction, the substratum theorist proposes a set of further propositions that are alleged to analyze or provide the metaphysical basis for the phenomena described by the target propositions. The agreed upon propositions are these:

(Exemplification) Particulars exemplify properties.

(The Rejection of Unqualified Particulars) Necessarily, particulars exemplify properties.<sup>8</sup>

(Change) Particulars change.

(Distinct Indiscernibles) Possibly, there are distinct indiscernible particulars.

---

5. By “properties” I mean “non-relational qualities.” I use the term neutrally between trope and universals theory. I consider below Sider’s (2006, 387) argument that substratum theorists should think of properties as mereologically composing the particulars they make up.

6. I assume this is the traditional bundle conception where there really are bundles of properties which cannot merely be identified with the properties that constitute “them” à la van Cleve’s (1985) third version of the bundle theory.

7. It is unclear to what extent the argument of this paper could be extended to bundle theories. For example, bundle theory may be less theoretically complex than substratum theory, and therefore at less of a deficit to Plain Particularism from the get-go. Also, bundle theorists sometimes deny what I take to be common ground in this discussion, that indiscernibles may be distinct. A referee also wonders whether it matters if properties are universals or tropes. Substrata typically—but not always (Martin 1980)—bring along universals rather than tropes.

8. More exactly, necessarily, if particulars exist then they exemplify properties. Armstrong (1979, 113) calls this the rejection of bare particulars. Since substratum theorists accept bare particulars, aka, substrata, this would be a very misleading term for the view. The thesis rejects the idea that there are any ordinary particulars that do not exemplify properties; it does not reject the idea that there are nonqualitative constituents of ordinary particulars, i.e., substrata.

Plain Particularists and substratum theorists agree on the conjunction of: Exemplification, The Rejection of Unqualified Particulars, Change, and Distinct Indiscernibles. Substratum theorists go on to assert certain propositions regarding ontological structure that are alleged to provide the metaphysical basis of those four.

It would be nice if a theory of the nature of particulars could be tested by considering possible or actual particulars that do not satisfy the theory or possible or actual entities that satisfy the theory but are not particulars. But the concept of a concrete particular seems so general as to make the method of counterexample hopeless. I, at least, am unable to think of more or less concrete scenarios where something satisfies the substratum theory but is not intuitively a concrete particular or where something is intuitively a concrete particular but does not satisfy the theory. Instead I will compare the two theories on their capacity to handle various dialectical pressures. I will argue that (1) substratum theory begins at a substantial deficit compared with Plain Particularism because of the additional and mysterious entities and relations it postulates; and (2) substratum theory does not make up for this deficit by providing superior accounts of the four phenomena. In fact, the explanations substratum theorists offer do no more than restate the phenomena. Before coming to the main argument, I begin with some previous discussions of Constituency Theory and substratum theory.

### 1. *Van Inwagen's arguments against Constituency Theory*

In "Relational vs. Constituent Ontologies," Peter van Inwagen presents some arguments against the Constituency Theory (van Inwagen 2011, 393–398). These arguments are directed both at substratum and bundle theories. I show in this section that these arguments do not really tell against Constituency Theory and therefore that plenty of work remains to be done in showing the flaws of that view. As he acknowledges, van Inwagen's "principal reason" for rejecting Constituency Theory is no more than the confession that he does not understand non-mereological constituency (van Inwagen 2011, 393). Absent some reason for thinking that the concepts the Constituency Theorist appeals to cannot be understood, van Inwagen's ignorance may as likely be due to a fault in him as to a fault in the theory. Nonetheless, his extended confession includes some comments that may be construed as something more than the mere expression of van Inwagen's ignorance. Whether these comments are intended

as an argument or not, it is interesting to see what plausibility they have so considered.

Van Inwagen notes that according to the Constituency Theorist the mass of an electron—say,  $9.11 \times 10^{-31}$  kg—may be among its constituents (van Inwagen 2011, 394). One can divide this entity by six, multiply it by some other quantity, and so on. But van Inwagen finds it nonsense to suppose that something to which one can apply arithmetical operations could be a constituent of a physical thing like an electron.

Why should it be that if arithmetical operations apply to something then that something cannot be a constituent of a physical thing? Van Inwagen doesn't say and it's hard to think of some premises for this assertion that don't assume the falsehood of Constituency Theory. One might say that things to which arithmetical operations apply are not spatio-temporal, but then a Constituency Theorist will disagree and hold that at least some things to which arithmetical operations apply are spatio-temporal (Armstrong 1988, Swoyer 1987). Or one might say that things to which arithmetical operations apply cannot be physical and any constituents of an electron must be physical. But then the Constituency Theorist will surely deny that the constituents of an electron must be physical and even non-Constituency Theorists may want to hold that arithmetical operations apply to physical things (Yi 1998, 103).

Van Inwagen's second official reason for rejecting Constituency Theory is that Constituency Theorists appeal to a confused methodology or notion of explanation to arrive at their theory of particulars (van Inwagen 2011, 396-398). Taking their model from scientists, Constituency Theorists seek to explain, in some problematic sense of the term, certain phenomena concerning particulars such as that they may exemplify properties and that two of them may share a property.

