

**Tropes as Divine Acts:  
The Nature of Creaturely Properties in a World Sustained by God**

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# TROPES AS DIVINE ACTS: THE NATURE OF CREATURELY PROPERTIES IN A WORLD SUSTAINED BY GOD<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** I aim to synthesize two issues within theistic metaphysics. The first concerns the metaphysics of creaturely properties and, more specifically, the nature of unshareable properties, or *tropes*. The second concerns the metaphysics of providence and, more specifically, the way in which God sustains creatures, or *sustenance*. I propose that creaturely properties, understood as what I call modifier tropes, are identical with divine acts of sustenance, understood as acts of property-conferral. I argue that this *theistic conferralism* is attractive because it integrates trope theory and the doctrine of sustenance in a mutually enhancing way. Taking modifier tropes to be divine acts mitigates certain weaknesses of trope theory and safeguards divine sustenance from the threat of both deism and occasionalism.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In this article I aim to synthesize two issues within theistic metaphysics. The first concerns the metaphysics of creaturely properties and, more specifically, the nature of unshareable properties, or *tropes*. The second concerns the metaphysics of divine providence and, more specifically, the way in which God continually sustains creatures, or *divine sustenance*. My aim is to bring these issues into closer contact by explaining and motivating the proposal that creaturely properties are identical with

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<sup>1</sup> I dedicate this article to the memory of my friend Scott Austin, who acted divinely if anyone ever did.

divine actions. Ultimately, I will arrive at a more nuanced version of the following thesis:

*Theistic Conferralism* (provisional statement): Divine sustenance involves basic and unmediated acts whereby God supplies creatures with their properties. As such, there is no distinction between the supplying of a property and the property supplied. In fact, those actions are identical with the properties of creatures. And, with respect to a metaphysical theory of properties, those actions-cum-properties are tropes.

Note that this thesis identifies *creaturely* properties with divine acts. It does not affirm (or deny) that *divine* properties are identical with divine acts. I will not directly discuss the latter identity claim here, though it merits consideration.<sup>2</sup> At any rate, the restriction to creaturely properties will be suppressed in the sequel.

I will argue that, in its final form, theistic conferralism is attractive because it offers a mutually enhancing integration of a prominent theory of properties – trope theory – and a crucial monotheistic doctrine – sustenance. Taking tropes to be divine acts mitigates certain weaknesses of trope theory and safeguards divine sustenance from the threat of both deism and occasionalism.

## II. THE METAPHYSICS OF CREATURELY PROPERTIES

There are many theories about the existence and nature of properties. However, I take theistic conferralism to be viable only if it is understood in terms of the specific theory I have in mind, which I call *modifier trope theory*. The latter is often conflated with a nearby but fundamentally different view, what I call *module trope theory*. As I explain below, if theistic conferralism is (mis)understood in terms of module tropes,

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<sup>2</sup> The claim may offer a way to understand or improve theistic activism. As originally developed by Morris and Menzel (1986), theistic activism has it that God creates the platonic realm of necessarily existing objects, including God's own essence. I'm inclined to think that theistic activism is best understood (or improved) as identifying the divine nature with a basic divine action, rather than taking the divine nature to be in some sense *created* by a divine action. So understood, theistic activism would hold that God's nature just is a self-naturing act. Thus, because a basic divine act is free but not itself created, a theistic activist could affirm that God freely natures himself, while denying that God creates his nature. For more on basic divine action see Alston (1994: 45). For recent discussion of theistic activism, see Menzel (Forthcoming) and the essays in Gould (2014).

it will straightforwardly entail occasionalism. Thus, because avoiding occasionalism is one of the chief aims of the proposed view, it will be important to distinguish module tropes from modifier tropes and to understand theistic conferralism in terms of the latter. Something else that is important for understanding the view is the distinction between a property-role and the various types of candidate entities that philosophers have employed or postulated to play that role. To clarify these matters, I will begin by sketching out a hierarchy of views and choice points concerning the metaphysics of properties, eventually drilling down to modifier trope theory.

Among the many traditional and contemporary views concerning the existence and nature of properties, perhaps the highest level of disagreement concerns whether properties exist at all. The naysayers are called *austere nominalists*. On their view, strictly speaking, there are no characteristics but only primitively characterized objects; there are spherical objects – billiard balls and the like – but no sphericity *per se*.<sup>3</sup> Those opposed to austere nominalism agree that properties exist in some sense or another.

Generally, philosophers who think that properties exist think that properties are needed to do metaphysical work. This is sometimes expressed by saying that there are one or more *property roles* that need to be played.<sup>4</sup> Thus, as Alex Oliver puts it, each of the competing property theories can be seen as positing a system of candidate entities that are supposed to be the best qualified to play whatever property roles need to be played (1996, 11). There are several putative property roles, but here I will focus on the traditional idea that a property is a *character-grounder* and plays what we might call the *character-grounding role*. Properties ground character in that an object is variously characterized in virtue of having the specific properties that it does. For example, the sphericity of a ball grounds its shape; the ball is shaped as it is in virtue of being related to sphericity in the right way.

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<sup>3</sup> As I understand it, austere nominalism entails but is not equivalent to so-called ostrich nominalism. Roughly, the latter denies that properties are required to account for *predication*, whereas austere nominalism denies that properties are required to account for *anything*. For more on austere nominalism, see Loux (2006), Garcia (2009), and Carroll and Markosian (2010). For ostrich nominalism, see the excellent discussion in Imaguire (2014).

<sup>4</sup> For helpful discussion about various putative property roles, see Oliver (1996), Swoyer (1999), and Edwards (2014).

Those who agree that properties exist disagree over what properties are like – over the *kind* of entity that plays the character-grounding role. Indeed, philosophers have employed a wild variety of entities to play this role. Here, the most general disagreement concerns whether properties are constructed out of more fundamental entities. Among philosophers who take properties to be constructed, for example, some identify properties with sets of (actual or possible) ordinary objects. On the latter view, generally speaking, an object is characterized in some way in virtue of being a member of a certain set of objects; here, the set plays the role of a character-grounder and, thus, the set *is* a property.

