

Property Instrumentalism and Metaphysical Dissatisfaction

Anthony Dardis

Hofstra University

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Abstract

Property instrumentalism is an “error theory” about properties: what we say about them is false, since there are no properties. Barry Stroud offers a *cogito*-like argument for “metaphysical dissatisfaction”: in cases where belief in some disputed bit of ontology is indispensable, we cannot consistently argue that the things do not exist, nor can we gain a satisfying positive verdict about them. The argument, if it succeeded, would show that existence claims and philosophical disputes about such cases are pointless. This paper shows, using the example of property instrumentalism, that such disputes are not pointless.

1 Error theories

One part of contemporary metaphysics is questions of existence: do numbers exist? properties? propositions? possible worlds? fictional characters? and so forth. One appealing answer is: no, they do not; and, because they do not, the things we say about them (“there is a least prime”, “Melvin has the property of being a cat”) are false. So a fair number of things we say are, in some sense, errors. Is an error theory a viable position? (Daly and Liggins, 2010) argue that it is: many of the arguments that have been given for why error theories are problematic are not successful. In this paper I want to consider a form of argument that they do not directly discuss, and in particular

how that form of argument interacts with a version of an error theory about properties, that is, property instrumentalism.

Stroud (2011) argues that a certain kind of metaphysical project is guaranteed to be “dissatisfying”. Philosophers are inclined to argue for a “negative metaphysical verdict” about some set of our beliefs: there is no causation; there are no properties, propositions, etc. However, we will find that we do have the relevant beliefs, and we will find that these beliefs are indispensable. They have therefore a kind of metaphysical invulnerability, since denying them is inconsistent with the beliefs we do have. Invulnerability doesn’t guarantee truth, and in fact blocks any positive or “satisfying” account of the beliefs. Thus we are condemned to “metaphysical dissatisfaction”.

Stroud’s argument has very wide applicability to contemporary metaphysics. If he is right, much discussion of existence questions is pointless. It makes sense, for example, to investigate the structure of our reasoning about causation, but it doesn’t make sense to ask whether there are causes. And so forth.

Instrumentalism about properties combines a negative verdict about properties (there are none) with a positive view about what we are doing when we talk about properties (we are using the property language as an instrument for reasoning). It is simple to develop a version of Stroud’s argument against property instrumentalism. I don’t think it is successful: I think an error theory about properties is a reasonable position to take, at least as far as Stroud’s argument goes.

2 The arguments for metaphysical dissatisfaction

I will briefly summarize Stroud’s discussion of causation and nomic necessitation and develop the argument for metaphysical dissatisfaction, then draw the parallels for the case of property instrumentalism.

2.1 Causation

Stroud reviews familiar problems for the indispensability and irreducibility of the concept of causation. Problems for indispensability:

- (a) Anscombe’s observation (Anscombe, 1971) that a very great deal of ordinary language expresses causally involved concepts (cook-

ing, for example, is causing food to change state by applying heat);

- (b) what we might call “Hume’s problem” of explaining how we come to have causal beliefs: he says that experience of something like constant conjunction produces in us a habit of the mind to move from the first to the second. But that “produces” is clearly causation.

Stroud’s version of reduction is meaning equivalence. He notes that

In my own resistance to reductionism in previous chapters the only idea of non-equivalence I have relied on is the possibility of one of the allegedly equivalent statement’s being true while the other is false. That is sufficient for non-equivalence, and I think it holds in each of the three cases we have considered. (141)

For causation and law, the arguments go like this:

- (a) if “*a* caused *b*” is true, *a*’s occurrence explains *b*’s occurrence. But a summary of what actually happens does not explain any particular occurrence, since the *explanandum* is part of the *explanans* (Dretske, 1977; Tooley, 1977; Armstrong, 1983).
- (b) If a causal claim, or a law claim, is a conjunction of a correlation and something about us (a statement about its place in a Best System, for example), then asking whether *a* caused *b* is in part asking about the place of a statement in Best system. But that is not so.
- (c) If causal claims are universal generalizations, then “all these emeralds were green” confirms “this emerald will be green” just as well as it confirms “this emerald will be blue”. But that is not so (Goodman, 1954).

