Theistic Conferralism: Consolidating Divine Sustenance and Trope Theory

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Consolidating Divine Sustenance and Trope Theory

Robert K. Garcia

> What is it that holds the structured universe together, and which if it were withdrawn would lead to immediate and total disintegration? The pressure of the will of God. Running right through life, through time and space, nature and personality, history and experience, there is this one living incomparable energy, this supercharged cosmic current, the will of God.
>
> James S. Stewart[1]

> As truly as we have our being from the endless Power of God and from the endless Wisdom and from the endless Goodness, just as truly we have our protection in the endless Power of God, in the endless Wisdom and in the endless Goodness.
>
> Julian of Norwich[2]

This chapter concerns the causation involved in divine sustenance—the "pressure of the will of God" that continually upholds things in existence and supplies them with their properties and powers. My aim is to consolidate the theological doctrine of sustenance and a metaphysical theory of properties. Towards that end, I develop and justify two consolidatory proposals, which together secure a more parsimonious theistic ontology and integrate the doctrine of sustenance and a theory of properties in a mutually enhancing way.[3] The bulk of the chapter concerns the first proposal, which I explain and justify in the first three sections. In the last two sections, I explain and justify the second proposal.

I. Tropes as Divine Acts: Explanation

My first proposal is the following thesis:

- **Tropes as Divine Acts** (**TDA**): creaturely properties are non-transferable modifier tropes, and modifier tropes are identical with divine acts.

There are two components of TDA that especially require explanation: the "creaturely" qualifier and the notion of a "non-transferable modifier trope." I will dispatch the former after focusing on the latter.

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The concept of a modifier trope may be unfamiliar, so I will begin by offering a provisional sketch which I will then unpack by considering a number of choice points in the debate over the metaphysics of properties. These choice points provide a path to the logical space occupied by the notion of a modifier trope. As a provisional sketch, we may say that a modifier trope is a *non-self-exemplifying* and *non-shareable character grounder*. We will see and unpack each of these three constituent concepts along the diverging path traced by the following choice points.

The first choice point concerns whether properties exist. Generally, philosophers who think that properties exist think that properties are needed to do metaphysical work, that there are one or more *property roles* that need to be played.[4] One important property role is the *character-grounding role*. Here, the idea is that a property is a character grounder in that an object is charactered in virtue of having that property. Put differently, an object is *characterized* by a property—made to be charactered in some way. 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. Here the object is spherized—made to be spherical—by sphericity. Like other cases of grounding, character grounding may be described as "metaphysical explanation" to distinguish it from efficient-causal explanation.[5] This distinction will be of crucial importance in what follows. Character grounding does not involve efficient causation. Rather, it involves formal causation. A character grounder is not an efficient but a formal cause of an object's being charactered in some way.

At the first choice point, the *austere nominalist* says that properties do *not* exist.[6] She holds that we don't need properties—either for character grounding or anything else: in her view, charactered objects are primitively charactered and thus do not require the postulation of characteristics *per se*. At the first choice point, philosophers who think we need character grounders say that properties *do* exist but disagree over the *kind* of entity that plays the character-grounding role.

We thereby arrive at a second choice point: whether character grounders are constructed out of more fundamental entities. The class nominalist says properties are constructed and takes properties to be identical with *sets* of (actual or possible) ordinary objects. In their view, an object is charactered in a certain way in virtue of being a member of a certain set of objects; a ball is spherical in virtue of being a member of the set of all and only spheres. Here, the latter set plays the role of a character grounder, and, thus, the set *is* a property.

Note two things about class nominalism that will be relevant in the following. First, in this view, properties are *non-self exemplifying*. Although the nature of sets is disputed in the broader context of metaphysics, this much seems clear: if there is a set of all and only spheres, that set is not itself spherical. Thus, in class nominalism, the property of sphericity is identical with a set that is not itself spherical. This generalizes: in class nominalism, a property qua set does not itself have or bear the character

that it grounds. In this sense, in this view, properties are non-self exemplifying. Second, in class nominalism, properties are *formal causes*. An object is spherical in virtue of belonging to the set of all and only spheres; the set *makes it the case* that the object is spherical, where the "making" is a case of formal, not efficient, causation. As we will see, the concept of a non-self-exemplifying property that is a formal cause is not unique to class nominalism—it is also deployed by TDA.

In contrast to the class nominalist, other philosophers take properties to be unconstructed and fundamental. They disagree, however, on the next and third choice point: whether 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 properties to be shareable and calls them *universals*. In realism, if at a given time there are two distinct spheres, *a* and *b*, then the sphericity of *a* is (numerically) identical with the sphericity of *b*; the sphericity is a universal.[7] In contrast, a trope theorist takes properties to be non-shareable and calls them *tropes*. In 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 properties; the sphericities are tropes.[8]

Although the literature typically uses "shareability" (repeatability, etc.) to distinguish universals and tropes, this choice point is more accurately said to concern *synchronic shareability*, as indicated by language (see previously) like "at once" and "simultaneously." In fact, although trope theorists agree that a trope cannot characterize more than one object at a time, they disagree on whether tropes are diachronically shareable, or "transferable": able to characterize multiple objects *over time*. We will pick up this issue further subsequently, as our final choice point.

