

Marshall and Parsons on 'Intrinsic'

RAE LANGTON

University of Edinburgh

DAVID LEWIS

Princeton University

Dan Marshall and Josh Parsons note, correctly, that the property of being either a cube or accompanied by a cube is incorrectly classified as intrinsic under the definition we have given unless it turns out to be disjunctive. Whether it is disjunctive, under the definition we gave, turns on certain judgements of the relative naturalness of properties. They doubt the judgements of relative naturalness that would classify their property as disjunctive. We disagree. They also suggest that the whole idea of judging relative naturalness is a dubious business. We reply that, like them or not, such judgements cannot easily be avoided.

Something is *accompanied* iff it coexists with something wholly distinct from itself, and otherwise *lonely*. In 'Defining "Intrinsic"' we first noted that when a property is intrinsic (1) a lonely thing can have it, (2) a lonely thing can lack it, (3) an accompanied thing can have it, and (4) an accompanied thing can lack it. Call any property that satisfies (1)–(4) *independent of accompaniment or loneliness*, or for short *independent*. Unfortunately, not all independent properties are intrinsic; sometimes they are disjunctive, one disjunct takes care of two of the four conditions, and another disjunct takes care of the other two. The example we gave was the property of being either cubical and lonely or non-cubical and accompanied: it is extrinsic, independent, and obviously disjunctive. So we defined "intrinsic" in two stages: first, the *basic intrinsic* properties are independent properties that are not disjunctive (and not negations of disjunctive properties), and second, *intrinsic properties* are truth-functional compounds, perhaps infinitary, of basic intrinsic properties.¹

Dan Marshall and Josh Parsons ask us to consider the property of being such that there is a cube: that is, the property that belongs to a thing iff either it is itself a cube, or it is accompanied by a cube (not necessarily

¹ Rae Langton and David Lewis, 'Defining "Intrinsic"', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 58 (1998), 333–45; reprinted in David Lewis, *Papers in Metaphysics and Epistemology* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

wholly distinct from itself).² They say, and we agree, that this property is independent but not intrinsic. However, they doubt that it is a disjunctive property (or the negation of one). We think it is.

Our test for a disjunctive property was not that it can be expressed as a disjunction—any property can be. Rather, our test was that it can be expressed as a *bad* disjunction, that being one such that the property is much less natural than the disjuncts. (A special case that need not concern us here is that the disjuncts are perfectly natural and the property is not.) Marshall and Parsons note that their property can be expressed as the disjunction ‘being either a cube or accompanied by a cube’. They doubt that this disjunction is bad. We disagree: it seems to us (1) that being accompanied by a cube is less natural than being a cube, and (2) that being either a cube or accompanied by a cube is less natural still by a disjunction. The general rule is that disjoining unrelated properties always reduces naturalness; and we think that the relation between the disjuncts in this case—both involve being cubical, though in very different ways—is not a relevant sort of relatedness.

Further, we note that the Marshall-Parsons property can be expressed instead as a worse disjunction than the one they mention: ‘being either a cube or a non-cube accompanied by a cube’. This second disjunction, at any rate, seems to us bad. That suffices to make the Marshall-Parsons property disjunctive.

Now, it may turn out that Marshall and Parsons disagree with our judgements of comparative naturalness that make the second disjunction bad and thereby make their property disjunctive. But a different response is more likely. There are two themes in their paper, and the two are in some tension. One theme is that they disagree with some of our judgements of relative naturalness; the other is that they think the very idea of relative naturalness is a dubious notion (except perhaps when one property is perfectly natural and another is not), and they would rather not be in the business of judging relative naturalness at all. They say that such judgements are “obscure” and “not obvious” and “not among the Moorean facts of naturalness”. They say that their intuitions about one question of relative naturalness are “weak”.

Their second theme raises a much bigger and more interesting issue than the mere clash of judgements. One of us (Lewis) has argued elsewhere that the notion of naturalness, including relative naturalness, can do very many jobs of philosophical work that need doing, that most philosophers are convinced can somehow be done, and that cannot be done by other means.³

² Dan Marshall and Josh Parsons, ‘Langton and Lewis on “Intrinsic”’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 63 (2001), 347–51.

³ David Lewis, ‘New Work for a Theory of Universals’, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 61 (1983), 343–77; reprinted in *Papers in Metaphysics and Epistemology*. The point does not depend on any particular theory of naturalness. Lewis remains explicitly neutral between several theories. The need for naturalness is endorsed even by Barry

We shall not repeat all that here. But if it is true, then it will take more than discomfort and clashes of judgements to establish that judging relative naturalness is a dubious business.

Taylor, 'On Natural Properties in Metaphysics', *Mind* 102 (1993), 81–100, though Taylor's theory of naturalness differs radically from any of those that Lewis considers.