So believing anything, and in particular attempting to reason to the conclusion that there is no such thing as causation or nomic necessitation, or that it reduces away to something else, involves believing some things about causation and some things about nomic necessitation. Hence Humean skepticism about causation, and neoHumeanism about causation and laws of nature, are inconsistent positions. It’s not that the theories themselves are inconsistent. It is rather the combination of asserting the theories and the reasoning in favor of them, and the theories, that is inconsistent. The model for the form of argument is Descartes’ *cogito*: the proposition that I do not exist is not

inconsistent, but my asserting that I do not exist is inconsistent with that proposition.

Thus beliefs about causation and nomic necessitation are metaphysically invulnerable: they cannot consistently be denied. But their invulnerability also prevents our gaining any kind of metaphysical assurance that the beliefs are true. No argument in their favor could avoid assuming or presupposing them. All we can do is note that we do have these beliefs and that we cannot do without them.

2.2 Properties

Universals are puzzling, obscure, philosophically troubled. Particular things seem less puzzling: they're right here in front of us. Universals have to do odd things ("be one in many"). They aren't particular or tangible or in front of us. This sense of their obscurity can lead us—indeed, does lead me—to seek a negative metaphysical verdict about universals: really, there are no such things.

Indispensability is simple to demonstrate. Thought of any kind involves thinking that there could be more than one thing of a given kind: what they have in common is the properties they share. Property talk seems to be robustly irreducible. Traditional projects of reducing it to something else (two examples: set nominalism; trope theory) fail in familiar ways. Perhaps more fundamentally, *whatever* we say involves generality and hence properties, and so all belief, and any attempt to reason about properties, involves beliefs about properties.

Nor does this pattern of reasoning yield a satisfying positive metaphysical verdict. There is no way to avoid beliefs about universals when we reason about universals. By itself that is no guarantee that what we say about them is true. And that invulnerability means that no argument is possible that somehow accounts for universals in other terms. Certainly the ubiquity of belief about universals does not remove the sense of dissatisfaction with the metaphysical picture. I didn't understand how one thing could be in many before I considered Stroud's pattern of reasoning. I still don't.

3 Instrumentalism about properties

By “instrumentalism about properties” I intend a position with the following characteristics:

- (a) There are no properties.
- (b) Property talk is indispensable (van Inwagen, 2004): it permits quantification over properties in cases where we do not know what the relevant similarity is.
- (c) The theory of properties is second-order logic (Hale, 2012).

Property instrumentalism is problematic in a way that seems to fit well with Stroud’s argument for metaphysical dissatisfaction. Experience presents us with various things. These come in groups: apples, red things, things that reflect light predominantly at 700nm. We say that when two things are the same they share a property: these two things are apples, so they both have the property of being an apple. It is not easy to believe that we are not talking about the things themselves, independent of our language and thought. More than one thing reflected light at 700nm long before there were any sentient beings. So how could property instrumentalism possibly be the correct view, since it says there are no properties?

My relation to property instrumentalism hence has exactly the features needed for Stroud’s argument for metaphysical dissatisfaction. Motivated by philosophical puzzlement, I articulate a negative metaphysical verdict about properties. But I believe that things are the same and different: things I experience, things long ago, things endlessly far away. I believe, in my reasoning, that two of my thoughts share the property of being about properties. I believe that any theory of properties uses language, and that the words the theory uses are used elsewhere: the same words, with the same meanings. For me to deny that there are properties strongly appears to involve me in at least a pragmatic inconsistency.

4 Responses

4.1 Belief

Stroud’s argument is couched in terms of what we believe and what we must believe. The property instrumentalist should, I think, hold that

the rationally preferable position is to believe property instrumentalism, and to fail to have beliefs that entail that there are properties. In the sense of (Burgess and Rosen, 1997, 6), the idea is “revolutionary” as opposed to “hermeneutic” instrumentalism. It’s difficult to know what, really, we believe about these things, so better to offer a suggestion about how we could think about them than a claim about what we do in fact believe about them.

Certainly we say things about cats, and we believe things about cats. I don’t think there is a valid argument from these facts to the conclusion that we believe things about the property of being a cat.

It has been argued that there is a (semantically) analytic connection between “there are two cats” and “there are two things that have the property of being a cat”, most notably recently by Amie Thomasson (Thomasson, 2007, 2015). Property instrumentalism denies this connection. Clearly since it denies that there are any properties, it must deny that the connection is analytic on pain of denying that there are any cats.

