

Properties without Problems

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0 Introduction

The problem of universals has traditionally be regarded as one of the great problems in the history of philosophy. The problem concerns whether there are, in addition to concrete particular things, general and abstract things that these particular things might share or “instantiate.” For instance, in addition to the Sun and Neptune, is there the property of being round, which they both instantiate? The platonist says that there is. The nominalist says that there isn’t. These two answers present themselves as two horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, it seems that our ordinary ways of speaking and thinking show us that platonism *must* be correct. On the other hand, when we try to think seriously about what such “general and abstract things” could possibly be and how we could possibly know about them, we’re struck with such puzzlement as to think that platonism *can’t* be correct. It’s a classic philosophical aporia.

As with most traditional philosophical problems, there is no consensus among philosophers on the solution to the problem of universals. This is made most clear by the recent PhilPapers survey (Bourget and Chalmers 2023) which showed that philosophers’ positions on “platonism” and “nomianlism” are a near-even split; of nearly two-thousand philosophers polled, 38.4% claimed to be platonists and 41.9% claimed to be nominalists (with 19.7% either having no view on the matter, having

an alternate view, or rejecting the question). This rift in philosophical opinion, however, seems to be at odds with a general trend in philosophical practice. Talk of properties is widely accepted and nearly ubiquitous in contemporary philosophical theorizing. This is true all over philosophy, but it is especially true of contemporary philosophy of mind and language, which very often includes talk of a great number of uninstantiated properties, since it seems clear that in experience, thought, and speech, we often represent things that as being all sorts of ways that, in fact, nothing is. Yet, in metaphysics, there is currently no account of all of these properties on offer that resolves the traditional metaphysical and epistemological problems associated with such things.¹ In this paper, I will provide such an account.

On the account I'll provide, properties are modal profiles that things might (or might not) have. Modal profiles are complex and multi-faceted. Part of an object's modal profile might be referred to as its "dispositional profile," its being such that, in certain circumstances, it will necessarily do certain things, it will generally do certain other things, it can't possibly do certain other things, and so on. But, in addition to considering modal relations between an object's being a certain way and various things it might (or must, or can't) do, we may also consider modal relations between an object's being a certain way and various other ways it might (or must, or can't) be. Thus, part of its modal profile will include its being such that, necessarily, it must be certain other ways, can't possibly be other ways, and so on. This account accommodates properties a plenty. Uninstantiated properties are modal profiles that, in fact, nothing has. Impossible properties are modal profiles that things could not possibly have. Negative, conjunctive, and disjunctive properties can be straightforwardly defined given the modal profiles of simple properties. All of these properties, on the account I will provide, can be said to exist, at

¹This is, of course, just the traditional problem of universals once again, unsolved as ever, manifest in conflict between practice and theory in contemporary philosophy.

least in the “thin” sense that we can quantify over them and talk about them. Whether they all exist in some more robust sense (i.e. necessarily, fundamentally, etc.) is a question on which I’ll remain officially neutral.

One might think that, by substituting talk of properties with talk of modal relations, I will have simply substituted one metaphysical and epistemological mystery for another. I’ll show, however, that this is not the case. Perhaps most notable is the upshot for the epistemology of properties. As Amie Thomasson (2020) has recently argued, one can arrive at a satisfying epistemology of metaphysical modal relations by thinking of our knowledge of such relations as grounded in our mastery of semantic norms. This account of properties as modal profiles enables this epistemological story for metaphysical modality to be generalized to properties as such: we grasp properties by learning a language, mastering the rules governing the use of predicates, whether these predicates belong to a natural language such as English or a specialized scientific language such as that of mathematical physics. Though many have taken accounts along these lines to have anti-realist implications, I’ll argue that such conclusions needn’t be drawn. Thus, while the account I’ll offer is *epistemologically nominalist*, in understanding our knowledge of properties in terms of our mastery of the rules governing the use of predicates, it is nevertheless *metaphysically platonist*, in thinking of at least some properties as being ways that things are, completely independent of us and our linguistic practices. I take it that, once properties are actually accounted for in a way that avoids the traditional metaphysical and epistemological problems, admitting that there exist such things is itself unproblematic.

The plan for the paper is as follows. In Section One, I’ll articulate the need for a satisfying theory of abundant properties, drawing attention to appeals to such properties in philosophy of mind and language. In Section Two, I’ll spell out two fundamental problems that any satisfactory theory of properties must resolve, a metaphysical one and an epistemological one. In Section Three, I lay out the basic proposal of properties as

modal profiles. In Section Four, I spell out the epistemological nominalist proposal, according to which properties are grasped through mastery of linguistic norms, showing how it resolves the epistemological problem. Finally, in Section Five, I articulate how the proposal resolves the core of the metaphysical when it comes to instantiated properties while remaining neutral on the metaphysical status of uninstantiated properties.

