INTRINSICALITY FOR MONISTS (AND PLURALISTS)

Kelly Trogdon

Two competing views in sparse ontology are monism and pluralism. In Trogdon [2009] I propose an account of intrinsicality that I argue is both compatible with monism and pluralism and independently plausible. Skiles [2009] argues that my account fails on both fronts. In this note I respond to his two objections.

Let pluralism be the thesis that the properties of mereological atoms provide the ultimate ground for the properties of complex objects, and monism be the thesis that the properties of the world instead provide the ultimate ground for the properties of all its proper parts. In Trogdon [2009] I propose an account of intrinsicality that I claim is both independently plausible and compatible with both monism and pluralism. What is the account?

The above formulations of monism and pluralism, as well as my account of intrinsicality, appeal to the grounding or in virtue of relation. In Trogdon [2009] I distinguish between what I call 'intra-virtue-of' and 'inter-virtue-of' relations. A property P of an object x is instantiated *intra-virtue-of* a property Q of an object y just in case P is instantiated in virtue of Q and x and y occupy the same mereological level. In contrast, P is instantiated *inter-virtue-of* Q just in case P is instantiated in virtue of Q and x and y occupy different mereological levels. And there I work with a very fine-grained conception of mereological levels: x and y occupy the same mereological level just in case x and y are composed of the same number of atoms. With these notions in the background, my account of intrinsicality is as follows:

Intrinsic fashion: x has P in an intrinsic fashion just in case (i) P is independent of accompaniment; and (ii) for any individual y and property Q, if x has P intra-virtue-of y having Q, then Q is either fundamental or independent of accompaniment.[1]

Intrinsicality: P is an intrinsic property (or relation) just in case P is fundamental or, for any possible individual x, if x has P, x has P in an intrinsic fashion.

[1]Following Langton and Lewis [1998]: x is accompanied just in case x co-exists with some wholly distinct contingent object, and lonely otherwise. A property P is independent of accompaniment just in case it is possible for a lonely object to have P, a lonely object to lack P, an accompanied object to have P, and an accompanied object to lack P.

Skiles [2009] argues that my account of intrinsicality is neither plausible nor compatible with monism. I will consider each objection in turn.

My account says that any non-intrinsic property that is independent of accompaniment is possibly instantiated intra-virtue-of some property that is not independent of accompaniment. Consider the relational property *being a molecule (a complex object) such that there is an atom to which one is attending* (*P*). *P* is independent of accompaniment and intuitively non-intrinsic, and Skiles claims that there is no property or relation *Q* such that *P* is possibly instantiated intra-virtue-of *Q*, where *Q* is not independent of accompaniment. Now consider the relation *R*, where *R*(*x*, *y*) just in case *x* is a molecule, *y* is an atom wholly distinct from *x*, and *x* attends to *y*. Here the assumption is that, following Armstrong [1997: 92], Jubien [1997: 38], Hawthorne [2001], and others, there is a genuine ontological distinction between relations (e.g. *is the father of*) on the one hand and corresponding *relational properties* (e.g. *being a father*) on the other. Skiles points out that someone, say, Frank, can have the property *P* in virtue of the instantiation of the relation *R*, and *R* obviously is not independent of accompaniment. The in virtue of relation between *P* and *R*, however, is an inter-virtue-of relation since its relata occupy different mereological levels. Generalizing from this example, Skiles claims that there is no property or relation (more specifically, an intra-virtue-of relation to some property or relation that is not independent of accompaniment) for *P* to 'go non-intrinsic' by on my account. If this is right, then my account classifies an intuitively non-intrinsic property as being intrinsic.

The problem with this objection, however, is that the result does not seem to generalize, and it is easy to see why. For consider the relational property *being a molecule such that there is a wholly distinct atom to which one is attending* (*P**). *P* and *P** together are possibly instantiated by Frank, and if Frank instantiates them, intuitively the former is instantiated in virtue of the latter. It seems, therefore, that there is a possible case in which *P* is instantiated intra-virtue-of a property that is not independent of accompaniment, so my account classifies *P* as non-intrinsic.[2]

Let us move on, then, to Skiles' second objection. Here the objection is that, on my account of intrinsicality, the monist in particular is committed to classifying properties that are intuitively intrinsic as being non-intrinsic. This objection is more complicated than the first one and requires some stage setting. In particular, I need to quickly recount five relevant (and controversial) claims I make in Trogdon [2009]. First, the theses of monism and pluralism are, if true, necessarily true. Second, according to monism, the fundamental properties are maximally specific distributional properties. Third, if a property *P* is instantiated in a world *w*, then *P* is fundamental in *w* only if *P* is not instantiated in virtue of (either intra-virtue-of or inter-virtue-of) any other property in *w*. Fourth, whether a property is fundamental or not is an essential feature of it and, therefore, property

---

[2]Perhaps *P* and *P** can both be instantiated inter-virtue-of *R*. This, however, is not a problem, for there is no reason to think that *P* and *P** being instantiated inter-virtue-of *R* 'screens off' *P* being instantiated intra-virtue-of *P**.

fundamentality is not world-relative. Fifth, fundamental properties are intrinsic.