First, at best this is a flaw not with Constituency Theory but rather with an argument for it. The Constituency Theorist is alleged to arrive at his view by following a certain method. This method is said to be flawed. From this obviously it doesn't follow that the view is flawed. A reason to reject Constituency Theory must be a problem with the theory that results, not with the path that leads one there.

Second, there is little to be said for assuming that the Constituency Theorist partakes in this allegedly problematic notion of quasi-scientific explanation. Why not suppose that the Constituency Theorist is engaged in the entirely benign and mundane philosophical enterprise of seeking to arrive at a theory that illuminates something in much the way that

one may seek to better understand knowledge, fiction,<sup>9</sup> or properties themselves? So in much the way that one tries to understand the fictional world so that we may say all we want to say about Don Quixote, so we may try to understand particulars so that we may say all we want to say about them.

Finally, it appears that there is a notion of explanation that is neither what is used in science nor fundamentally problematic. One may explain why water freezes but one may also explain why the number two is even. Putting forth some propositions about what two is and what being even is from which it follows in an illuminating way that the number two is even seems a perfectly acceptable example of explanation, even if it is not quite what is done in offering a scientific explanation. The sort of explanation the Constituency Theorist may be supposed to put forth is of just this sort: he proposes some propositions about the nature of particulars from which it is alleged to follow in an illuminating way that Exemplification, Change, Distinct Indiscernibles, and so on.

In sum, van Inwagen's criticisms leave a great deal to be done in comparing the merits of Constituency Theory and Plain Particularism.

## 2. *Is there really a distinction between substratum theory and Plain Particularism?*

An initial challenge to the claim that Plain Particularism is superior to substratum theory is the thought that the Plain Particularist's particular is just the substratum theorist's substratum or thin particular. Perhaps then Plain Particularism and substratum theory are just different ways of saying the same thing. There are a number of reasons to think this is not the case. First, the substratum, unlike the Plain Particularist's particular, is conceived to be a constituent of a concrete particular. The Plain Particularist's particular is not a constituent of a concrete particular but rather itself a concrete particular. Second, even where this notion of constituency has not been assumed, the notion of a substratum has been different from a plain particular. David Armstrong, for example, claims that sometimes when we are thinking about particulars we have in mind thin particulars (Armstrong 1979, 114). A thin particular, he says in a popular formulation,

---

9. Van Inwagen (1977, 302) explains the ontological categories that creatures of fiction belong to.

is “a thing taken in abstraction from all its properties.”<sup>10</sup> The thought seems to be that the thin particular is what remains after all its properties have been set aside. This may strike some as suspiciously similar to the plain particular, which does not include any of its properties as constituents.

But this abstractionist conception of the thin particular is not the Plain Particularist’s conception of a particular. A particular, Plainly understood, is not “a thing taken in abstraction from all its properties.” To “take[]” a thing “in abstraction” from its properties is to perform a certain mental operation. The fact that something is a particular, however, has nothing to do with the mental attitude we take toward it. Furthermore, one can “take[]” something “in abstraction” from its properties even if there is no such item as the thing without the properties. One might take or consider, for example, the number two in abstraction from the property of being even. But there is no such thing as the number two without the property of being even.

In addition to defining this notion of a particular in terms of a certain mental performance, the definition has the further defect of singling out the wrong thing at the end of the operation. Suppose there is something that corresponds to one’s taking a thing in abstraction from all its properties.<sup>11</sup> What would that thing be like? The thing—the thin particular or allegedly the Plain Particularist’s particular—would not have any of the particular’s properties.<sup>12</sup> But the Plain Particularist wants no part of saying that a particular is something that has none of that particular’s properties. The Plain Particularist’s particular is precisely that which exemplifies the particular’s properties.

---

10. In his (1997, 115), Armstrong says the thin particular is “the particular apart from its properties.”

11. Giberman (2012, 308) says the bare particular “is ‘what is left’ when we mentally abstract away all of a material object’s properties.” If something “corresponds” to that conception, he says, it is a bare particular. So on this notion I conceive of something as bare when I conceive the material object without any of its properties. There are two ways in which something might “correspond” to this concept. First, I might conceive X in a certain way, and X actually exists even if not in that way. That is likely not the intended sense, since on this definition every (existing) conceived material object would be bare. Or, the thing might correspond to the conception in the sense that it exists in the way conceived. So something would correspond to my conception in this second sense if it were the material object I am conceiving but didn’t have any of the material object’s properties (or any others, presumably). But that won’t work either—no one thinks there are material objects that have no properties.

12. What properties, if any, the resulting thing, the thin particular, would have is the subject of some dispute (Sider 2006, Bailey 2012). Because I take no position on this debate, I will speak of *substrata* as instantiating or being associated with the properties exemplified by the particular.