Both realists and trope theorists face a further choice point. However, because I am tracing a path that culminates within trope theory, I will explain the choice primarily in terms of tropes. As I've shown elsewhere, we can find in the literature a largely tacit distinction between two concepts of a trope.[9] This yields two versions of trope theory, and, thus, our fourth choice is between them. The best way to understand the distinction is by way of examples. 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 so, then it is what I call a *module* trope. If not, then it is what I call a *modifier* trope.

Towards understanding and assessing TDA, it is crucial to not conflate these rival concepts of a trope. TDA employs modifier tropes and, indeed, would be a non-starter if understood in terms of module tropes. Thus, to forestall potential misunderstandings, it will be useful to draw out the distinction in more detail.

Because tropes are supposed to be *properties*, it is natural to talk about the module/modifier distinction in terms of whether tropes are *self exemplifying*. Thus, we might say that a module trope is a non-shareable

character grounder that is *self exemplifying*, whereas a modifier trope is a non-shareable character grounder that is *non-self exemplifying*. However, in using this language, we should be careful, because the concept of self-exemplification is not pre-theoretical and, more problematically, may come with theoretical baggage that can obscure the module/modifier distinction.

With respect to module tropes, self-exemplification should *not* be taken to imply that a module trope somehow has its intrinsic character *derivatively*. Rather, a module trope is *primitively* naturally charactered with respect to the character it "self-exemplifies": a sphericity module trope is primitively spherical. Note that, aside from the character that it grounds, a module trope has *no other* natural character. It is primitively and singly charactered. Thus, in effect, a module trope is a primitively singly propertied *object*. A sphericity module trope is a primitively merely spherical object.

With respect to modifier tropes, non-self exemplification means that a trope characterizes without being charactered: the trope does not exemplify, have, or bear the character it grounds. Rather, a modifier trope and its bearer are (numerically) distinct, and the trope grounds the character of its *bearer*: it *characterizes* its bearer (*makes* it charactered) in some single and specific way, but the trope itself is not charactered in that way. Thus, a modifier trope is a singly characterizing property. A sphericity modifier trope is a non-shareable, non-spherical, *sphere-maker* or *spherizer*.

To illustrate, consider how each theory accounts for the character of a billiard ball. In module trope theory, a billiard ball is hard in virtue of its hardness trope and spherical in virtue of its sphericity trope, where the hardness trope is itself (primitively) hard and the sphericity trope is itself (primitively) spherical. In contrast, in modifier trope theory, the billiard ball is hard in virtue of its hardness trope and spherical in virtue of its sphericity trope, but the hardness trope is not itself hard and the sphericity trope is not itself spherical.

This account of modifier tropes invokes causal language, such as "characterizing," "character-making," and "spherizing." Importantly, this language should be understood as invoking *formal* causation and not efficient causation. Modifier tropes are not efficient causes. In fact, because modifier tropes have no natural character, they *cannot* be efficient causes. A mass trope is neither massive nor otherwise naturally charactered; as such, it is ineligible to play a direct efficient causal role.[10] Rather, a modifier trope is a formal cause of object's being naturally charactered in some way. A sphericity modifier trope is the formal cause of an object's being spherical.[11] It is important to stress this general point because if modifier tropes were misunderstood as efficient causes, then TDA would straightforwardly imply occasionalism, which it is designed to avoid.

The modifier trope theorist is not alone in postulating properties that are formal causes. As noted previously, the class nominalist's properties qua sets are formal causes. Similarly, universals may also be understood as formal causes. Faced with her own version of the fourth choice point,

the realist must choose between taking universals to be self exemplifying (sometimes called "paradigms" or "paradigmatic") or non-self exemplifying (what we might call "merely formal" universals).[12] Like modifier tropes, and for similar reasons, non-self-exemplifying universals would be merely formal causes.

Through this series of choices, we have arrived at the concept of a modifier trope: a non-shareable and non-self-exemplifying character grounder. To arrive at the property concept employed by TDA, we must traverse a final choice point concerning whether modifier tropes are diachronically shareable, or *transferable*. As noted, if tropes are transferable, then although a trope cannot characterize more than one object at time, it may characterize several objects over time. In contrast, if tropes are non-transferable, then a trope must characterize its object, and no other object can ever be characterized by that trope. In other words, if a trope is non-transferable, then it cannot exist and not characterize its object.[13] Thus, a non-transferable modifier trope would be an *object-specific* character grounder. For example, suppose S is a sphericity modifier trope and S spherizes object O. If S is non-transferable, then S must spherize O, and no other object can ever be spherized by S. Thus, S is an O-specific character grounder. More exactly, S is an O-spherizer.

So much for our path of choice points. The property concept employed by TDA is that of a non-transferable modifier trope. TDA proposes that we take properties to be non-transferable modifier tropes and the latter to be divine acts. For ease of expression, in the sequel, I will usually suppress the "non-transferable" qualification. Let it be understood.

With the notion of a modifier trope in hand, we can now consider what TDA proposes in taking modifier tropes to be divine acts. In effect, TDA deploys a general metaphysical strategy that is shared by other views in which properties exist and are fundamental, whether properties are taken to be universals or tropes. To illustrate, suppose O is an ordinary spherical object and that sphericity is a natural property (among those taken to exist and be fundamental). To account for O's being spherical, the general strategy is as follows. Take there to be a property of sphericity, S, such that O is spherical in virtue of having S, where "in virtue of" invokes formal causation: S is the formal cause of O's being spherical—S *spherizes* O. Of course, apart from agreeing on this general strategy, different theories will disagree on the nature of S—in particular, whether S is self exemplifying or (synchronically or diachronically) shareable. In a theory that takes properties to be non-transferable modifier tropes, S is a non-spherical O-spherizer.

