# Chapter 10
# The Transcendental Metaphysic of G. F. Stout: His Defence and Elaboration of Trope Theory

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*I should have never expected so sensible an election for Oxford, the way they have been going on lately.*

*(McTaggart on Stout, 1899)*

**Abstract** G. F. Stout is famous as an early twentieth century proselyte for abstract particulars, or tropes as they are now often called. He advanced his version of trope theory to avoid the excesses of nominalism on the one hand and realism on the other. But his arguments for tropes have been widely misconceived as metaphysical, e.g. by Armstrong. In this paper, I argue that Stout's fundamental arguments for tropes were ideological and epistemological rather than metaphysical. He moulded his scheme to fit what is actually given to us in perception, arguing that our epistemic practices would break down in an environment where only universals were given to us.

**Keywords** Stout · Moore · Tropes · Universals · Perception

## 10.1 Introduction

Are the characteristics of concrete things particular or universal? That was the question G. E. Moore and G. F. Stout arrived at in Durham in the summer of 1923 to settle. Exchanges with Bradley, Russell and McTaggart had already won Stout the éclat for holding that every character of a concrete thing is particular and not universal. But Moore pitched his pavilion at the other end of the Northumberland field, insisting that every character is predicable and everything predicable is universal. To many British philosophers it seemed that Moore's arguments carried the day. Witness Ramsey's cursory dismissal 2 years later of Stout's view that qualities and relations are all of them particular; Ramsey paused only to note that "Dr Stout has been already sufficiently answered" by Mr Moore (1925, p. 402). The result was the ubiquitous neglect by an upcoming generation of the possibility that characteristics are particular.

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It is curious therefore to discover upon dusting off the covers of the third supplementary volume of the Aristotelian Society—that includes the record of the Moore–Stout dispute—that so far from carrying the day, Moore's arguments mostly missed their mark.[1] According to Stout, each particular red thing has its own particular redness (a trope). Moore took this to mean that "an absolutely specific character, which characterizes a concrete thing, *must* characterize one thing only" (Ramsey 1925, p. 104). And this, Moore found to be absurd because it is quite evidently a logical possibility that more than one thing partake of an absolutely specific shade of red. But this mistook what Stout meant when he said that the characters of things are particular. He *did not* mean that if two things are red then one must have a different shade from the other. He meant that even two things that have exactly the same shade have separate characters, albeit instances of the same class or kind of character. According to Stout, when we say that red things partake of the same shade, we are saying something elliptical: "We must mean not that there is one numerically identical quality in all, but that each possesses a quality of the same sort as a quality belonging to each of the others" (1952, p. 80).[2]

Kevin Mulligan has speculated that Moore and Stout talked past one another because Stout had a very different perspective upon perception to Moore—Stout had been a psychologist, an Anderson Lecturer in Comparative Psychology at Aberdeen and the first Wilde Reader in Mental Philosophy at Oxford before turning metaphysician in St. Andrews (Mulligan 1999, p. 172).[3] The diagnosis is characteristic of the man and the contribution he has made to our understanding of the history of analytic philosophy, helping us see that our familiar cartoon histories of superheroes and supervillains will not do: that many other contributing characters and intellectual forces have shaped us to become what we are now.

In the present chapter, I pursue a project that I hope will interest Mulligan and complement his own speculations about Stout: to lay bare some of the epistemological roots covered up by the sands of time and neglect, roots that sustained Stout's metaphysic of particular characteristics.

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[1] A fact that was lost neither on Segelberg (1947, p. 156) nor on Williams (1953, p. 13), two of the twentieth century's leading trope activists.

[2] This remark is drawn from the Gifford lectures (*God and Nature*) that Stout had delivered at the University of Edinburgh in 1919–1921. The lectures were only published posthumously in 1952.

[3] Stout's works on psychology include his Analytic Psychology (1896) and Manual of Psychology (1898). It is a further part of Mulligan's diagnosis (that unfortunately remains unpublished) that Stout qua psychologist was heavily influenced by the writings of two pupils of Brentano: especially Stumpf's book on spatial perception (1873) and Husserl's Logische Untersuchungen (1901), on which see Mulligan (1995). See Valentine (2001) for an account of the contribution made by Stout to the development of cognitive science.

## 10.2 Stout overcomes the Particular–Universal Distinction

When Moore and Stout rode into Durham in 1923, Ramsey was shortly to become famous for advocating scepticism about the traditional distinction between particular and universal; so far as Ramsey was concerned "The whole theory of particulars and universals is due to mistaking for a fundamental characteristic of reality, what is merely a characteristic of language" (1925, p. 405). But the particular–universal distinction had been already put under pressure some years before by Stout—differently but arguably for deeper reasons.