In a similar spirit, Theodore Sider has argued that the dispute between “those who think that a particular contains its universals as parts and those who think that it does not” is “merely verbal” (Sider 2006, 388).<sup>13</sup> Since substratum theorists hold that properties are constituents of their particulars and Plain Particularists deny this, it would appear that Sider is challenging the distinction I have drawn. However, it is unclear what exactly is the target of Sider’s argument, and to the extent his argument can be construed as directed toward this distinction it is unsuccessful.

Sider characterizes this dispute about whether properties are parts of particulars as being “among” substratum theorists (Sider 2006, 388). Unfortunately, Sider also characterizes substratum theory as holding that particulars are mereological composites made up of both properties and substrata (aka, “thin particulars”):

[T]he bundle theory says that a particular is exhaustively composed of . . . its universals. The substratum theory, on the other hand, denies this. Take a particular, and mereologically subtract away its universals. Is anything left? According to the bundle theory, no. But according to the substratum theory, something is indeed left. Call this remaining something a “thin particular”. (Sider 2006, 387)

Substratum theory, therefore, holds that a particular is a mereological composite of all of its universals plus the remaining non-universal, the thin particular. Since substratum theorists by Sider’s own definition hold that particulars are composites of properties and substrata, there can be no dispute among them about whether particulars have their properties as parts.

But let us see whether Sider’s argument against the substantiality of the dispute about whether particulars have properties as parts can be understood simply as concerned with those who affirm and those who deny that properties are parts or constituents of particulars. Sider proceeds to argue as follows:

Call the fusion of a particular and its universals a “thick particular.” The mereological difference between a thick particular and its universals is . . . a thin particular. All substratum theorists agree that thin and thick particulars both exist. Thick particulars contain their universals as parts, thin particulars do not. Whether *particulars* have their universals as parts then depends on

---

13. Nothing hinges on Sider’s assumption that properties are universals or that constituency is parthood here.



the nonissue of whether one means thick or thin particulars by ‘particulars’.  
(Sider 2006, 388)

So supposedly the question whether a particular is constituted by its properties reduces to whether we should think of “particulars” as meaning the same as “thick particulars” or “thin particulars.”

First, it is far from clear why deciding between “thick particular” and “thin particular” as the semantic content of “particular” is a trivial matter. To discover the meaning of “particular” would appear to be a significant achievement, especially discovering whether by definition to be a particular something must have its properties as constituents. “Particular” is hardly a term of art to be stipulatively defined by metaphysicians.<sup>14</sup>

Second, the apparent triviality of the dispute seems to be merely an artifact of unduly restricted terminology. A thick particular, by definition, is a composite of a particular and its universals. A thin particular, by definition, is something that includes a particular but not its universals. But why should we restrict ourselves to only these two conceptions of a particular? One can readily define the notion of a medium particular: something that includes a particular and which may or may not include its universals. That is, the notion is neutral on the inclusion of universals as parts. With these definitions, it is a perfectly substantive question whether particulars are thick, thin, or medium.

Sider presents a different version of the argument in his 1995 (367f.). He argues that any dispute about whether properties are parts of particulars is “pointless” on the assumption that properties are spatio-temporally located where their particulars are. I believe a Plain Particularist should be open to the possibility that properties are spatio-temporal, though I will not expand on that conception here. So I want to see the prospects of the argument on this assumption. This time Sider defines thick and thin particulars more helpfully as follows. The thick particular is, e.g., the composite of an electron along with its properties. A thin particular is, e.g., the mereological difference between the electron and its properties. Sider argues that on these assumptions

[t]hick and thin particulars would have identical locations, and anything we want to say about particulars can be said just as easily whether they are thick

14. Although “particular” does not actually get much use in its relevant sense in ordinary parlance, allied terms implicated in this debate do. If it is a matter of stipulative decision whether “particular” means “thick” or “thin particular” it must similarly be a matter of stipulative decision whether “tiger” means “thick tiger” or “thin tiger,” “electron” means “thick electron” or “thin electron,” and so on. These terms can hardly be claimed to be susceptible of stipulative definition.

or thin. For example, we can speak of the relation of “thin instantiation” which holds between thin particulars and universals; but we can speak just as easily about the relation of “thick instantiation”, which holds between a thick particular and the universals the corresponding thin particular thinly instantiates. Surely, our talk of electrons, people, etc. would simply be indeterminate between talk of thick particulars and talk of thin ones, and so there would be no sense in arguing over whether particulars are thick or thin.

As Sider makes explicit in his 2006, the argument assumes that there are both thick and thin particulars. Plain Particularists believe that there are particulars that exemplify properties. One of the benefits of the view is that they need not believe that there are also entities that include as constituents both particulars and properties. So a Plain Particularist may well want to deny that there are both thick particulars and thin particulars. Indeed, the assumption that there are both thin and thick particulars may well reflect the notion that this dispute again is understood as internal to the substratum theory. Within the substratum theory, of course it is plausible to assume that everyone agrees that there are both substrata and complexes made up of substrata plus properties.