1 The Need for an Account of Abundant Properties

In order to appreciate the need for the sort of account of properties I will provide, let me start by drawing attention to the sorts of appeals to them that are prominent in contemporary philosophy. Not only is talk of properties ubiquitous, but properties themselves actually play important roles in the development of many philosophical theories. Though appeals to properties are widespread in basically every field of contemporary philosophy, I will focus on philosophy of mind and philosophy of language.

In philosophy of mind, whole debates are framed over specifying the nature of different kinds of properties. For instance, Jeff Speaks's book *The Phenomenal and the Representational* begins with the sentence:

It is now standard to think about perception in terms of two sorts of properties: phenomenal properties and representational properties.

As Speaks frames the debate in the philosophy of perception (and this is not a particularly idiosyncratic way of framing it) all the participants to the debate acknowledge that there are these two classes of properties that we or our experiences/thoughts instantiate, and the debate concerns how to understand their nature and relation. Now, perhaps, if one is nominalistically inclined, one might think that this is just convenient shorthand, and it can be paraphrased away, perhaps replacing it with talk of predicates such as "phenomenal" and "representational." However,

when one enters into the debate of which Speaks speaks here, it becomes clear that properties play a crucial role not just in framing the debate, but in actually spelling out the various positions. Consider, for instance, how Adam Pautz spells out the representationalist position, according to which phenomenal properties are a special kind of representational properties. Pautz articulates the position as follows:

[S]uppose you hallucinate a blue ball. It seems to you that there is a thing before you with the properties being bluish, being round, and being before me. Yet these properties do not characterize any physical thing in your environment or brain. How is this possible? When you hallucinate a blue ball, nothing before you really has the properties being bluish, being round, and being before me. Still, these properties exist. [. . .] Representationalists propose that your hallucination consists in your phenomenally predicating such properties as a result of aberrant activity in your visual system, in the absence of anything that has the properties.

Strikingly, Pautz's statement of the representationalist position in the philosophy of mind involves an explicit avowal of the platonist position in metaphysics: "these properties exist," he says. They must exist, on the representationalist picture, since they play a crucial role in the account of what hallucination is. Hallucination is a real event in the world; people really hallucinate. So if the hallucinations people have involves their phenomenal predication of properties to things, then these properties must exist.

As pronounced as appeals to properties are in the philosophy of mind, they are perhaps even more pronounced in the philosophy of language. Consider two facts about language that Jeff King argues that any satisfactory theory of meaning must enable us to explain:

Productivity: speakers can produce and understand novel sentences, where such understanding consists at least in part in grasping the truth conditions of the sentence, which often

involve objects, properties and relations.

Truth and falsity: speakers make robust judgments about the truth or falsity of sentences taken relative to contexts and circumstances of evaluation, where such judgments are based on whether certain objects possess certain properties or stand in certain relations in those circumstances.

King articulates these facts about speakers not as *conclusions* of some theory of meaning, but as *data* for which that any adequate theory of meaning ought to be able to account. When we reflect on our own understanding of language, what he says seems clearly right. Consider the following sentence:

1. The eighth planet from the Sun is round

You may have not heard the sentence before, but you know what it means, and you presumably know that it's true. You might know that it's true even if you don't know that Neptune is the eighth planet from the Sun. Let's suppose you don't know that Neptune is the eighth planet from the Sun. Nevertheless, you know that the eighth planet from the Sun is round because you know that the eighth planet from the Sun, whichever planet it is, is a *planet* and planets are *round*. In this way, you grasp the truth-condition of this sentence and your judgment that it's true clearly seems to involve your grasp of the properties of being a planet and being round, and this clearly seems to require the existence of properties.

David Lewis (1986) draws a distinction between "sparse" and "abundant" properties, and it's clear that what is needed to cover the actual appeals to properties in philosophy of mind and language is an account that encompasses all properties of the latter sort. To get a sense of what an account of properties would have to encompass, consider all the properties that need to figure into our semantic theory in order for it to provide the sorts of explanations of semantic competence that King suggests it should. We need not just what one might regard as the more metaphysically or nomologically fundamental properties, such as the property of

being red, being green, being square, being round, and so on; being positively charged, negatively charged, and so on. We need *all* the properties corresponding to predicates of the language. So, we need the property of being a chair, being a table, a cup, a flask; the property of swimming, of skiing, of smoking; the property of being milk, coffee, tea, chocolate cake; the property of being a novel, a novella, a screenplay; the property of being a vampire, a unicorn; and many *many* more. As competent speakers of English, we bear cognitive relations to this *vast network* of properties, each one the content of a predicate of the language we speak. It is in virtue of bearing cognitive relations to these various properties that we are capable of representing things, real or fictional, as having them, that is, as being round, as skiing, as being a glass of milk, as being a vampire and so on. Moreover, the fact that we do represent things as instantiating these properties can figure into an explanation of our cognitive and linguistic behavior of the sort proposed by philosophers of mind and language like Pautz and King. So it seems that some account of these properties is needed in order to explain certain real facts about the world; those consisting in our thinking, speaking, and acting as we do. However, there is no account of them on the contemporary philosophical marketplace that avoids the traditional metaphysical and epistemological problems associated with such things.