Working within modifier trope theory, TDA takes (non-transferable) modifier tropes to be divine actions. In other words, an object's being naturally charactered in some way is directly grounded by a divine action, an action which plays the role of a modifier trope. Thus, TDA analyzes the previous example in this way: O is spherical in virtue of S, where S is identical with an O-specific divine act, a non-spherical O-spherizer. In

TDA, the role of modifier tropes is played by certain divine acts. Those acts qua character grounders are non-shareable and non-transferable because they are object specific. They are non-self exemplifying in that they do not have the character they ground (a spherizing act is not itself spherical). And, importantly, as modifier tropes, they are formal causes and thus neither are nor compete with efficient causes.

Notice that in TDA, properties contingently exist but are not created. If something is created by God, then it is the *result or product* of a divine act—the act of creating something. God's acts of creating exist, but on pain of an apparently vicious regress, those acts are not themselves created. Thus, in TDA, character grounding does not involve God *creating* properties. Rather, God's character-grounding acts *just are* properties. Those acts ground character directly, without properties distinct from the acts themselves. Further, because creatures exist contingently, so do the properties qua divine acts that ground their character. Thus, in TDA, properties contingently exist but are not among the entities God creates.

Before moving on to the justifications for TDA, I'd like to explain its "creaturely" qualifier. I think there are good reasons to exclude divine properties from TDA's scope and, more generally, for treating creaturely properties and divine properties differently. Here I can only offer a sketch of my reasons.

To begin, if TDA lacked the "creaturely" qualification, then it would imply that if there are divine properties, they would themselves be divine acts. Thus, if *having the power to act* is one of God's properties, then God would have that power in virtue of . . . acting. I'd prefer to avoid the burden of showing that the latter circularity isn't vicious—hence the qualifier.

But avoiding trouble isn't my only reason for the "creaturely" qualifier. My main and principled reason is that I am not convinced that, strictly speaking, divine properties exist.

First, I neither affirm nor deny that God is a simple being; I am not convinced either way. Thus, for all I know, God is simple and identical with each divine property (omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence, etc.). However, I disagree with those who hold that divine simplicity entails that God is a (divine) property. I see no reason not to collapse the categories (of object and property) in the other direction, so I take divine simplicity to entail that a divine property is an object (God). In this sense, I take it that if God is identical with each divine property, then, strictly speaking, God exists, but there are no divine properties *per se*. Such a view would involve a form of austere nominalism about God and God's character.

Second, the standard reasons for taking a realist view about creaturely properties (taking them to be, say, universals or tropes) stem from the need or desirability of accounting for various explananda, including the one-over-many phenomenon, the many-over-one phenomenon, and the apparently "irreducible need for reference to (or quantification over) a property."[14]

However, it is not obvious that God occasions any of these explananda. It is unclear how God, if simple, could display the many-over-one phenomenon. It is unclear how God, if metaphysically unique, could display the one-over-many phenomenon. And, to my knowledge, no one has shown that there are true sentences that inescapably quantify over divine properties. Arguably, then, the reasons for taking a realist view about creaturely properties do not straightforwardly provide reasons for taking a realist view about divine properties.

So much for explaining TDA. In the next two sections, I will justify TDA by arguing for its viability (Section II) and merits (Section III).

II. Tropes as Divine Acts: Viability

There are at least three reasons to think that TDA is viable. By "viable," I mean that TDA is conceptually coherent and sufficiently on a par with other metaphysical proposals in good standing.

First, TDA is viable because divine acts are eligible to play the role of modifier tropes. Their eligibility stems from the fact that the concept of a non-self-exemplifying property—whether that of a modifier trope or a "merely formal" universal—is a *functional* concept. Unlike a self-exemplifying property, a non-self-exemplifying property is not understood in terms of its intrinsic nature. Rather, a non-self-exemplifying property is understood in terms of what it *does* (or can do), in terms of its *characterizing effects*, as it were. For example, on the assumption that properties are non-self-exemplifying, the concept of sphericity is the concept of a non-spherical sphere-maker—it is something that *spherizes* something else. However, specifying the *role* a property plays—saying what it *does*—does not suffice to specify the intrinsic nature of the entity that plays that role. Thus, because the concept of a non-self-exemplifying property is a functional concept, merely postulating non-self-exemplifying properties is not enough to fix the property ontology. That is, the postulation amounts to saying that there are entities that play the property role, but the postulation does not determine the intrinsic nature of those entities—the properties themselves.

This conceptual indeterminacy leaves opens the (epistemic) possibility that divine acts play the role of non-self-exemplifying properties. In fact, object-specific divine acts of character grounding would be especially well suited to play the role of *non-shareable* non-self-exemplifying properties, or modifier tropes. Previously, we saw that object-specific divine acts of character grounding would be non-shareable, non-transferable, non-self exemplifying, and contingent. As such, they satisfy all the eligibility requirements for playing the modifier trope role.

Second, TDA is viable because God's power makes it possible for a divine act to be a formal cause. Consider a toy theory, unlike TDA, in which God *creates* non-self-exemplifying properties (whether modifier tropes or "merely formal" universals) which themselves directly ground

the character of objects. In this view, God has the power to create formal causes. Prima facie, there is nothing logically or metaphysically impossible with the toy theory.[15] This, in turn, provides us with a reason for thinking that it is possible for God to create formal causes.