With these claims in the background, Skiles objects as follows. Suppose that x is a proper part of the actual world, @, x exemplifies a distributional property P such that P completely specifies the mereological structure of x and the nature of its proper parts, and P is intuitively intrinsic. Suppose, for *reductio*, that P is indeed intrinsic. Let w be a possible world that is a contraction of @, where $w = x$. Since P is intrinsic and non-fundamental, my account says that P is independent of accompaniment. It follows that it is possible for a lonely individual to have P. w considered above is lonely, so suppose that w instantiates P. Supposing that monism is true in @, it is true in w as well. Hence, P, *qua* maximally specific distributional property of w, is fundamental in w. Since fundamentality is essential and P is instantiated in @, it follows that P is fundamental in @ as well. But P is not fundamental in @, since P is instantiated by a proper part of @. By *reductio*, P is not intrinsic after all.

How to respond to this objection? We are stipulating that P is instantiated by a proper part of @, and P is instantiated by an improper part of w. So far, so good. What I disagree with, however, is the claim that P is fundamental in w. To see why, let me first say something more about what it is to be a maximally specific global distributional property.

Now, whether or not monism is true, each possible world instantiates one and only one maximally specific distributional property. Why just one? Well, if property P^* is a maximally specific distributional property instantiated by w, then P^* has two features. First, it specifies (i) the proper parts a, b, c etc. of w and their properties, (ii) the other properties instantiated by w (the other global properties), and (iii) the relations a, b, c, etc. and w stand in to one another. Let us say that P^* is 'comprehensive' in this sense. Second, P^* tells us that a, b, c, etc. are *all* the proper parts of the world that instantiates it; it tells us that there are *no more* proper parts. (It says the same thing about the properties and relations just mentioned, but we can put this to the side for now.) Let us say that P^* is 'exhaustive' in this sense.[3] Since only one property can be both comprehensive and exhaustive for any world, each world instantiates only one maximally specific global distributional property.

Returning to the debate between the monist and the pluralist, they both agree that fixing the maximally specific global distributional property of each world fixes how that world is in its entirety. This fact about metaphysical entailment is not under dispute. What *is* under dispute, however, is whether maximally specific global distributional properties are fundamental. The question is not whether the instantiation of P^* from above by w necessitates the instantiation of various other properties by w and its proper parts, but whether the latter are ultimately grounded in the former. The monist (at least on the version of monism I think most plausible) claims that any property instantiated by w or a proper part of w that is instantiated in

---

[3]Since P^* is exhaustive, its instantiation by w necessitates the instantiation of global properties corresponding to universal truths such as the property *being such that all Fs are Gs*. Comprehensiveness alone does not have this consequence.

virtue of another property is ultimately grounded in $P*$, while the pluralist denies that this is the case.

Supposing that monism is true, $P*$—w's maximally specific global distributional property—is fundamental. Since $P*$ is exhaustive, it is not instantiated by @ or any proper part of @, so $P*$ obviously is not instantiated both in @ and by w. But P from above is instantiated by a proper part of @ and by w, so P and $P*$ are different properties. Assuming that $P*$ is the fundamental property of w, what is the relation between $P*$ and P in w? The thing to say, it would seem, is that P is instantiated intra-virtue-of w instantiating $P*$.

In Trogdon [2009] I was not as clear as I should have been that fundamental properties for the monist, *qua* maximally specific distributional properties, are exhaustive in addition to comprehensive. If fundamental properties in this context were merely comprehensive, it would make sense to say that P is fundamental in w. After all, P, *qua* comprehensive property, covers everything about w. But if I am right that the monist should also claim that fundamental properties are exhaustive, then, once we see that P is not exhaustive because it is instantiated by a proper part of @, we can see that P is not fundamental in w after all.[4] I conclude, therefore, that, so long as the monist claims that fundamental properties are both comprehensive and exhaustive, Skiles' objection that my account of intrinsicality is incompatible with monism fails.[5]

References

Armstrong, D. M. 1997. *A World of States of Affairs*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Hawthorne, J. 2001. Intrinsic Properties and Natural Relations, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 58/2: 399–403.
Jubien, M. 1997. *Contemporary Metaphysics*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
Langton, R. and D. Lewis. 1998. Defining 'Intrinsic', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 58/2: 333–45.
Sider, T. 2001. Maximality and Intrinsic Properties, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 63/2: 357–63.
Skiles, A. 2009. Trogdon on Monism and Intrinsicality, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 87/1: 149–54.
Trogdon, K. 2009. Monism and Intrinsicality, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 87/1: 127–48.
Trogdon, K. Unpublished ms. Grounding, Border-Sensitivity, and Intrinsicality.

[4]Properties that are comprehensive and exhaustive, you might argue, are akin to what Sider [2001] calls 'border-sensitive' properties and are therefore non-intrinsic. If comprehensive and exhaustive properties are non-intrinsic and I am right that fundamental properties are intrinsic, then the monist is in trouble. In Trogdon [unpublished] I argue, however, that it may be a mistake to think that if a property is border-sensitive it is thereby non-intrinsic.

[5]I would like to thank Sam Cowling, Maya Eddon, Barak Krakauer, Alex Skiles, Ellen Woodall, and two anonymous referees at *AJP* for helpful comments.