2 Two Problems for a Theory of Properties

I have picked an examples from the philosophy of mind and the philosophy of language, since these are two areas in which the appeal to properties and relations is most pronounced, but I could have picked examples from pretty much any other field of philosophy. Appealing to properties in articulating one's philosophical theories is both widespread and widely accept in contemporary philosophy. Given this, one would think that there would be more of a philosophical consensus regarding

platonism. Yet, once again, when polled more philosophers reject it than accept it. The reason, I take it, is that there currently exists no theory of properties and relations in the contemporary philosophical landscape that avoids the traditional metaphysical and epistemological problems associated with the existence of such things. The two core such problems are both, what we might call, *relation problems*. We might put the two relations problems as follows:

The Metaphysical Problem: How are properties metaphysically related to the objects that instantiate them?

The Epistemological Problem: How are we epistemically related to properties so as to have knowledge of them?

Let me explain these problems in turn.

The fundamental metaphysical problem associated with properties is that countenancing the existence of such things seems to divide the world in two in a problematic way. On the one hand, there are concrete particular things like the Sun, Neptune, and you and me, and, on the other hand, there are abstract general things like the property of being round, the property of being alive, and so on. Peter van Inwagen describes the metaphysical situation like this:

“Platonists must say that reality, what there is, is divided into two parts: one part we belong to, and everything in “our” part is more like us than is anything in the other part. The inhabitants of the other part are radically unlike the things in our part—any given object in the other part is vastly more unlike any object x in our part than anything in our part is unlike x —and we can’t really say much about what the things in the other part are,” (15-16)

I take it that the situation described here wouldn’t be a *problem* if it weren’t for the last bit, that “we can’t really say much” about what such things as properties are. For if we *could* provide a satisfying account of abstract general things like being round and being alive and how these

things relate to concrete particular things like planets and ourselves, there would no real issue in distinguishing between things of the first sort and things of the second sort. The core metaphysical problem of properties and other general abstracta is that it's not at all clear how to draw the distinction between them and concrete particulars so as to make the relations between these two sorts of things intelligible.²

The main problem with many existing accounts of properties is that there's a serious trade off between, on the one hand, providing a metaphysically satisfying account of them, and, on the other hand, providing an account that encompasses the vast number of properties that are actually appealed to in contemporary philosophy. For instance, one of the more seemingly metaphysically acceptable accounts of properties is the "causal structuralist" account, most associated with Sidney Shoemaker (1980, 1998), according to what it is to have a certain natural property just is to have a certain causal profile. Consider, for instance, the property of being negatively charged, instantiated by such things as electrons. We might articulate this property in terms of its causal profile by saying that what it is to be negatively charged is to attract positively charged particles, repel other negatively charged particles, and so on. In saying such things, we articulate what it is for something to be negatively charged in terms of the causal relations that such a thing bears to other things with other causal profiles. An account along these lines does seem to at least provide the prospect of giving an a satisfying account of the relation between general causal profiles and the particular things that have them. The main problem for such an account, however, is that it is severely limited in scope, only straightforwardly applying to the sorts of properties that figure in causal explanations of the sort provided by natural science. Shoemaker explicitly rules out a vast number of properties in proposing his account:

²As Robert Brandom says (in a not totally unrelated context), "a distinction becomes a dualism when its components are distinguished in terms that make their characteristic relations to one another ultimately unintelligible."

For example, my typewriter has the property of being over one hundred miles from the current heavyweight boxing champion of the world. It is not easy to think of a way in which its having this property could help to explain why an event involving it has a certain effect.

However, once we have the sorts of appeals to properties that figure in philosophy of mind and language, it is surely easy to think of a way in which this property of the type writer *could* help explain why an event involving it has a certain effect. Consider a case in which Shoemaker is asked to name something that is over one hundred miles from the current heavyweight boxing champion of the world. He thinks for a moment and replies “my typewriter.” This event involves Shoemaker’s reference to his typewriter, and so, in that way, involves the typewriter, and part of the explanation of why this event occurred is that Shoemaker knows that his typewriter instantiates the property of being over one hundred miles from the current heavyweight boxing champion of the world. This is precisely the sort of property that might figure in the sort explanation of semantic competence proposed by King, but causal structuralist accounts of the sort proposed by Shoemaker do not offer any account of it.