Stout took as crucial test cases what Russell called "intuitive judgements of perception", i.e. judgements in which a character is affirmed of a given sense-datum. According to Russell, as Stout understood him, these "characters or attributes are always general, whereas the sense-datum we are acquainted with is not general but particular" (Stout 1914–15, p. 348). But Stout insisted that Russell was wrong about this: "Both the sense-datum and the characters asserted of it are in the same sense particular and in the same sense general". Indeed Stout went so far as to affirm that, on his view, "The distinction between subject and attribute would be abolished in the limiting case of a subject with a perfectly simple nature" (1914–15, p. 350). Concerns about how to handle the interrelated dichotomies between *particular* and *universal, abstract* and *concrete,* and *particular* and *general* were already a long-standing preoccupation for Stout. Contrasting his own view with that of Bradley's *Principles of Logic* (1883), Stout had written a decade earlier: "What is concrete is particular. But we cannot affirm that whatever is particular is concrete. The roundness of this or that orange, as it exists in the orange, is particular. But it is not concrete. It is not concrete, for the reason that its particularity is derivative. It is particularised not only for knowledge, but in fact, by its being a partial feature of the particular orange" (Stout 1901–02, p. 1).

It is his conception of what is given in perceptual experience that provides Stout with the immediate reason for casting doubt upon the distinction between subject and attribute. Of a subject that remains once the characteristics of the sense datum have been taken away Stout reports, "I can find no trace"; "Except such attributes" as colour, size and shape "there is nothing that I am immediately acquainted with" (1914–15, p. 348). Stout was correspondingly wary of admitting particulars conceived as bare bearers of characteristics (Lockean substrata): "it is plain that an actual content of immediate experience, such as a present sense-datum, cannot be identified with the bare abstraction of Locke's formula" (1952, p. 73). But nor, Stout maintained, are we acquainted with attributes *as such* either: "it is pure mythology to suggest that besides the particular red we are also aware of a shadowy counterpart of it called redness, in the form of a floating adjective hovering over this and all other particular reds" (1914–15, p. 349). This meant Stout was wary too of admitting universals conceived as separate but common to many distinct particular things.

Stout accordingly moulded his metaphysical scheme to fit what actually was given in intuitive judgements of perception, *viz*. characters as particular as the things

they characterise. Stout's metaphysic thereby cuts across the particular–universal distinction as traditionally conceived whereby characters are universals whilst particulars are not characters.

### 10.2.1   Stout's Ideological Insight

The shift in intellectual key that made it possible for Stout to avoid the untenable dualism, as he saw it, of Russell's philosophy—of particulars on the one hand and universals on the other—has never really been properly acknowledged as a shift Stout made.[4] Let me begin by explaining things from our end of history. It has become a commonplace of contemporary metaphysics to recognise that there is more than one way that an effort at systematic philosophy may account for a purported fact (Lewis 1983, p. 352). It may do so by giving an analysis. Or it may simply take the fact as primitive. Quine famously offered an account of the latter style when he refused to analyse the fact that (e.g.) many things are red in terms of the instantiation of a common universal redness, instead taking the fact that all of them are red "as ultimate and irreducible" (1953, p. 10). But Stout, ahead of Quine, had already refused to analyse the "unity of a class or kind" in his efforts at systematic philosophy.

According to Stout, "The unity of a class or kind is quite ultimate and that any attempt to analyse it leads to a vicious circle" (1921, p. 384). And this was only one of a manifold of forms of ultimate unity that Stout recognised: "There is the unity of a successive series; there is the unity of a spatial complex, there is the unity of characters belonging to the same thing" (1952, p. 79). For Stout, this conception of classes, kinds, series, material things, etc. was of a piece with the more familiar empiricist conception of the self as a bundle of experiences rather than a mysterious soul standing behind them: "just as the unity of a triangle or a melody or of an organism consists merely in the special mode in which its parts are connected and correlated so as to form a specific kind of complex, so the unity of what we call an individual mind consists merely in the peculiar way in which what we call its experiences are united with each other" (1911, p. 358).

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[4] It would be going too far to say that this shift in key had never been noticed by anyone. D.C. Williams heard it but only as a disharmony. About Stout, Williams remarked, "His theory of abstract particulars…is almost identical with the one I am defending; if there is a difference it is in his obscure idea of the class as a unique form of unity not reducible to similarity" (1953, p. 12). O'Connor heard the shift in key too, "Every philosophical theory has to take certain concepts as basic and unanalysable, just as every logical system has to assume certain primitive ideas and unproved postulates", but he questioned whether distributive unity conceived as a primitive concept contributed towards an ideologically economical theory (O'Connor 1949, pp. 64–5).

## 10.2.2   Stout on Bradley's Regress

The necessity for recognising that there are ultimate and irreducible forms of unity had been impressed upon Stout whilst thinking through what he took to be wrong with Bradley's regress. Bradley came up with this argument to demonstrate that the very idea of a relation was absurd. He supposed that if some things are connected together by a relation then there must be a further relation that connects it to them. But this relation must itself be connected to the items it relates, forcing us to continue positing relations without end. Bradley's beef here is not with there being an indefinite plenitude of such relations. It is with the fact that positing them never enables us to account for a relation and its terms being connected together in the first place. If we allow ourselves to be caught up in the eddies of Bradley's regress, then we will go on recognising more and more relations; but what we thereby recognise will never add up to something unified. Bradley concluded that the very idea of a relation being used to account for how things are connected together was confounded by a dilemma: "If you take the connection as a solid thing, you have got to show, and you cannot show, how the other solids are joined to it. And if you take it as a kind of medium or unsubstantial atmosphere, it is a kind of connection no longer" (1893, p. 33).

