Chapter Four

PROPERTIES AND CONCEPTS

The argument of the last chapter made it obvious that epistemology is closely connected with metaphysics. Although I discussed several conceptions of propositions there, both classic and very recent, I had very little to say about properties, the entities rationalists such as Chisholm and BonJour claim to apprehend directly and regard as their source of synthetic a priori knowledge. I have done my best to refute the rationalist position, but I cannot realistically hope to create conviction in my alternative if I do not come to terms with the nature and reality of properties. The importance of doing this is amplified by the fact that no single conception of properties is clearly dominant in current discussion. Two conceptions appear to be primary rivals, and what is plausible on one of them is implausible or even nonsensical on the other.

What are Properties?

Properties have historically been conceived of in two fundamentally different ways. One is basically Platonic and the other Aristotelian. I say "basically" here because I am thinking of generically similar conceptions, instances of which may differ significantly from the conceptions actually held by Plato and Aristotle. Philosophers holding a basically Platonic conception sometimes speak of their properties as "concepts." One naturally thinks of concepts as general ideas, as Kant did, [1] but there is a precedent going back to Frege for thinking of concepts as objective entities that particular things may exemplify or be subsumed under. In the essay "On Concept and Object" Frege actually says "I call the concepts under which an object falls its properties,"[2] and Bertrand Russell confidently asserted ~~that~~ "awareness of universals is called *conceiving*, and a universal of which we are aware is called a *concept*."[3] Philosophers in the other tradition, the one I am calling "basically Aristotelian," conceive of properties as entitles that are literally present in the world around us; [4] they are either constituents of particulars or attached to them in some intimate way.

Both of these traditional views are still defended, or at least espoused,[5] but they are accompanied by two more, one of which is technical and idiosyncratic. The technical one is accepted mainly by writers on the semantics of modal logic: according to this conception, properties are either functions from possible worlds to possible individuals or simply sets of possible individuals.[6] This conception is comparable to the technical conception of a proposition that I discussed in the last chapter, the one taking them to be functions from possible worlds to truth-values or simply sets of possible worlds. I shall say little about this conception in the present chapter, because it has played almost no part in philosophical debates, either

---

[1] Kant (1997), B377.
[2] Frege (1892), p. 51.
[3] Russell (1953), p. 200.
[4] Russell took this line in his paper "On the Distinction between Universals and Particulars."
[5] For the first, see Steup (1996), who describes the properties he analyzes as concepts (p. 21), or perhaps Chisholm (1991), p. 169. The recent view espoused by van Inwagen (2004), which is a significant improvement over the view of Steup or Chisholm, also belongs here. For the second sort of view, see Armstrong (1978).
[6] See Lewis (1986), pp. 50-69.

historical or contemporary, about the existence and nature of properties.[7] The remaining conception that I shall discuss is a more plausible rival Platonic or Aristotelian conceptions; it take properties to be attribute-instances, or "tropes."

Since each of the three generic conceptions I intend to discuss may be spelled out in a variety of ways sufficiently elaborate to merit the term "theory," I shall discuss them as theories and distinguish them from one another by reference to well-known instances. In deference to Frege, I shall call the first sort of theory an *F-theory*; I could call it a P-theory, after Plato, just as well, but Frege is more representative of the modern theorists I have in mind. In deference both to Aristotle and D. M. Armstrong, I shall call the second sort of theory an *A-theory*. Because the third sort of theory is associated with two quite different names, Donald Williams and Keith Campbell, I shall speak of T-theories, using the letter that begins the word "trope," which is applied to the sort of the entities that such theories postulate. As it happens, A-theories and T-theories appear to be the most popular these days, but I shall contend that a certain kind of F-theory is the best of the lot. In my view A- and T-theories are both undermined by a serious error about predication, which the better F-theories easily avoid. I shall begin with A and T-theories, leaving F-theories to the last.

Armstrong calls the objects of his A-theory immanent universals, but he takes them to be properties or relations. [8] As he understands them, properties are absolutely determinate entities that may exist at many different places at the same time; they are "repeatables." The basic reason he gives for thinking that such things exist is that different particulars have what appears to be the same nature;[9] they are the same in a significant way. This sameness, which "cannot be explained away" in his opinion, may be partial rather than complete, for a red ball and a red book may have something in common too. Normally, a general predicate is applicable to a thing because of some property the thing possesses, but if two things are truly described by certain predicates —"colored," for example—the color-property possessed by one may be very different, he says, from the color-property possessed by the other. One may be green while the other is red.

A T-theory differs from an A-theory in denying that any attribute possessed by one particular is (or could be) identical to an attribute possessed by another particular. For a T-theorist, properties are nonrepeatable entities: each one of them is uniquely instantiated, a unique property-instance. Such instances may be more or less similar, however. If two objects, x and y, are both $\text{scarlet}_{29,}$ the scarlet_{29} of x is an exact duplicate of the scarlet_{29} of y; if x is scarlet_{29} and y is scarlet_{16}, the scarlet of x is very similar to the scarlet of y, but not a duplicate of it.

An F-theory differs from A- and T-theories in denying that properties are literally present in the spatio-temporal world. According to an F-theory, an elementary statement, judgment, or belief "s is P" is true just when the referent of "s" (the subject) *falls under* (or bears some comparable relation to) an F-property that is associated with the predicate "is P." The distinctive feature of an F-property is that it does not exist *in* the particulars that fall under it, exemplify it, or are otherwise related to it. According to some conceptions, F-properties exist in "a realm apart"; according to others, they are items we construct and take account of in deciding whether a predicate is or is not applicable to a particular object. The

---

[7] As my subsequent discussion illustrates, I have no objection to this conception when it is used for the technical purposes I mention in the text.

[8] Armstrong (1978), vol. 1, p. 6.

[9] "If two things have the very same property, then that property is, in some sense, 'in' each of them," Armstrong (1978), p. 108.

universals of the F-theory I shall recommend are, in fact, best described by Frege's word "concept," but my use of the word will not be exactly the same as his.

Problems with A-theories and T-theories

A theories and T-theories are similar in locating properties in particulars, but the difficulties they involve are quite different. As I have indicated, A- theories are thought to provide a general explanation of why predicates are truly applicable to particular things. The predicates are applicable because the objects possess appropriate properties as constituents. Some property or other corresponds to every predicate that truly describes the object. This last assertion raises two serious problems, one about particulars and one about the properties they possess.

The problem about particulars can be brought out as follows. If A-properties are actually constituents of particulars, a particular is either a complex of A-properties (as "bundle" of such things) or it contains something in addition to those A-properties. Both alternatives have historically been defended.[10] The first is not plausible by contemporary standards. Leading A-theorists reject it—as Armstrong does[11]--and it is vulnerable to an objection that I shall develop later in connection with T-theories.[12] I shall therefore pass over it now and consider the second alternative—that particulars are something in addition to the A-properties that they possess. The difficulty with this alternative is that it renders particulars unnecessarily mysterious. Particulars become mysterious on this alternative because the nature of a thing, according to A-theories, is constituted by the properties it possesses, but the particular is distinct from those properties. As a result of this, a particular is distinct from its nature--distinct not just in the sense of being not identical with it but in the sense of being something in addition to it. John Locke famously described such distinct particulars as "things I know not what," mere *substrata* that support qualities or provide a subject in which qualities can inhere.[13] He acknowledged that he has no clear and distinct idea of such things, and A-theorists who regard particulars as ultimately "bare" subjects ("bare particulars") describe them in an equally mysterious way. [14]

Armstrong, an A-theorist who accepts the second alternative, thinks that these problematic descriptions can be avoided by distinguishing two conceptions of a particular, one thick and one thin. According to the thick conception, a particular is a "thin" thing along with its qualities: If the thin thing is **a** and **S** is the conjunction of **a**'s qualities, the thick particular is the state of affairs, **a-**having-**S**.[15] According to the thin conception, a particular--in this case, **a**--can be thought of in abstraction from the state of affairs in which it figures; so conceived, it can be thought of as distinct from the properties **S**. Armstrong concedes that, thought of this way, the thing **a** is "perhaps...in a way" a bare particular: "it is the mere thisness of a thing as a Scotist would put it"; it "can have no properties. It is a bare principle of numerical difference."[16] Although Armstrong allows that non-spatio-temporal particulars are imaginable, he nevertheless suggests that the particularity "or thisness" of a particular might in fact be identifiable (owing to the nonexistence of immaterial things) with a "total-position" in space-time. The attributes of such positions, their

---

[10] The first was defended by Russell (1940); the second is defended by Armstrong (1984), among others.
[11] Armstrong (1978), vol. 1, pp. 89-101.
[12] See below, p. 117.
[13] Locke (1984), p. 392.
[14] See Allaire (1963), pp.
[15] Armstrong (1984) p. 254.
[16] *Ibid.*

shape and size, are of course universals, he says; but two different total positions may yet be two, he thinks, even though they have the same attributes.[17]

It seems to me that Armstrong's thinly conceived particulars, and therefore the thickly conceived ones of which they are constituents, are every bit as mysterious, ultimately, as Locke's "things I know not what." It is, of course, possible (epistemically speaking) that Armstrong's thin conception of a particular is not really required for a defensible A-theory denying that particulars are complexes of universals. Roderick Chisholm, who spoke of a thing's properties in a way that suggested he held an A-theory himself, said that the following assertions are "simply a muddle":

1. If we distinguish between a thing and its properties, then we must say that the thing is a "bare particular" that doesn't have any properties.
2. One is tempted to regard "This is red" as a subject-predicate proposition, but if one does so, one finds that "this" becomes a substance, an unknown subject in which predicates can inhere....[18]

Chisholm did little to explain why these assertions are muddles other than observing that the idea of a self (a self being a particular) is "the idea of an x such that x loves or hates and such that x feels cold or x feels warm, and so forth."[19] Evidently he was confident that the x he speaks of here is not a bare particular because it is patently not characterless but warm, cold, a lover or hater, and so on. Yet if properties are A-properties, collectively distinguishable from the subject that "has" them, how could Chisholm know that the x he speaks of is not "an unknown subject in which predicates can inhere"?