Among those who posit unconstructed, fundamental properties, a major point of disagreement concerns whether or not properties are *shareable* (multiply-instantiable, repeatable, etc.). A property is shareable if and only if it can characterize multiple wholly distinct objects at once. A realist takes (non-haecceitistic) properties to be shareable and calls them *universals*. On realism, it is possible that two distinct spheres *a* and *b* exist simultaneously, such that the sphericity of *a* is (numerically) identical with the sphericity of *b*; the sphericity is a universal.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, a trope theorist takes properties to be non-shareable and calls them *tropes*. On their view, if distinct spheres *a* and *b* exist simultaneously, then the sphericity of *a* and the sphericity of *b* are exactly similar but numerically distinct; the sphericities are tropes.<sup>6</sup>

We have almost drilled down to modifier trope theory. Discerning this theory is somewhat impeded by the fact that the literature tends to conflate the view with a nearby but fundamentally different trope theory, what I call module trope theory.<sup>7</sup> The difference turns on a distinction between two competing concepts of a trope. To illustrate the distinction, suppose there is a billiard ball that has a sphericity trope, what a trope theorist might describe as “an instance of sphericity” or “the sphericalness of the ball”. Now consider: Is the trope itself spherical? If you think the answer is yes, that a sphericity trope is itself spherical, then you are thinking of what I call a module trope. If you think the answer is

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<sup>5</sup> Important contemporary defenses of realism include Armstrong (1989) and (1997), and Moreland (2001) and (2013).

<sup>6</sup> Important defenses of trope theory include Stout (1921) and (1923) and Williams (1953), and, more recently, Campbell (1981) and (1990), Maurin (2002), and Ehring (2011).

<sup>7</sup> I am indebted to Michael Loux for first alerting me to this distinction. I say more about my indebtedness in Garcia (2015), where I discuss the distinction at length.

no, that a sphericity trope is not itself spherical, then you are thinking of what I call a modifier trope. Roughly, the module/modifier distinction turns on whether tropes are self-exemplifying (module tropes) or non-self-exemplifying (modifier tropes).

As before, it is crucial to understand theistic conferralism in terms of modifier tropes and not module tropes. Thus, to forestall potential misunderstanding, it will be useful to say a bit more about each concept of a trope. On the one hand, a module trope is a character-grounder that is self-exemplifying and non-shareable. However, self-exemplification should not be taken to imply that a module trope somehow has its intrinsic character derivatively. Rather, a module trope is *primitively* characterized with respect to the character it self-exemplifies: a sphericity module trope is primitively spherical. Moreover, a module trope is primitively *maximally thinly* characterized: a sphericity module trope is primitively spherical and not (to the extent possible<sup>8</sup>) otherwise intrinsically characterized. Thus, in effect, a module trope is a primitively singly-proprietyed *object*.<sup>9</sup> A sphericity module trope is a primitively merely-spherical object. This concept of a trope often shows up – usually only tacitly – within a trope bundle theory, such as those defended by D. C. Williams (1953), Keith Campbell (1990), and, perhaps<sup>10</sup>, Anna-Sofia Maurin (2002), and Douglas Ehring (2011). This is no accident arguably, module tropes are better suited for a bundle theory of substance than are modifier tropes.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, a modifier trope is a character-grounder that is non-self-exemplifying and non-shareable. It does not exemplify, have, or bear the character it grounds. Rather, a modifier trope grounds the

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<sup>8</sup> In Garcia (Forthcoming) I argue that there are problems lurking here for module tropes.

<sup>9</sup> Although module trope theorists often categorize tropes as properties, I think module tropes are best thought of as belonging to the category of object. In contrast, modifier tropes are accurately thought of as being properties in the traditional sense of being “predicable” entities. For this reason, modifier tropes tend to be employed within a substance-attribute model. For example, some philosophers – such as Lowe (2006) – sharply distinguish *objects* and *modes* of objects while identifying modes with tropes. I take such a view to be identifying modes with *modifier* tropes. Arguably, the latter identification is incompatible with a *module* trope theory. I thank Ross Inman for pressing me to clarify this.

<sup>10</sup> I say “perhaps” because it is less than clear to me that Maurin and Ehring are working with the concept of a module trope.

<sup>11</sup> I discuss this in my (2015) and “Tropes as Character-Grounders”.

character of its *bearer*; a modifier trope is, as it were, a *character-maker* or *characterizer*. On modifier trope theory, a sphericity trope is not itself spherical. Rather, the trope makes its bearer spherical. A sphericity modifier trope is a non-shareable, non-spherical, *sphere-maker* or *spherizer*. This concept of a trope is often tacitly at play within substance-attribute ontologies such as that of C. B. Martin (1980) and E. J. Lowe (2006).<sup>12</sup>

To sum up, we may say that a modifier trope is a singly-characterizing property, whereas a module trope is a primitively- and singly-charactered object. Both concepts of a trope have currency in the literature, and each has unique strengths and weaknesses.<sup>13</sup>

There are several reasons why theistic conferralism should be understood in terms of modifier tropes and not module tropes. First, taking creaturely properties to be module tropes that are identical with divine actions would entail that divine actions are (or are among) the basic *objects* of the world. This is not only implausible – on the grounds that no action is itself, say, spherical – but it would also seem to amount to a version of panentheism.<sup>14</sup> This would be an unwelcome result, not least because the proposed view aspires to improve a theistic doctrine of sustenance.

Second, for similar reasons, understanding theistic conferralism in terms of module tropes would imply that natural causes are identical with divine actions – in other words, it would amount to a version of occasionalism. Many trope theorists hold that tropes are the immediate objects of perception and the terms of causal relations.<sup>15</sup> With respect to perception, trope theorists have argued that one immediately sees the redness of a rose. And, regarding causation, they have argued that the hotness of the stove is the direct cause of the burn on your hand (Maurin 2013). Arguably, however, these claims are predicated on the (tacit) assumption that tropes are module tropes.<sup>16</sup> For example, it

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<sup>12</sup> It is not easy to tell which concept of a trope is the intended one in Lowe's work. In conversation, however, Lowe clarified that he takes tropes to be modifier tropes.