According to the historical reconstruction I am putting forward, the best way to interpret Stout is to attribute to him the insight that we can avoid the horns of this dilemma by taking the unity of a relation and its terms as primitive, thereby impugning Bradley's slight upon relations. To Bradley's question, "What connects a relation and its terms?" Stout answered, "There is no intermediate link, and that there is need for none. For the connexion is continuous, and has its ground in that ultimate continuity which is presupposed by all relational unity" (1901–02, p. 12). What Stout means here by a continuous connexion is a connexion that is not mediated by anything else. By taking a relation as continuously connected to its terms, Stout avoided the need to posit a further relation to connect it and its terms; so Bradley's regress could not kick off. But this did not mean that Stout had shirked the obligatory task of providing an account of how a relation and its terms connect together. Stout did give a conscientious account of the matter, albeit not an analysis, because his theory takes the unity of a relation and its terms as ultimate and irreducible. He was later to express his account of relational unity thus: "A relation considered as subsisting between terms presupposes some complex unity within which both the terms and relations fall. This complex unity is the *fundamentum relationis*" (1921, p. 388).

## 10.2.3   Stout on Nominalism

The insight that unity stands in need of an account that is not an analysis can also be seen as operative in Stout's critique of nominalism. Berkeley's nominalism is Stout's immediate target. Berkeley had offered an analysis of general ideas according to which an idea of a given triangle can be taken as representing *all* other figures

which resemble it in a certain respect. But Stout insisted that this could not be a satisfactory point to terminate our enquiry into generality. This is because "unity is signified by such words as "all", "every", "any", "some", and the indefinite article" (1921, p. 387). But Berkeley was beggared to provide any account of this unity—what we might describe as the universe of discourse presupposed when a quantifier word is used. This is because "all" is itself deployed in Berkeley's analysis of general ideas and Berkeley cannot avoid this circularity by offering an enumerative analysis of the quantifier because, as Stout pointed out, we cannot plausibly be taken to "severally apprehend" each thing in the universe of discourse. We might hope to get around this problem by taking the universe of discourse associated with a quantifier to be a single object, *viz.* a class. But, as we will see, Stout did not conceive of a class as a single thing; for Stout a class is nothing but the unity of its members; so his positive proposal is most charitably interpreted as being that the unity associated with a quantifier is primitive.

I do not mean to suggest that Stout had the idea that unity is primitive fully under his control. He did sometimes err, falling back into a manner of speaking that suggests unity admits of an ontological analysis. But usually these slips are no more indicative of confusion than the fact that Russell and Whitehead often made slips when it came to use and mention—usually these slips arise in circumstances where exact expression would be unduly cumbersome. The fact of the matter is that Stout *did* take a decisive step toward appreciating the extraordinary power of the idea that unity is primitive.

### 10.2.4   Stout on the Monism–Pluralism Debate

A wide-angle view upon his philosophy: By recognising that there are ultimate forms of unity, Stout hoped to find a *via media* that avoided the excesses of old-fashioned monism on the one hand and new-fangled pluralism on the other (1921, pp. 393, 402–3; 1952, pp. 38, 53, 81). He hoped it would enable him to avoid the excesses of monism because it would allow him to admit a sense in which the universe is one, i.e. a unity, without having to deny that there is genuine plurality of different things. But he also hoped it would enable him to avoid the excesses of pluralism too, allow him to acknowledge that there are many different things without having to suppose that the universe is a mere plurality. By adopting an account of unity that was not an analysis, Stout advanced an approach that was intended to be more nuanced than that of his rivals: Whilst an ontological pluralist, he remained an ideological monist.

### 10.2.5   Distributive and Concrete Unity

How did recognising ultimate forms of unity enable Stout to overcome the untenable dualism of particulars and universals? Universals are typically posited to explain

how it is possible for different things to resemble one another—because each of them partakes of the same indivisible universal. Philosophers who posit universals to explain resemblance typically regard abstract nouns, like "redness" or "squareness", as singular terms that stand for them. But the apparent necessity to posit universals to account for resemblance disappears once it is recognised that the particular characters actually given in experience admit of a "unique and ultimate form of unity" of their own—that Stout dubbed "*distributive*" (1914–15, p. 348; 1921, p. 386).

It is because (e.g.) particular red characters exhibit distributive unity that they are aptly described as instances or examples of the same sort or kind, *viz*. red. Their unity is "distributive" in the sense that the different elements of this unified plurality are distributed amongst many different things, each red thing having its own quite separate part of the plurality, its own particular red character. Different things resemble one another because they have particular characters that belong to the same distributive unity. So there is no need to posit universals and abstract nouns, like "redness" or "squareness", which are therefore regarded by Stout not as singular but as "general terms" that denote all of the characters that exhibit the relevant distributive unity (1921, pp. 386–7). Stout does not deny that there really are universals, preferring to state his view by saying instead that "the universal is a distributive unity" (1921, p. 388). But here Stout is most charitably interpreted as treating the word "universal" as an incomplete symbol, one whose significance is exhausted by statements that describe the distributive unity of particular characters, rather than a noun that describes shadowy things standing behind these characters responsible for unifying them.

