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Tropes and Facts

INTRODUCTION/ABSTRACT

The notion that there is a single type of entity in terms of which the whole world can be described has fallen out of favor in recent Ontology. There are only two serious exceptions to this. Factualists (Skyrms 1981, Armstrong 1997) hold that the world can be fully described in terms of facts. Trope theorists (Williams 1953, Campbell 1981, 1990) hold that it can be fully described in terms of tropes. Yet the relationship between facts and tropes remains obscure in both camps' writings. In this note, a distinction between (the names of) events and facts, due to Vendler and Bennett, is extended to distinguish between (the names of) tropes and facts. On its basis, a portrait of the domain of abstract particulars is sketched. The purpose is to contribute to our understanding of both forms of (if you will) metaphysical monism by offering a principled distinction between them.

1. Events and Facts

Jonathan Bennett (1988), following Zeno Vendler (1967), distinguishes between events and facts. Consider the indicative sentence

(1) I strolled in the park.

(1) is a sentence, not a name. So it does not name anything, indeed any *thing*. But there is a standard way to produce names from sentences – nominalization. One way to nominalize (1) is with the *perfect nominal*

(2) My stroll in the park

Another way is with the *imperfect nominal*

(3) My strolling in the park

(2) is called a ‘perfect’ nominal, because the nominalization leaves no trace of a verb. In (3), by contrast, there is a trace of a verb, so it is said to be an ‘imperfect’ nominal.

Both (2) and (3) are not sentences but names. For they can be plugged into the subject position in a subject-predicate sentence, as in

- (4) My stroll in the park was noted by the neighbor.
- (5) My strolling in the park was noted by the neighbor.

Here ‘noted by the neighbor’ predicates the name-bearers of ‘My stroll in the park’ and ‘My strolling in the park’. What are these name-bearers? According to Vendler and Bennett, the former names an *event*, whereas the latter names a *fact*.

In general, imperfect nominals are the names of facts.¹ Vendler and Bennett offer several arguments in favor of this thesis.² One basic reason to accept this thesis is that (3) can be transformed into the very straightforward nominal

- (6) The fact of my strolling in the park

(3) and (6) are surely co-referential. There is no doubt that (6) names a fact. Therefore, (3) names a fact too. In general, imperfect nominals like (3) (which feature gerunds, e.g., ‘strolling’) are always interchangeable with some imperfect nominal similar to (6) (i.e., a nominal which features the operator ‘the fact of’).

The same is not the case with perfect nominals. Thus, (2) cannot be transformed into a similar straightforward nominal. For the following construction is ungrammatical:

- (7) The fact of my stroll in the park

The only straightforward nominal (2) can be transformed into is

¹ By “fact” we mean something like the traditional states of affairs. The term “fact” is used here because “state of affairs” is not a very ordinary term, but rather technical and theoretical. To the extent that we want to see how these sorts of entity are named in ordinary discourse, we would do better to use such an ordinary language term as “fact.”

² See, again, Vendler 1967 and Bennett 1988.

(8) The event of my stroll in the park

Again, (2) and (8) are co-referential, and given that (8) surely names an event, (2) names an event as well.

2. Tropes and Facts

Vendler and Bennett start out with indicatives featuring verbs; this is because they are interested in facts mainly in the context of their difference from events. But the same analysis can be applied to indicatives featuring the copula, such as

(9) The park is nice.

(9) has a perfect nominalization in

(10) The park's niceness

And an imperfect nominalization in

(11) The park's being nice

We may say that (10) is a ‘perfect’ nominal, in that there is no trace of the copula in it, whereas (11) is an ‘imperfect’ nominal, since there *is* a trace of the copula in it. Both can be used as names in a subject-predicate sentence:

(12) The park's niceness was noted by the neighbor.

(13) The park's being nice was noted by the neighbor.

The suggestion I would like to make is that (10) is the name of a trope, whereas (11) is the name of a fact.^{3,4}

³ We can accept this claim regardless of our take on the more general pretensions of trope theory.

⁴ Tropes have been first introduced into the modern literature, under that name, by Williams (1953). But by different name, they can be found already in Stout (1923),

We can see this by noting, again, that (11) can be transformed into the straightforward nominal

- (14) The fact of the park's being nice

(14) is not eloquent, but it's English. The following is not, however:

- (15) The fact of the park's niceness

This is because the name-bearers of perfect nominals (whose parent sentences are true) are tropes, not facts. Facts are the name-bearers of imperfect nominals (whose parent sentences are true). The argument is the same as in the case of nominals featuring verbs: Since (11) and (14) are co-referential, they name the same thing, and given that (14) names a fact, (11) must name a fact as well.

This distinction between names of tropes and names of facts conforms with our intuitions. If niceness is a universal property, then the park's niceness is a particularized property, that is, a trope. But the park's being nice is not a property at all. (A property of what?) The park's being nice is just a fact. The difference can be brought out by comparing the following pair of sentences:

- (16) The park's niceness was ignored by the neighbor.
- (17) The park's being nice was ignored by the neighbor.

(16) and (17) are very different. In (16), what the neighbor is stated to ignore is *something about the park*, namely, its niceness. That is, what she ignores is a property of the park, albeit a particularized one. By contrast, in (17), what she is stated to ignore is not something about the park, but something altogether different: she ignores something about the way things are – *something about the world*. The park's being nice: the neighbor ignores that this is how things are. That is, she ignores a certain *fact*, a fact about the world.

and some would claim that Aristotle's “individual accidents” are in effect tropes. Trope theory, which makes many ontological claims on behalf of tropes, has been developed mainly by Campbell (1981, 1990), with inspiration from Williams' original piece.