The claim that something that is warm or cold or wet or dry cannot be a bare particular is perfectly acceptable to me, but then I do not hold an A-theory. As I have explained, those who hold such a theory conceive of properties in a particular way, and they also assume an analysis of predication that makes a mystery of something otherwise not mysterious at all. They take properties to be entities that are "possessed" by particulars but distinguishable from them. When a particular, **a**, is said to be **F**--blue, say--the A-theorist adopting the first alternative interprets the speaker as saying that a property, **u**, is present to **a** but distinguishable not only from it but from the entire "bundle" (or sum) of properties **a** possesses. Although **a** can be known as the possessor of **u** and whatever other properties it may possess, its nature as something distinct from those universals cannot be known because any predicate or concept that one might use to describe its nature is said (by the A-theorist) to refer some other property that is distinct from it or any part of it. So the intrinsic character of **a** remains mysterious, according to the theory.

I said earlier that A-theories also create a problem about properties themselves. The problem, which Leibniz may have been the first to see,[20] can be brought out as follows. According to A-theories, if we are to explain why a general term is truly applicable to a thing, we must ultimately acknowledge the presence in it of some A-property or universal.[21] But A-properties can perform this explanatory

---

[17] *Ibid.*

[18] Chisholm (1976), pp. 43f. Chisholm says the first argument "seems" to have been offered by Allaire in Allaire (1963); he quotes the second argument from Russell (1948), p. 97.

[19] Chisholm, (1976), p. 39.

[20] According to Mates (1986), Leibniz held that the "accidents" of substances should not themselves be regarded as parts of reality because if we think of them this way we shall have to acknowledge an endless series of higher-order objects, "abstractions of abstractions" (pp. 171-173).

[21] In "To Aune," Armstrong expresses a cautious attitude to this principle, saying "It may be that some such principle is true' (p. 252). But in discussing the view that he calls Predicate Nominalism, he raises

role only if they differ from one another: the A- property whose presence in **x** explains why "blue" is applicable to **x** must differ from the A-property whose presence in **y** explains why "red" is applicable to **y.** Similarly, the A-property whose presence in **z** explains why the absolutely determinate predicate "scarlet_{29}" (assuming it to be such) applies to it must be the same as the property that explains why this predicate is applicable to some **w** ≠ **z**. But if properties can differ or be identical in this way, they must have features that distinguish them. Since A-theorists assume that things possess features (are thus and so) only if they have appropriate A-properties, such A-properties must be their constituents in just the way that the A-properties of particulars are their constituents. As in the case of particulars, a distinction will have to be drawn between the A-properties and their constituents, and the A-properties will end up with the characterless "thisness" that Armstrong attributes to particulars. Since the constituents comprising the nature of a property must be distinguishable from one another, they too must have different natures, and this means that they will possess constituents in turn. There can be no end to this on A-theorist assumptions: every property will be like an infinitely complex system of Chinese boxes, one within another and each containing its own peculiar "thisness." This consequence is incredible.

Armstrong does not accept this criticism of his theory. When I brought it to his attention in the mid-eighties, he replied that although a fully determinate shade of white, W_{57}, will be different from every other property, the relevant differences may only be "numerical."[22] I find this suggestion unintelligible and certainly at odds with the assumptions about predication implicit in his A-theory. If particulars **x** and **y** could be distinct without having attributes (that is, A-properties) that distinguish them, how could two universals be distinct things without having attributes (that is, A-properties) that distinguish them? A-theorists attribute properties to particulars on general grounds--they want to explain the similarities and differences that are recorded by the application of predicates. We may not have an infinity of predicates that we customarily apply to properties, but that fact is irrelevant to the metaphysical explanation of the similarities and differences that must exist between them if they are to do the explanatory work that A-theorists attribute to them. If $\mathbf{u_1}$ and $\mathbf{u_2}$ are distinct objects with explanatory potential, there must be some **F** that $\mathbf{u_1}$ has but that $\mathbf{u_2}$ does not have--and so on without end.

On the face of it, T-theories (trope theories) do not face the problems I have attributed to A-theories. According to them, particulars are not ultimately mysterious subjects of predication but "bundles" of tropes. But tropes differ from one another in spite of the similarities that may exist among them. They cannot differ or be similar, however, without having definite natures--and this means (given the assumptions of the theory) having distinguishing attributes. If a trope theory is consistent in all its presuppositions, a thing's ostensible attributes are actually its constituents: "a is F" implies that a particular **F-ness** is part of **a**. Consequently, if a T-theory is consistent in this way, it must allow that every trope consists of further tropes--and so on without end. Since unanalyzable particularity can be no more allowable for tropes than for ordinary particulars, every identifiable thing will decompose into a bundle of other things, and no bundle will have an irreducible core. (An analogous consequence will hold for A-theories that regard particulars as complexes of A-properties; this is the objection that applies to "the first alternative" that I did not discuss when I considered A-theories.)

---

the question, "In virtue of what do these general terms apply to the things that they apply to?" implying that a satisfactory answer will have to refer to universals. See Armstrong (1978), vol. 1, p. 19.

[22] Armstrong (1984), p. 252.

Adopting a defensive strategy similar to one naturally adopted by A-theorists, T-theorists might argue that tropes can resemble and differ without having similar or contrasting components--that their resemblances and differences can be ultimate facts about them. But an exactly parallel argument could be used to argue that ordinary particulars can resemble and differ without having tropal constituents: their resemblances and differences can be ultimate facts about them. The latter claim is no less credible than the former. In fact, it is far more credible, all things considered: it does not have the bizarre consequences of a consistently developed trope theory.

Predication

When David Lewis, in his important paper "New Work for a Theory of Universals," criticized Armstrong's main argument for universals, he insisted that predication should be acknowledged as "primitive," as not requiring any analysis, least of all the sort of analysis that Armstrong was tacitly requiring.[23] When you attempt to explain why a thing **a** is **G** by introducing some constituent **u** in **a**, whether A-type or T-type, you are always left with an unexplained datum of the same structure: **u** is **F**. This way of putting the point is closely related to mine; I have simply tried to show what happens when predication is consistently analyzed according to the pattern assumed by an A- or T-theory.[24]

Although I would not attempt to reduce predication to some more basic relation, I don't want to say that I accept it as primitive and let it go at that. The fact that shrewd philosophers constantly provide (or assume) unacceptable analyses of it makes it important to offer some clarification of it--to say enough to help readers resist the tendency to offer a reductive analysis. I also want to say enough to discourage a philosopher from saying, as Armstrong did, that if I say that a dog is barking but "deny the metaphysical reality of properties and relations" I am committed, against my will, to the view that the world consists of "truly bare particulars."[25]

To clarify the basic nature of predication as I understand it, we should consider what is fundamentally accomplished by elementary English sentences having a predicative function. The following examples illustrate the simplest forms that A-theorists make use of in developing their views; they are also employed by T-theorists, but I shall ignore the latter in this context.

(1) Socrates is wise.
(2) Alcibiades laughed.
(3) Plato admired Socrates.

In (1) the predicate contains a linking verb conjoined to an adjective, a construction that A- theorists interpret as relating a subject to a repeatable property or universal.

---

[23] Lewis (1983). I interpret Lewis' claim that predication should be acknowledged as primitive as equivalent to the assertion that a predication to the effect that a thing *a* is *F* may be incapable of any ontologically more revealing paraphrase. I say "may" rather than "is" because some predications do admit of such paraphrases. "∃x(x is a brother of Tom or x is a sister of Tom)" may be a revealing paraphrase of "Tom is a sibling."

[24] Actually, I made essentially the same point as Lewis in both Aune (1985), p. 44, and in Aune (1984), where I said "Whatever the ultimate entities of the world may be, a proposition of the form "*a* is *F*" must be true of them without implying the existence of further, more elementary entities. If universals did exist, they themselves would be describable by propositions of this form; but the proponent of universals would not insist that such propositions could be true only if entities of a further sort exist. To parody Wittgenstein, "predication has to come to an end somewhere," p. 167.