Particulars are typically posited as the underlying subjects responsible for binding the characters of a concrete thing together. They are also posited as the underlying substrata that persist though change in qualities. But Stout argued that recognising another form of unity as unique and ultimate obviates these posits too: "There is no need to consider the subject as being something distinct from the total complex of its characters. What we call the characters or attributes of the same subject are united with each other by a form of unity as peculiar and ultimate as that which I have ascribed to a class or kind" (1914–15, p. 350; 1952, pp. 73–4). The distinctive unity in question Stout dubs "*concreteness*" (1902–03, p. 1, 1921, p. 393). Because the unity in question is ultimate, there is no need to posit further entities to bind the qualities of a thing together. Nor is there a need to posit anything to serve as a substratum of change. It was a long-standing view of Stout that a thing persists because the concrete unity that constitutes it admits of systematic patterns of variation in the particular characteristics that it unites: "A material thing is a complex of sensible qualities, and that within this complex there is a central core constituted by visible and tangible qualities which have spatial extension and position, and are spatially coincident and co-extensive. Other sensible qualities are more loosely attached to their central core. They are attached to it in so far as their appearances disappearances and variations are connected in definite ways with change in it, and in its spatial variations" (1900–01, pp. 2–3).[5]

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[5] So I read Stout as anticipating Peter Simons' "nuclear trope theory", according to which an ordinary thing that is constituted from a bundle of essential tropes, a "nucleus", acts as the substratum of a looser bundle of accidental tropes (see Simons 1994).

### 10.2.6   An Alternative Interpretation of Stout

I have advanced an interpretation of Stout according to which "thing" and "universal" are incomplete symbols. There are no things or universals conceived as independent pieces of the world's furniture. There are only particular characteristics. But some of them are united differently from others—some distributively, others concretely.

In advancing this interpretation, I diverge from another put forward in Maria van der Schaar's unsurpassed study *G. F. Stout's Theory of Judgement and Proposition* (1991). She argues that, according to Stout, a universal, such as whiteness, is a special kind of whole, albeit with its own distinctive form of unity (1991, pp. 140–3). She bases this interpretation upon the following remark from Stout's Gifford Lectures of 1919–21: "It [whiteness] is a whole with parts which, being abstract, are called "instances" of it and not "members" of it. Every particular white thing literally participates or shares in the universal whiteness. For each has a particular character which is a particular instance of it. Each possesses a part of it and none possesses the whole" (1952, p. 80).

But this remark does not, I think, reflect Stout's considered position according to which "whiteness" is a *general term* that denotes the plurality of particular whites. It is not a singular term that stands for anything, not even a whole. In order to get clear about this, we will need to bring into the foreground an aspect of his case against universals that Stout conceived to be of "vital importance to my general argument", *viz.* that the realist cannot account for the peculiar and unique relationship to be found amongst determinates and determinables (1921, p. 395).

### 10.2.7   Stout on Determinates and Determinables

According to realism, red things resemble one another because there is a common universal, a determinate, belonging to them, the universal *red*. But red things also resemble yellow and blue things; they are all coloured things. By parity of reasoning, they resemble one another because there is common universal, a determinable belonging to them that is responsible for their being coloured, the universal *colour*. Stout considered determinables such as *colour* or *shape* to be of dubious standing. And he argued that once this was recognised one did not need to be Argus-eyed to see that his account of distributive unity was the only credible treatment of resemblance and predication left standing (1921, p. 397; 1923, pp. 117–8; 1936, pp. 4–8). The way that Stout told the story, W. E. Johnson had scored an own goal for realism with the recent publication of Part I of his *Logic*.

In his *Logic,* Johnson had committed himself to the existence not only of the determinate universals (*red, green,* etc.) but also of the determinables (*colour, shape,* etc.). He further argued that "the grounds for grouping determinates under one and the same determinable is not any partial agreement that could be revealed by analysis" (1921, p. 176). *Red* is not grouped with *green, blue,* etc. because there is a

common character belonging to them; we are unable to discern in coloured things a generic character that makes them all alike alongside a separate package of differentia that make them different. Rather, they are grouped together, Johnson maintained, because of a "unique and special kind of difference that subsists between the several determinates under the same determinable". Roughly speaking, Johnson's idea was that determinates fall under the same determinable because they form a family united by their mutual incompatibility, i.e. united by the fact that they cannot simultaneously qualify the same particular.

Stout agreed with Johnson that *red, green,* etc. are incapable of being analysed as the result of adding differentia to a common genus, *colour:* "I find this a frightfully difficult view to understand. If it is right, we ought to be able to discern in a square shape two qualities, squareness and shape. Speaking for myself, I can do nothing of the sort" (1923, p. 118). He also agreed that determinates under the same determinable form a family. He only disagreed with Johnson about the exact character of the relation that unites them. For Stout the relation also involves "a peculiar kind of resemblance": *red* and *green* are not only incompatible but are also alike, *viz.* with respect to being colours. Stout summed all this up using Cook Wilson's dictum: "square shape is not squareness plus shape; squareness itself is a special way of being a shape" (Stout 1921, p. 398).