<sup>13</sup> See my (2015) and (Forthcoming).

<sup>14</sup> Roughly, panentheism is the view that God is in the world and the world is in God but God is not identical with the world. Panentheists cash out their view in different ways. For recent discussion, see especially Clayton and Peacocke (2004).

<sup>15</sup> See Campbell (1990), Ehring (2011), Maurin (2013), Schaffer (2001), and Williams (1953).

<sup>16</sup> I argue for this in my (Forthcoming).

is precisely because a redness module trope is itself red that the trope can be immediately perceived when I look at a rose. And, it is precisely because a hotness module trope is itself temperatured that a hotness trope can directly cause a burn when I touch a hot stove. In other words, module tropes can play a direct role in causation and perception because they are thinly-charactered objects. Thus, if understood in terms of module tropes, theistic conferralism says that divine actions are identical with thinly-charactered objects that play a direct role in causation and perception – that divine acts *are* natural causes and percepts. In this way, on module trope theory the proposed view would entail occasionalism.

Crucially, this is *not* the case on modifier trope theory. A redness modifier trope is not colored and a hotness modifier trope is not temperatured. As such, modifier tropes are not eligible to play a direct role in causation and perception. More generally, as character-grounders, modifier tropes act as formal causes rather than as efficient causes. Thus, identifying divine actions with modifier tropes does not entail that those acts are efficient causes, and so does not entail occasionalism.

A third reason stems from conclusions that are upstream of this project. For reasons given elsewhere, I take modifier tropes to be superior to module tropes.<sup>17</sup> As I will explain in section seven, however, several weaknesses of modifier trope theory can be mitigated by conjoining the theory with theistic conferralism.

Fourth and finally, on a plausible understanding of it, the monotheistic doctrine of sustenance seems to tacitly involve a commitment to modifier tropes. I hope to substantiate this claim in the next two sections.

### III. SUSTENANCE

In Western monotheism a perennial philosophical issue concerns the nature of providence. There are several aspects of providence, but the dimension of interest here is that of *sustenance*. The scriptures and creeds of the monotheisms of the Abrahamic tradition routinely give voice to the idea that creatures are profoundly and continually dependent on God.<sup>18</sup> This idea is so important as to be called the doctrine of sustenance, which

<sup>17</sup> I offer reasons in my (2015), (Forthcoming), and “Tropes as Character-Grounders”.

<sup>18</sup> The doctrine is said to find expression in many sacred texts, including Wisdom 11:25; Psalm 36:5-6; Acts 17:28; Romans 11:36; Hebrews 1:2-3; Colossians 1:16-17; and Qur-án 13:2-3 and 59:24. The doctrine is affirmed in creeds such as the 1530 *Augsburg Confession* (God is said to be the “creator and preserver of all things visible and invisible”)

we may summarize as the thesis that all created entities whatsoever are dependent on God's sustaining them in being from moment to moment.<sup>19</sup>

To understand theistic conferralism, we need to draw a distinction within sustenance itself. The distinction stems from a contrast between a narrow and a broad sense of sustenance. Kathryn Tanner draws the contrast as follows:

In a narrow sense God is the creator as the giver of existence, where the fact of being is contrasted with what one is or does or becomes. But in a broader sense, God acts in the mode of creator whatever the aspect of created existence at issue ... [In the broad sense, from] the most general to the most specific features of existence, all that the creature is it owes to God as the creator of the world. (1994: 112-113).

In other words, in the narrow sense, sustenance only involves God's continually upholding creatures in existence, or supplying them with existence. Hugh McCann calls this *existence-conferral* (2012, 30). In the broad sense, sustenance also involves God's continually supplying creatures with their properties and powers. That is, it involves the continuous dependence of all creatures on God for their properties and powers. I will call this dimension of broad sustenance *property-conferral*. In this sense, creaturely properties are *conferred properties* – hence the name, “theistic conferralism”.<sup>20</sup>

The broad sense of sustenance finds expression in the work of various theologians and philosophers. For example, Louis Berkhof says that sustenance is “that continuous work of God by which He maintains the things which He created, together with the properties and powers with which He endowed them” (1996, 170). Similarly, Richard Swinburne says that “God is our supreme benefactor: we owe our existence from moment to moment, and our powers and pleasures, our knowledge and desires, to his sustaining power” (1998, 112). Thus, for Berkhof and Swinburne, sustenance is twofold and involves not only God's continually upholding things in existence (existence-conferral) but also God's continually supplying things with their properties (property-conferral).

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and the 1646 *Westminster Confession of Faith* (“God ... doth uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things ...”).

<sup>19</sup> This summary is adapted from Rogers (2010: 99). Sustenance is sometimes called *preservation*. For a helpful general discussion see Kvanvig (2008).

<sup>20</sup> See Ásta Sveinsdóttir (2008) and (2013) for an excellent discussion of conferred properties. I take it that, in Sveinsdóttir's terms, theistic conferralism is a conferralist account of (creaturely) properties.

Similar avowals of broad sustenance are not hard to find throughout the monotheistic tradition.<sup>21</sup>

Property-conferral seems to be at the root of one of the traditional challenges for an account of providence. The challenge I have in mind is that of avoiding both deism and occasionalism. As Farley notes, in the orthodox tradition, “God’s governance can neither be reduced to ‘bare permission’ [deism] nor identified with the natural order alone [occasionalism]” (1988, 173). Some philosophers reject property-conferral, apparently on the grounds that property-conferral leads to occasionalism by making God the immediate cause of a creature’s having its properties.<sup>22</sup> Others affirm property-conferral, apparently on the grounds that rejecting it leads to deism by taking God out of immediate contact with the world.<sup>23</sup> Thus, it seems that property-conferral poses a dilemma: the rejection of it threatens to give rise to deism and the affirmation of it threatens to give rise to occasionalism. My principle aim in this paper is to take a closer look at property-conferral and to propose a way of understanding it in terms of modifier tropes. My hope is that understanding property-conferral in this way will resolve the above dilemma and, moreover, shore up weaknesses of modifier trope theory.