[25] *Ibid*, p. 254.

In (2) the predicate is a mere verb, which is less plausibly interpreted by the subject-R-*Fness* paradigm; and in (3) the entire sentence must be transformed to accord smoothly with A-theorist preconceptions: it must assume the form of "The ordered pair <Plato, Socrates> R *admires.*"

In contrast to the A-theorist, I take "is wise," the predicate of (1), to be a unit, one by means of which the person denoted by the subject is described. The predicate does not denote (or pick out) a repeatable component that is attached to this subject; it applies directly to the subject itself, telling us what *the subject* is like. Since a wise person is not a characterless "this" but a wise thing, the predicate of (1) gives no support to the inferences Chisholm regarded as muddles. The same is true of the predicate in (2). Here a simple verb is predicated of a subject: Alcibiades is described as having laughed at some time. If, using the sentence, I describe Alcibiades this way, I cannot reasonably allow that I have described a "bare" particular, for I have described Alcibiades as having laughed, and nothing ultimately characterless can do a thing like that. Sentence (3) is similar to (1) and (2) in describing something, but it describes two people rather than one: it describes Plato in relation to Socrates. It does not identify anything other than Plato and Socrates, and there is no justification for representing its logical structure in the contrived way suggested above.

What I have just said no doubt needs elaboration, for the reasoning supporting the postulation of A-properties is very deeply entrenched in the thought of many philosophers. The key consideration is that the predicates in sentences like (1) and (2) directly apply to the things picked out by their subjects; they do not apply to, stand for, or denote some further items that their subjects may possess. If I say that a fireplug is red, the only thing I am talking about is the fireplug; I am not talking about something that it "has." Anyone who is familiar with red things and understands English will know what I am in effect saying about the plug: *it* is a red thing. Red things resemble one another with respect to color, but one should not suppose that this resemblance consists in a common component, an A-property. The A-theorist Armstrong actually denies that there are generic universals: he claims that repeatable determinate whites (for instance, yellowish white$_{25}$ and greenish white$_{14}$) color-resemble without exemplifying a higher-order whiteness, and a T-theorist would claim that corresponding tropes would color-resemble without containing a common white. I avoid the exotic but make a parallel claim: white things (bed-sheets, writing paper) and red things (fire engines, balloons) color-resemble one another without containing any common metaphysical element. If you are familiar with fire engines and can speak English, you will know what I mean in speaking of a red balloon. You will not have to be familiar with any metaphysical entities, particular or general, that supposedly inhere in certain balloons and fire engines.

Armstrong claimed that one cannot avoid postulating A-properties by speaking of color-resemblance or shape-resemblance because these resemblances are merely "respects" in which objects resemble and differ, and such respects require explanation by reference to A-properties. Armstrong's claim is unconvincing, however. When we learn to apply a color vocabulary to the objects around us, we learn to classify *them,* the objects, as more or less similar in color; and we readily learn to classify things as more or less similar in respect to other possible descriptions: for instance, in respect to being round or square. ("Is this as round as that?" we may ask?) What is redder or more round or squarer than another thing are *particulars*; they are what we are comparing, not some abstract component that they have; and *they* are what resemble and differ in respect of their color or shape, not their supposed abstract components. When we apply predicates, simple or compound, to particulars, we describe *those particulars* (we say what *they* are like). We do the same when we speak of how *they* resemble one another.

It is useless for an A-theorist or T-theorist to reply, "Why do you emphasize that we describe particulars? We don't deny this. We simply insist that particulars are truly described as thus and so because they possess qualities, though we disagree about whether those qualities are repeatable or particular." The reply is useless because it assumes that true predication is invariably explained or justified by reference to items other than the particulars that are described.[26] Yet these other items can do the intended work (of explaining or justifying) only if they have natures of their own. If having a nature (or being such and such) is invariably assumed to involve some kind of relation to a higher-order object that must itself have a nature of its own, a single predication is never fully understandable: it must always be understood (or tacitly analyzed) in relation to something further, which must be understood in the same way--and so on without end. If a predication is ever fully understandable--and it usually is--some predication must be understandable in its own terms, without reference to further objects. I contend that "x is round" and "x is scarlet" are acceptable examples of predications understandable this way.

An ostensible reason for postulating A-properties or tropes that I have not mentioned deserves a special comment here. In everyday life we often find it useful to employ singular descriptions that, carelessly considered, seem to apply to something abstract rather than concrete. If we run across a piece of fabric that is colored in a way that is, for us, unusual and especially attractive, we might proceed to use the words "the color of that fabric" in mentioning our discovery to our friends. Although there is nothing mysterious about the fabric that interests us, our talk of "its color" might lead a philosopher to think of G.E. Moore's famous claim that colors are simple, unanalyzable qualities.[27] This claim is quite foreign to what we have in mind when we think about the attractive fabric. We may describe that fabric as red in a very special way: it, the fabric, is a little like this (a crimson lampshade) and a little like that (a little dress that is red but without the orange tinge of something crimson). A philosopher hearing the singular term "the color of the fabric" and thinking of its referent as a object in its own right might be led to Moore's view because our descriptions of the fabric do not equally apply to such an object. The abstract "color" is not a little like the scarlet cloth and a little like the reddish dress. It is evidently not spread out in space, either, nor does it reflect light and look a bit different when the fabric is moved the about the room to see how it contrasts with objects that are blue or yellow. The object the philosopher thinks of is really nothing like the fabric that we found so special on account of *its* color. The singular term we used is very misleading to the literal-minded philosopher.

Advantages of F-theories

The critical remarks I have been making in the preceding pages do not apply to F-theories of properties and relations, the sort of entity Frege described by the word "Begriff" or (as we would say) "concept." Instead of postulating items whose presence in a thing are supposed to account for the truth of what is said about that thing, an F theory seems to be built on the idea that what accounts for such a truth

[26] This claim would not be made by my colleague Jonathan Shaffer, who tells me he postulates tropes only to account for the causal properties (or interactions) of empirical objects: he does not suppose that a trope corresponds to every true predication. In opposition to his view, I say that the special tropes he recognizes are excess baggage, for a thing's causal interactions are adequately explainable by reference to its own empirical character: a window shatters, for example, because *it* is brittle and struck by a sufficiently heavy object. The same principles apply to the interactions of micro-entities: they behave as they do because of what *they* are like. No special tropes are needed.

[27] Moore (1903), p. 7.

is the thing itself.[28] Objects are truly described as blue, red, or green because *they* are blue, red, or green—not because they possess some further items that possesses some other feature. It is, of course, true that all objects truly described as blue fall under the concept *blue*, but saying that they fall under this concept just means that the concept is applicable to them. It applies to them because they are the right sort of object: the concept *blue* applies to blue things.

Another virtue of F theories, at least the kind espoused by Frege, is that the "concepts" they postulate are plausible constituents of propositions.[29] As I noted in the last chapter, the singular proposition that Kaplan takes to correspond to "Socrates is wise" is an ordered couple whose first member is Socrates and whose second member is the property *wise.* But if this property were the sort of thing postulated by an A-theorist—namely, the sort of thing whose presence in an object makes it the sort of object it is—we would expect the couple to be a wise one, just as we would expect an object containing the A-property *red* to be a red one. Of course, an A-theorist would want to dash these expectations. But if a property were the sort of thing he says it is, we would need an illuminating explanation of why our expectations are erroneous. Just saying that a property is not present in a proposition in the way that it is present in a particular is hardly sufficient.[30] If the A-property *red* is a red-making property, as A-theorists claim, it should have that character wherever it is located—whether in an apple or a proposition.

Although a Fregean concept is not a psychological entity, it is like a Kantian concept in relating a predicate to the class of objects of which it is true or to which it applies. As Frege is commonly interpreted,[31] the sense of a sentence (its meaning, the thought it conveys) is a proposition, and a concept, being the sense of a predicate, is an appropriate ingredient in a proposition, one that helps determine the sentence's reference. How does the concept do this? It does it by identifying one of the constituents by means of which the sentence's reference is identified. For Frege, this reference is a truth-value. Here is an example of how such a truth-value is identified. Take the sentence "Socrates is a man." The subject of this sentence, the name "Socrates," has an individual concept as its sense; this individual concept picks out the man Socrates as the referent of that name. The predicate, "is a man," has the property *man* as its sense; this sense (this concept) picks out the class of men falling under this predicate. (Technically, the class is the reference of the predicate.) By virtue of the way the concepts are connected in the proposition, the reference of the sentence is determined to be truth or "the true" (to have this value) just in case the reference of "Socrates" is a member of the class that is the reference of the predicate. Since Socrates is a member of this class, the sentence is true.

In spite of being similar to a Kantian concept in a central respect, a Fregean concept is different in an important way. According to Kant, general ideas (or concepts) are distinguished from singular ideas (intuitions in his sense) in being related to objects only "mediately," by means of "marks" that are common to those

---

[28] There are, of course, certain cases in which a thing satisfies the conditions for being **F** only if it is related to a further thing: to be a brother one must be suitably related to another person. The point is simply that there is no general requirement to this effect.