It does appear to be true that assuming spatio-temporal properties, thick and thin particulars would have the same locations. The rest of the passage, which expresses two arguments for the insubstantiality of the dispute about the Constituency Thesis, is not so successful. First, there is a very abbreviated argument for the conclusion that “anything we want to say about particulars can be said just as easily whether they are thick or thin” (Sider 1995, 372). Second, there is a very abbreviated argument involving the claim that our particular talk is “indeterminate” as between thick and thin particulars.

As to the first argument, the rest of this paper will be concerned with various areas in which it makes a difference whether or not properties are construed as constituents of particulars. The gist of Sider’s example here begins by noting that we want to say that particulars instantiate properties. The Plain Particularist can understand instantiation in terms of a “relation” between a particular and a property. The substratum theorist can “just as easily” understand instantiation as a relation “between a thick particular and the universals the corresponding thin particular thinly instantiates.” However, the non-equivalence of the two accounts can be seen by noticing that the two theories posit different “relations” and different “relata” to explain property-having. The substratum theorist’s account of particular instantiation requires not only an instantiation connection between the

substratum and the property but also a constituency relation between the thick particular and the property element. Also, instantiation connects a particular and a property on the Plain Particular theory. The substratum theorist's instantiation connects a thick particular, a thin particular, and a property. It is difficult to see how these could be different ways of saying the same thing.

As to the second argument, I am not sure whether our talk about particulars is indeterminate as between thick and thin particulars. Before being convinced that it is, I would need to see something more than just a bare assertion. Furthermore, even if our talk about particulars is indeterminate between the two conceptions, the metaphysical question would remain seemingly unaffected. Consider those entities which are particulars; are they constituted by properties or not? Even if the answer is not settled by the meaning of "particular," there may be other metaphysical considerations that support one or another conception.

Before moving on to a discussion of these metaphysical considerations, it is worth pausing to note a difficulty with Sider's purely compositional version of substratum theory. This view holds that concrete particulars are not states of affairs or otherwise bundles of their constituents. Instead, they are made up of their qualitative and substratum elements in just the same mereological way that human beings are made up of their cells. In the substratum theory as developed by Sider, a concrete particular is a composite of the relevant properties and the substratum.

Consider that concrete particulars can be decomposed to different levels. My arms, legs, torso, etc., compose me. Also, at a different level of decomposition, my cells compose me. Similarly, since composition is the same in ontological structure as in physical structure, I can be decomposed into my properties and substratum as well as my cells. If the Xs compose Z and the Ys compose Z then it follows that there must be something, A, that overlaps one (or more) of the Xs and overlaps one (or more) of the Ys.<sup>15</sup> But this principle does not seem to apply if ontological structure is just another level of mereological decomposition. A ball is composed of red, round, mass M, etc. It is also composed of certain electrons. But there

---

15. This follows from van Inwagen's (1987, 22f.) classic definition of composition. If the Xs compose Z then Z is the sum of the Xs; and if the Ys compose Z then Z is the sum of the Ys. So, every part of Z must overlap at least one of the Xs, and every part of Z must overlap at least one of the Ys. Since Z is a sum, it must have parts. And each of these parts will overlap at least one X and at least one Y.

is no guarantee that there is something that is a part of both one of red, round, mass M, etc. and those electrons.<sup>16</sup>

### 3. *At the starting line*

In this section I spell out the ontological commitments of Plain Particularism and substratum theory. I show that at the starting line—that is, pending an examination of the phenomena to follow—substratum theory is less credible than Plain Particularism because it posits more entities—including relations, connections, or whatever—and because we have little if any independent grasp on these entities.

Plain Particularists posit concrete particulars, their properties, and some connection between them in virtue of which the former exemplify the latter. They also postulate certain axioms about particulars. Particulars exemplify properties. Particulars cannot exist without exemplifying properties. They change. And there are or could be distinct yet indiscernible particulars. Substratum theorists also posit concrete particulars, their properties, and some connection between them in virtue of which the former exemplify the latter. While the story offered by the Plain Particularist is just what I have said, the substratum theorist's is much more complicated. In explaining property exemplification, substratum theorists posit a constituency relation that connects the property and the concrete particular so that the property is a constituent of the particular. Substratum theorists also posit substrata, which are the non-qualitative core of particulars. This substratum supports the properties of the particular. It also serves to individuate different particulars (Armstrong 1979, Moreland 1998, Bergmann 1967). Substratum theorists also postulate certain axioms. Substrata support properties.<sup>17</sup>

16. One could find a guarantee on certain assumptions. Suppose properties are abundant in the sense that there is a property for every meaningful predicate. And suppose that, just as with concrete particulars, when a property exemplifies a property, the property exemplified is a part of the property doing the exemplifying. So red exemplifies the property of being self-identical insofar as being self-identical is a part of a composite made up of certain properties (and perhaps a substratum). Then, because red is self-identical and my cells are all self-identical, there will be something, the property of being self-identical, that is a part both of red and of my cells. But note that the reason for the overlap between red, round, etc., and my cells has nothing to do with their both composing me. Being self-identical overlaps both red, round, etc. and my cells just because it overlaps everything.