Property instrumentalism claims that Russell’s famous argument for universals (Russell, 1912, Chapter 9) (there are many cats; therefore there is one thing they all have, namely, the property of being a cat) is invalid, and that it is best construed as an inference to the best explanation. The property instrumentalist argues that what is being inferred here is at least part of a theory that has properties in its ontology. I follow Hale in suggesting that when fully articulated, that theory will include second-order logic.

Instrumentalism about this theory means that the theory is not counted as true; rather, it is counted as a mechanism for reasoning, a calculating engine. The property instrumentalist therefore says that the rationally preferable, and apparently consistent, position, is to say that one shouldn’t believe things about the property of being a cat. Rather, one should entertain thoughts that apparently refer to or quantify over properties, but not believe them. Instrumentalism is not quite the same thing as fictionalism (Dardis, 2015), but it does share this *credo* with fictionalism: we do not believe the theory, but we accept it.

4.2 Indispensability

Property instrumentalism holds that thought (not belief) and talk of properties is indispensable. The reason is more specific than Stroud’s.

This has two advantages. First, Stroud’s argument leaves metaphysical dissatisfaction hostage to fortune in the development of philosophical argument, while property instrumentalism’s argument for indispensability incurs no such debt. So there’s a way in which the argument for the indispensability of property talk is a lot stronger than Stroud’s argument for the indispensability of causal or nomic necessity. But, and this is the second advantage, the particular form of the argument for the indispensability of property talk very specifically encourages the move from belief to acceptability.

4.2.1 Causation

Stroud is clear (xi) that his goal is to proceed at a very high level of generality rather than to provide completely knock-down arguments that the concepts are irreducible and indispensable. That seems like the right level of generality. But it also, in an unavoidable way, leaves the overall argument hostage to what progress we might be able to make with these concepts.

Consider again the case for the indispensability of beliefs about causation. Stroud brings out some of the recent discussion of neo-Humean approaches to the metaphysics of laws of nature and of causation. Objections like these to the neoHumean approach have been made well and often in the recent history of the philosophy of science. There are of course answers and responses (see (Cohen and Callender, 2009; Woodward, 2014) for some recent work on the Best System view). There is a fundamental division among people who work on these issues between neoHumeans and antiHumeans: “fundamental” in the sense that philosophers’ commitments are strong, the arguments go back and forth, and it’s really not clear which view should prevail. Stroud’s view would explain the current impasse.

But so would the slowness of philosophical progress: there are strong arguments on both sides and nothing fully decisive to tip the balance. I think, given that the dispute is fundamental, it is unlikely that “highly localized fighting at close quarters” (Bennett, 2009, 74) is going to decisively settle it. So I think trying to *settle* the question of the viability of a neoHumean account of causation and laws is unlikely to be a good strategy here. This has consequences both for the not-yet-convinced metaphysician and for Stroud. It’s unlikely to be a good strategy to try to argue against Stroud that he is wrong about neoHumean accounts of cause and law. But it’s also unlikely to be

a good strategy for sealing the case for metaphysical dissatisfaction about causation for Stroud to argue that neoHumean accounts must fail. That would make the case for the unavoidability of metaphysical dissatisfaction hostage to the fortunes of the antiHumean arguments.

4.2.2 Properties

My argument that property talk is indispensable has essentially two parts. The first part is the observation that it is impossible to talk or think about anything without being involved in generality. To this extent the argument is much like the *cogito*; we can even make the point using the *cogito* reasoning. If I doubt whether I exist, or doubt whether I have to think in general terms, I can reflect that my doubt involves concepts, and concepts are general. The second part of the argument for indispensability is that there are things we can do with this false theory—mainly, quantify over properties—that we could not do without it.

These two arguments for indispensability do not depend on the resolution of any particular debate in the contemporary literature. They should be acceptable to just about anyone who is thinking about properties.

Indispensability arguments have certainly been offered in favor of belief in disputed entities. (Price, 2009) in a Carnapian spirit offers reasons to doubt whether they really are reasons to believe, rather than a way of noting only that we do in fact believe in these things. Stroud's argument that invulnerability makes a positive verdict problematic is similar (although clearly not in a Carnapian spirit).

The property instrumentalist here agrees that talking and reasoning about properties is indispensable. But that means that using the theory is indispensable—not, believing in it.