[29] The properties espoused by van Inwagen (2004) are precisely this: constituents of propositions, which he takes to be "things that can be said." I comment on propositions understood this way in Appendix 4.

[30] To accommodate his supposed direct awareness of the incompatibility of red and green, BonJour (1998) tentatively suggests that a thought whose content affirms this incompatibility "instantiates a complex universal of which redness and greenness are literal constituents." He emphasizes that the colors are exemplified in a special way, so that they do not make his thought literally red and green. But he does not explain how this special exemplification is accomplished, or how greenness can be present, and recognized to be present, in thought or consciousness, where nothing is actually green (p. 185).

[31] The common interpretation I refer to is the one given by Carnap and Church; see footnote 45 of chapter three above.

objects.[32] Kant's marks recall A-properties, which have no place in Frege's system. For Frege, the objects to which a predicate applies are simply the objects falling under the concept that is the predicate's sense. As I have explained, Frege identified a thing's properties with the concepts under which it falls. As he put it, "to be Φ is a property of Γ" is just another way of saying "Γ falls under the concept of a Φ."[33] Frege used Kant's terminology of conceptual "marks" in his analysis, but he regarded marks as components of compound concepts, not items shared by the objects falling under a concept.[34]

As these observations indicate, a basic function of concepts in Frege's system is to connect predicates with the objects to which they apply. How do they do this? Frege gave only a partial answer. He said (according to the Carnap-Church interpretation) that a predicate has a concept as its sense, but he offered no explanation of how a concept is connected to the objects falling under it. The notion of an object falling under a concept was primitive in his system, an unexplained explainer. He was no doubt convinced that we learn to identify what falls under a concept in the process of learning to understand it. If a concept is not complex, we learn to apply it to instances directly—as we learn to apply the concept *red* to red objects. This does not of course explain why an object **o** falls under concept **A** rather than concept **B**. It gives us no understanding of the connection.

Did Kant explain this connection better with his twin notions of concepts and marks? The answer is no. He evidently believed that empirical concepts are associated with specific mediating marks because, according to the erroneous theory of concept-formation that he accepted for empirical concepts, these marks provide the experiential material from which the appropriate concepts were created by a process of abstraction.[35] The redness perceived in roses and sunsets is the sensory input, Kant thought, from which the concept of red is ultimately created. But input or history does not explain reference, any more than similarity does.[36] If we want an explanation of how elementary predicates become attached to these rather than those objects, we must go beyond Kant and Frege and construct such an explanation ourselves.

It is worth noting that the role of concepts in recent possible-world semantics leaves the connection between predicates and their extension just as unexplained as Frege did. Just as propositions are identified, by these theories, with functions from worlds to truth-values (or simply as sets of worlds, the ones in or at which particular sentences are true), so concepts, understood as the senses or intensions of predicates, are identified with functions from worlds to sets of individuals, the individuals to which particular predicates apply in each world.[37] The concept *green*, or the intension of the predicate "is green," associates with a world **w** the class of objects that are green at that world. The function here is essentially a correlator, if it is not a mere class of correlated items, and it provides no explanatory account of how this or that object in this or that world is ultimately attached to this or that predicate. To say this is not to expose a defect in these semantic theories, for they make no pretense of providing such an explanation. But an appropriate explanation is important for epistemology.

---

[32] Kant (1997), A320, B377.
[33] Frege (1892), p. 51.
[34] Ibid.
[35] See Kant (1974), pp. 99. For a criticism of abstractionism, see Geach (1956), chs. 6-11.
[36] See Putnam (1981), ch. 1.
[37] Or simply as sets of possible individuals, as Lewis (1986) says, pp. 50-69.

What are Concepts?

To develop the desired explanation I want to begin with Frege's notion of a concept and, by means of various qualifications and explanations, work my way toward a conception of my own. In current philosophical practice the word "concept" is used very loosely and equivocally, applying to ideas, abstract objects of conception, and sometimes even uses of words.[38] In spite of this ambiguity and indefiniteness, it nevertheless has connotations that I want my notion to preserve. Judging from an observation by Elizabeth Anscombe, the terminology of objects falling under concepts is not unusual in everyday German. She reported that Michael Dummett once saw in a Münster railway station a notice beginning "All objects that fall under the concept *hand-luggage*...." (*Alle Gegenstände, die unter den Bergriff Handgepäck fallen...).*[39] This anecdote reminds us that we commonly classify things by "concepts" that are humanly invented and rest on conventions that may have significance only for special groups. Frege no doubt thought of concepts this way even though his technical notion of a *Begriff* was supposed to be a special "logical" one, not identical with a vernacular idea.[40]

The word *hand-luggage*[41] gives expression to a humanly-invented, non-technical concept, and so does *carry-on*, *personal effects*, *engagement ring*, *American citizen*, *slave-driver*, *mule*, *Venetian blind*, *flotsam*, *jetsam*, *retriever*, *pointer*, *barber*, *typewriter*, *zipper, computer, computer-programmer*, *disk jockey,* and *play-boy*--this list can be extended as far as you want. It is true that things in nature fall under these concepts, but it is absurd to suppose that these concepts are eternal entities that define the structure of reality, as Plato's Forms were supposed to do. They all have histories, and they came into existence as the result of numerous contingencies.

Another important feature of the everyday words we use to classify objects is that they are vague. A vague word, as I observed earlier, is one that clearly applies to some actual or imaginable things, that clearly fails to apply to some such things, and that neither clearly applies nor clearly fails to apply to other such things.[42] *Bald* and *tall* are standard examples of vague words, but in fact every generic color word is vague, and so are most of the words we use in everyday life. Consider such words as *sarcastic, sardonic, frivolous, trivial, flimsy, superficial, paltry, petty, trifling, lucky, unimportant, yuppie, dismal, morose, severe, zaney, dour, carefree, windy, brisk, sparse*--again, the list can be continued almost endlessly. Although such words can perfectly well express vague concepts or ideas, they cannot stand for definite properties or items in reality, because they connote nothing definite or determinate.

One might suppose that a word like *bald* could be construed to apply in a strict sense to people whose head is utterly hairless and to apply to people with some hair only in a loose and popular sense. But the word is not really used this way; and an analogous claim holds for vague words generally. Take the word "sarcastic," which is familiar to every adult speaker of English and is used with confidence even by high school students. No adult or adolescent has any doubt about its application to some people and some things people say. Some people are clearly sarcastic either generally or on some occasions; some people clearly are not; and a great many people exhibit behavior that is not clearly classifiable either way.

---

[38] See Margolis and Laurence (1999).
[39] Anscombe (1959), p. 122.
[40] Frege (1982), p. 42
[41] I normally mention words by putting them in quotation marks, but I mention so many words in this section that I use the alternative method of italicization here.
[42] See chapter one, footnote 14.

In spite of the confidence with which "sarcastic" is commonly used, it is a very difficult word to define or even clarify by synonyms. Its etymology is very illuminating, however. It derives from the Greek *sarcazô*, which Lidell and Scott define as "to rend of flesh" in the manner of dogs.[43] As this derivation indicates, "sarcastic" was originally metaphorical. The metaphor is very tenuous today, but we still think of a sarcastic remark as one that is wounding, hurtful (and a sarcastic person as someone prone to making such remarks). Since we have encountered many clear cases of sarcasm and non-sarcasm, we have the ability to recognize such cases when we see them; but we are constantly presented with borderline cases that we cannot confidently classify either way. *Most of our vocabulary is like this*. Our words commonly involve metaphors--compare *inspire, inspiration; expire, expiration; understand, understanding*-- and their meaning is rarely precise or determinate.

To be confident that the kind of F-theory I wish to recommend is actually a good one, I must be more specific about what I take a concept to be. As I noted, there is no definite and unequivocal sense in which the word is normally used in philosophy. Insofar as a concept is assumed to be something that a person may possess, there is general agreement that the relevant mental capacity is associated with general words. A person who understands the adjective "red" is said to have the concept of red, and this same concept is said to be possessed by someone who understands a word synonymous with "red." If we accept this presumption, we can say that the concept *red* is something associated with "red" and its counterparts in other languages. The question is, "What is the 'something' and how is it associated with the relevant words?"

One way of answering the question is suggested by the observation that a person who uses the word "red" in speaking or thinking would generally be held to be *employing* the concept *red*. The same concept would be employed by a French person who uses "rouge." Now, if "rouge" is a good translation of "red," the words are used in formally analogous ways. Speakers of French apply "rouge" to objects that speakers of English would describe as red, and each would relate their word to other words of their language in a way that is parallel, formally speaking, to the usage of the other. Thus, the French would use "rouge" in relation to "vert" in basically the way that we use "red" in relation to "green." It is convenient to have a general term by which to classify words that are functional counterparts in this way. Such a term was supplied years ago by Wilfrid Sellars; he constructed it by means of his dot quotes: any expression that is a functional counterpart to "red" can be described as a *red*.[44] (I use asterisks where Sellars uses dot-quotes, because asterisks are easier to see.) If we use Sellars' terminology, we can say that the concept *red* is something that is closely associated with the use of *red*s.