3. The World of Abstract Particulars

We have considered four kinds of nominal: (i) perfect nominals whose parent sentences feature the copula (e.g., “the park’s niceness”), (ii) perfect nominals whose parent sentences feature a verb (e.g., “the stroll in the park”), (iii) imperfect nominals whose parent sentences feature the copula (e.g., “the park’s being nice”), and (iv) imperfect nominals whose parent sentences feature a verb (e.g., “the strolling in the park”). The suggestion I have made is that (i) name tropes, (ii) name events, and (iii) and (iv) name facts.

One may hold that these four kinds of nominal refer to four different kinds of *abstract particulars*. Although this is problematic, let us for the purposes of present discussion say that a thing of kind K is abstract just in case there can be more than one K in the same place at the same time, and that a thing of kind K is particular just in case it cannot be in more than one place at the same time.⁵ The trope of the park’s niceness is in the same place at the same time as the park’s vastness, but it cannot be in any other place at the same time. So the park’s niceness is both abstract and particular. All tropes are.

By this rough test for abstract particularity, tropes are not the only abstract particulars. Facts are too. There can be more than one fact occurring in the same place at the same time, but the same fact cannot occur in more than one place at a time.⁶ Thus, the fact of the park’s being nice oc-

⁵ This characterization is not unproblematic. For starters, it does not allow us to say that numbers are abstract, since numbers have *no* spatial location. There are three ways to deal with this problem: (i) redefine abstractness as being either a-spatial or at the same place at the same time as other entities of the same kind; (ii) deny the existence of numbers (see Field 1980); (iii) claim that numbers do have spatial location, as some structural realists may do (see Maddy 1980). A second problem for the characterization is that it makes coincident objects – such as the statue and the clay – come out abstract, since they share the same spatial location at the same time. This is a difficulty indeed, and the only way I can see of dealing with it is to deny that the statue and the clay are two different things (as in Yablo 1987). A third problem is that it is not obvious how to individuate location, in a way that tells us definitely when L₁ and L₂ are one and the same location and when two distinct location. For all these reasons, we may do well to use the characterization in the text not as a definition of abstract particularity, but as a rough test (or indication) for abstract particularity.

⁶ There might be a problem here with characterizing *disjunctive facts* as abstract and *conjunctive facts* as particular. A fact such as the park’s being nice or the zoo’s being impressive is neither where the park is nor where the zoo is, and therefore cannot be

curs at the same time in the same place as the fact of the park's being vast; and it occurs only where the park is and could not occur anywhere else at the same time. So there are (at least) two kinds of abstract particulars: tropes and facts.⁷

Several philosophers have argued, quite plausibly, that events are tropes.⁸ If we treat events as a subgroup of tropes, it appears that perfect nominals are generally the names of tropes – either event tropes or non-event tropes – whereas imperfect nominals name facts.

Within the group of tropes, then, we have events (e.g., the stroll in the park) and non-event tropes (e.g., the park's niceness). Let us call the former *dynamic tropes* and the latter *static tropes*. We may draw a parallel distinction between *dynamic facts* and *static facts*. A dynamic fact (e.g., the strolling in the park) is named by an imperfect nominal whose parent sentence features a verb, whereas a static fact (e.g., the park's being nice) is named by an imperfect nominal whose parent sentence features the copula.

The emerging picture is of a structured domain of abstract particulars. Abstract particulars divide into two groups – tropes and facts – that subdivide into two subgroups, dynamic and static tropes and dynamic and

co-located with any other fact. And a fact such as the park's being nice and the zoo's being impressive is both where the park is and where the zoo is, and is therefore in two different places at the same time. One response could be to reject the existence of disjunctive and conjunctive facts. A better response, though, would be to embrace such facts, but claim that they can be analyzed, in turn, in terms of atomic facts, or at least facts that are neither conjunctive nor disjunctive. A third option is to take this second line with respect to conjunctive facts and the first one with respect to disjunctive facts – in the same way some philosophers accept conjunctive properties but not disjunctive ones (e.g., Armstrong 1978).

⁷ This is something that escaped much of the discussion of these sorts of entities. Many philosophers use “trope” and “abstract particular” interchangeably. But tropes are not abstract particulars *by definition*, even if they are *by necessity*. What tropes are *by definition* is particularized properties. Particularized properties happen to be abstract particulars, but it turns out that so do facts. If one defines tropes as abstract particulars – which I chose not to do – then of course tropes are the only abstract particulars; but there is still a distinction between particularized properties and facts, as two kinds of tropes.

⁸ For the most comprehensive formulation and defense of this view, see Lombard 1986.

static facts. Each of the subgroups has its own proprietary nominal referring to it. This structured domain can thus be represented as follows:

Linguistic expressions	Perfect Nominal	Imperfect Nominal
Copula	Static Trope	Static Fact
Verb	Dynamic Trope (Event)	Dynamic Fact

The result is a cohesive account of the world of entities that are neither concrete particulars nor universals (abstract or concrete).

Conclusion

Both tropes and facts have been offered by 20th century philosophers, mainly Australian, as the fundamental entities of the world: Williams (1953) and Campbell (1981, 1990) for tropes, for instance, and Skyrms (1981) and Armstrong (1997) for facts. Yet a clear distinction between these two kinds of entity is hard to come by. It would be somewhat *recherché* to claim that the distinction I have offered between the canonical ways of referring to facts and tropes might be useful in deciding which (if any) would be fit to serve as the bedrock of reality. My hope is not that the framework I have sketched *settles* such issues, but rather that it *illuminates* them.⁹

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