4.3 Positive verdict?

Stroud argues that indispensability and invulnerability cut against the possibility of a satisfying positive verdict about, say, causation or necessity or value. Distinguishing between belief and acceptability goes some way toward meeting this point: if I don't believe that my thoughts about properties are true, then the fact that I can't reason without those thoughts shouldn't be an obstacle to getting a satisfying metaphysical account of them.

In any event, I think that Stroud's reasoning about the unavailability of a positive verdict is somewhat obscure. He writes,

If indispensable beliefs could not possibly 'fail,' their 'success' or 'survival,' or their having 'passed' the metaphysical test, would show only that they are still believed. Their indispensability would simply have rendered them invulnerable to any attempt to reject them on metaphysical grounds.
(140)

The argument, as I understand it, goes like this. Suppose P is some belief I discover will be engaged in any reasoning directed at securing a positive metaphysical verdict in particular about P itself. Take the axioms for a logic you reason with. Any reasoning designed to demonstrate their truth will use those very axioms. The reasoning therefore would be circular, and hence would not have rational force in favor of those axioms.

It's not entirely clear what to make of this argument. First: talk of a metaphysical test suggests that if there is a positive verdict on a metaphysical existence question, that verdict is the result of a process that involves argumentation and hence the possibility of circularity. That seems open to question. Evidently not all things we believe can be non-circularly justified on the basis of further things we believe. The metaphysical questions are all ones about starting points. So it would be surprising if they turned out to have non-question-begging justifications. And, of course, no metaphysician is going to stop at the *next* justificatory premise. So it is unclear whether the reason we cannot hope for a positive verdict is the indispensability of the beliefs or rather the fact that they are ones that occupy the "first mover" position in our reasoning, unjustified justifiers.

Second: the concept of circularity applies best to deductive arguments. (Quine, 1948) argued that method in metaphysics is inference to the best explanation; that is the general position I am taking here. An explanatory argument might be circular if it took as one of the data the theory to be supported by the argument: " a caused b ; the best explanation for the data includes that a caused b ; therefore a caused b ". That does not appear to be the form of argument that the metaphysician is offering, though. A Quinean indispensability argument for properties might go like this:

There are lots of things, some of which are like other things,
and some are different: there are many cats, there are

many dogs, and so forth. Theories that invoke the concept of properties to talk about sameness and difference are more successful in explaining what sameness and difference are, and indeed we are unable to conceive of theories of what there is at all without using the concept of properties. Therefore there are properties.

This argument does not take the conclusion as one of its premises, so it is not circular. So it does not seem obviously to fail to yield a satisfying positive verdict.

The only difference between this argument and the position of the property instrumentalist is that the instrumentalist refrains from making the inference. She says, this is the best theory, but it's the best theory of something that seems impossible, so let us accept it rather than believe it. It is unclear why using generality, indeed why using the theory of properties itself, would undermine the "satisfyingness" of this argument. I must reflect that I cannot reason at all without using generality and property talk. The argument I offer shows how the theory of properties is related to everything I think and say—it, as it were, "locates" talk about properties in my picture of how I think.

Stroud's claim about the unavailability of a negative metaphysical verdict is that it involves a pragmatic inconsistency: denying that causation is real is an act that involves believing that causation is real. That is a genuine logical impropriety. A positive metaphysical verdict doesn't involve a pragmatic inconsistency.

According to property instrumentalism, the best account of what we are doing when we talk, and when we talk about things in the world, is an account that says things have properties. That is the account the property instrumentalist offers about her own argument in favor of property instrumentalism. But this act of arguing for property instrumentalism doesn't start by asserting property instrumentalism as a premise. So I don't think there is an obvious logical impropriety involved in arguing for the negative claim about properties while simultaneously being committed to the correctness of that claim about the very discourse that constitutes the act of making the argument.

4.4 Our conception of the world

Stroud's arguments claim that beliefs in causation, necessity and value are part of our "conception of the world" (Stroud's expression), indispensable and irreducible and hence invulnerable to metaphysical

verdict. But the disputed concepts are involved with a wide and not clearly delimited range of our beliefs about the world. There is a deep history of inquiry into these concepts, and a wide variety of proposals about how they might be understood, or reduced, or explained, or replaced. The same clearly goes for our thought about universals.

Stroud's argument requires something quite definite and precise at this point: *certainty* (or something approaching certainty) that there is a core set of beliefs that must be preserved no matter what philosophical progress we might make in understanding ourselves and the world. Stroud has not identified that core set. The history of philosophy suggests that it is unlikely that we will find it, or that we could be so confident of the set that we have found that we should conclude that that set is indeed indispensable and invulnerable.