D. M. Armstrong once said that the task of giving an account of "the" type-token distinction is a "compulsory question on the [philosopher's] examination paper."[45] A plausible way of relating *red*s to the concept *red* is to say that the latter is the type of which the former are tokens. Saying this requires that one come to terms with *a* type-token distinction (there may be more than one), but it accords with the common assumption that if you understand and use "red," you have and employ the concept *red*, and that if you understand and employ "rouge," you have and employ the same concept.

When we think of types, we often describe them in ways appropriate to tokens. This tendency is perhaps evident in Plato's practice of describing particulars

---

[43] Liddell and Scott (1984), p. 630.
[44] See Sellars (1979), ch. 4.
[45] Armstrong (1978), vol. 1, p. 17.

as imperfect imitations of perfect Forms,[46] but it stands out in Hilaire Belloc's amusing lines:

> The llama is a woolly sort of fleecy hairy goat,
> With an indolent expression and an undulating throat.[47]

It is obvious that what is said of the type here is properly predicated of the tokens, for only particular llamas are fleecy hairy goats with indolent expressions and undulating throats. Surely no abstract object is hairy and has an indolent expression. Wilfrid Sellars devoted a lot of attention to expressions such as "the llama"; he called them *distributive singular terms* (or *DSTs*) and said that statements containing them are by definition equivalent to statements about concrete things. In his view a statement of the form "The llama is F" can be paraphrased as "Llamas are F." [48]. This view is very plausible, I think, for the predicate in "The llama is a woolly sort of fleecy hairy goat" certainly makes it appear that the statement as a whole is about actual llamas. If "the concept *red"* can also be understood as a DST, statements containing it can reasonably be regarded as equivalent to general statements about the expressions said to "express" that concept. This will fit in nicely with the conceptualist view of propositional content that I presented near the end of the last chapter.

As attractive as I find this suggestion about concepts to be, I must acknowledge that the distributive treatment Sellars and others[49] have endorsed for words ostensibly referring to types has been seriously questioned in the literature. Linda Wetzel has in fact criticized it at length in an earlier article[50] and in a more recent book.[51] Before attempting to develop the suggestion about concepts, I must obviously come to terms with this criticism.

Some Problems about DSTs

According to Wetzel, the schema commonly offered for the elimination of DSTs is seriously defective. It fails, she says, because the relevant tokens do not always possess the attributes ostensibly attributed to the type. To take the example from Hilaire Belloc, although it is perhaps true that

> The llama is a wooly sort of fleecy hairy goat
> With an indolent expression and an undulating throat,

it is certainly not true that every actual llama satisfies this description. Shaved or burned llamas are not wooly and fleecy; beaten llamas do not have indolent expressions; and starved ones probably lack undulating throats. This criticism of the standard definition schema is clearly correct. Even in cases where the ingredient general term seems to apply to all members of a class, the relevant class appears to be restricted to typical or ideal examples.[52] If such favored llamas have wooly, fleecy coats, we can say that "the" llama has such a coat; if we are justified in making this last assertion, we can justifiably conclude that all favored llamas have

---

[46] As in *Republic* 597a.
[47] "The Llama," in Belloc (1970), p. 245.
[48] Sellars (1979), 89-99.
[49] Goodman (1951), pp. 360-63, makes use of essentially the same idea in his treatment of assertions ostensibly about statements.
[50] Wetzel (2000).
[51] Wetzel (2003).
[52] I argued this in Aune (2002). Frege noted it much earlier; see Frege (1892), where he said, "The horse is a four-legged animal" is "probably best regarded" as expressing a universal judgment, say "All properly constituted horses are four-legged animals" (p. 45).

such a coat. Our "the" statement thus has the assertive content of a universal statement restricted to a domain of favored cases.[53]

Wetzel also has objections to this qualified view, however. Her first objection is that the notion of what is normal or properly constituted--and therefore what is ideal-- should be viewed with suspicion; it is not, she suggests, scientifically credible (p. 98). She might be right that these notions are scientifically dubious, but the corresponding distributive statements (the ones about *the* llama or *the* grizzly) would evidently be scientifically dubious as well. If I say the llama has an indolent expression and an undulating throat, a hectoring critic might say, "Okay, Aune, how do you identify a *typical* llama, or a "good example" of the species?" Since I am not an expert on domestic animals, I would have to appeal to someone who is. But I don't think even an expert can provide a definition than can single out typical, or "good," llamas with precision. I say this because I think the notion of a typical or good instance of something is vague, and I expect that even llama breeders might disagree about the qualities llamas should ideally have--just as Airedale breeders do disagree about the qualities Airedales should ideally have, some thinking that, because they are terriers, Airedales ought not to be the eighty to ninety pound animals that others admire. Belloc's statement about "the" llama, like ordinary statements about the cat or the Airedale, is not strict or precise. It calls attention, in an amusing way, to striking features of the healthy, well-cared-for llamas that one might see in a field or a zoo--but it does not pretend to be scientifically exact.

The imprecision of ostensible type statements sometimes leads to problems about verification. In her discussion of statements about *the* grizzly*,* Wetzel emphasizes that not that all grizzlies are big, not all are brown, and not all have humps. Yet it is still true, she insists, that *the* grizzly is a big, humped brown bear native to North America (p. 96). But how do we *know* that this is true? Are we not generalizing from some grizzlies or other? In this case I should say yes, though in the case of the llama and the Airedale, which have been bred to suit human purposes, our conception of "the" animal is partly based on our wants rather than our observations. But there are often striking differences between the instances--the good examples --from which we generalize. Some relevant differences are associated with sex. When we think of a Black Widow spider, for instance, we are probably thinking of the female, for the males are small, insignificant, and eaten by the female at the completion of the inseminating act. Yet the Black Widow species contains males as well as females. I suspect that we simply ignore sex (we abstract from it) when we make statements about *the* Black Widow spider. When sexual differences are brought up, we are apt to make more restrictive statements. We would probably do the same if we discovered that most female grizzlies do not have humps. Instead of speaking about "the" grizzly generally, we might then speak about the male grizzly, the female grizzly, and possibly even the adolescent grizzly, the cub grizzly, and the aged grizzly (male or female)--if there are distinctive traits that such grizzlies possess.

This brings me to another of Wetzel's objections to the distributive analysis. She says, in effect, that such analyses fail because some properties of the type are derived from the *distribution* rather than the *common features* of its tokens. To support her claim she says that *Ursus horribilis*, the grizzly bear, "had at one time a U.S. range of most of the West, and numbered 10,000 in California alone. Today its range is Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho, and numbers less than 1000. [But no]

---

[53] Wetzel shows that "The K is F" does not imply "all Ks are F"; the implication evidently does not go the other way either, since some things truly predicable of every grizzly are apparently not predicable of "the" grizzly. Contingent, accidental features seem to be exceptions. If every actual grizzly happened to lose a claw in a trap or a fight, I doubt we would say that the grizzly lacks a claw.

…particular flesh and blood bear numbers 1,000 or had a range comprising most of the West" (p. 102). Her example here is convincing if her opponents are expected to apply a distributional analysis in a mechanical way, but if they are allowed to use their ingenuity in interpreting predicates, a broadly distributional reading is easily achieved. Take the assertion "The grizzly bear once ranged over most of the western U.S." Put in vernacular terms, this tells us that grizzly bears once ranged over most of the western U.S. Saying that *they* had this range is not saying that each one had this range; the predicate is applicable to the grizzlies collectively: *they* were distributed over this area. The predicate of the second statement is also collective, a plural predicate taking a plural subject: *they* (certain grizzlies) numbered 10,000 in California alone. The same principles apply to the two statements about the grizzly today: grizzlies now have three states as their range, and they now number 1,000. These collective predications are, of course, reducible to singular ones. Saying that grizzlies *are* distributed over a certain area amounts to saying that individual grizzlies exist here and there throughout that range.

Reflection convinces me that not all statements about "the" grizzly are distributional in the ways I have so far described. If one says that the grizzly was seen in Washington State in 1975, one is not saying that typical instances were seen there then; one is saying that *some* instance was so seen. And if one says (as I heard someone recently say) "Many rich people now transfer nothing to the poor," one is evidently speaking of the poor collectively rather than individually, although one is certainly implying that no poor person is receiving any goods or money from certain rich people. As I see it, there is considerable ambiguity to terms like "the poor" and "the grizzly," and no single distributive analysis is applicable to all of them.[54]

Wetzel agrees that many assertions ostensibly about types can be paraphrased by assertions about tokens, but she insists that we can have no assurance that this can always be done unless we have a systematic way of doing so. As I have implied in my last paragraph, I do not believe that a systematic way of providing such paraphrases can be found; but I have no doubt that the predicates included in Wetzel's favored examples of ostensible type terms apply only to particulars, to "tokens." Only individual grizzlies can be found in the United States (only they can have such a range) and only they can scratch, bite, and become more or less numerous. If the relevant "the" statements cannot be interpreted as saying something about tokens, they will not make sense and they cannot be true. The lack of a systematic means of paraphrasing all examples will not, therefore, at least as I see it, support a commitment to irreducible types. The requirement of a systematic paraphrase for everyday assertions ostensibly about types is, in any case, excessively demanding.