17. Moreland (1998, 258): "it is a primitive fact that properties are tied to them [bare particulars] and this does not need to be grounded in some further capacity or property within them. In analytic ontology, one eventually comes to primitives ... [T]here is no need to ground

Necessarily, substrata do not exist without supporting some properties. Substrata may exist at distinct times even though they support incompatible properties at those times. And possibly, substrata may be distinct even though they support all the same properties.

At the starting line—that is, absent further arguments—it seems Plain Particularism is significantly more reasonable than substratum theory. This is because substratum theory requires belief in all sorts of entities that Plain Particularism does not require. Between two theories, the one that postulates more entities and relations is a priori less likely to be true. In addition, many if not all of the substratum theory's extra entities are mysterious posits with which we are familiar only through their roles in substratum theory.<sup>18</sup> I am unaware of any efforts to explain the notions of substratum, inherence, support, and constituency in ways that purport to make these entities comprehensible apart from the theory. The difficulty of appealing to notions that are entirely theoretical—that is, constructed—is that one's understanding of the concepts is exhausted by what has been explained. Any further questions one has about the entities, absent those features that are entailed by their asserted character, have no determinate answers. In other words, their nature seems to be invented to fit a purpose rather than discovered as with real entities. Even champions of the substratum have acknowledged the difficulty of accepting at the core of their theory of particulars an entity with which we are never acquainted (Allaire 1963, 2).

This advantage of Plain Particularism may be overcome after we leave the starting line and examine the particular phenomena that give rise to the substratum theorist's posits. Theoretically, if there were some advantages to substratum theory in some of these domains, one would need to weigh these against Plain Particularism's advantage in simplicity. This won't be necessary because, as I will argue, none of the phenomena to be examined support the substratum theorist's theoretical framework. The rest of this paper is devoted to considering whether the substratum theorist's account of Exemplification, The Rejection of Unqualified Particulars, Change, and Distinct Indiscernibles provide some reason to think that substratum theory is superior to Plain Particularism.

---

the inherence of properties in a bare particular by way of some further entity within it when we recognize that 'inhere in' is taken as 'tied to'."

18. This is not true in the case of constituency, which arguably occurs in other phenomena, although I also don't know of any illuminating explanation of this relation, either.

#### 4. *Exemplification*

One desideratum of an acceptable theory of particulars is that it give some story of what happens when particulars exemplify properties. In this section, I consider the substratum theory's account of exemplification and compare it with Plain Particularism's. I argue that the substratum theory's account does not provide any reason to prefer it to Plain Particularism.

Just what is involved in a particular's exemplifying a property? According to the substratum theorist, two things are going on when a particular exemplifies a property. First, as J.P. Moreland and Timothy Pickavance put it, the property is "rooted within" the complex entity that includes the various property constituents (Moreland and Pickavance 2003). That is to say, the property is a constituent of the particular.<sup>19</sup> Second, the property must have the appropriate connection to the other constituents of the particular. The substratum theorist holds that the property must inhere in the substratum that is unique to that particular.<sup>20</sup>

What about the Plain Particularist's theory of exemplification? When a particular exemplifies a property, there is one thing, a particular, and a distinct thing, a property, and the one exemplifies the other. To be sure, this is not, and in no way claims to be, an analysis of exemplification.<sup>21</sup> But this is indeed an advantage of this view. It should be no surprise that exemplification would not be susceptible of analysis. If any phenomenon in all of philosophy has a good claim to be unanalyzable surely exemplification is it. To see the benefit of acquiescing in the ultimate character of exemplification, one need look no further than the inelegant complexity and ultimately unilluminating character of the substratum theorist's alternative.

Is it any improvement in our understanding of exemplification to say that when a particular exemplifies a property, there is a substratum entity within the particular in which the property inheres? To the extent one understands the substratum it is because of its resemblance to an ordinary particular. A substratum seems to have many of the properties of an ordi-

---

19. Bundle theorists also explain a particular's having properties in terms of the properties being constituents of the particular (Benovsky 2008, 176).

20. Alston (1954, 258) discusses "two senses of exemplification": when the pencil exemplifies yellow, that's inclusion (257); the relation between the substratum and universal is underlying (257).

21. van Inwagen (2011, 398) similarly denies that the exemplification of properties by concrete particulars is susceptible to further elucidation: "no set of statements ... counts as an explanation of what it is for a particular to have a property."

nary particular: it seems to persist through time, to change, to have modal aspects. The substratum's supporting properties sounds a lot like what a particular does when it exemplifies properties. To the extent supporting a property is different from exemplification, no one really knows what sort of thing it is supposed to be. But to the extent supporting a property is just exemplifying it, the analysis of exemplification is caught in a tight circle. To further our understanding, an analysis of a phenomenon must appeal to other phenomena on which we have some grip. The substratum theorist's analysis of exemplification fails this elementary test.<sup>22</sup>

### 5. *The Rejection of Unqualified Particulars*

One of the major motivations for substratum theory is the sense that particulars are intimately connected with their properties. Surely a particular is intimately connected with its properties if the properties are actually contained in the particular. But what is the precise content of the notion that particulars are intimately connected with their properties? A popular thought is that particulars are intimately connected with properties insofar as particulars cannot exist unless they have properties. There is surely something questionable about the idea of a particular that lacks properties. Let us call the doctrine that particulars cannot exist without exemplifying properties the Rejection of Unqualified Particulars. In this section I argue that the Plain Particularist is in no worse a position than the substratum theorist in trying to justify the Rejection of Unqualified Particulars.

