ABSTRACT. In this paper, I consider an objection to “natural class” trope nominalism, the view that a trope’s nature is determined by its membership in a natural class of tropes. The objection is that natural class trope nominalism is inconsistent with causes’ being efficacious in virtue of having tropes of a certain type. I argue that if natural class trope nominalism is combined with property counterpart theory, then this objection can be rebutted.

In this paper, I propose a response to an objection considered by Armstrong to “natural class” trope nominalism, the view that a trope’s nature – the type of trope it is – is determined by its membership in a natural class of tropes. The objection is that natural class trope nominalism makes properties causally irrelevant, or, more specifically, that this theory is inconsistent with causes’ being efficacious in virtue of having tropes of a certain type. I argue that if natural class trope nominalism is combined with property counterpart theory (the latter as developed by Mark Heller), then this objection can be rebutted.

Armstrong first raises this causal-irrelevancy objection to the object-based version of “natural class” nominalism rather than to the trope-based version. For an object class nominalist, for a thing to be of a certain type is nothing more than for it to be a member of a certain class. For \( x \) to be of the type “tree” is for \( x \) to be a member of the class of trees. “The idea is that the ‘property’ of being an electron is constituted by being a member of the class of electrons.” A natural class nominalist holds that for a thing to be of a certain type is for it to be a member of a certain natural class, where the notion of a natural class is taken as primitive. “The class of all white things forms a natural class, a class with a reasonable degree of naturalness. That is all that can be said about what makes a white thing white.” For a thing to be white is for it to be a member...
of this natural class. Membership in this class is not based on resemblance between these objects; indeed, resemblance ultimately rests on natural class membership.

The causal-irrelevancy objection against the natural class view begins with the assumption that when a thing acts causally, it acts in virtue of its properties. For example, if a thing acts in virtue of the fact that it has a mass of four kilograms, then it is efficacious in virtue of possessing that property. But for an object-based natural class nominalist, what it is for that object to have a mass of four kilograms is for it to be a member of a natural class of objects, all of which have that mass. But “if a class analysis of what it is to be four kilograms in mass is correct, then the whole class of tokens should be relevant.”5 The difficulty is that the other four-kilogram things in the universe seem to be irrelevant. “But in fact, though, the only thing relevant is the thing that actually acts. This suggests that any class account of properties is unsatisfactory.”6

Armstrong also suggests that the causal-irrelevancy objection might apply to the trope-based version of natural class nominalism. A natural class trope theory makes a trope’s being of a certain sort a matter of its membership in a certain natural class of tropes. As with the object-based version, the notion of a natural class of tropes is taken to be a primitive. A trope’s nature is determined by its membership in such natural classes. The trope itself, independently of such membership, has no (is not a) nature and is not of a particular type. It would seem, then, that when a thing acts in virtue of having a trope of a certain sort, that thing’s efficacy will require the relevancy of that trope’s membership in that natural class, and, thus, the relevancy of the other members of that class. But it is highly implausible to assign relevancy to those other member tropes. The consequence is that nothing ever acts in virtue of having a trope of a certain sort, contrary to our assumption.

What is the structure of this objection? Following Armstrong, assume that objects are causes and that object x causes e in virtue of x’s having a trope t of type T. The causal argument starts with the irrelevancy of the non-t members of C. It concludes with the irrelevancy of t’s being a T-type trope. I believe this inference is meant to go as follows. From the fact that the non-t members of C are