## 10.2.8   Stout's Coup de Grâce

Having spelt out the large measure of agreement between them, Stout proceeded to deliver what he conceived to be his coup de grâce: "Mr. Johnson's view is not really self-consistent" (1921, p. 399). The problem that Stout thought he had identified was that recognition of the unique character of the determinate–determinable structure cannot be consistently combined with realism about determinates and determinables. Suppose that "colour" as well as "red" is a singular term that stands for a universal. Then what can we mean by saying that red is a colour? Stout thinks there are only two analyses available to a realist like Johnson: either (1) that the universal *red* is identical with the universal *colour* or (2) that *red* is part identical with *colour*. The former is untenable because it is also true to say that green is a colour; so, by parity of reasoning, *green* is identical with *colour* too. But then the absurdity follows from (1) that *red* is identical with *green*. The latter analysis is untenable too because, as Johnson has shown, *red* is not a complex that can be analysed into a generic quality that is equality present in the other colours plus some determining quality which distinguishes it from *green* and *blue*.

Stout concludes that we must "give up the initial assumption that redness and colour are singular terms". We can only avoid the difficulty Johnson encounters if we understand that they are really "general terms" that stand for more or less inclusive distributive unities, i.e. pluralities of particular characters. Thus "red" is a general term that denotes the plurality of particular reds, "colour" a general term that denotes the plurality that includes not only the particular reds but also the

particular greens, blues, etc. This avoids Johnson's difficulty because "colour" is not conceived as a standing for a single, though indeterminate, quality: "Colour in general is nothing but the distributive unity of its specific sub-kinds, just as those are ultimately the distributive unity of their particular instances. To be a particular colour is to be a particular example *either* of this, that or the other special kind of colour" (1921, p. 399; 1923, p. 118).[6]

Despite the significance that Stout assigned to it, realists are unlikely to be impressed by this particular argument that Stout gave. They may deny, as Moore subsequently did, the existence of generic universals whilst continuing to affirm the reality of specific ones (see, for example, Knight 1936, p. 58). Or, to avoid Stout's *reductio ad absurdum,* they may attribute to the statement that red is a colour a more sophisticated logical form than (1) identity or (2) part-identity.

Nonetheless, what Stout's argument does reveal is the depth of his commitment to treating "red", "colour", etc. as general rather than singular terms. It is because he took (e.g.) "colour" to stand for many things—many particular characteristics rather than a single quality—that Stout was able to avoid the difficulties that he took to confront realists when they endeavour to explain the peculiar relationship between determinates and determinable that Johnson had identified. Hence Stout's explicit pronouncement: "Abstract nouns are, on my view, not singular, but general terms. Shape, for example, stands for "all shapes as such," and squareness stands for all square shapes as such" (1921, p. 386). Since they are general, "shape" and "colour" are not singular terms that stand for wholes either. Of course, this does not prevent Stout talking as if shape or colour, more generally universals, were single things, so long as it is understood that to do so is merely to talk in an abbreviated manner about particular shapes, colours, etc.: "Analogous abbreviations are very common: for example, we say that the same thing has occurred before, though we know that the same event cannot occur twice. What we mean is that a very similar event has occurred before. In like manner, when we say that two men have the same thought, we do not mean that the thought of one is identical with the thought of the other. We only mean that they are thinking of the same thing" (1936, p. 4).

## 10.3   Against Bare Particulars

I have cast Stout in the role of seeking to overcome the untenable dualism, as he saw it, of Russell's philosophy—of Lockean substrata on the one hand and self-subsistent universals on the other. He sought to do so by conceiving of the world as exhausted by pluralities of particular characteristics unified along a variety of dimensions, concrete and distributive. He offered two arguments in favour of adopting this extraordinary world hypothesis. The first, targeted at abstract particulars, is

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[6] This is essentially the view of determinates and determinables advanced by Campbell (1990, p. 83), although his analysis takes resemblance rather than distributive unity as primitive.

metaphysical but McTaggart showed to falter; but the second, that is near enough transcendental, is load bearing.

Stout disfavoured bare particulars (*à la russellienne*) because he could make no sense of something the entire nature of which is exhausted by it being the subject of attributes which themselves are conceived as entirely distinct from it: "How can the whole being of anything consist in its being related to something else? There must be an answer to the question, 'What is it that is so related?'" (Stout 1914–15, p. 350; Stout 1940, p. 117; Stout 1952, p. 73). Since there can be no satisfactory answer to this question—bare particulars are bare by definition—Stout refused to admit them.

McTaggart took up their defence in his *Nature of Existence* (1921, § 69). Mc-Taggart granted Stout's assumption that a particular (substance) cannot be a mere node in a network of relations to other things, *viz*. its attributes. But he denied that a particular conceived as the bearer of attributes distinct from it, is merely a node in a network. Suppose Smith is happy. Then it is a fact that Smith is characterised by happiness—the particular is indeed related to its attributes. But this relational fact is not fundamental. It is derived from a more basic fact that is not relational in form, *viz*. that Smith is happy; Smith is only characterised by happiness because he is happy. This gives McTaggart a ready reply to Stout's question: "*What* is it that stands to happiness in the relation of being characterised?" McTaggart's answer: "Smith, who is happy, he is also a man, and so on".