Now consider the following principle concerning omnipotence: *God can do whatever a creature can do*. Or, a bit more formally:

- If God has the power to endow a creature with (its own) power, then whatever the creature has the power to do, God has the power to do (without "using" the creature to do it).

Clearly, this principle is too strong. Some creatures, for example, may have the power to do evil, whereas God does not. Nevertheless, it is in the ballpark of something true. I'm not prepared to offer an adequate and fully general revision of the principle, but whatever such a general principle might look like, I think it would imply a specific principle concerning created formal causes. To articulate the principle, as previously, let's use "characterize" (and its specific cognates) to describe what a formal cause *does*. That is, a formal cause characterizes its object in some way. For example, as a formal cause of a sphere's shape, a sphericity property *spherizes* an object. Accordingly, here is the specific principle:

- **Principle of Omnipotence and Formal causes** (**POOF**): If God has the power to create a formal cause that would characterize an object in some way, then God has the power to directly characterize an object in that way. By "directly," I mean "without using or needing a created formal cause."

In POOF, if God has the power to create a sphericity property, then God has the power to directly spherize an object.

POOF seems intuitively plausible, and I see no reason to doubt it. The antecedent of POOF is supported by the previous toy theory, which provided a reason for thinking that God can create formal causes. POOF then allows us to infer that it is possible for God to directly act to formally cause: to directly characterize objects.

In addition, arguably, there is nothing in the concept of a formal cause that requires formal causes to be self exemplifying. As such, the concept of a formal cause is a functional concept. Thus, in directly characterizing an object, God's action would play the role of a formal cause; the divine act of characterizing would itself *be* a formal cause. In this way, the joint plausibility of the toy view and POOF provides a reason for thinking that TDA is viable.

Third, TDA is viable because it deploys the same type of explanatory strategy as other seemingly viable theses in theistic metaphysics. I have in mind the general strategy of taking the items in some traditional metaphysical category to be identical with certain divine acts (or, to say the

same thing, taking divine acts to play the role for those items), thereby collapsing or consolidating the former category into the category of divine action. I will offer two examples.

The first example is a recent proposal by Christopher Menzel concerning the nature of sets.[16] Building on the work of Alvin Plantinga, Menzel proposes that sets are identical with *divine collectings*. In this view, sets are a special type (and proper subset!) of divine action: a set just is God's thinking of some things *as a whole*. For example, the set containing Michelle and Barack is identical with God's thinking of Michelle and Barack as a whole. Setting aside its motives and merits, which are, at any rate, too complicated to unpack here, notice that Menzel's proposal collapses the category of set into the category of divine action. Likewise, TDA proposes to collapse the category of property into the category of divine action. Properties are a special type (and proper subset) of divine action. Menzel's proposal seems attractive and viable. It is certainly not a non-starter. Arguably, because TDA is similar in strategy, it is similar in viability.

The second example is divine command theory (DCT), in which acts (or act-types) have their moral properties in virtue of divine commands. Here, the moral character of an act is grounded in a divine command: an act, *A*, is morally obligatory in virtue of God commanding *A*. The divine act *makes A* morally obligatory—where the "making" is not, of course, efficient causation but presumably is a species of formal causation. According to C. Stephen Evans, different versions of DCT stem from alternative ways of understanding the relation between divine commands and moral obligations.[17] However, to avoid an ambiguity concerning "moral obligation", I will, as before, describe these versions in terms of the relation between divine commands and moral *properties*. Here is how I understand the alternatives.[18] One alternative is to take the relation to be *causal*: an act's having the property of being morally obligatory is brought about or caused by a divine command. Another alternative is to take the relation to be *supervenience*: an act's having the property of being morally obligatory (partly) supervenes on a divine command. In contrast to the first two, a third alternative takes the relation to be *identity*: an act's property of being morally obligatory is identical with a divine command.[19] The latter move is the distinctive feature of what Evans calls the "identity version" of DCT (hereafter, "identity-DCT").[20] In effect, TDA deploys the same strategy for non-normative properties that identity-DCT deploys for normative properties. Thus, TDA and identity-DCT complement each other. Identity-DCT would seem to be a viable theory—in fact, Evans takes it to be the most plausible version of DCT.[21] Thus, in virtue of their shared strategy, the viability of identity-DCT strongly suggests the viability of TDA.

The similarity between these examples and TDA provides a useful perspective from which to consider what I call the category mistake objection to TDA.[22] The objection alleges that TDA involves a category mistake—by identifying formal causes with divine actions, it confuses

the category of formal cause (or property) with the category of action. For perspective, consider parallel allegations against identity-DCT and Menzel: Identity-DCT involves a category mistake; by identifying normative properties with divine actions, it confuses the category of normative property with the category of action, and nothing can belong to both categories. Likewise for Menzel; by identifying sets with divine actions, he confuses the category of set with the category of action, and nothing can belong to both categories.

Arguably, both objections beg the question. Identity-DCT and Menzel do not *confuse* those categories; rather, they explicitly *collapse* one into the other. The collapse is constitutive of each view—it is not an alleged or downstream implication. Thus, to avoid begging the question, the objector needs to do more than allege that the collapse involves a category mistake. Rather, she must show that such a collapse is *impossible*—that the relevant categories are such that nothing can belong to both.