Substratum theorists have an initially appealing explanation for why particulars cannot exist without properties. According to substratum theory, a particular must be constituted by properties. That is its nature. A particular's existence involves there being something that is constituted by properties in the right way. Being constituted by properties in the right way means having property elements that are the properties of the particular. So of course on the substratum theory, a particular could not exist unless it exemplified properties.

And initially it looks as if Plain Particularism is inferior on this score. According to the view, a particular is wholly diverse from its properties. As Armstrong (1979, 76) puts it in a related context, particulars and proper-

---

22. Moreland (1998, 260) asserts that substrata come "with properties tied to them in a primitive way ungrounded in capacities or properties within" them.

ties “stand apart” from each other. If particulars and their properties are “separate,” how can there be a necessary bond between them such as that required by the fact that particulars must have properties?

The substratum theory’s explanation of the Rejection of Unqualified Particulars in fact masks a problem similar to that of the connection between particulars and their properties. Because of this the substratum theory is no better than Plain Particularism in accounting for the Rejection of Unqualified Particulars. Particulars require properties, on this view, because particulars are constituted by properties that inhere in substrata. So substrata play the crucial role of connecting to properties to make qualified particulars. But this story is of little use if substrata themselves can exist without having or supporting properties. It is surely no more plausible to think that substrata can exist without properties than it is to suppose that particulars exist without properties. And according to Moreland (1998, 257), substrata “do not exist unless they possess properties.” So what metaphysical story can be told to explain why substrata must have properties? One can explain this situation by maintaining that it is in the nature of substrata to have properties. But this explanation is no better than what is available to the Plain Particularist, who may just as well say that it is in the nature of particulars to exemplify properties.

Moreland (1998) suggests a couple of reasons to suppose that substrata must come attached to properties. First (p. 261), perhaps there are “transcendental properties” that are “truly predicable of all entities whatsoever.” Since such properties qualify everything, they would also have to qualify substrata, and therefore substrata could not exist without supporting at least those properties. Second, Moreland hints at a “general theory of existence that requires entities to have properties in order to exist” (p. 261). If everything must have properties in order to exist, so must substrata.

It should be obvious that both of these lines are available to Plain Particularists. They can with equal plausibility say that there are transcendental properties that are necessarily exemplified by all things and that existence requires the exemplification of properties.

## 6. *Change*

Particulars change. They have properties at one time that they lack at others. Can this fact about particulars be illuminated further? Does the supposed illumination offered by substratum theory constitute an improve-



ment over the Plain Particularist's primitivist<sup>23</sup> account? Is there something in the nature of change that tends to support the substratum theory over Plain Particularism?

The problem of change is the problem of temporary intrinsics. How can one account for the fact that a particular may be F at T1 and not be F at T2? The substratum theory explains this by holding that a substratum can be connected to F at T1 and not be connected to F at T2.<sup>24</sup> It seems in order for genuine change to be possible, there needs to be some common element in the persisting object that survives whatever qualitative change it undergoes. For the substratum theorist, a particular can persist through change because there is a substratum that stays within the complex of properties and remains the same even as properties come in and out. According to Benovsky (2008, 179), the substratum theorist will say that when change occurs, there is a "substratum that remains the same over different times, and this guarantees me that the individual, while changing its properties, is the same individual."

The Plain Particularist, again, does not purport to identify an element that is common in the persisting individual from one time to the other. Apart from possible positions regarding the dispute between endurantism and other such theories, the Plain Particularist does not have anything informative to say by way of explaining how a particular persists through time.

Again, substratum theory turns out not to improve our understanding of the original phenomenon. On this view, a concrete particular can survive change because it has in it a substratum that survives change. In order to work, this account must hold that a substratum can only ever exist in one concrete particular. In other words, if a substratum is in particular P at T1, and the substratum is in some particular at T2, then the T2 particular is P. But this is not all the substratum needs to do. The existence of the particular at T1 and T2 doesn't seem enough to explain change. The element that guarantees the survival of the particular from T1 to T2 should also be that which underlies the changing properties. The substratum plays

---

23. In saying that change is primitive for a Plain Particularist, I don't mean to deny the possibility that the Plain Particularist will have some preference for endurantism over perdurantism, say. Whether persisting particulars are "wholly present" at each time when they exist or are rather space-time worms remains a live question even if Plain Particularism is true.

24. Some advocates of what I call substratum theory do not accept this conception of change. Generally, advocates of bare or thin particulars tend to hold that particulars persist by being composites of temporary stages (Armstrong 1979).

this special role in connecting to the particular's changing properties. The substratum supports the changing properties of the particular. A concrete particular, P, can survive change from being F at T1 to being not-F at T2 because it has a substratum in it at both times that supports F at T1 and supports not-F at T2.