Stout was unmoved by this defence. Even what McTaggart calls the primary fact—that Smith is happy—contains two quite distinct existences, the particular on the one hand and the character predicable of it on the other. But, Stout insists, "two distinct existences within a complex can only be connected by a relation" (1921, p. 394). If so, then even the fact that Smith is happy is a relational fact. But Stout (especially) should not have been satisfied with this line of response. It was integral to his own account of how things integrate together—along a whole variety of dimensions—that a plurality of diverse constituents may be united without there being a relation that connects them together: "the unity of a complex as a whole ought not to be confused with relations between terms" (1921, p. 388). As we have already established, it was by means of such a distinction that Stout hoped, *inter alia,* to evade Bradley's regress.

Even though Stout's rejoinder to McTaggart is unsatisfactory, it is not difficult to get into a frame of mind where the mere fact that a (bare) particular and its characters are distinct existences is already a troubling enough feature—never mind whether there is a relation connecting them. A bare particular is just another element of a complex juxtaposed with others. There is no saying what it is except saying what complexes it contributes towards—never mind whether these are relational complexes or not. Because it is distinct from the characters with which it makes common cause, it cannot be a "false abstraction" to consider the particular by itself. And so considered there is no satisfactory answer concerning a bare particular to Stout's question: "What is it?" And when we have allowed ourselves to adopt this mind-set it is not so difficult to feel the attraction of Stout's favoured ontology of particular characters. Particular characters are not the union, relational or otherwise, of a particular on the one hand, and, on the other, an attribute quite distinct from it.

Whilst we may be able to conceive of a particular character *qua* particular this really is a false abstraction: there is really nothing bare about it, it is a character, albeit a particular one; there is no separate "it", something that is not a character, to pick out.

## 10.4   Against Universals: Initial Pass

If this attempt at persuasion makes us more sympathetic to Stout's project, it still leaves us wanting a real argument for affirming his world hypothesis. If I am right then Stout does provide such an argument, this one targeted against the other side of Russell's dualism: universals.

Stout was impressed by a distinctive feature of the epistemology of numerical diversity, *viz.* that we are able to appreciate at a glance that two things are numerically different even though we often are not able to isolate any respect in which one of them is qualitatively unlike the other. Stout's position is that we could not appreciate diversity this way, not see (e.g.) that the two billiard balls are numerically different at a glance, if their characters were universals. Indeed we could not see this unless we apprehended that the roundness, smoothness and whiteness of the one ball are numerically diverse from the roundness, smoothness and whiteness of the other; their characters must be particulars. Stout makes two passes over this material to try and get what he takes to be a single line of thought across; but really he offers two distinct lines of reflection.

The first line of reflection, which has attracted the most attention from commentators, relies upon the metaphysical axiom that nothing can be present in different places without itself being divided (see Aaron 1939, pp. 177–178; Segelberg 1947, pp. 152–153, Jones 1949, pp. 159–60; Seargent 1985, pp. 87–88; van der Schaar 1991, pp. 130–131). It follows straightaway that one and the same character cannot be wholly present in a multitude of different places and times. Since (e.g.) the roundness of one ball is present in a different place from the roundness of the other, it follows that the characters of these concrete things must be different too, i.e. different particulars rather than a common universal (1921, p. 390).

Certainly, Stout himself affirms in his dispute in Durham with Moore that this metaphysical axiom is key to his case against universals: "All that I require for my argument is the proposition that nothing in its entirety can be locally or otherwise separate from itself in its entirety" (Stout 1923, p. 120). And certainly this axiom continued to inform Stout's subsequent campaign against universals: "Now I cannot understand how a universal, however specific, can be thus divided into separate bits. I cannot see how a universal can be beside itself, or at a distance from itself" (1936, p. 11). But it is no less certain Stout is begging the question when he wields this axiom. It is plausible that a particular cannot be wholly present in a multitude of different places at a time.[7] But universals are supposed to be a different kind of beast

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[7] Although even the principle that that a particular cannot be wholly present in different places at the same time is open to question. What about the possibility of extended atoms, bi-located saints, Dr. Who meeting himself and so on? (see MacBride 1998, pp. 220–7).

altogether, the things responsible for our being able to truly say that particulars in different places have the very same characteristics. So the upholder of universals will be unmoved by what Stout says. Certainly, this was one of the reasons that Moore thought Stout's argument for particular characteristics begged the question (see Moore 1923, pp. 105–107).

### 10.4.1   Against Universals: Second Pass

The second line of reflection that Stout assays indicates that he had no need to rely upon so strong an assumption to establish his case. Indeed, it seems that Stout mistook a conclusion for a premise when he made his initial pass over this material. What primarily exercises Stout this time around is the thought that the epistemic techniques we routinely rely upon to distinguish numerically diverse things would simply lack credibility in an environment where the characteristics of concrete things are universals. Stout's starting point was that only the characters of a thing are perceptually given to us, rather than the substrata clothed by them: "There can be no knowledge of it which is not knowledge of its characters" (1921, p. 391; 1923, pp. 122–3). Stout surmised from this that the only way to discern that things are numerically diverse is to discern a difference in their characters. Now it is a feature of our epistemic practice that we routinely distinguish between concrete things even in circumstances where we can perceive no *qualitative* difference between them; for example, when we distinguish between the different parts of a sheet of white paper. But if the characters of things were universals we could have no credible grounds for regarding such things to be numerically diverse. Why? Because the characters we perceived them to exhibit would be exactly the same universals. If, however, the characters of things are themselves particulars, then attending to them is already to have appreciated their diversity.