TDA can avail itself of a parallel response. Because TDA precisely proposes collapsing the category of formal cause into the category of divine action, the objector needs to do more than allege a category mistake; she must show that the collapse is impossible.[23]

At this point, our objector might retrench and appeal instead to the *counter-intuitiveness* of TDA as a reason to reject it. I do not deny that identifying formal causes with divine actions may seem counter-intuitive. But this counter-intuitiveness counts against TDA only if we have a reason for thinking that our intuitions are calibrated for ontological categories. It is not obvious that they are. Furthermore, given that there is little agreement about the nature of formal causes, we shouldn't put much stock in our intuitions about them.

So much for TDA's viability. I'll now discuss its merits.

III. Tropes as Divine Acts: Merits

The first merit of TDA is that, given theism, TDA improves modifier trope theory by making it more plausible that it would otherwise be. It does so by mitigating several disadvantages of modifier tropes. I've detailed some of these mitigations elsewhere, so here I will brief.[24]

The first mitigation was intimated previously. Because the concept of a modifier trope is a functional concept, merely postulating the existence of modifier tropes does not settle the question of what those tropes are like. Leaving this question unanswered saddles the theory with an undesirable and vexing indeterminacy. However, by taking modifier tropes to be divine acts, TDA resolves the ontological indeterminacy of modifier tropes.

The second mitigation concerns trope theory's account of trope similarity. In the standard view of tropes, to avoid invoking a universal or generating a regress, the exact similarity of several (say, sphericity) tropes is not grounded in a further property (being a sphericity trope) that is

instantiated by each of those tropes. Instead, exact similarity among tropes is grounded in each trope being primitively what it is. This explanatory shallowness is a weakness of trope theory.

TDA mitigates it by allowing the trope theorist to ground the exact similarity of tropes in the single divine idea that they express. For example, one could take the exact similarity of all the sphericity tropes—qua divine spherizing acts—to be grounded in the fact that each is an expression of the single divine idea of sphericity. (Arguably, the divine idea of sphericity cannot be *identical* with any or all of those tropes because the idea is general and presumably exists necessarily, whereas the tropes are object specific and exist contingently.)

The third mitigation concerns the origination of tropes. In standard trope theory, tropes are contingent beings and come into existence "as needed" and seemingly *ex nihilo*. As Keith Campbell himself noted, trope origination seems "absolutely obscure and magical."[25] TDA consolidates this mystery into one to which a theist is already committed: the mystery of basic divine acts, which are contingent but non-created (as previously).

The second merit of TDA is that it provides the theist with a parsimonious way to have properties in her ontology. According to TDA, a theist is already committed to a category (divine action) whose items can play the property role. Theists believe that in creating, sustaining, and governing the world, God acts and continues to act. Moreover, because God's acting is not necessitated by his existence or nature, divine action cannot be reduced to or identified with God or God's nature. In this way, independent of TDA, theists are committed to an ontology that includes (a category of) divine action. Thus, by taking properties to be modifier tropes and identifying the latter with divine acts, TDA consolidates the category of property into a category to which a theist is already committed—that of divine action. In TDA, because properties exist as divine acts, properties are neither fundamental nor *sui generis*. Thus, TDA allows a theist to have properties in her ontology without postulating an additional *sui generis* category for properties—a gain in ontological parsimony.

The third merit of TDA is that it can be extended to offer an attractive account of the way in which God continually upholds things in existence, often called *divine sustenance*. I will explain and justify this move in the following.

IV. Theistic Conferralism: Explanation

Independently of TDA, a traditional theist is committed to divine action. The details vary among versions of theism, but generally, God creates, sustains, speaks, saves, intervenes, and so on. TDA identifies modifier tropes with divine actions but otherwise says nothing specific about those actions. In particular, TDA does not say whether those actions (cum tropes) are among the divine actions to which a theist is independently

committed. In other words, you could consistently affirm TDA but take modifier tropes to be identical with a *novel* type of divine action. Happily, however, this novelty is not necessary: by adopting my next proposal, a theist can affirm TDA without postulating a novel type of divine action.

Building on the first, my second proposal is that we take modifier tropes to be identical with *certain types* of divine acts—namely acts of divine sustenance and, more specifically, sustaining acts of *property-conferral*:

- **Theistic Conferralism (TC):** creaturely properties are non-transferable modifier tropes, and modifier tropes are identical with acts of divine sustenance—specifically, unmediated acts of property-conferral.

There are both narrow and broad ways of understanding divine sustenance. This distinction will bring to the foreground the aspect of sustenance that I call "property-conferral."

According to traditional monotheism, all created entities whatsoever depend on God's sustaining them in being from moment to moment.[26] This doctrine of *divine sustenance* (or "preservation") is expressed in numerous sacred texts. According to the Christian tradition, for example, Jesus, God incarnate, "upholds all things by the word of His power" and "is before all things, and in him all things hold together."[27]

This dependence secures a profound and unmediated intimacy between God and each creature, an intimacy that traverses the categorial divide between the God who exists *a se* and the creature who does not. This is well captured by C. S. Lewis:

> God is both further from us, and nearer to us, than any other being. He is further from us because the sheer difference between that which has Its principle of being in Itself and that to which being is communicated, is one compared with which the difference between an archangel and a worm is quite insignificant. He makes, we are made: He is original, we derivative. But at the same time, and for the same reason, the intimacy between God and even the meanest creature is closer than any that creatures can attain with one another. Our life is, at every moment, supplied by Him: our tiny, miraculous power of free will only operates on bodies which His continual energy keeps in existence—our very power to think is His power communicated to us.[28]

As suggested by Lewis's description, there are two aspects of divine sustenance: God's sustaining our *existence* ("our life") and God's sustaining our *powers and properties* ("our very power to think"). This distinction is explicitly drawn by Kathryn Tanner:

> 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, f]rom 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.[29]

In other words, in the narrow sense, sustenance involves God's continually upholding creatures in—or supplying them with—existence. Hugh McCann calls this *existence-conferral*.[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*.