#### IV. THE PALETTE THEORY

The foregoing has primarily been stage setting: First, I have introduced trope theory and distinguished between modifier tropes and module tropes. Second, I have introduced the doctrine of sustenance and marked out the aspect of sustenance that I call property-conferral. I will now focus on the following questions: *Metaphysically speaking, what does property-conferral amount to? And, in particular, does God create properties prior to distributing them to objects?*

In the next section, I will argue against a natural and affirmative answer to the second question. In descriptions of broad sustenance, such as those noted above, the language often suggests that in property-conferral there is a distinction between an act of conferring and the property that is conferred. More specifically, it suggests that God creates a property prior to bestowing it on an object, where the priority here

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, Berkouwer (1952) and van Inwagen (1988).

<sup>22</sup> E.g., Thomas Tracy (1994: 89).

<sup>23</sup> E.g., Kathryn Tanner (1994) and Hugh McCann (2012).

need not be temporal. I will call this the *palette theory* because it suggests that the way that God confers properties on objects is analogous to the way that a Renaissance artist paints a canvas: by first making the paint and then applying it to a canvas. On this analogy, God paints objects with antecedently created properties.<sup>24</sup> Or, dropping the analogy, God characterizes objects with antecedently created characteristics. For example, in sustaining the character of a ripe tomato, God has created redness and bestowed or conferred it on the tomato.

The palette theory offers a natural way to understand property-conferral. However, I think that there are reasons to reject the palette theory and that those reasons support theistic conferralism. In the next section I will offer reasons to reject the palette theory. In the subsequent section I will explore the implications of rejecting it.

#### V. AGAINST THE PALETTE THEORY

I will present three problems for the palette theory. As we will see, the case against the palette theory is also a case for theistic conferralism.

##### *The Immediacy Challenge*

First, the palette theory violates an immediacy criterion for sustenance. According to Charles McCracken, a traditional aim of a doctrine of sustenance is to secure or recognize “the total and immediate dependence of all things on God.”<sup>25</sup> Others, such as Philip Quinn (1988, 87, 98) and Kathryn Tanner (1988, 84), take it to be a *criterion* for an acceptable doctrine of sustenance that sustenance be characterized by immediacy and the absence of instruments. According to Tanner, “God’s agency must be talked about as universal and immediate, ... conversely, everything non-divine must be talked about as existing in a relation of total and immediate dependence upon God” (1988, 84). As Tracy puts it, on this view “there is no instrumental substructure in God’s creative activity, God does not do one thing by doing another” (1994, 84).

On the palette theory, properties are God’s *tools* for character-grounding. Mediating between God and an object is a distinct entity: a property that serves as a created instrument for God’s sustaining that

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<sup>24</sup> This analogy is not perfect, as the artist case involves temporal priority whereas the palette theory does not.

<sup>25</sup> Cited in Quinn (1988: 98).

object. For example, between God and a billiard ball, there is sphericity, a created property by which God sustains the ball. More generally, on the palette theory, one category of created entities – the properties – is used by God to sustain another category of created entities – the objects. Thus, if palette theory is true, then property-conferral is a *mediated* divine activity. In this way, the palette theory violates the immediacy criterion.<sup>26</sup>

### *The Regress Challenge*

Second, the palette theory either leads to a problematic regress or requires a self-undermining restriction. As we will see, the regress can be stopped by a natural and plausible restriction on the palette theory, but the theory is undermined by the very fact that this restriction is plausible.

As a warm up for the regress problem, suppose there is a peculiar craftsman – let us call him Guido – whose peculiarity stems from two facts about him. First, Guido cannot make anything without using his tools. And second, Guido must make all his tools. I submit that Guido would be hard pressed to make *anything*. Or, perhaps he could make something only if he made an infinite number of things. As we will see, on the palette theory, God and Guido are in similar situations.

The palette theory accepts the broad conception of sustenance: it takes sustenance to involve property-conferral and the continuous dependence of all creatures on God for their properties and powers. What makes the palette theory unique is that it takes property-conferral to involve the creation and bestowal of a property. Here, a creature is dependent on God's supplying a property that God has created. On this picture, God creates a character-grounder with which he grounds the character of an object by giving the character-grounder to the object. That is, for any creature *x*, God sustains *x*, in part, by creating properties and bestowing them on *x*. For example, God creates sphericity in order to ground the shape of a sphere; in being shaped as it is, the sphere *depends* on God's (logically) prior creation and bestowal of sphericity.

Unfortunately, this threatens the palette theory with a vicious regress. According to the palette theory, for any creature *c*, *c* depends on God's sustaining activity, where this involves God's creating *c*'s properties and bestowing them on *c*. But because *c*'s properties are created, they also

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<sup>26</sup> I follow Quinn (1988) in taking immediacy to be a criterion and not merely a desideratum for a theory of sustenance. However, even if immediacy is only a desideratum, violating immediacy is still a *pro tanto* disadvantage of the palette theory.

depend on God's sustaining activity. Thus, where F is one of *c*'s properties, God sustains F by creating F's properties and bestowing them on F. Thus, to sustain a *first-order* property (F), the palette theory has God creating *second-order* properties (the properties of F). An example of a first-order property is the familiar property *sphericity*, whereas a second-order property would be a property of sphericity itself, such as *being a shape*. On the palette theory, to sustain the first-order property sphericity, God must create and bestow all of sphericity's second-order properties – such as *being a shape*, *being non-shareable*, *being a sphericity property*, and so on. In being the kind of property it is, sphericity depends on God's prior creation and bestowal of these second-order properties. But because each second-order property is created, it also is dependent on divine sustenance, generating an unattractive and seemingly vicious dependence regress of property-conferral.