More about Concepts

Before discussing the problems Wetzel raised with distributional analyses of statements containing terms such as "the llama" or "the grizzly," I offered the suggestion that what is ostensibly true of concepts reduces to what is true of certain tokens, specifically certain general terms. The idea seems reasonable in view of some standard assumptions about concepts. Jacques has the concept *snow* when and only when he understands some general term, perhaps "neige," that is a *snow*; Jacques and Tom have a common concept when and only when they

[54] It is possible to "reconstruct" statements containing such terms in a way that justifies a distributional analysis; this has been done by Jeffrey Sicha in an unpublished letter to me. Sicha's reconstruction diverges from everyday discourse in certain respects, as reconstructions commonly do, but I can find no serious fault with it.

understand general terms that are functional counterparts; and I have a concept that is applicable to snow when and only when I have a general term that is applicable to it.

Although the idea that I just mentioned may seem reasonable, it is actually over-simplified in two important ways. The first complication is that concepts have a kind of generality that is greater than anything narrowly verbal. Sellars, who used dot quotes to create special predicates applicable to tokens that are functional counterparts, included mental tokens as well as physical ones. He did this because he was convinced that we can think what we can say and that we can do so without saying anything to ourselves in the way we mentally say something when we silently recite a poem. If, without uttering anything, we think, "That snow is yellow," we are employing concepts of snow and of something yellow, and doing this requires that certain elements of our thought do the functional work of the words "snow" and "yellow." These elements are reasonably described as *snows*s and *yellow*s, Sellars thought, even though they differ from audible *snows*s and *yellow*s in material (that is, nonfunctional) respects.

I think Sellars was clearly right on this matter: we can think exactly what we can say, and we can do this without saying something to ourselves in the way we mentally say something when we recite a poem to ourselves.[55] Endorsing Sellars's view of the components of a complete thought amounts to asserting that the concepts exercised in thinking and saying the same thing are the same. I accept this view, and I draw the obvious conclusion: What falls under an idea or thought-component in such a thought also falls under a word or phrase in the corresponding utterance. Another way of putting this is to say that the ideas or thought-components involved in verbally expressible thoughts have the semantical properties of the words in the statements that are said to "express" them. They are about the same things; they have corresponding implications; and they are equally appropriate, semantically, in particular circumstances. (The thought "That's red" is just as inappropriate to a green object as the statement "That's red.") As a result of these semantic parallels, the extended view of analyticity I presented at the end of the last chapter applies to thinking in basically the way it applies to statements. No alternative account is needed.

The other complication in the relation of concepts to corresponding tokens is that the latter need not be understood as mental or verbal elements having the semantic character of discrete general terms. Although many of the concepts I have are associated with single general terms, my conceptual resources greatly outstrip my finite vocabulary. The point stands out if we think of concepts as F-properties. A thing has an F-property just when it is truly describable in a certain way, and to be so describable is to fall under appropriate concepts. But the languages in which a thing is truly describable in a way W need not possess discrete predicates associated with a W way of being; a thing can be truly described by a string of words newly conjoined for the purpose. Strings of words newly put together in the right arrangements can often serve as *definienda* for new predicates, but until those new predicates are introduced, the conceptual specifications will exist only in a long-winded form. We will have the concepts without a simple way to express them.

Since I reintroduced the notion of an F-property, I might just as well comment on a question often addressed to defenders of F-properties. If a theory of this kind is correct, must we say that things would lack all properties if languages or thinking beings did not exist anywhere in the universe? The answer is yes, but it is not really a source of concern. A world without F-properties would not be a strange or peculiar world. Each thing existing in it would be intrinsically the same as it would

[55] This same view appears to be held by Jerry Fodor: see Fodor (2000).

be in a world with speakers and languages. A frozen lake would be just as frozen and just as blue and cold as it now is if the concepts **frozen, cold,** and **blue** had never been invented. The existence of languages does not change anything nonlinguistic. Lakes are what they are independently of how anyone describes them.[56]

Concepts, Predicates, and the World

When I discussed the role of general concepts in Frege's semantical theory, I said that a basic function they perform there is to connect a predicate with the objects to which it applies. As for how a general concept can do this, I added that Frege had nothing to say: the idea of an object falling under a concept is primitive in his system, an unexplained explainer. Yet if his concepts are viewed in the way I am recommending, as distributive objects, the idea that they are what relate words to objects is a mistaken one. The truth is, in fact, the opposite: objects fall under general concepts only in the sense that they are truly described or rightly classified by appropriate predicates or phrases containing predicates. Predicates, as I see them, are *direct* describers or *direct* classifiers of objects: they describe or classify without the help of conceptual mediators. In this respect they are semantically comparable to names and demonstratives. Just as the latter directly refer to their bearers, so predicates directly describe or directly classify the objects to which they apply. In neither case is the semantic function performed by means of conceptual intermediaries.

But how, one may ask, does a predicate gain the predicative function it possesses? My answer is that it gets it from they way it is used by speakers and writers. When I criticized the rationalist account of how color-incompatibilities are known, I introduced a simple example that shows how classifying behavior may fix distinctive meanings and create Fregean properties. The example concerned Mary, Tom, and Harry, who described the color of a bush in three conflicting ways. Mary insisted the color was a shade of yellow, Tom a shade of green, Harry a shade consisting of both yellow and green. In stubbornly holding to these contrasting descriptions, Mary, Tom, and Harry in effect distinguished four generic color concepts. Mary's concept of yellow applied to the shrub's unusual shade; her concept of green did not apply to it. Tom's concepts of yellow and green applied in an opposite way: his green included it and his yellow excluded it. Harry, claiming that the shade involved green and yellow in equal degrees, showed that his concepts of yellow and green overlapped in this instance. In holding to their descriptions, Mary, Tom, and Harry jointly distinguished six generic colors and therefore six generic color concepts. These six concepts, we may assume, are closely related, because their extensions (the things to which they apply) overlap in most cases. But they differ in their application to the bush, and this is enough to distinguish them. *Strictly speaking*, they are different.

When I introduced the example, I assumed that the existing uses of "yellow" and "green" are insufficiently determinate to render any one of the three descriptions right or wrong. In holding fast to their descriptions, the three persons were making their concepts of yellow and green determinate in different ways. But even in cases where "correct" and "incorrect" may be thought to apply, the standards often differ for different speakers or writers. Bookish people, those who frequently consult dictionaries, are strongly influenced by etymology and precedent; they are apt to emphasize the differences that distinguish the meanings of such closely related modifiers as "accidental, "inadvertent," and "by mistake."[57] Others, particularly

[56] I defend this point at length in Aune (1985), pp. 126-130.
[57] See "A Plea for Excuses" in Austin (1961).

those who rarely consult dictionaries or, as Kingsley Amis once complained,[58] may not even own them, are apt to regard these expressions as basically synonymous: they and their intimates may use them almost interchangeably. The bookish people will say that this indiscriminate usage is incorrect, that those who speak this way are misusing the English language. People who write dictionaries these days have a much more democratic attitude. Usage rules. Those who wish to respect etymology and follow the precedent of fastidious writers may continue to do so, and like-minded readers or hearers will appreciate their fastidiousness. But those who are attuned to a more popular idiom have their own standards, and they often find the usage of the others archaic, unnatural, and puzzling.

Meaning, Intending, and Content Clauses

My claim that predicates, like singular terms, directly apply to objects in the world fits together neatly with the conceptualist view of propositional attitudes that I endorsed in the last chapter.[59] According to that view, mental states such as believing, judging, or supposing have "contents" rather than "objects." Philosophers who speak of contents this way commonly say they are given (or conveyed) by declarative clauses attached to a noun clause denoting a person's propositional attitude. They are also given by such a clause in a sentence that may be used to ascribe a propositional attitude to a person—for instance, by "Tom believes that snow is white." When I introduced the conceptualist view, I said that the content of a person's belief had concepts as constituents, meaning by concepts the sort of singular and general ideas that Kant called "Begriffe." This way of describing the contents of a propositional attitude is actually oversimplified in important ways, and it is now appropriate to make some of the requisite qualifications. The qualifications turn out to be epistemically important.

The sentences used to specify the contents of psychological states are structurally the same as sentences used to specify the contents of verbal acts such as stating, asserting, declaring, or, more simply, just saying something. As it happens, the qualifications I want to make about psychological contents are easiest to identify by means of this latter kind of sentence. So consider the following:

Mary said, "Tom has a perverse sense of humor."

