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In Defence of 'Partially Clad' Bare Particulars

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DISCUSSION NOTE

IN DEFENCE OF ‘PARTIALLY CLAD’ BARE PARTICULARS

Timothy Pickavance

In a recent article in this journal, Richard Brian Davis argues that ‘bare particulars [as defended by J. P. Moreland] face several serious shortcomings’ [2003: 547]. I argue that Davis’s two principal criticisms fall flat.

Let me set the scene.¹ Moreland has defended bare particulars as the best candidate solution to the problem of individuation. Moreland’s bare particulars are bare in that, unlike ordinary particulars, bare particulars have no ‘constituents’. Rather, properties are merely ‘tied-to’ bare particulars. Here’s the picture (more details later, as necessary). An ordinary, ‘thick’, particular is a complex whole with (at least) a bare particular and the whole’s essential properties as constituents. The properties are tied to the bare particular in the nexus of exemplification. For example, and simplifying, Socrates is a complex whole with two constituents, a bare particular (call it ‘*b*’) and the property of *being human*, tied to one another. Bare particulars have no essential properties, in this sense: no property is such that it is tied to every bare particular because properties are sparse and there aren’t any properties corresponding to predicates like ‘*x* is green or not green’ and ‘*x* is not complex.’ Davis thinks this picture is inadequate.² I don’t intend to defend the picture; I shall argue only that, given the picture, Davis’s criticisms can be answered.³

First, Davis claims, ‘If no property is ‘tied to’ Socrates’s bare particular essentially, then ... even *being human* isn’t an essential constituent of Socrates, and therefore not among his essential properties’ [2003: 546]. However, *being human* is among Socrates’s essential properties, so Moreland’s theory goes awry.

Davis is misconstruing the picture. Socrates is identical to the *whole* consisting of *b* tied to *being human*; Socrates is *not* identical to *b*.⁴ As such,

¹I refer the reader to Davis [2003], Moreland [2001], and Moreland and Pickavance [2003] for the full story.

²One might find it inadequate because unclear; I refer the reader to Moreland’s work for the desired clarity.

³This is a justified dialectical move: Davis intends to use Moreland’s (and Pickavance’s) commitments to derive contradictions. Therefore, showing how to answer the criticisms while assuming Moreland’s theory is the burden created by Davis’s arguments.

⁴Discussing claims like (16) and (17) below, Moreland says, ‘humanness is predicated of a bare particular to form a this-such: Socrates’ [2001: 146]. I infer from this that Socrates is identical to a this-such, which is a whole consisting of (at least) the property of *being human* and a bare particular, and not identical to a bare particular alone.

from the putative fact that *b* might not have been tied to *being human*, it does not follow that *Socrates* could have existed without having *being human* as a constituent. There seems to be a conflation of an object's individuation conditions and its identity conditions. It is true that *b* individuates *Socrates*. It does not follow, however, nor does Moreland claim, that having *b* as a constituent is all it takes for an object to be *Socrates*. The property of *being human* is required as well, though, since that is shared, it is not enough to make *Socrates* the individual that he is. For that, one needs a bare particular. While *Socrates's* individuation condition is just his having *b* as a constituent, his identity conditions include his having *being human* as a constituent as well. Furthermore, the bareness of *b* does not entail that it could have existed without being tied to *being human*. As Davis recognizes, *b's* bareness consists in its not having any constituents. Moreland's view is compatible with the claim that *b* exists only if it is tied to *being human*.⁵ Davis's first criticism, then, fails because *Socrates's* not being essentially human does not follow from *b's* not being essentially tied to *being human* and because Moreland's theory does not entail that *b* is not essentially tied to *being human*.

Second, Davis argues that, in a surprising twist, bare particulars have *themselves* as constituents. Here Davis appeals to certain moves made by Moreland [2001]. Consider:

(16) *Socrates* is human.⁶

Moreland claims that the 'is' in (16) is that of constituent-whole, not of strict predication. So, unlike in cases of strict predication, the 'is' in (16) does not express the 'nexus of exemplification' [Moreland 2001: 99]. (16) asserts that '*humanness* is an essential constituent of *Socrates*' [ibid.: 48]. Further, Moreland claims that (16) is 'grounded in' [ibid.]:

(17) This (bare particular) is human.

In (17), 'is' does express the 'nexus of exemplification', so (17) claims that *b* is tied to *being human*. On the basis of Moreland's move from (16) to (17), Davis asserts the general principle that anything filling the blank '*Socrates* is _____' 'denotes one of *Socrates's* constituent properties' [2003: 545] and

⁵An anonymous referee pointed out that it would be problematic for Moreland if *b* must be tied to *being human*. Given the standard motivations for believing in universals, you might think that there must be something common between *b* and other bare particulars of humans to account for their connection to *being human*. That connection is absent in the case of other bare particulars, so it seems bare particulars of humans have something in common that the bare particulars of other sorts of things do not. This is certainly an interesting question, but one that I do not want to take up here. The matter is complicated, it seems to me, and since (a) it is outside the stated scope of this note, which does not include extending or defending Moreland's views, and (b) the point that it raises is optional to the reply to Davis, it is best to leave discussion for another context.