An obvious and plausible way to avoid the regress is to restrict the palette theory to exclude properties from its scope. Call this the *restricted palette theory*. Here, God creates and sustains properties but the property-conferral involved in sustaining properties does not involve God's creating second-order properties which God then bestows on the first-order properties. Instead, with respect to sustaining created properties, property-conferral is immediate and amounts to unmediated character-grounding. In other words, God acts so as to ground directly the character of first-order properties without a separate and prior act of creating their second-order properties. On the restricted theory, God's unmediated characterizing action is itself the character-grounder for a property and there is no distinction between the act of conferring and the property conferred. For example, in sustaining a billiard ball, God creates, confers, and sustains sphericity, but God does not sustain sphericity by first creating a rather rococo second-order property called "being a sphericity property" and bestowing it on sphericity. Instead, with respect to sphericity, property-conferral is immediate: God directly grounds the character of sphericity. Thus, whereas sphericity directly grounds the character of the ball by *spherizing* the ball, God directly grounds the character of sphericity by *sphericity-izing* sphericity.

To be sure, there are independent reasons for denying that there are second-order properties. For example, one might take second-order predications like "being a sphericity property" to be made true by the (first-order) property itself (i.e., by sphericity). This provides a further

reason to restrict the palette theory.<sup>27</sup> However, as we will now see, the upshot of this restriction is the same.

The restricted palette theory stops the regress of property-conferral, but it does so by allowing that for some created entities – namely, (first-order) properties – property-conferral is immediate and does not involve the prior creation and bestowal of (second-order) properties. However, if the regress can be stopped by immediate property-conferral for *some* category of created being, why not stop it at the object-level rather than at the property-level? Presumably, if the strategy works at the property-level, then it would also work at the object-level. But deploying it at the object-level would do away with *all* non-immediate property-conferral, thus making it unnecessary for God to create any properties at all. Thus, the restricted palette theory requires a move that makes it unnecessary for God to create first-order properties in the first place. In this way, the restricted palette theory undermines the rationale for the original palette theory.

To sum up, the palette theory involves either a problematic regress or a self-undermining restriction. More generally, the problems with the palette theory suggest that property-conferral need not involve the creation of properties. Moreover, it suggests that all property-conferral is immediate and amounts to unmediated character-grounding, whereby God plays the character-grounding role by acting to ground directly the character of objects, without a separate and prior act of creating their properties. For example, there is no need for God to sphericity-ize sphericity, which in turn spherizes the ball. Instead, God can directly spherize the ball.

### *The Precognition Challenge*

The palette theory faces a third and final challenge. Here the problem stems from a plausible principle concerning divine precognition. According to many prominent voices in the tradition, God's knowledge of creation, in some sense, precedes God's free creative activity. That is, in some sense, God precognizes what he freely creates. Here I want to focus on what we might call *qualitative* precognition, the principle that God foreknows all the *kinds* of things God could make. I will put the idea as follows:

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<sup>27</sup> I thank John Heil for drawing this to my attention.

*Precognition*: Prior to creating anything whatsoever, for any  $x$  that God could create, God foreknows everything about the kind of thing  $x$  would be, everything about the nature  $x$  would have, and, in particular, God foreknows all the kinds of things that  $x$  would be essentially capable of doing.

Two brief but important caveats about this principle are in order. First, the type of priority in precognition need not be temporal. That is, however we understand Precognition, it should be consistent with different views about God and time and whether or not creation has always (albeit contingently) existed. Second, I intend for Precognition to be neutral on whether and to what extent God foreknows what creatures would freely do.

I take Precognition to enjoy a high degree of plausibility, largely stemming from a consideration of how things look if we deny it. In his recent book, *Ontology and Providence in Creation: Taking Creation Ex Nihilo Seriously*, Mark Ian Thomas Robson develops a view of providence predicated on the denial of Precognition. In short, Robson argues that if God has precognition then what God creates is a mere replica of what God precognizes, and this, in turn, violates the doctrine of creation ex nihilo. Indeed, to imagine that God has precognition is to think of “God as the great photocopier” (2008, 50). Thus, to preserve creation ex nihilo, we must deny that God has prior qualitative knowledge of what his free creative acts could produce. Strictly speaking, God lacks foreknowledge about the kinds of things God could create prior to God’s free creative act. Robson aptly calls this *radical* creation ex nihilo.

Unfortunately, and with all due respect to Robson, what he takes to be radical, I take to be a compelling and vivid *reductio* on the denial of Precognition. To show why, perhaps it will suffice to consider a passage from Timothy Pawl’s review of Robson’s book. As Pawl imagines it, if Robson is right, God found himself in the following situation:

God is confronted with a large (perhaps infinite) number of levers (i.e., continua or capacities), each of which, in some sense, is a part of God. Each lever has a large (perhaps infinite) number of possible positions (i.e., actualizations of that capacity), and, for any position, if the lever is put to that position, it will produce something or other. God, however, does not know which lever does what. In fact, he doesn’t even have a list of things the levers could do. It isn’t that he knows that one produces colors and another elephants; he doesn’t even know of colors or elephants. The only

way he learns which lever does what and which position on each lever does what is by trial and, if not error, at least observation. Then, after pulling levers, he can tell what each lever is for, and what general sort of thing it creates. In creating, God pulls lots of levers (2009).

In other words, on Robson's view, God literally *discovers* what he is capable of. On this picture, prior to creation, God is omnipotent yet maximally ignorant of what his creative power can do. In effect, this represents God as the greatest conceivable savant<sup>28</sup> – by my lights, a more dubious deity than the photocopier God.

Moreover, I am not convinced that we are forced to choose between the photocopier God and the savant God. This is because I think there are grounds to reject an apparent assumption of Robson's argument. I have in mind the assumption that *God has precognition only if what God creates is a mere replica of what he precognizes*. This seems to be based on the idea that precognition would require not only divine ideas but divine ideas understood as self-exemplifying forms – as *archetypes* or *paradigms*. However, even if precognition requires divine ideas, it is neither obvious nor plausible that those ideas must be archetypal. Indeed, whatever case can be made for archetypal divine ideas, I would sooner reject some premise in that case than accept the maximally savantic God.