Arguably, although the label is new, the concept of property-conferral is part of the traditional doctrine of sustenance. Louis Berkhof, for example, 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."[31] Other expressions of the broad sense can be found in many prominent theologians and philosophers.[32]

Sustaining acts of property-conferral are a specific type, or sub-category, of divine sustenance, which is itself a sub-category of divine action. Insofar as she takes the traditional, broad view about divine sustenance, a theist is committed to property-conferrals independently of and prior to her views or commitments concerning the metaphysics of properties. Thus, given the previous viability arguments, insofar as she is already committed to acts of property-conferral, a theist is already committed to something that can play the character-grounding property role. TC proposes to put this prior commitment to work by identifying modifier tropes with divine acts of property-conferral.

V. Theistic Conferralism: Motives

When presenting the motives for TDA, I discussed its viability and merits in turn. With respect to the motives for TC, it will be simpler to discuss its viability and merits together. In what follows, I offer two justifications for TC. First, TC neatly solves a dilemma that vexes the doctrine of sustenance. Second, TC further improves the parsimony of theism.

The first argument in favor of TC is that it resolves a dilemma for sustenance. Despite its historical standing, the doctrine of broad sustenance is not unproblematic. In fact, property-conferral seems to pose a dilemma for an account of divine providence. On the one hand, affirming property-conferral implies that God is the immediate cause of each creature's having the properties that it does. This seems to involve a version of (strong) occasionalism, in which everything that happens in the created realm is directly caused by God and God alone. To avoid this result, some, like Thomas Tracy, reject the broad notion of sustenance.[33] On the other hand, rejecting property-conferral implies that God directly sustains the existence but not the properties of creatures. This reduction

of sustenance to the "bare permission"[34] of existence takes God out of immediate contact with the flesh-and-blood world of creatures qua charactered and empowered things, thereby collapsing the overall view into a version of deism. To avoid this consequence, some, like Kathryn Tanner and Hugh McCann, affirm the broad notion of sustenance.[35] Thus, property-conferral poses a dilemma: affirming it threatens occasionalism, and rejecting it threatens deism.

TC offers a solution to this dilemma. On the one hand, it avoids deism by affirming that sustenance involves property-conferral. That is, TC maintains that a creature's having a property or power depends immediately on an unmediated act of God. On the other hand, TC avoids occasionalism by taking property-conferral to involve formal causation, not efficient causation.

To see how TC avoids occasionalism, it is important to recall the distinction between module tropes and modifier tropes. This distinction disrupts a commonly advertised virtue of tropes—namely that they are eligible to play a direct role in (efficient) causation and perception. We are told, for instance, that the redness of a rose (its redness trope) is the immediate object of your perception and that the hotness of the stove (its hotness trope) is the direct cause of the burn on your hand.[36] However, although module tropes might have this advertised virtue, modifier tropes do not—indeed, they *cannot* have it.[37] Unlike module tropes, modifier tropes are not self-exemplifying. As such, they are not the sort of thing that you can directly see, touch, taste, and so on. For example, a redness modifier trope is not the sort of thing that you can see, and a hotness modifier trope is not the sort of thing that you can touch. Thus, modifier tropes do not themselves have any natural character and, as such, they lack the character required to be (play the role of) efficient causes. Because it is not itself colored, a redness modifier trope cannot be the immediate object of perception. Because it is not itself hot, a hotness modifier trope cannot be the direct cause of a burn. Suppose I burn my hand on a hot stove. In explaining what caused the burn, we might refer to "the hotness of the stove" or "the stove's hotness." These phrases are ambiguous between referring to (i) the hotness property itself or (ii) the hotly charactered stove. In module trope theory, they refer to (i). In modifier trope theory, they refer to (ii). Here, it is not the hotness trope that causes the burn. Rather, it is the stove that causes the burn—the stove which is hot in virtue of having the trope. Thus, in modifier trope theory, the entities that play a direct role in (efficient) causation and perception are the trope *bearers*, not the tropes. The latter are ineligible to play these roles—they are formal causes rather than efficient causes.

Because TC identifies modifier tropes with divine actions, it does not thereby identify efficient causes with divine actions. It does not imply that God is the immediate efficient cause of each creature's having the properties that it does, nor that everything that happens in the created realm is directly caused by God and God alone. Thus, in TC, divine acts

of property-conferral do not compete with natural causes. TC allows for property-conferral without occasionalism.

