CHAPTER FOUR
A SUGGESTED APPROACH TO THE PROBLEM OF UNIVERSALS

In the previous chapter we mentioned the possibility of a non-relational Immanent Realism and we saw how Armstrong argued that such a theory would probably be able to avoid Abstract Particularism without encountering the difficulties into which a relational Immanent Realism leads.

Nevertheless, Armstrong’s non-relational Immanent Realism still employs the language of ‘properties’, ‘characters’, and ‘qualities’, that is to say it continues to employ a ‘thing language’ — a terminology which seems to suggest that there exist peculiar ‘thin’ entities which are termed ‘characters’, ‘properties’, ‘qualities’ or collectively, ‘attributes’. Whether these terms describe the same sort of things and whether these entities are abstract particulars or universals, are questions which are answered differently by different philosophers. Most philosophers however, agree that these terms denote entities in some sense of the word.

It seems to me that once this latter assumption is made — that once it is assumed that these terms denote entities, it is almost inevitable that discussion of concrete particulars and their qualities will be framed within the language of related things — of one thing (the concrete particular) standing in a certain specifiable relation to other things (its qualities, irrespective of whether these are conceived as being Stoutian particulars or Realistic universals).

Even if such a relational doctrine is explicitly denied, the language itself will all the while seem to affirm it. A philosopher postulating a non-relational interpretation of ‘a has the property F’ may therefore have to face the criticism that to assert ‘a has the property F’ and yet to deny that ‘a is related to F’ is to make a self-contradictory statement. Merely defending oneself by asserting that a and F are not the sorts of things which can be related may just seem to be begging the question.

We are reminded of Donagan’s statement about the inevitably misleading nature of language — a language which conjures up images of very ‘thin’ entities somehow sticking together in Humean bundles or inhering in Lockean substance.

Is there, we may well ask, a language which is not as misleading, which does not inevitably suggest such imagery?

The existence of an alternative way of considering things and their qualities is strongly hinted at from time to time. For instance, Matthews and Cohen write let us suppose that this bit of pink is in x and that bit of pink is in y. Then this bit is x’s way of being pink and that bit is y’s way of being pink. The two bits are related to one another not as two ‘bare bits’ partaking in the same thing, pinkhood, but rather as two ways of being pink (cf. two ways of being a dog-owner viz. having Boso and having Fido) (OM, pp. 642-3).
For our present purpose, the important point here is the interpretation of a ‘colour bit’ as a *way* rather than as a *thing*.

In a somewhat similar vein, Anthony Quinton argued that tropes (an alternative term for Stoutian particulars) are “minimal events” which “occur or happen rather than exist”.

These two statements are not identical. The first seems to me to be more in agreement with the language of Realism and the second with the language of Abstract Particularism (that is to say, a way is general and an event is particular — I am not, incidentally, implying that this was the intention of the respective authors of these statements), but this is not our immediate concern. What does concern us is the fact that, in both these statements, we have a formulation of things and their properties in terms of a language which does not spontaneously suggest that we are concerned with entities.

These examples, therefore, provide us with a hint at a language in which discussion of things and their attributes may be framed and which does not ‘inevitably mislead us’ into thinking of qualities in terms of ‘thin’ entities which must then stand in a relationship to other, concrete, entities.

Such a language is, it seems to me, provided by simply replacing ‘quality’ with ‘qualifying’ (and even, of ‘relation’ with ‘relating’).

That is to say, ‘a has the quality F’ now becomes ‘a is qualified in an F way’. If, in other words, we say of a that it has the qualities X, Y and Z, we are really saying that a is qualified in X, Y and Z ways. Furthermore, if asked what X, Y and Z are, instead of replying that they are qualities (with the consequent implication of ‘thin’ entities) we may now reply that they are ‘qualifyings’ or, if this seems too artificial, that they are the ways in which the particular a is able to be qualified.

Simply saying this tells an enquirer all he really needs to know at this level — at least, it tells him as much as the answer ‘they are qualities’ would. *Why* a is able to be qualified in these ways (why it ‘has these qualities’) is the subject for scientific research.

Consider the example expressed by ‘Fido is yellow’. On the suggested interpretation, this is translated as ‘Fido is qualified in a yellow way’. This is, I think, more agreeable to the philosophically unsophisticated person’s understanding of ‘Fido is yellow’ than an interpretation implying the possession of a ‘thin’ thing called ‘the quality yellow’ (be it Stoutian particular or universal). It also impresses one as being a more economical translation of the original statement in so far as it avoids extra entities.

This, it seems to me, agrees completely with Armstrong’s conception of the ‘nature of a concrete particular. That is to say, it seems a straightforward assertion that the nature of a particular is the totality of the various ways in which it is able to be qualified (compare and contrast this with Armstrong’s — and McTaggart’s — conception of the nature of a particular as the conjunction of its non-relational qualities).

Understood in this way, it becomes very difficult to make sense of any statement concerning a particulars’ being related to its ‘nature’ (in the sense of McTaggart)

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