To be sure, Precognition naturally suggests some form of divine conceptualism – roughly, the idea that God's eternal knowledge in some way involves rich ideational content. I have a few things to say about this below, but for the purposes of this paper I do not need to settle the question of which version of conceptualism best complements or supports Precognition.<sup>29</sup>

Their logical independence notwithstanding, the plausibility of Precognition lends support to theistic conferralism. It does so by undermining the palette theory. To see why, suppose that God has qualitative precognition and, setting aside the above regress worries, suppose that the palette theory is true. And consider a token property of sphericity, which God has made. Given Precognition, prior to making

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<sup>28</sup> The following *OED* gloss on 'savant' is the relevant one: "A person who displays an unusual (often exceptional) aptitude for one particular type of mental task or artistic activity despite having significant impairment in other areas of intellectual or social functioning ..." ("savant, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, Web. 2 April 2015.)

<sup>29</sup> I'm inclined to pair theistic conferralism with *theistic conceptual realism*, as developed by Greg Welty (2014).

sphericity, God knew what sort of metaphysical work the property would be able to do, or, to say the same thing, what sort of property role the creature would be able to play. Generally speaking, sphericity's job would be that of a formal cause, or character-grounder. More specifically, its job would be to ground, or be the formal cause of, the shape of a sphere. To use language I introduced above, the job of sphericity is to be a *sphere-maker* or *spherizer*. Thus, creating sphericity would amount to making a sphere-maker. And, given palette theory, God's creating sphericity amounts to God's making a sphere-maker in order to sustain the shape of a sphere.

But, presumably, if God essentially has the knowledge and power required to make a character-grounder – for example, to make a sphere-maker, then God has what it takes to ground character directly, whereby his doing so plays the role of a formal cause, and thereby *just is* a formal cause, such as a sphere-making or spherizing. Thus, if God's aim is to ground the sphericity of something, there would seem to be no point for God to make first a sphere-maker. In this way Precognition suggests that the palette theory saddles God's creative activity with redundancy and unparsimoniousness. These vices provide a reason to reject the palette theory and affirm theistic conferralism, which removes them.

This line of argument suggests that God does not need to create properties in order to ground the character of creatures. Rather, given Precognition, God can *directly* ground the character of objects. In any given case, God's act of doing so would itself be a character-grounding. In this way, God's action would itself play the property-role and, thus, the divine act would *be* a property.

## VI. CONVERGING ON THEISTIC CONFERRALISM

This concludes the case against the palette theory. The immediacy, regress, and precognition challenges present serious difficulties for the thesis that God creates the properties he bestows – and, indeed, for any theory on which God creates character-grounders.<sup>30</sup> Those challenges also converge on and support the following idea, which is an enhanced version of my original proposal:

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<sup>30</sup> Elsewhere I hope to show how the regress and precognition challenges pose difficulties for the version of theistic activism proposed by Morris and Menzel (1986). But see my suggestion above, in footnote 2.

*Theistic Conferralism:* Property-conferral does not involve the creation and bestowal of properties. Instead, a divine act of property-conferral grounds the character of an object immediately, without the instrumentality of a property distinct from the act itself. Thus, the properties of creatures are identical with acts of divine sustenance, specifically, unmediated acts of property-conferral.

On this view, the actions-cum-properties that constitute property-conferral turn out to be modifier tropes. Above I noted that a modifier trope is a non-shareable, non-self-exemplifying property, or character-grounder. On theistic conferralism, the acts that constitute property-conferral satisfy this description of a modifier trope. First, if the proposed view is right, then an unmediated act of property-conferral itself plays the character-grounding role that a traditional trope is supposed to play. But whatever can play a property-role is, by definition, a property. Thus, because an act of property-conferral can play the property role, it is a property qua character-grounder. In this sense, the properties of creatures are identical with divine actions. Second, acts of property-conferral are non-shareable. If an act grounds the sphericity of some object O, then God's doing so – his *spherizing-O* – is an O-specific action. As such, the act is unshareable in that God's *spherizing-O* could not possibly be an act of spherizing some creature distinct from O. Third, the act of grounding the sphericity of a ball is not itself spherical. Rather, the act is the formal cause of the *ball's* being spherical. In this sense, acts of property-conferral are not self-exemplifying. Thus, the acts that constitute property-conferral are non-shareable, non-self-exemplifying properties. They are modifier tropes.

## VII. IMPROVING MODIFIER TROPE THEORY

Previously, I mentioned that theistic conferralism mitigates several weaknesses of modifier trope theory. We are now in a position to see how this is so.

The first weakness concerns unifying natural classes of tropes. Almost all trope theorists allow that there are (or could be) numerically distinct but exactly similar tropes.<sup>31</sup> There might be, for example, many exactly

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<sup>31</sup> Charles Hartshorne seems to have held to a trope theory on which no two tropes are exactly qualitatively alike; see Robson (2008: 55-56).

similar but numerically distinct sphericity tropes. However, on pain of invoking a basic or irreducible universal, many (perhaps most) trope theorists deny that the unity of the natural class of sphericity tropes is to be explained in terms of a distinct property that is shared or instantiated by all and only sphericity tropes.

Instead, the standard view takes it to be primitive that a basic<sup>32</sup> trope is the kind of trope it is.<sup>33</sup> On this view, tropes belonging to a natural class are similar just in virtue of being the tropes that they are.<sup>34</sup> That is, the unity of a natural class of tropes is grounded in the similarity of tropes, and the latter is determined by each trope primitively being what it is. Realists have alleged that accounting for the unity of a natural class of tropes in this way is unsatisfying and marks at least a pro tanto weakness of trope theory. A trope theorist may or may not agree, but if they do agree they will take the relative lack of explanation at this point to be a disadvantage that is, all things considered, outweighed by the advantages of having non-shareable properties.

Regardless of whether or not this marks a genuine pro tanto weakness of trope theory, theistic conferralism allows for a deeper explanation of the unity of natural classes of tropes. By accepting the proposed view, trope theorists can take a sphericity trope to be a divine act of spherizing. And, by accepting Precognition, they can take the natural step of holding that the unity of a natural class of modifier tropes is grounded in *whatever it is* that God precognizes when God precognizes the kind of thing that he would make were he to perform one of those acts-cum-tropes. Or, if you go in for a theory of divine conceptualism, the unity of a natural class of tropes would express and be grounded in a single divine idea. For example, the natural class of all and only divine spherizings – all the sphericity tropes – would enjoy a unity that is grounded in the single divine idea of sphericity that all and only those acts-cum-tropes express. Thus, any two spherizing acts are spherizing acts in virtue of expressing the divine idea of sphericity in general. Solving the unity problem in this way requires something like divine conceptualism, but as noted

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<sup>32</sup> At issue here is the similarity of *simple* tropes. A trope theorist who allows for complex tropes (tropes that have tropes as proper parts) can account for the similarity of complex tropes in terms of the similarity of their proper parts. Of course, this would not account for the similarity of simple tropes.