The second argument for TC is that it further improves the parsimony of theism. Apart from TC, TDA offers the theist a parsimonious consolidation. A theist is independently committed to an ontology that includes divine action(s). TDA makes it unnecessary to postulate a further *category* of sui generis (creaturely) properties (qua character grounders). Thus, TDA consolidates the category of trope into the category of divine action. TC offers the theist a further consolidation. A theist has independent grounds for taking acts of property-conferral to be among the divine actions. Thus, TC makes it unnecessary to postulate a *special sub-category* of divine action to provide role players for the character-grounding role (to be modifier tropes). Thus, TC further consolidates the category of trope into the category of divine acts of property-conferral. This consolidatory gain in parsimony provides a second important justification for TC.

VI. Conclusion

In this chapter, I've argued for the viability and merits of two consolidatory proposals. For theists who are looking for a theory of properties, TDA offers gains in both theoretical and ontological parsimony. In TDA, the property role is played by something to which a theist is already committed: divine actions. Thus, TDA offers the theist a way to have properties without having a *sui generis* category for properties. In addition, for theists who are independently attracted to tropes, TDA offers a way to mitigate some of the standard weaknesses of trope theory. TC offers a further consolidatory gain in parsimony, along with an attractive way to understand divine sustenance. Independently of TC, the theist has a good reason to take divine sustenance to involve property-conferral—namely to avoid deism. Thus, TC identifies tropes with a specific type of divine action to which a theist is already (or has good reason to be) committed. TC also defeats the main reason for eschewing property-conferral—namely the worry that property-conferral would involve occasionalism. In TC, this objection fails because TC identifies property-conferrals with formal and not efficient causes. Thus, TC offers a view of sustenance that not only avoids deism and occasionalism but also secures a more parsimonious ontology. Together, TDA and TC offer the theist a more parsimonious ontology and integrate the doctrine of sustenance and a theory of properties in a mutually enhancing way.[38]

Notes

1. James Stewart, *The River of Life* (Nashville and New York: Abingdon Press, 1972), 77.
2. Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, introduced, translated, and ordered for daily devotional use by Father John-Julian (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2011), 115.

3. In this chapter, I build upon Robert K. Garcia, "Tropes as Divine Acts: The Nature of Creaturely Properties in a World Sustained by God," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 7.3 (2015): 105–130, wherein I first made these proposals.
4. Alex Oliver, "The Metaphysics of Properties," *Mind* 105.417 (1996): 1–80; Chris Swoyer, "How Ontology Might Be Possible: Explanation and Inference in Metaphysics," in Peter A. French and Howard K. Wettstein, eds., *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 23 (1999): 100–131; Douglas Edwards, *Properties* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014).
5. Here I expand Tuomas Tahko's claim that "grounding is often called 'metaphysical explanation' exactly to distinguish it from 'causal explanation'." Although Tahko is not explicitly discussing character grounding, his point applies equally well to it. In addition, by "causal explanation," Tahko clearly means *efficient*-causal explanation. See Tuomas Tahko, *An Introduction to Metametaphysics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
6. 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 Robert K. Garcia, "Nominalist Constituent Ontologies: A Development and Critique" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Notre Dame, 2009); John Carroll and Ned Markosian, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). For ostrich nominalism, see Guido Imaguire, *Priority Nominalism: Grounding Ostrich Nominalism as a Solution to the Problem of Universals* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2018).
7. Important defenses of realism include Michael Loux, *Substance and Attribute* (Dordrecht: L D. Reidel Publishing, 1978); David Armstrong, *Universals: An Opinionated Introduction*. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1989); and, *A World of States of Affairs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); J. P. Moreland, *Universals* (McGill: Queens University Press, 2001); J. P. Moreland, "Exemplification and Constituent Realism: A Clarification and Modest Defense," *Axiomathes* 23.2 (2013): 247–259.
8. Important defenses of trope theory include Keith Campbell, "The Metaphysics of Abstract Particulars," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 6.1 (1981): 477–488; Keith Campbell, *Abstract Particulars* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990); Anna-Sofia Maurin, *If Tropes* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002); Douglas Ehring, *Tropes: Properties, Objects, and Mental Causation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
9. See the following for references to the literature and discussion of the unique strengths and weaknesses of each type of trope. Robert K. Garcia, "Is Trope Theory a Divided House?" in *The Problem of Universals in Contemporary Philosophy*, eds. M. Loux and G. Galluzzo (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Robert K. Garcia, "Two Ways to Particularize a Property," *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 1.4 (2015): 635–652; Robert K. Garcia, "Tropes as Character-Grounders," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 94.3 (2016): 499–515.
10. I argue for this in "Two Ways to Particularize a Property."
11. What about module tropes—are they formal or efficient causes? It is unclear whether module tropes should be thought of as formal and not efficient causes.
12. Thanks to Anne-Marie Shultz for suggesting this label.
13. Ross Cameron, "Tropes, Necessary Connections, and Non-Transferability," *Dialectica* 60.2 (2006): 99–113, calls this *strong* non-transferability, which he distinguishes from *weak* non-transferability. The latter would (problematically) allow for the existence of "unaccompanied" tropes—tropes that existed without characterizing *anything*.

