

Time for Bergmann's Bare Particulars

In many philosophical circles, a view is reduced to absurdity if it's shown to imply there are bare particulars. Quentin Smith's view [2003] that past and future things lack the ordinary intrinsic properties they have when present has been criticized for implying the existence of "nearly-bare" particulars [Zimmerman 1998: 212]. David Armstrong, without much of a look at the doctrine itself, endorses a principle of the rejection of bare particulars [1978: 169]. And D. W. Mertz complains that the bare particular is the contemporary incarnation of Locke's "I know not what" substratum, and that it lacks "content" [2001: 48].¹

This,² I would guess, is not among the philosophical circles in which "bare particular" is a dirty word. Still, if Bergmann's bare particulars are to do any constructive work, as I think they can, they must first be exonerated from the most common of the complaints against them. The reason bare particulars are in such ill-repute is that they are assumed to be bare. In Armstrong's formulation, a particular is bare if it does not have any properties or perhaps even stand in any relations [*loc cit.*]. (I sometimes use "properties" to include both non-relational and relational characteristics.) Because everything has some properties, or maybe because everything particular has some properties, this has been enough to impugn the bare particular.

At one level, one cannot help but understand the objection. If one were only familiar with the phrase and not the idea it was used to express, it would be natural to infer that a bare thing is one that does not have the relevant clothing. The relevant clothing in this case being properties, of course bare particulars would be the ones that do not have properties. But at another level those who impugn bare particulars on these grounds are

¹ To be fair, Mertz, unlike the others, actually offers arguments for his rejection of bare particulars.

² I referred to the group gathered for the Bergmann Centenary Celebration.

guilty of wholly ignoring the actual idea that has been expressed by those who championed such things. It's simply not true, as others have also noted,³ that bare particulars are bare in this sense. A bare particular is bare in the sense that it's merely a particular and nothing else. It's not, in other words, a property; nor is it something that involves properties as constituents. But it does involve properties in another highly relevant sense. So far from being propertyless, the bare particular is precisely that which has properties.⁴

It's hard to fathom what would be the point of a particular that was bare in the critics' sense. Why suppose that there was this particular entity out there that did not exemplify any properties? One could imagine an advocate of universals impressed by counter-examples to the identity of indiscernibles supposing a bare particular in each otherwise indiscernible object. So now two objects with all the same universals could be individuated in virtue of their brutally different bare particulars. But why stop there? Why not have the particulars that individuate those entities also be the exemplifiers of their properties? Otherwise, one would have a miscegenetic marriage of the bundle theory and categorial dualism: objects as bundles of both properties and bare particulars.

But even if bare particulars do not lack properties, isn't there some other objection to them in this neighborhood? Isn't it true that apart from its properties a bare particular has no properties? Isn't that a problem? If "apart" means "considered apart," so that the question is whether a bare particular considered apart from its properties lacks properties, then bare particulars are not propertyless apart from their properties. If I am considered apart from my money I am not thereby poor. If "apart" means "if it were not for," so that the question is whether if it were not for its properties a bare particular would have any

³ The classic and still best critical discussion of bare particulars is in Loux [1979].

⁴ This dramatic way of putting it is surely wrong, though, since properties have properties and enter into relations. In his elementarist moments, Bergmann does subscribe to the dramatic claim [1960: 115ff.].

properties, the answer is somewhat more complicated but probably yes. Bergmann thought bare particulars could not lack properties – even that it was unintelligible to suppose them to do so. If it's just impossible and not outright nonsense that bare particulars lack properties, and counterfactuals with logically impossible antecedents are necessarily true, then so is the claim in question. If one holds that the antecedent is unintelligible, and thus lacks a truth-value, then the whole “statement” lacks a truth-value. Since I incline toward the view that it is impossible and not unintelligible for bare particulars to lack properties, the fact that bare particulars would lack properties if they had no properties, so far from being a *reductio* of accepting them, is rather an indication that they meet the minimal requirements of intelligibility. Every entity must be bare in the sense that if it had no properties it would have no properties.