The same referee claimed it would be odd if *b* and *being human* were not necessarily tied to one another. I confess that I don't share this intuition. Compare: Aristotelian/Thomistic 'matter' is not necessarily connected to the substantial form predicated of it, despite the fact that matter is the principle of individuation of primary substances. So there is precedent for claiming that individuator is not necessarily connected to the essential universal(s) of the things they individuate. It is the dependence of *Socrates* on *b* that is crucial; a dependence running the other way seems optional.

⁶I follow the numbering from Davis [2003].

therefore entails '*b* is _____', in which 'is' expresses the nexus of exemplification and the blank-filler denotes the aforementioned constituent property. Davis then considers (18), to which Moreland is committed:

- (18) Socrates is ontologically constituent-dependent on *b*.

Using (18) and the general principle, (20) follows:

- (20) *b* is ontologically constituent-dependent on *b*.

And finally, since Moreland claims that *x* is ontologically constituent-dependent on *y* only if *y* is a constituent of *x*:

- (22) *b* is a constituent of *b*.

So bare particulars, in fact, have constituents, viz. themselves, contradicting the assertion that they have no constituents.

The fundamental problem with this line of reasoning is that the general principle on which it relies is one Moreland rejects. As I noted initially, Moreland's theory of properties is sparse, so it is simply false that all general terms denote a property.⁷ Therefore, Moreland has no reason to agree that any general term filling the blank of 'Socrates is _____' denotes a constituent of Socrates. Moreland and Pickavance [2003] deny, for example, that 'green or not green' denotes a property since they deny that there is any such property, so from the truth of the claim that Socrates is green or not green it does not follow that *being green or not green* is a constituent of Socrates. In so far as Davis's argument relies on that general principle, then, Moreland has traction for resistance. Davis may reply that his argument only needs the much weaker claim that in (18) 'ontologically constituent-dependent on *b*' denotes *being ontologically constituent-dependent on b*. That is true enough, but I see no reason for Moreland to accept the weaker claim. Nothing to which he commits himself entails that there is such a property. More importantly, this seems like just the kind of property the sparse property theorist rejects, since the fact seems to be a relational one. No sparse theorist would accept that the general term 'to the left of a tree' (in, e.g., 'Socrates is to the left of a tree') denotes *being to the left of a tree*. Despite the fact that a sparse theorist could and likely would accept that 'being to the left of' denotes the genuine relation (dyadic property) of *being to the left of*. Likewise with any predication involving a putative relation, including claims about ontological constituent-dependence.⁸ Because Davis relies on this principle, Davis cannot derive (22).

⁷Davis does criticize aspects of Moreland's motivation for a sparse theory, but (a) one might have other motivations and (b) a dispute between a sparse property theorist and her opponent is not likely to be settled in this context. So I have chosen not to engage Davis on this score.

⁸Importantly, the issue here is *not* whether 'is ontologically constituent-dependent on' denotes the relation *being ontologically constituent-dependent on*, but whether 'is ontologically constituent-dependent on *b*' denotes the property *being ontologically constituent-dependent on b*. Moreland can accept the former claim (clearly, bare particulars can stand in genuine relations); it is the latter he must deny.

Furthermore, Moreland only moves from (16) to (17) on the supposition that the 'is' in (16) is that of constituent-whole. (Recall what Moreland claims that (16) asserts and the discussion above regarding *being ontologically constituent-dependent on b.*) Davis gives no reason to suppose that (18) involves a constituent-whole 'is'. Moreland can simply deny that it does. Again, (18) is a case of a relational predication, and sparse theorists are wont to cash relational predications in terms of relations, not monadic relational properties. So there is reason to deny that (18) expresses a constituent-whole relation: only if (18) predicates a monadic relational property should the 'is' should be construed as constituent-whole. (The analogy with 'Socrates is to the left of a tree' is instructive here as well.) Therefore, the move from (18) to (20) is not justified by Moreland's move from (16) to (17), and (22) remains out of reach. Davis's second criticism, therefore, fails on two scores as well.⁹ Whatever problems beset bare particulars, those alleged in Davis's [2003] aren't among them; the 'partially clad' emperor may have no clothes, but that's just as he's meant to be.¹⁰

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⁹Again, Davis would resist by arguing against sparse property theories, an issue which I have bracketed.

¹⁰Thanks to two anonymous referees for helpful comments, and to J. P. Moreland for advice and encouragement.