14. David Manley, "Properties and Resemblance Classes," *Noûs* 36 (2002): 75.
15. In "Tropes as Divine Acts: The Nature of Creaturely Properties in a World Sustained by God," *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 7.3 (2015): 105–130, I argue that a view in which God creates formal causes faces serious difficulties and that these difficulties, in turn, provide an argument for (TDA) taking formal causes to be identical with divine acts. Here, I wish to ignore those difficulties to show that even if the toy theory is possible, its being possible also provides an argument for TDA.
16. Christopher Menzel, "The Argument from Collections," in *Two Dozen (or so) Arguments for God: The Plantinga Project*, eds. T. Dougherty and J. Walls (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 29–58.
17. C. Stephen Evans, *God and Moral Obligation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 26, 102.
18. In explaining these alternatives, Evans (*God and Moral Obligation*) uses "moral properties" and "moral obligations" rather interchangeably but without explicitly saying how the interchange works. This is important because (as explained in the next note) the alternatives seem to require different understandings of the ontological status of a moral obligation. The first two alternatives seem to require a moral obligation to be a moral *state of affairs* (such as an act's having the property of being obligatory), whereas the third alternative seems to require a moral obligation to be a moral *property* (such as the property of being morally obligatory). Thus, there is more to the disagreement than what is indicated by Evans. The views disagree not merely on the nature of the relation but also on the nature of one of the relatum (moral obligation).
19. Unlike the first two alternatives, the third drops "having the" from the relatum. In other words, it does not identify the divine command with a state of affairs (such as *an act's having the property of being morally obligatory*) but with a constituent property in that state of affairs (such as *being morally obligatory*). For the supervenience and causal views, it makes sense to take "moral obligation" to refer to a state of affairs, one which either supervenes on or is caused by a divine command, respectively. For the identity version, however, it is implausible to understand "moral obligation" to refer to a state of affairs. First, if the identity view takes a moral obligation to be a state of affairs, then the view's identity claim implies that some divine acts have wrongful acts (or act types) as constituents. Where A is some act, consider the state of affairs *A's having the property of being morally wrong*. The latter has A, a wrongful act, as a constituent. Thus, if the state of affairs is identical with a divine command, then there is a divine command that has a wrongful act as a part. This would seem to be a rather unwelcome implication. Second, the view would seem to fail as a divine command theory. In general, DCT aims to provide an account of what makes it the case that certain actions are morally wrong (or obligatory or permissible). Put in terms of *states of affairs*, DCT aims to provide an account of what makes it the case that certain state of affairs obtain, such as *A's having the property of being morally wrong*. But the view in question only tells us *what* the latter *is*; it does not achieve DCT's aim of telling us *why it obtains*.
20. Evans, *God and Moral Obligation*, 26, 102.
21. Of course, this is not to say it has gone unchallenged. Evans takes the main challenge to be the "supervenience objection," as posed by Mark Murphy. For Evans's reply, see *God and Moral Obligation*, 102f.
22. I wish to thank Helen Stewart for raising this objection.
23. The totality of this collapse is based on my working assumption, not defended here, that (A) all formal causes are creaturely properties. Given (A), TDA implies that every formal cause is identical with a modifier trope

cum divine act. Thus, given (A), TDA collapses the entire category of formal cause into the category of divine action. However, neither TDA nor TC (see subsequently) entails (A); in principle, you could accept TDA and deny (A). If (A) is false, then TDA collapses only *part* of the category of formal cause into the category of divine action. I thank Gregory E. Ganssle for pressing me to clarify this.

24. Garcia, "Tropes as Divine Acts: The Nature of Creaturely Properties in a World Sustained by God."
25. Campbell, *Abstract Particulars*, 141.
26. This summary is adapted from Katherin Rogers, "Incarnation," in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Philosophical Theology,* eds. C. Taliaferro and C. Meister (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 99.
27. Hebrews 1:3 and Colossians 1:17. Both NASB. See also Wisdom 11:25; Psalm 36:5–6; Acts 17:28; Romans 11:36; and Qur-án 13:2–3 and 59:24.
28. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (London and Tonbridge: Whitefriars Press Ltd., 1940), 29–30.
29. Kathryn Tanner, "Human Freedom, Human Sin, and God the Creator," in *The God Who Acts: Philosophical and Theological Explorations*, ed. T. F. Tracy (State College: Penn State Press, 1994), 112–113.
30. Hugh J. McCann, *Creation and the Sovereignty of God* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 30.
31. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 170.
32. For similar expressions and commitments to property-conferral, see G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: The Providence of God* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1952); Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Peter van Inwagen, "The Place of Chance in a World Sustained by God," in *God, Knowledge and Mystery: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).
33. Thomas F. Tracy, "Divine Action, Created Causes, and Human Freedom," in *The God Who Acts: Philosophical and Theological Explorations*, ed. T. F. Tracy (State College: Penn State Press, 1994), 77–102.
34. Benjamin Farley seems to have in mind the (or a) dilemma concerning property-conferral when he notes that in the orthodox tradition, "God's governance can neither be reduced to 'bare permission' nor identified with the natural order alone." B. W. Farley, *The Providence of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1998), 173.
35. Tanner, "Human Freedom, Human Sin, and God the Creator,"; McCann, *Creation and the Sovereignty of God*.
36. See Campbell, *Abstract Particulars*; Ehring, *Tropes: Properties, Objects, and Mental Causation;* Maurin, *If Tropes*; Donald C. Williams, "On the Elements of Being: I," *The Review of Metaphysics* 7.1 (1953): 3–18.
37. Arguably, such advertisements tacitly assume that tropes are module tropes.
38. For comments and discussion, I especially thank Jeff Brower, C. Stephen Evans, Hud Hudson, Jon Jacobs, Anne Jeffrey, Chris Menzel, Alex Pruss, and Bradley Rettler.