This is little more than the original problem repeated. To the extent it is mysterious how a particular object can have incompatible properties at different times, it is at least as mysterious how a substratum can support incompatible properties at different times. On this suggested theory, there is a substratum that exists at T1 and supports F and exists at T2 and supports not-F. How can that be? Supporting incompatible properties at different times seems no easier to swallow without further explanation than exemplifying incompatible properties at different times. Because the substratum account of change does not improve our understanding of the phenomenon, it presents no reason to accept the constituent analysis that comes with it.

### 7. *Distinct Indiscernibles*

Another phenomenon that has traditionally motivated certain metaphysical conceptions of particulars and undermined others is the problem of the identity of indiscernibles. It seems possible that concrete particulars X and Y should have all the same properties and yet be distinct. What does it say about the nature of particulars that there can be distinct indiscernibles?<sup>25</sup> Does the possibility of distinct indiscernibles tend to support substratum theory over Plain Particularism? Again, I will argue that the substratum theorist's account of distinct indiscernibles is no improvement on the Plain Particularist's.

According to substratum theory, indiscernible particulars X and Y are nonetheless distinct because the substratum of X, X\*, is distinct from the substratum of Y, Y\*. Indiscernible particulars may be distinct because each particular has its own unique substratum. Necessarily, if X and Y are distinct particulars then the substratum of X must be distinct from the substratum of Y.

---

25. Black (1952) is the classic presentation. Mertz (2001, 48) puts the problem this way: "The problem of individuation is the problem of how we are to account for the *unrepeatability* of an entity when absolutely all of its characteristics ... are repeatable." Inevitably, some philosophers deny that there could be distinct indiscernibles (O'Leary-Hawthorne 1995).

What account of the phenomenon of distinct indiscernibles can the Plain Particularist give? The Plain Particularist, again, does not attempt to provide an explanation of the phenomenon. He takes as an axiom of his theory of particulars, that, possibly, there may be distinct particulars that have all the same properties. While substratum theory appears to do more than acquiesce in the phenomenon, by actually offering a theory of the phenomenon, in fact the theory does little more than restate the phenomenon it purports to explain.

The substratum theorist supposes that each particular has its own unique substratum. So X has X\* and Y has Y\*, and X\* and Y\* are distinct. Notice that X\* and Y\* support the same properties. What has happened here? The substratum theorist has invented a category of entity to account for the possibility of distinct indiscernibles. And then he has said that those entities can be distinct yet support all the same properties. It is surely no less mysterious how substrata can be distinct yet support the same properties than it is that concrete particulars can be distinct yet exemplify the same properties.

Some substratum theorists hold that X\* and Y\* exemplify properties, and thus the same properties, but some hold that these substrata do not exemplify but support the same properties.<sup>26</sup> So if the substratum theorist holds that X\* and Y\* do not exemplify properties then they are not distinct indiscernibles in the sense that X and Y are distinct indiscernibles. X and Y are distinct indiscernibles in the sense that they exemplify all the same properties; on this version of substratum theory, X\* and Y\* are only indiscernible in that they support all the same properties.

But even if supporting a property is different from exemplifying the property, as I have argued, to the extent we understand the phenomenon, it is on analogy with exemplifying a property. Thus it is mysterious how distinct substrata can support the same properties to the exact same degree that it is mysterious how distinct concrete particulars can exemplify the same properties. Moreland (1998, 260) admits that the substratum theorist's explanation of the possibility of distinct indiscernible particulars bottoms out on the possibility of distinct substrata that support all the same properties. The substrata in indiscernible distinct particulars, he says, "are simples and, as a matter of primitive fact, they simply come individuated even if properties are necessarily tied to them." So it is a primitive fact that substrata "come individuated" and are not in need of any further

---

26. See Bailey (2012) and his references.

individuation. And this is so despite the fact that substrata must be tied to properties and possibly distinct ones are tied to the very same properties. In short, it is a brute fact that substrata may be distinct yet support the same properties.

Before finishing up I pause to examine a different argument for substratum theory in this same neighborhood. Moreland (1998, 251) identifies a “problem of individuation,” explaining it by reference to two red, round spots with all the same “pure properties.” A solution to the problem requires “offering an ontological assay of the situation so as to specify what it is that makes the two spots two particular, individual entities instead of one.” Moreland goes on to sketch and defend an account that appeals to bare particulars, i.e., substrata.

If solving the problem of individuation in this sense were a desideratum of a plausible theory of particulars, then Plain Particularism would be in some trouble. But there is little reason to accept the problem so characterized. It is a remarkable phenomenon that two spots may share all their “pure properties”—presumably those not defined in terms of some particular object, e.g., being taller than Steve. But why should the problem require offering an ontological *assay*? Though the dictionary definition does not require this, the expression has widespread usage in the philosophical world among those who think concrete particular entities and other entities can be analyzed into their constituent qualitative and other elements (Bergmann 1967, Mertz 2001). And a Plain Particularist has some reason to suspect that “specify[ing] what it is that makes the two spots two ... instead of one” will require identifying some further entities in the spots in virtue of which the spots are two and not one.<sup>27</sup> The sense of “specify” intended likely does not include the following story. The spots are two because, at least, they are different.<sup>28</sup> Why are they different? Here one may as well be up front in confessing that no illuminating explanation will be forthcoming. The spots just are different. This is not an analysis of their difference, but nothing has been said to motivate the notion that their difference requires analysis.