According to the terminology of traditional grammar, this sentence purports to contain a "direct" quotation of Mary's words on a certain occasion. The quotation is called an *oratio recta* clause in older textbooks.[60] It is used to describe what Mary is supposed to have said, and it does this by exhibiting the words she is thought to have used in her speech act. If we understand those words, we can understand her utterance and thus know what she is supposed to have said. Now consider the related construction:

Mary said that Tom has a perverse sense of humor.

According to tradition, this sentence contains an "indirect" quotation of Mary's supposed words. This indirect quotation, called an *oratio obliqua* clause in the older books, does not purport to contain Mary's actual words, but it may contain some of them, or a translation of some of them, together with modifications that reflect her relation to the person reporting her statement. If she used French in speaking of Tom, the *oratio obliqua* clause might consist mostly of translated words; if she spoke in English, the words might be more or less the same as Tom's.

---

[58] Kingsley Amis (1998) complained that "the habit of owning and even consulting a dictionary has largely died out among the general public" (p. 47).

[59] See chapter 3, pp. 121-124.

[60] Smyth (1920) discusses both *oratio recta* and *oratio obliqua* clauses on p. 584.

A different example can show how much the *oratio obliqua* clause might differ from the original words even when the narrator and the original speaker share the same language. Suppose Betty, pointing to a street corner some distance away, told Sam on Monday, "I will meet you there at noon tomorrow." On Tuesday Sam appears on the designated corner at noon, but Betty does not appear. Sam waits for a while, then leaves, and returns an hour later. Betty is there and asks, "Where have you been?" Sam replies, "Where have you been? You told me that you would met me here at noon, but you failed to appear." "I am sorry," Betty replies; "I thought I said one o'clock." This little exchange is perfectly natural, linguistically. Betty does not object to Sam's description of what she told him, but the words he used to report her statement agree with her words mostly in the things they identify; only three of them were the same as words she used: "meet," "at", and "noon."

A slightly more complicated example gives a better idea of the differences that are commonly tolerated in indirect quotations of a speaker's statement. Imagine that Fred once said to Sally:

"I will meet you tomorrow at The Blue Moon Café."

Sally, on the following day wishing to convey what Fred told her but forgetting the name of the café he spoke of, might say:

"Fred said he would meet me today at that shabby café on 14th Street."

Although Sally's description of what Fred said would be considered acceptable if her hearer knew what café she was referring to by "that shabby café on 14th Street" and did not dispute the aptness of the description, the only words of Fred's that she repeats here are "meet" and "at," a total of two out of eleven—one less than the total repeated in the simpler example featuring Betty and Sam. To identify the day Fred was speaking of a day after he spoke of it, Sally used "today" in place of his "tomorrow," and she also used pronouns and verbs appropriate to her perspective on him and what he spoke of in place of the ones he used. These differences are just as striking as the differing descriptions of the café on 14th Street. In spite of them—in fact, because of them—Sally's *oratio obliqua* clause gives her hearers a good sense of what Fred was referring to and what he wanted Sally to understand when he spoke as he did. This is what giving the content of an utterance commonly amounts to.[61]

The propositional clauses that give the content of a person's thoughts or beliefs can be understood in an analogous way. If you believe that snow is white, you need not have the thought of snow constantly in mind; but if you are in some way prompted to think about snow or typical examples of white things, the thought that snow is white is apt to cross your mind and serve as a premise in the reasoning by means of which your belief results in overt behavior. The content ascribed to your belief is owing to the content of this distinctive thought, for it, not the dispositional state of believing itself, has the conceptual structure approximately exemplified in the *oratio obliqua* clause conveying that content.[62] The constituents of this conceptual structure are related to the words of the *oratio obliqua* clause in a way that is formally the same as the way the words of an original statement are related to the words of the clause "indirectly quoting" it. Constituent ideas have the same reference as corresponding words, and they frequently possess corresponding

---

[61] After I wrote the above, I discovered Joseph Almog's wonderful paper, "Is a Unified Description of Language-and-Thought Possible? (2005). Although Almog approaches the subject of indirect discourse from a perspective somewhat different from mine, we arrive at essentially the same conclusion. Almog says "The reporter gets things right as long as he, with *his* terms—[his] names or descriptions—keeps the same denotation as those of the thinker [or speaker]," p. 525. I believe this is true as a general matter, but there are exceptions. If the speaker would reject a denotation, a reporter should not use it. Think of John Perry's example of the essential indexical. See Perry (1979).

[62] I defend this view of believing in Aune (1990).

implications. These semantic parallels are generally not tight; they can possess all the differences that distinguish Fred's "I will meet you tomorrow at the Blue Moon Café" from Mary's "…he would meet me today at that shabby café on 14th Street."[63]

These observations about the structure and function of *oratio obliqua* clauses have interesting implications for a conception of propositions akin to the conception of concepts that I developed earlier. Like my conception of concepts, which was indebted to the semantical views of Wilfrid Sellars, the relevant conception of propositions has the same source.[64] It takes propositions to be distributive objects. Instead of implying that propositional attitudes with the same "content" literally possess a distinctive common constituent, the distributive conception implies that these attitudes are tokens of a distributive type. The English-speaker's assertion "Snow is white" is a *Snow is white*, and so is the French-speaker's "La neige est blanche": the statements are semantic counterparts and thus are classifiable by the same illustrating common noun. The propositions in question are distributive objects because what is ostensibly predicated of them is ultimately reducible to predications about corresponding attitudes. The singular term "the proposition that snow is white" is construed (reconstructed) as meaning "the [proposition] *snow is white*, and what is predicated of the latter is taken to be reducible to assertions about appropriate tokens. As an illustration of this, the sentence "The proposition that snow is white is about snow" is reducible to "All *snow is white*s are about snow."

If natural languages did not contain demonstratives or tensed verbs, and if acceptable *oratio obliqua* clauses were so tightly related to the words or thoughts whose supposed "content" they report that a reference to the Blue Moon Café could not be reported by "that shabby café on 14th Street," I would find Sellars's conception of propositions fully acceptable. But natural languages do contain demonstratives and tensed verbs, and acceptable *oratio obliqua* clauses are in fact fairly loosely related to counterpart words and thoughts. As things stand, therefore, Sellars' conception of propositions (at least as I have described it) is not appropriate for natural languages as they actually exist; it is appropriate only for a more restricted idiom that requires the functional parts of corresponding tokens to play the same semantic roles.[65] "Snow is white" and "La neige est blanche" are perhaps sufficiently similar to be semantically classifiable in the same way, as *snow is white*s, but "I will meet you tomorrow at the Blue Moon Café" and "he would meet me today at that shabby café on 14th Street" are not similar enough to be classifiable in an analogous way, so that they count as tokens of the same ostensible type. This lack of similarity does not prevent an occurrence of the latter sentence from being used to report the "content" (or be considered a semantic counterpart) of an appropriately produced occurrence of the former. Semantic counterparts are, in general, related to one another by determinate rules, but they are not always or even usually tokens of a common functional type.

What I have said about *oration obliqua* clauses also has significant implications for a current controversy about "individualism" and the meaning of a

---

[63] Almog emphasizes these differences by an example in which he imagines himself saying to David Kaplan after returning from a trip to Paris, "Pierre believes that you are here." Pierre had said to him, he supposes, "Le professeur qui nous a parlait la semaine dernière avec ce costume elégant de Saville Row est retour dans le cité des anges," p. 506.

[64] Sellars (1979), pp. 95-100.

[65] Jeffrey Sicha has worked out an amendment to Sellars theory that accommodates the looser relations between counterpart tokens that I have been describing here. According to his amendment, the counterpart formulas belonging to the distribution class for a propositional assertion may contain expressions with the same extensions but different meanings or implications. As far as I can tell, Sicha's amendment, which was worked out in a letter to me and is not published, successfully eludes the objections I have raised against Sellars's original theory.

person's words.[66] According to philosophers such as Roderick Chisholm, our words have the meaning they do because of what we mean by them: our referential intentions call the tune.[67] Tyler Burge officially takes an opposite view; he argues that our words inherit their meaning from the linguistic community to which we belong. My own view is somewhere in the middle.

As I said near the end of the last chapter, I believe we gain the capacity to think (and therefore to speak) about occurrences in ancient history, exotic entities in subatomic physics, and even certain traits and quirks of everyday acquaintances only by means of words that we learn from parents and teachers, textbooks and dictionaries, newspapers and television. But we do not master perfectly the words we accumulate, and our sources are also imperfect transmitters of collective verbal wisdom, so there is generally some lack of fit between our speech and thought and the speech and thought of others.

Burge supports his stronger view by arguments based on the content clauses of sentences used to ascribe those states or events to particular persons. One of his central arguments concerns a man who has an erroneous understanding of what is meant by the term "arthritis." He knows that the term refers to a painful, inflammatory disease, but he does not know that the disease is restricted to joints. He thinks he has had the disease for a long time in his wrists and fingers, but he begins to believe he now has it in his thigh, and he tells his doctor about it. It is natural to say that when he makes this statement to his doctor, he *believes* that he has arthritis in his thigh. Yet if arthritis is properly a joint disease, he misuses he word in attributing that disease to his thigh. And if he misuses it, is it not the wrong word for an accurate expression of the belief he has about his thigh?