<sup>33</sup> See Campbell (1990: 29-30) for what Ehring (2012: 8f) calls “standard trope theory”.

<sup>34</sup> Ehring (2012) defends a different view. On his account, a trope is the kind of trope it is in virtue of belonging to primitively natural classes.

above, the latter is compatible with theistic conferralism and, moreover, is naturally suggested by Precognition.

The second weakness concerns the origination of tropes. It is plausible to think that tropes are contingent beings – especially within a theistic framework. But if so, what accounts for their coming to be? Campbell puts the problem as follows. On trope theory,

“[e]very real change involves trope replacement – if trope A gives way to trope B, where  $A \neq B$ , a change has occurred. If A and B are of different kinds, we have qualitative change of the classic type. What was green is now red (as apples ripen). ... As trope replacement, one trope disappears and its place is taken by a brand new creation, a trope that has not hitherto existed. The trouble with such a theory is that the whole process remains absolutely obscure and magical. Where does the original trope go? Where does the replacement come from? How does the new trope nudge the old one out of the way? There is no machinery to manage the transition.” (1990: 141-142).

As I read him, Campbell is a module trope theorist. However, his worry about trope origination also arises on a modifier trope theory. Suppose I mold some clay so as to make a ball and, for the sake of argument, suppose the ball is perfectly spherical. On trope theory, the sphericity of the ball is numerically unique – that is, it is non-identical with the sphericity of any other sphere that there might be. Moreover, on modifier trope theory, the sphericity of this ball is not itself spherical and so is numerically distinct from the sphere that my molding produced via efficient causation. Rather, the sphericity of the ball is the formal cause of the ball’s being shaped as it is. Nevertheless, on modifier trope theory, a sphericity trope did come into existence, just now, as I finished molding the clay. Again, the process by which a trope is conjured up is “absolutely obscure and magical”. Thus, in a sense that begs for deeper explanation, it would seem that the trope came to be *out of nothing*.<sup>35</sup>

Theistic conferralism goes some distance towards providing an explanation. Here, tropes are identical with *basic* divine acts. Because tropes are basic acts, they originate in God but are not created per se. And because acts of sustenance are *contingent*, tropes are contingent. Thus, theistic conferralism provides for both the origination and

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<sup>35</sup> Campbell attempts to solve this problem (and others) by taking *all* genuine tropes to be fields. See Moreland (2001: 66-67) for a critique.

the contingency of tropes. To be sure, this is not to say that such acts are wholly unmysterious. However, a theist is already committed to something rather mysterious: basic divine actions that are contingent but non-created. Thus, by identifying some of those basic divine acts with tropes, theists consolidate the mystery of trope origination into a mystery they already accept. On theistic conferralism, the origination of tropes is no more (or less) mysterious than the origination of other types of contingent divine acts.

A third and final problem concerns the indeterminacy of modifier tropes. This concern is specific to modifier trope theory. The problem is brought to light by the modifier/module distinction, which suggests that the concept of a modifier trope is a *functional* concept. That is, a modifier trope is defined in terms of what it *does*, in terms of its *characterizing effects*, as it were. A sphericity trope, for example, is a sphere-maker; it is something that *spherizes* something else. However, identifying the *role* a modifier trope plays – saying what it *does* – is insufficient to specify the intrinsic nature of the entity that plays that role. Thus, because the concept of a modifier trope is a functional concept, merely postulating modifier tropes is not enough to fix the trope ontology. Other than what they *do*, what can we say about the modifier tropes *themselves*? Leaving this question unanswered saddles modifier trope theory with an undesirable and arguably problematic indeterminacy.<sup>36</sup>

Theistic conferralism resolves this indeterminacy by identifying modifier tropes with divine acts of property-conferral, which, arguably, a theist is already committed to. (And even if theism does not entail property-conferral, theism is consistent with it.) These acts play the modifier trope role and thus provide a more determinate ontology for modifier trope theory.

We have now seen three ways in which theistic conferralism shores up weaknesses of modifier trope theory. In addition, theistic conferralism seems to be more nominalistic and parsimonious than the conjunction of theism and standard trope theory. A theist is independently committed to divine actions of some sort or other. Thus, by taking tropes to be divine acts, theistic conferralism makes it unnecessary to postulate a further category of *sui generis* tropes. Instead, the category of trope is consolidated into the category of divine action.

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<sup>36</sup> Edwards (2014: 93) raises a similar objection to both predicate and concept nominalism.

## VIII. IMPROVING THE DOCTRINE OF SUSTENANCE

Theistic conferralism also offers a way to overcome the previously mentioned dilemma that property-conferral seems to pose for a theory of sustenance. As previously, the dilemma is that the rejection of property-conferral threatens to give rise to deism and the affirmation of it threatens to give rise to occasionalism.

Property-conferral threatens occasionalism when it is taken to involve efficient causation. So understood, God's conferring sphericity on an object would involve God's being the efficient cause of the object's coming to be spherical. More generally, God would be the efficient cause of every creature's having the character it does. Thus, divine acts of property-conferral would be in direct competition with natural causes. On such a picture, the threat of occasionalism is severe.

On theistic conferralism, however, divine acts of property-conferral do not compete with natural causes. To see this, set aside theistic conferralism and consider how character-grounding would otherwise work on modifier trope theory.<sup>37</sup> To illustrate, suppose L is a lump of clay that an artist shapes into a perfect sphere. L thereby comes to have a sphericity trope and the trope grounds L's shape. Importantly, the *efficient* cause (the artist) of L's coming to be spherical acts logically (but not temporally) prior to the *formal* cause (the sphericity trope) of L's being spherical. In this way, on modifier trope theory, a sphericity trope is not an efficient cause. Rather, the trope acts logically posterior to efficient causes and does not compete with efficient causes.