There are two levels at which to make this point. One is the level of the particular arguments Stroud gives about the philosophical discussion (§4.2.1 above). It's already a "meta" level; the argument was that at least for the areas Stroud is using as examples, the disputes are ongoing and lively, and so it's unlikely that we could get a clear verdict once and for all that the concepts are irreducible and indispensable. The other, even more "meta", level is the history of philosophy and the question of why (in some sense) philosophy doesn't seem to make any progress. Stroud suggests (156-160) an answer to Kant's expression of this question in the *Prolegomena*: metaphysics is based on a mistaken understanding of what is possible to learn about the truth of a special category of beliefs, the ones we've been looking at. That's one answer. Certainly other answers have been suggested. It may be that there is something about philosophy and what it attempts to do that would explain both why our "conception of the world" is not something so definite as to support Stroud's argument, and why philosophy is not going to arrive at a stopping point on the key points, irreducibility and indispensability, needed for Stroud's argument.

We can make a similar point about irreducibility. One way to pursue a negative metaphysical verdict is by way of reduction: find an equivalent of the obnoxious statements in less obnoxious language. But the eliminativist is not conservative in this way. She thinks there is no causation and there are no laws (understood in the traditional ways). What she aims to do is provide a functional replacement: an account of the world as it really is, and an account of how we can do the things we did with causal or nomic language even if those claims are false. Eliminativism in the philosophy of mind (Churchland, 1981)

does not offer equivalences with our talk of belief. Nor has it been particularly concerned with the objection that *prior* to the elimination it is not possible to articulate the position without believing things.

The instrumentalist approach for properties does not aim for equivalences between ordinary language claims and claims made with an austere property-less language (Liggins, 2008; Dardis, 2015). The goal is rather to provide a means of getting property claims out of ordinary (property-less) claims, and so to engage the logical apparatus of quantification over properties. If Melvin is a cat, the property instrument says Melvin has the property of being a cat. These are clearly not equivalent, since it's true that Melvin is a cat and (according to the instrumentalist) false that he has the property of being a cat.

So again, it is not clear exactly what place our thought of properties has or could have in our "conception of the world", and hence there is no clear path to argue that, say, the traditional picture of properties is indispensable and hence metaphysically invulnerable.

4.5 Can't get no satisfaction?

Finally: Stroud's picture of metaphysical dissatisfaction is quietist. It recommends not trying to figure out how a negative metaphysical verdict is possible. It says you can't get no satisfaction, so don't even try.

But the problem (and various attempts at solutions to it) cries out for a constructive solution, an explanation of the persistent and pervasive sense that there's something really weird going on here that asks for explanation.

Maybe the situation is similar to what's going on with attempts to ground time in entropy (Loewer and Albert). Time is a mystery. Kant says that since time is a form of intuition, and hence indispensable for any rational being like us, it is not possible to gain a satisfying metaphysical verdict about it. That's a quietist position. We're not going to learn much about time if that's the view we hold.

You can't always get what you want, but if you try sometime, you might just get what you need.

5 Conclusion

It may well be that metaphysical dissatisfaction is inevitable. (Russell, 1912) for example thought that genuine philosophical problems are not soluble. Stroud builds a positive account of why some beliefs are invulnerable, and why verdicts on them are metaphysically dissatisfying, on the basis of an image of their place in our “conception of the world”. Reasoning about them is relevantly like the *cogito* reasoning, and so denying them is pragmatically inconsistent. Stroud’s positive account has the consequence that philosophical dispute about existence questions about invulnerable beliefs is pointless: we cannot successfully deny the beliefs, and we cannot gain a satisfying positive account of their truth.

I have argued that the place of our reasoning about properties is not as clear as would be required for this kind of argument to succeed. Thought and talk about generality is ubiquitous; thought and talk require generality. So some kind of thought about generality and properties is indispensable. But it does not have to be belief. The best argument for properties is a version of a Quinean indispensability argument, that is, an inference to the best explanation. But that form of argument does not demand that we believe the best explanation. We can accept it without belief. This form of argument does not appear to be open to undermining by the fact that that very theory will be implied by any reasoning in the course of that inference.

So I think that Stroud’s argument does not show that an error theory of properties is pragmatically inconsistent, or that any argument for or against the existence of properties is fundamentally pointless.

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