This invites the rejoinder that it is the awareness of *relational* differences that enables us to distinguish things even in circumstances when we can perceive no qualitative difference between them; for example, when we are aware that the left-hand part of paper is numerically diverse from the right-hand part because even though they are qualitatively indistinguishable, the former is closer to the inkpot whereas the latter is closer to the penholder. Stout dismisses this rejoinder: "Nor can we say that each part is distinguishable by its distinctive relations to other parts. For in order that one particular may be known as related in the required way to other particulars, it is a logical precondition that it shall itself be known as one particular amongst others" (1921, p. 391).

Unfortunately, Stout does not unpack his reasoning for saying so. But here is an argument for agreeing with him. If all we know is that something $x$ bears $R$ to $z,$ and something $y$ bears $S$ to $w,$ then we are not entitled to draw the conclusion that $x \neq y$. To be entitled to that conclusion, the further premise would need to be added that $x$ does not bear $S$ to $w$ or that $y$ does not bear $R$ to $z$—i.e. something is true of one that is not true of the other. But we cannot be entitled to this premise unless $x$ and $y$ have

already been distinguished by us—otherwise we would not be entitled to affirm that *x,* so to speak, slots into a truth *p* whereas *y* does not. So it is only because we already apprehend their diversity that we are able to apprehend the relational differences of concrete things. And we are able to do so—even in circumstances where we cannot perceive a qualitative difference between them—because we already apprehend the numerical diversity of their particular qualitative characteristics.

So interpreted, Stout's case for tropes is near enough transcendental, *viz*. that it is a condition of perceptual experience delivering knowledge of the numerical diversity of concrete things that the characteristics of concrete things are particular.[8] This means that Stout is not just assuming at the outset—as more recent trope activists have done—the metaphysical axiom that nothing can be in many places at once without being divided (see, for example, Campbell 1990, p. 12). Stout endeavours to put the case for tropes upon a far firmer footing, providing a deduction of the principle that the characters of concrete things are particular from the assumption that the informational packages that perceptual experience supplies are exclusively about the characters of concrete things.

### 10.4.2   Armstrong's Metaphysical Interpretation Dismissed

It will help us fix upon the distinctive features of this interpretation of Stout's case if we place it alongside another more familiar interpretation due to Armstrong—which we can now see to be far wide of the mark (see Armstrong 1978, pp. 81–82). According to Armstrong, Stout relies upon two metaphysical premises. (1) A concrete thing is nothing but a bundle of its properties. (2) Two concrete things can resemble exactly. Stout is committed to (1) because of his prior rejection of the idea of a bare particular. Stout is committed to (2) because he recognised that it is not a necessary truth that numerically diverse things differ in some of their non-relational properties. But these two premises cannot be consistently combined with (3) the characteristics of concrete things are universals. Suppose two concrete things exactly resemble one another. If (3) is correct, then they will have exactly the same characteristics. But if (1) is correct, then they cannot be two because they are the very same bundle of characteristics, but must be one, which is contrary to (2). Since (1) and (2) are already mandated for him, Stout, on this interpretation, concludes that (3) cannot be correct.

It is true that Stout did endorse a version of the bundle theory—he held that a concrete thing is the "peculiar unity" of the particular characteristics truly predicable of it. And Stout certainly did affirm the possibility of exactly resembling concrete things: "Two drops of water, for instance, may conceivably be exactly alike except that they must have different positions in space, and whatever further differences

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[8] Towards the end of his life, Stout was to remark in a paper that grew out of correspondence with Kemp Smith: "If distributive unity is a category, it ought to be possible to give a 'transcendental proof' of its formula, analogous to those given by Kant for causality and the other so-called principles of judgement" (1947, p. 16).

this must involve" (1952, pp. 77–8). But Armstrong's interpretation goes awry because Stout relied upon neither (1) nor (2) in his argument that (3) is mistaken.[9]

The premise to which Stout explicitly appeals to start his argument is "that the substance is nothing *apart from* its qualities" (1921, p. 390). Admittedly, taken out of context, this may give the impression that Stout is assuming a version of (1), that a concrete thing is nothing but a bundle of its qualities. But this is not how Stout intended his premise to be taken. He meant to put forward a proposition that is "almost universally admitted" so that even his adversaries could agree to it. In fact, Stout self-consciously drew the formulation of the premise from McTaggart's *Nature of Existence*. In this work, McTaggart rejected any version of the bundle theory but continued to maintain "It is, of course, quite true that a substance is nothing apart from its qualities" (1921, § 68). How was it consistent for McTaggart to hold these commitments together? Because he did not mean by the phrase "nothing apart" that a substance is *nothing but* its qualities. He meant only that a substance *without* its qualities is not something of which we can coherently conceive.

If not (1), then how did either Stout intend his premise to be understood? He intended to be understood in just that sense that McTaggart did, *viz*. that we cannot form an intelligible conception of a particular in abstraction from its qualities: "If we were to try to form a conception of a substance which had no qualities the undertaking would be as hopeless as an attempt to form a conception of a triangle without sides" (McTaggart 1921, § 68). This weaker premise is all that Stout needs to derive the *epistemological* lemma that shapes his subsequent argument but is absent from Armstrong's reconstruction: "If substance is nothing apart from its qualities, to know the substance without knowing its qualities is to know nothing" (Stout 1921, p. 391).