I believe this is the traditional picture of the bare particular, and it's the conception of a bare particular I will consider. But I should mention that some of Bergmann's apparently important claims about bare particulars do not obviously square with this conception. And they actually support the critics' conception. For example, in “Ontological Alternatives,” Bergmann says that bare particulars are “only numerically different” [1964: 133]. He also tells us, in *Realism*, that “the bare particular is a mere individuator,” and that structurally “[i]t does nothing else” [1967: 25; see also 1964: 160]. If bare particulars are only numerically different, then they are not qualitatively different. If bare particulars merely individuate, then they don't also exemplify properties. The obvious reason they would not be qualitatively different is that bare particulars lack qualities. If bare particulars did have qualities, how could they fail to be qualitatively different? Maybe what Bergmann means is that the brute numerical difference between bare particulars is primary; that their qualitative difference is only possible in virtue of this brute difference. And Bergmann surely does hold

that different particulars can differ qualitatively only because they are different in the first place. But this doesn't strike me as a very natural interpretation of the "only" in bare particulars "only" differ numerically. But recalcitrant though the textual evidence may be, I will assume that bare particulars do in fact have qualities and accordingly differ not only numerically but also qualitatively.⁵

So there may be problems with the concept of a bare particular, but obvious incoherence is not among them. Bare particulars may accordingly be considered as candidates for various philosophical jobs. The job I want them for is to be the individual content of time. I want bare particulars to be continuants and subjects of change. Change I will understand not in the Pickwickian sense of wholes made up of qualitatively diverse temporal parts located at different times, but in the sense that if something goes from being F to being not-F, the very thing that was F is the thing that is not-F. In terms of the contemporary literature, I want bare particulars to be the subjects of endurantist persistence and change.⁶ The alternative to endurance is perdurance – the sort of persistence that allows for what I derisively called Pickwickian change. Bergmann assumes persistence is endurance. He also thinks that endurance is only possible if there are absolute times – times construed as not reducible to the entities at them.⁷ I sympathize with the first claim; not so much with the second. Concerning the first, imagine something A is first F and then not-F. How can something be both F and not-F? The absolutist endurantist has an answer,

⁵ Partly as a result of the comments about this paper at the Bergmann celebration, I'm less inclined to insist on calling these entities "bare particulars." The expression is often associated not only with what I take to be its central feature – its mere particularity – but with various of the other characteristics Bergmann associated with those entities: being momentary, lacking parts, and not belonging to kinds.

⁶ The problems of persistence and change are related. Something persists just in case it exists from one time to another. Something exists from one time to another only if it's capable of changing. Endurantism, though often construed as a theory of persistence, may be best understood as an account of persistence and change.

⁷ Perhaps a more faithful interpretation is that for Bergmann, given a "subject-predicate world", change is only possible given absolute times. See "Some Reflections on Time" [1960: 230-231].

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Bergmann thinks: F is not, as it appears, a non-relational property of A but rather a relation between A and the absolute time, say, T [1960: 230-231]. Not-F is a different relation also had by A, but there is no problem as long as A has F-at and not-F-at to different times. (It's interesting that Bergmann sees this dialectical possibility long before its major public splash with D. H. Mellor's 1980 *Real Time*.)

Because Bergmann rejects absolute times he rejects endurance, and with it persistence. But could a relativist about times – the one who thinks times are reducible to located entities – think of changing properties as relations to times after all? I don't think so. Suppose the relativist thinks the fact that A is F at T is understood as the fact that A is F while B is G and C is H and D is J. . . Given this, it's hopeless to think of F as the relation is-F-while. Even if there is such a relational property, it's plainly not fundamental. The spirit of this relativist line is to take A's being F and B's being G, etc., as the relevant primitives, connect them through simultaneity and so build up times. By the relativist's lights, A's having the relation *being F-while* to B's being G is reducible to A's being F and B's being G, which are connected through simultaneity. The same sort of problem attends the idea that the fact that A is F at T is to be reduced to the fact that A's being F belongs to the collection of A's being F, B's being G, etc. To think that there is yet the fundamental relation *being-F-by-belonging-to* (a certain collection) is to take what is plainly derivative for something primitive. What is really there on this conception is A's being F, B's being G, etc., which are then connected to each other by belonging to a certain collection. So it does seem hopeless to take changing properties of enduring objects to be relations to relativistic times.