According to theistic conferralism, modifier tropes are identical with divine actions. As such, divine acts play the character-grounding role that standard modifier tropes would otherwise play. That is, divine acts cum tropes are formal (non-efficient) causes that operate logically posterior to efficient causes and do not compete with efficient causes. Thus, theistic conferralism offers a way for sustenance to involve property-conferral without putting acts of property-conferral in direct competition with natural causes – thereby avoiding occasionalism, while maintaining that a creature's having a property or power is immediately dependent on an unmediated act of divine sustenance – thereby avoiding deism.

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<sup>37</sup> This is more or less the same way character-grounding works if character-grounders are taken to be non-self-exemplifying universals. I take Armstrong (1980) and (1989) and Moreland (2001) to hold the latter view.

It should be noted, however, that theistic conferralism requires rejecting McCann's thesis that "to sustain an entity is the same thing as to create it" (2012, 29). On theistic conferralism, sustenance is not continuous creation because unlike creating, sustaining does not involve efficient causation. In other words, with respect to *creating* something, the divine acts that constitute property-conferral include acts that are formal causes and acts that are efficient causes. But with respect to *sustaining* something, the acts that constitute property-conferral only include acts that are formal causes.

### IX. GOING FORWARD

My aim has been to explain and motivate theistic conferralism, the thesis that creaturely properties are identical with acts that constitute divine sustenance. I have argued that the thesis is attractive because it connects so-called trope theory and the doctrine of sustenance in a mutually enhancing way. On the one hand, by identifying tropes with divine actions, theistic conferralism mitigates the weaknesses of modifier trope theory. And, on the other hand, by identifying divine actions with tropes, theistic conferralism offers an understanding of divine sustenance that avoids both deism and occasionalism.

Going forward, theistic conferralism raises many questions that cannot be taken up here. Most generally, it remains to be seen how best to situate the thesis within a complete theistic metaphysic. Perhaps I may be permitted to conclude by offering a provisional reply to two specific questions.

First, what is the ontological status of the entity that is *characterized* by a modifier trope cum divine act? That is, how should we understand *trope-bearers* on theistic conferralism? For example, what sort of entity is the *subject* of a divine act of (formal) spherizing? Many trope theorists are bundle theorists: they take objects to be entirely constructed out of tropes.<sup>38</sup> On such a view, the bundle that contains a trope is the bearer of that trope. Elsewhere I argue that while a module trope bundle theory is viable, a *modifier* trope bundle theory is not.<sup>39</sup> Thus, because theistic

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<sup>38</sup> Trope bundle theorists include Williams (1953), Campbell (1990), Schaffer (2001), Maurin (2002), and Ehring (2011).

<sup>39</sup> See my "Tropes as Character-Grounders". For criticism of bundle theory in general, see Garcia (2014b) and (2014c).

conferralism is predicated on modifier tropes, I take it to be incompatible with bundle theory. Presumably, then, if theistic conferralism is to work, it will have to work with a substance-attribute model.<sup>40</sup> For example, one might deploy the thesis within a substance-attribute model on which modifier tropes (here identified with divine acts) and bare particulars go together to make up objects. Following other constituent ontologies, such as Armstrong (1997) and Moreland (2001), this model could take objects to be characterized in virtue of having substrata and modifier tropes (divine acts) as constituents, in some (perhaps *sui generis* and non-mereological) sense of ‘constituent’.<sup>41</sup>

Second, how well does theistic conferralism comport with traditional views about divine immutability and divine simplicity? Would an unmediated act of property conferral – God’s spherizing a particular, say – involve an intrinsic change in God or require God to have constituent parts? According to theistic conferralism, by performing acts of property conferral, God is *in some sense* responsive to creaturely reality. But I see no reason to think that this kind of divine activity and responsiveness is any more (or less) problematic than the more familiar kind of divine activity and responsiveness, such as God’s answering prayers or talking to Abraham. In short, theistic conferralism does not appear to introduce any *new kind* of challenge for the doctrines of immutability or simplicity.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Trope theorists who reject bundle theory and opt for a substance-attribute model include Martin (1980), LaBossiere (1994), Lowe (2006), and Heil (2012).

<sup>41</sup> See Magalhães (2006) for a helpful discussion of the sense(s) in which Armstrong’s universals are (or are not) spatio-temporal. See Garcia (2014a) and Pickavance (2014) for recent discussion of bare particulars.

<sup>42</sup> For stimulating discussion of these matters, I wish to thank William Abraham, Scott Austin, José Tomás Alvarado, Paul Audi, Andrew Bailey, Tony Bolos, Greg Boyd, Jerry Cederblom, John Churchill, Lindsay Cleveland, Richard Cross, Brian Cutter, Michael Della Rocca, Laura Ekstrom, Evan Fales, Tobias Flattery, John Forcey, Guido Imaguire, Marcin Iwanicki, Christoph Jäger, Nate King, Jon Kvanvig, Hugh McCann, William Melanson, Chris Menzel, Christia Mercer, Andrew Newman, Tim Pawl, Tim Pickavance, Alex Pruss, Maysam Qasemi, Josh Rasmussen, Gonzalo Rodríguez-Pereyra, Marleen Rozemond, Noël Saenz, Derek Shiller, Jeff Snapper, Helen Steward, Kevin Timpe, Zita Toth, Tom Tracy, Chris Tweedt, and Ezequiel Zerbudis, as well as audiences at Yale Divinity School, Talbot School of Theology, Houston Baptist University, the University of Nebraska at Omaha, the 2013 *Philosophy of Religion Conference* at Baylor University, the 2014 *Divine Action in the World Conference* in Innsbruck, and the 2014 *Cuarto Coloquio de Metafísica Analítica* (Fourth Symposium of Analytical Metaphysics) in Santiago, Chile. For discussion and comments on earlier drafts, I am indebted to two

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