Stout did not employ (2) as a premise of his argument either. In fact, he begins by making a concessive nod towards McTaggart's contention that there cannot "be two things which are exactly similar" (1921, § 94). About this claim, the negation of (2), Stout declares, "In this he may be right" (1921, p. 390). Stout's argument then proceeds without making any appeal to actual or possible examples of diverse things that are exactly similar. Instead, he appeals to the *epistemic* fact that we are able to discern numerical diversity even in circumstances where we are unable to discern qualitative differences. Recall Stout's discussion of what he is able to appreciate from just looking at a sheet of white paper: "I am able to discern the several parts of the paper without discerning qualitative unlikeness between each part and every one of the others" (1921, p. 391). To say that he can discern numerical diversity between the parts of the paper without discerning any qualitative difference between them does not require Stout to presuppose that there are no qualitative differences between the parts, i.e. the parts of the paper actually exactly resemble one another. He need only presuppose that if there are any, he cannot see them. And this is all that

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[9] The argument that Armstrong attributes to Stout is really one to be found in Russell (1911–12) who had filched it from Moore (1900–01). Stout was doubtless aware of Russell's argument; he alludes to it in his Gifford lectures (1952, p. 78). But although there is a family resemblance between them, Stout's argument, as will become apparent, exhibits key differences. See Hochberg (1978, pp. 129–33) for discussion of Russell's argument.

Stout needs to run his argument, *viz.* that it would not be possible for us to discern numerical diversity without discerning qualitative difference—our epistemic practices would not survive—in an environment where only the universal characteristics of concrete things were given to us.

### 10.4.3   Stout's Rejection of Russell's Distinction between "Knowledge of Things" and "Knowledge of Truths"

We can gain further insight into the epistemic character of Stout's case for tropes by attending to the rejoinder Stout himself took most seriously, *viz.* that, despite what he had said, "there can be knowledge of a substance which is not knowledge of its characters" (1921, p. 391). In *Problems of Philosophy,* Russell had drawn a distinction between "knowledge of things" and "knowledge of truths"—roughly, Russell suggested, a distinction marked by "savoir" and "connaître" in French and "wissen" and "kennen" in German (1912, p. 23). Russell identified knowledge of things, when it is of the kind he called "knowledge by acquaintance", as essentially simpler than, and logically independent of, knowledge of truths. Whereas the latter presupposes the capacity upon the part of a knowing subject to form a discursive judgement about a thing—that it is thus-and-so—the former is immediate: "I say that I am *acquainted* with an object when I have a direct cognitive relation to that object, i.e. when I am directly aware of the object itself. When I speak of a cognitive relation here, I do not mean the sort of relation which constitutes judgement" (Russell 1910–11, p. 108). If Russell is right, then there can be knowledge of a substance— knowledge of a thing—that is not knowledge of its characters—knowledge of truths about it. So if the stark contrasts of Russell's nascent epistemology are forced upon us, then Stout's transcendental argument for tropes collapses.

This explains why it was a vital task for Stout, when constructing his case for tropes, to overcome Russell's antithesis between knowledge of things and knowledge of truths.[10] His strategy was to argue that immediate knowledge of a thing that is not mediated by knowledge of truths about it is a false ideal because we cannot know anything "if it is supposed that we know absolutely nothing about it" (1921, p. 392), "mere existential presence is not knowledge at all" (1952, p. 72). Stout presupposed that in order to know a thing we have to be capable of intellectually detaching it from the background against which it is presented. To do so, requires us to appreciate *what* it is, in order to tell where its boundaries lie. But thing knowledge, because it is not mediated by knowledge of truths about a thing, cannot supply the sortal information we need to perform such an act of intellectual detachment: "If we inquire what in mere acquaintance we are acquainted with, mere acquaintance itself, being blind and dumb, can supply no answer" (1921, p. 393).

To explain how it is possible to intellectually carve a thing out, Stout appeals to an epistemic version of the Context Principle. It is only because we are already

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[10] Stout consequently devoted an appendix of his "Russell's theory of judgement" and chapter IV of his Gifford Lectures to undermining the various contrasts of Russell's epistemology (1914–15, 345–52; 1952, 53–76).

aware of a thing *as* a thing of a given sort that it is possible for us to make it an object of our attention. So the answer to the question "what in mere acquaintance are we acquainted with?" must "be sought in analytic judgements which involve knowledge about".[11]

Stout identified perceptual judgements as the analytic, i.e. discursive judgements that are responsible for enabling us to detach a thing from the environmental backdrop against which it is presented. But "these judgements never reveal a mere thing apart from its characters, but always the thing as in some way characterised". Because there is no knowledge of a thing that is not mediated by knowledge of truths about it, Stout concluded that the epistemic principle holds good—upon which his case for trope depends—that there is no knowledge of a substance that is not knowledge of its characters.

Of course whether Stout's transcendental argument for tropes succeeds, or not, depends upon whether, as he supposes, the informational packages supplied by perceptual experience are solely about characters of things or, rather, about things-having-characters or things-lying-in-relations.

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[11] Compare the semantic version of the Context Principle that Dummett sketches in his 1973, pp. 496–8.

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