Fortunately for genuine persistence and change, the endurantist need not be a relationist – relationism being this view that changing properties are relations taking times as

terms. Faced with the puzzle above that a changing A is both F and not-F, the endurantist may just insist that A is not both F and not-F. Either A is F and was not-F, or was F and (earlier) was not-F, or – you get the picture. The point is to insist that tense matters; that endurantist change is coherent precisely because tense matters. Bergmann would reject this alternative because he rejects tense. The sentences of his ideal language, in which the world is supposed to be most accurately pictured, are not sensitive to context in the way tensed sentences clearly are [1964: 179-80]. As I see it though, a language without tense would not get the world quite as it is. One of the very interesting things about the world is that it's changing all the time. A language that was not sensitive to this fact would be thereby a less than ideal language.

Interestingly, the relationist – again, the person who thinks of changing properties as relations to times – who accepts universals can be shown to be committed to bare particulars. This may be seen by thinking about just which properties the relationist should take to be relations to times. It's not promising to take all and only changing properties to be relations to times. (A changing property is not one that changes but one with respect to which something changes.) Whether F is a changing property is a contingent fact. It's a contingent fact, for example, that green is a changing property. It could have turned out that some things were green but that none of them changed with respect to being green. If a property's being a relation to a time is determined by its being a changing property, and it's a contingent fact whether something is a changing property, then it's a contingent fact that properties are relations to times. So it's a contingent fact whether a certain property is a relation or not. Since that isn't a contingent fact, it can't be that whether a property is a relation to a time is determined by whether it's a changing property.

Bergmann has the absolutist who believes in continuants holding that all properties of ordinary objects are relations to times [1960: 230-231]. Although this choice raises the same problem I'm about to point out, perhaps the best route for the relationist endurantist is to hold that all changeable properties are relations to times, where a changeable property is one with respect to which something can change. Since it's plausibly a necessary fact whether a given property is changeable, it will turn out to be a necessary fact about a property that it is (or is not) a relation to a time. All this is important because there is some question how this kind of endurantist will individuate his continuants. If our changing or changeable properties are relations to times, what accounts for our being different entities? I assume that individuation cannot be accounted for in terms of relations or relational properties. On my proposal, as long as some properties are not changeable, there might be some hope of non-relational qualitative individuation in these immutable properties. But the hope is small since whatever the immutable properties of continuants are, they're surely such as to be capable of being shared by several continuants at the same time. And if this endurantist is a realist about universals, he won't have the materials to individuate his continuants. Well, at least those materials won't be found among properties. But this endurantist can appeal to non-qualitative bare particulars to individuate otherwise qualitatively identical entities. So even for the relationist endurantist with certain commitments, it looks as if bare particulars are a helpful posit.⁸

But, as I said, I'm interested in bare particulars as the continuants of serious tensing endurantism, not the relationist endurantism just considered. I don't see, admittedly, anything in the bare particular that especially recommends it for this job. On the other hand, it seems to me there are independent reasons to think that bare particulars are as good

⁸ Thanks to Adam Friedlander for helping me see this problem more clearly. Also see K. Hawley [2001 and 1998].

as it gets as an answer to the question what keeps the characteristics of individual objects together at a time. So my main concern is whether there might be some reason bare particulars can't also be enduring continuants.

One complaint against this move is that I am no longer even talking about bare particulars; as Bergmann describes the idea in *Realism*, "persisting bare particular" is an oxymoron [1967: 117]. This raises the question what is central and what is peripheral in the concept of a bare particular. I take as central that bare particulars are only particular and that they exemplify properties. All else is peripheral. I assume it is coherent to take a bare particular to persist and to change. (Those who find it oxymoronic to talk of persisting and changing bare particulars may replace that expression with whatever they think is more appropriate.) I also assume that it is possible for a bare particular not to be simple. This is also a bit sacrilegious since, as far as I know, Bergmann consistently held that bare particulars are simple. Holding that they may be complex leaves open the possibility that the most obvious examples of persisting entities are genuine.

One question that has daunted endurantists concerns the exact conditions in which something survives. Just what changes can something undergo? Can a human become a minotaur? Can a fetus become a human? Can a ship lose all its original boards and acquire all new ones? It may be thought that these questions are particularly awkward for the endurantist with bare particulars for continuants. Not having a nature, it might be argued, there is nothing in the "nature" of a bare particular to explain the kinds of changes it can or can't survive.