Burge says no. In his view the man's belief is identified by means of its content, and the standard practice for attributing beliefs is to take the words a person would use to express his beliefs as *prima facie* evidence for what their content is. I think there is no doubt that if Tom candidly asserted "I have arthritis in my thigh," we would normally conclude that he said he had arthritis in his thigh and that he believed he had arthritis there. What is somewhat doubtful is the rational basis for this conclusion and the philosophical significance the conclusion should possess.

The matter of philosophical significance deserves to be considered first. Burge takes it to be considerable. He supports this verdict by describing a counterfactual situation in which the man who says he has arthritis in his thigh belongs to a community in which the word (the sound or sign design) "arthritis" has a different meaning: there it applies to rheumatoid ailments that may exist in bones as well as joints. Apart from this difference in the man's linguistic community, he is fundamentally the same; his "entire physical and non-intentional mental histories, considered in isolation from their social context," are in no way different (p. 79). But since the word he uses to describe his disease in the two cases has a different referent—an inflammatory disease of the joints in the first case and a disease of the bones or joints in the second case--his beliefs about his disease in those cases differ as well, Burge says. He will have different beliefs because his beliefs will have different contents: in the first case they pertain to one disease, in the second case they pertain to another.

To decide whether Burge is right in this last matter, we must obviously consider the justification we have for concluding that a person who utters certain words has a belief with a particular content. We certainly do not always suppose

---

[66] The word "individualism" comes from Burge (1979), whose criticism of the doctrine it applies to I shall discuss shortly.

[67] Chisholm (1997), p. 359.

that someone who says that P believes that P. If Mary utters the words "I like Tom's sense of humor," we will unquestionably agree that she said she likes Tom's sense of humor, but we know she could be speaking ironically and possibly believe that his sense of humor is absurd or even revolting. To be convinced that she said that P we need only be convinced that she was engaging in what J. L. Austin called a "locutionary act"[68] and that she uttered words appropriately related to the words we include in the *oratio obliqua* clause following "She said that…." How she meant these words, or what thoughts she intended to convey by means of them, is not represented in our that-clause. The transition from "She said that P" to "She believes that P" properly requires information (enough to support a reasonable conjecture) about what she meant in so speaking and what her intentions were.

Burge is well aware of this last fact, of course. To support his contention about the dependence of propositional attitudes on community standards, Burge emphasizes that partial understanding is "common and even normal in the case of a large number of expressions in our vocabularies" (p. 83) and that partially understood and even misapplied words may yet be used without qualification in giving the content of our statements and beliefs. In many of the examples he considers the subjects are willing, Burge says, to submit their statements and beliefs to the arbitration an authority, and this suggests that they are willing to have their words taken in the normal way (p. 101). This willingness, where it exists, shows the kind of intention that can often justify a transition from "She said that P" to "She believes that P." Where it does not exist, the transition is very dubiously made.

Although the acceptability of Burge's views about believing is not pertinent to my purposes in this book, I might nevertheless observe that in cases where we are intending to use a word as certain others use it, the differing beliefs that we may express with the same words in different social contexts are like the differing beliefs we may express by the words "He or she is on time" when we hear a package being left on our porch. We may have no idea who is delivering the package this time, but we use the same words anyway. In one sense we could say exactly the same thing on the following day even though, if the delivery person is not the same on both days, we would in fact be referring to different people on each occasion. Our beliefs would be semantically different each time, since they applied to different delivery-people; but they would be exactly the same in their intrinsic features. In this respect the changes of belief that Burge discusses are what have been called "Cambridge changes," changes that can be attributed to a thing because of an alteration in something else.[69] A man becomes a father when his wife gives birth to their biological child. The change he thereby undergoes is a Cambridge change, not a material change in his person.

As Burge rightly observes, "One need only thumb through a dictionary for an hour or so to develop a sense of the extent to which one's beliefs are infected by incomplete understanding" (p. 79). In spite of this incompleteness, normal speakers intend to refer to the commonly accepted referents of the names they use, and they intend to attribute to those referents, by means of predicates and associated words, the features they take to be attributed to such referents by others using those words. Who are these other persons? The variety is wider, I believe, than Burge imagines. In the first instance, they are people with whom the speaker commonly associates, such as friends or family, or they are specialists of one kind or another who may understand the words much better than the speaker does. But the speaker may also intend to conform to the usage of many special groups. Teenagers have their own *argot*, and so do philosophers, plumbers, investment bankers, and sailors.

---

[68] Austin (1962), pp. 99-109.
[69] See Geach (1969), pp. 71f.

Common words are used differently in different parts of one country; and every traveler knows that many words of American English have implications that conflict in various ways with their homonyms in England, Ireland, Australia, or India. People with different education—not just in quantity but in variety—attach different meanings to different words; and the syntax of their sentences is apt to differ as well. As a result of these varying subgroups, dictionaries of different sizes give conflicting information; in some, words like "sarcastic" and "sardonic" are listed as synonyms; in others, such words are carefully distinguished.

Because different people do, in fact, mean different things by many of the lexically identical words they use, and because their referential intentions are always relevant to the interpretation of their words, Burge's anti-"individualist" arguments apply to a much smaller class of propositional attitudes than he officially supposes. In fact, his arguments apparently fail to rule out the individualist view of R. M. Chisholm—that the referents of a speaker's words are invariably determined by that speaker's intentions, that the words mean what the speaker intends them to mean. Since I have already expressed my disagreement with Chisholm's view, I want to say something about it.

The first point to make is that if Burge is right, Chisholm's individualist view must be compatible with the idea that speakers may misunderstand or not fully understand the meaning they intend their words to have. They intend certain words to be understood in some accepted way, but they do not fully understand what this accepted usage amounts to. Thus, the details of their meaning may elude their understanding; it is determined more by the ideas of informed speakers than by their own ideas. Their own referential intentions are important, but they do not specify the referential details.

The second point is far more important from my point of view. It is that referential intentions can give words meaning only by means of intentional behavior, and the relevant behavior is what actually gives the meaning whatever determinacy it may possess. This is true even for the incompletely understood meaning that one gives to a word one intends to be understood as it is used by certain experts. To use a word with this meaning is to defer to those experts for details about the things, events, or conditions to which they apply it. Consistency involving the details of use is what is fundamentally important—not a mere mental state of intending. Suppose a Humpty Dumpty character insisted that he can mean *horse* by "ashtray." To succeed in such a thing he would have to use "ashtray" the way others use the word "horse" or some synonym in another language. This will involve both observations and inferences. If you point to some horses in a field and ask what he thinks they are, he should say "ashtrays" if he can understand your English. If you ask him whether ashtrays can be saddled and ridden, he should assent. And so on. One can give meaning to one's words only by using them in some reasonably consistent way.

Concluding Remarks

I began this chapter by distinguishing three generic conceptions of properties, the two most important being elaborated by A-theories and F-theories, the first Aristotelian in spirit and the other Fregean or, in view of its ultimate provenance, Platonic.[70] The Fregean conception is far preferable to the other, I argued, but it

[70] After writing this I noticed a footnote in Adam's edition of Plato's *Republic* in which Adam observes that German translators of Plato's Greek mostly use "Begriff" for Plato's "*eidos*." In calling his properties "Begriffe" Frege was therefore following a familiar precedent. See Adam (1902), note to *Rep.*V, 476A2.

needs elaboration and reconstruction if it is to be fully acceptable. Frege called his properties "concepts" (or "*Begriffe*") and, like his followers today, he thought their basic semantic function lies in relating the objects falling under them to appropriate predicates. (The predicates apply to the objects falling under their "senses.")[71] But he offered no account of this "falling under" relation and had no explanation of why object x falls under concept C1 rather than concept C2. The need for such an explanation is the basis for a long-standing problem in metaphysics, the earliest form of which arose from the assumed *chôrismos***,** or separation, of Plato's forms from the particulars we see.[72]

I argued that predicates as well as names apply to certain objects and not others because of the way they are used by speakers and writers. Concepts as I understand them play no essential role in securing this reference. Their task is to facilitate the identification and description of predicates whose semantic features are established by speakers and writers. Like the lion, the lamb, or the llama, they are distributive objects whose ostensible traits are really traits of the objects they collectively identify or functionally describe. Although we say "The lion is carnivorous," the predicate of our assertion is not truly applicable to an abstract object; it meaningfully applies only to living things. Something comparable is true of our assertions about concepts. We say that the concept *lion* applies to ferocious felines, but our predicate in this sentence, "applies to ferocious felines" is a string of words that, because of the way its constituents are used and structured here, strictly applies to other predicates—specifically, the word "lion," its translations in other languages, and its mental counterparts. The subject of concepts, or F-properties, is vitally important to epistemology because it shows us that a priori truth can be based on the structure of sentences (strings of words) or corresponding thoughts rather than on perceived connections between properties themselves, as rationalists perennially contend.

[71] See footnote 28 above.
[72] The problem was originally raised in Plato's *Parmenides*, 130a-135d.