---

27. Interpreting and taking up Moreland’s problem of individuation, Mertz (2001, 49) writes that to solve the problem “what are required are constituents of each of [the indiscernible particulars], and these constituents must be unrepeatable and thus serve to distinguish” the particulars.

28. Being different may not suffice for being two—the clay and the statue it makes up may be different yet one (Moyer 2006)—but that is surely not the problem Moreland has in mind.

## 8. Conclusion

Constituency Theory holds that properties are in the particulars they qualify. One version of this view, substratum theory, holds that in addition to the properties that constitute a particular, there is something non-qualitative—substratum, thin, or bare particular—that supports those properties or in which they inhere. Plain Particularism, on the other hand, holds that properties are not elements of the particulars they exemplify; instead, particulars are wholly distinct from their properties. I have argued that Plain Particularism is superior to substratum theory. First, I criticized some of van Inwagen's complaints about Constituency Theory. Then I showed that Plain Particularism is genuinely distinct from substratum theory, despite the arguments by Ted Sider to the contrary. I then argued that the phenomena that supposedly support substratum theory—change, the possibility of distinct indiscernibles, exemplification, and the impossibility of unqualified particulars—in fact present no reason to believe substratum theory at all. Since substratum theory—with its extra and mysterious entities—begins at a significant disadvantage vis-à-vis Plain Particularism, Plain Particularism is the better “theory” of particulars.<sup>29</sup>

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Allaire, Edwin B. 1963: “Bare Particulars”. *Philosophical Studies* 14, 1–8.
- Alston, William 1954: “Particulars—Bare and Qualified”. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 15, 253–258.
- Armstrong, David M. 1979. *Nominalism and Realism*. Volume 1 of *Universals and Scientific Realism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- 1988: “Are Quantities Relations? A Reply to Bigelow and Pargetter”. *Philosophical Studies* 54, 305–316.
- 1997: *A World of States of Affairs*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bailey, Andrew 2012: “No Bare Particulars”. *Philosophical Studies* 158, 31–41.
- Benovsky, Jiri 2008: “The Bundle Theory and the Substratum Theory: Deadly Enemies or Twin Brothers?”. *Philosophical Studies* 141, 175–190.
- Bergmann, Gustav 1967: *Realism: A Critique of Brentano and Meinong*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.

---

29. Thanks to Richard Fumerton, Nathan Oaklander, and an anonymous referee for this journal for their helpful comments.

- Black, Max 1952: "The Identity of Indiscernibles". *Mind* 61, 152–164.
- Gibberman, Daniel 2012: "Against Zero-Dimensional Material Objects (and Other Bare Particulars)". *Philosophical Studies* 160, 305–321.
- Lowe, E. J. 2012: "A Neo-Aristotelian Substance Ontology: Neither Relational nor Constituent". In: Tuomas Tahko (ed.), *Contemporary Aristotelian Metaphysics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 229–248.
- Martin, C. B. 1980: "Substance Substantiated". *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 58(1), 3–10.
- Mertz, Donald W. 2001: "Individuation and Instance Ontology". *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 79, 45–61.
- Moreland, James P. 1998: "Theories of Individuation: A Reconsideration of Bare Particulars". *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 79, 251–263.
- Moreland, J. P., & Pickavance, Timothy 2003: "Bare Particulars and Individuation". *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 81, 1–13.
- Moyer, Mark 2006: "Statues and Lumps: A Strange Coincidence". *Synthese* 148, 401–423.
- O'Leary-Hawthorne, John 1995: "The Bundle Theory of Substance and the Identity of Indiscernibles". *Analysis* 55, 191–196.
- Russell, Bertrand 1948: *An Enquiry into Meaning and Truth*. London: Allen and Unwin.
- Sider, Theodore 1995: "Sparseness, Immanence and Naturalness". *Noûs* 29, 360–377.
- 2006: "Bare Particulars". *Philosophical Perspectives* 20, 387–397.
- Swoyer, Chris 1987: "The Metaphysics of Measurement". In: John Forge (ed.), *Measurement, Realism and Objectivity*. Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 235–290.
- Van Cleve, James 1985: "Three Versions of the Bundle Theory". *Philosophical Studies* 47, 95–107.
- Van Inwagen, Peter 1977: "Creatures of Fiction". *American Philosophical Quarterly* 14, 299–308.
- 1987: "When Are Objects Parts?". *Philosophical Perspectives* 1, 21–47.
- 2011: "Relational vs. Constituent Ontologies". *Philosophical Perspectives* 25, 389–405.
- Yi, Byeong-Uk 1998: "Numbers and Relations". *Erkenntnis* 49 (1), 93–113.