I'm not sure what to say in the final analysis, but there are several things I feel confident I can say. One is to suggest that, coming from some objectors at least, this complaint is hypocritical. It's admittedly hard to state non-trivial conditions under which

something does persist through time. But this is just as hard for perdurantists as it is for endurantists. I believe the problem is hard for any of them, but consider the worm theorist, just to fix our focus. The worm theorist says something persists by having diverse stages that have the appropriate relations of resemblance, causal connection, etc. Therein lies the rub: how much resemblance? Do some resemblances matter more than others? What kind of causal connection? How much? It's notoriously difficult for causal theorists of all kinds to distinguish in a principled way the "right" from the "wrong" kind of causal connection. Even those who say persistence is a matter of convention face the analogous problem of discovering just what our conventions are about these matters. So as far as the problem of criteria is concerned the perdurantists and endurantists are in the same boat.

But this is little solace if the boat we're all in is sinking. My hunch is that there are no non-trivial (henceforth I drop this qualification) sufficient conditions for persistence.⁹ The most obvious reason for this is that persistence involves identity and there are no sufficient conditions for identity. I do think there are necessary conditions for the persistence of something. If B at T1 is A at T2, i.e., now, then whatever properties A has are properties B has, and vice versa.¹⁰ Thus persistence is governed by the indiscernibility of identicals. But since this is a serious tensing version of endurantism, it's important to watch the tense. It's not necessary in order for B at (the earlier) T1 to be A now that A *have* whatever properties B *had*. Nor is it necessary that B *have* every property A *had*. If these were necessary conditions for persistence, change would be impossible. Significantly, I don't

⁹ Compare Merricks [1998].

¹⁰ But maybe this is not in the final analysis a non-trivial necessary condition for persistence. Notice that the condition itself asserts the identity of some entities, i.e., properties. Still, the condition is significant insofar as it shows the connection between the identity of A and B in terms of the identity of some items other than A and B. The paradigm of a trivial necessary condition would be one which required that in order for some entity to be F it must be F.

see any reason why bare particulars could not have the sort of connection B and A in the schema are supposed to.

This necessary condition unfortunately yields little or no guidance in deciding whether the minotaur is the human, whether the adult is the fetus, or whether the ship with the new boards is the ship with the old boards. It would be nice if one of the necessary conditions for persistence were something more substantive. Let me consider two such substantive conditions: spatio-temporal continuity and kind membership. Promisingly, spatio-temporal continuity would help rule out several possibilities and it fits nicely with bare particular continuants. Bare particulars are plausibly spatially located, and although in my opinion not strictly temporally located, yet the temporal continuity condition may be understood to require that a bare particular exist at continuous times. The main problem with spatio-temporal continuity is that it doesn't strike me as a plausible necessary condition for persistence. Why couldn't my mom pop out of existence for a while and then come back? Or why couldn't she go from one place one moment to a place very distant the next?

A kind restriction on persistence is similarly helpful with problem cases. The idea that once a K, always a K should help us figure out whether humans can become minotaurs and whether fetuses can become humans. If kind conditions do only yield necessary conditions for belonging to certain kinds then the help will be limited. Perhaps in order to be a K something must have DNA of a certain kind. But since at any given time lots of things will have that certain DNA, it will require further information to determine whether some K at T1 is still around at T2. More seriously, a kind condition seems to conflict with something apparently at the heart of Bergmann's conception of bare particulars. Since they are supposed to lack natures, at least in the sense of essential properties, it's hard to see how they can be fitted to belong to kinds. Are bare particulars still bare if, as I want them to,

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they exemplify essential properties? Actually, it's not clear that kinds on this view need be essential properties in this sense. F is an essential property of A if A has F in every possible situation in which A exists. The kinds in question are not, or need not, be essential in this sense. A kind must be connected with the particular in such a way that if A is K at T, then A is K whenever it exists. I don't see that having a property immutably entails having it essentially. So supposing they belong to kinds may not quite imply that bare particulars even have essential properties. And having immutable properties does seem compatible with what I take to be the heart of the concept of the bare particular – that it's simply a particular. Unfortunately, and somewhat anticlimactically, I can't accept kind conditions because I can't bring myself to believe that the persistence of things is restricted by their belonging to kinds.

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