I have picked Shoemaker’s theory as an example here, but the same considerations apply to most theorists of “natural” or “sparse” properties—those properties that can be identified an object’s causal or dispositional profile, as articulated by a natural science. These theories don’t seem to face any serious metaphysical problems, However, they simply don’t account for the vast majority of properties that are actually appealed to in philosophical theorizing. On the other hand, so-called theorists of “abundant” properties, like van Inwagen, offer no account of what it is for an object to instantiate a property at all. Indeed, van Inwagen expresses complete skepticism that any account could possibly be forthcoming:

[N]o set of statements among all possible sets of statements counts as an explanation of what it is for an individual to have

a property or for two individuals to have the same property,

But of course, providing a quasi-scientific *explanation*, as van Inwagen is imagining here, is distinct from providing a philosophical *account*. That is what a causal functionalist provides for sparse properties. Yet, when we expand our ontology to abundant properties, it's not at all clear what such an account might look like. So, there's a basic metaphysical problem faced by theories of abundant properties.

Let me now turn to the epistemological problem. The core problem is simple. How do we make sense of our knowledge of abundant properties, their properties, and their relations? One traditional version of the epistemological problem associated with properties, most forcefully put forward by Benaceraff (1975) with respect to mathematical entities, is very closely tied to the traditional metaphysical problems. For any object x , it seems that bearing the sort of cognitive relation to x required to have knowledge of x must involve standing in some sort of causal relation to x . But, given that properties are abstract rather than concrete, it's hard to see how one can stand in any causal relations to them at all. While such a problem can be pressed, I don't think that the main epistemological problem with properties needs to be tied to any particular metaphysics of causation.³ It is straightforward enough to argue, even bracketing such concerns about causation, that it's hard to make sense of what cognitive relation we could bear towards properties in virtue of which we have knowledge of them. Let me explain.

One of the most flatfooted ways of answering this question is to say that our knowledge of at least some properties is perceptual and our knowledge of many other properties depends on knowledge of these more basic properties. Scott Soames, when pressed by Ray Buchanan on how to explain the sort of cognitive access to properties appealed to in his theory of propositions as cognitive act types, simply responded:

³See, for instance, Callard (2007) for a flatfooted response to the Benaceraff problem which simply claims that we *can* stand in causal relations to abstract entities.

Properties are ways things are; some—colors, shapes, sizes, textures—are things we perceive by perceiving their bearers.

But it's hard to make sense of the claim that properties are themselves perceived even if this perception of properties is supposed to be mediated by perception of their bearers. We can see the Sun, and we can see that it's round, but we can't, it seems, see roundness itself. If I try to picture roundness itself, I find myself picturing a particular circle. Or perhaps, if I try a bit harder, I picture a number of circles, spheres, and other round shapes. But here too, it seems that all I'm doing is picturing particular round things, not the property of being round itself that they all share. No matter what I do, I can't picture *that*. Roundness itself just isn't the sort of thing that can be seen, either in my mind's eye or with my actual two eyes. So it seems that our knowledge of the property of being round can't be perceptual, at least in a straightforward sense.

Now, as I just indicated, we clearly can see *that* something is round. We can, for instance, look inside a box and see that the shape contained within—a blue ball, say—is round. The question is whether we can acquire knowledge of roundness itself through such a perceptual episode. It seems clear to me that we can't. The reason we can't, I take it, is because something like the representationalist view I've mentioned above, according to which properties are involved in the articulation of the content of perception, is correct. Recall, on the representationalist picture as laid out by Pautz, having an experience of a blue ball involves *phenomenally predicating* the properties of being blue and being a ball. Insofar as this notion of "phenomenal predication" is understood by analogy to the sort of "cognitive predication" that occurs in judgment, then, just as cognitively predicating the property of being round of Neptune in thinking that Neptune is round clearly presupposes grasp of the property of being round, it's reasonable to think that phenomenally predicating the property of being round of the blue ball in seeing the blue ball presupposes a grasp of the property of being round. In other words, properties are

something *we* bring to bear in having perceptual experiences, though in a different way that we bring them to bear in making judgments. So, the general problem with any epistemological picture according to which we acquire knowledge of properties perceptually is that such a picture seems to require that perceptual experiences of the sort that things are blue or round are *epistemically prior* to our knowledge of the general properties of being blue and being round. But it's not at all clear how to make sense of the *content* of such experiences so as to understand them as knowledge-conferring apart from *appealing to* our knowledge of these properties.⁴

A further problem has to do with the possibility of *conceptually fundamental yet uninstantiated* properties. For instance, Adam Pautz (2006a, 2006b,) argues from a naturalistic perspective that color properties are such properties: they cannot be conceptually reduced to other properties, and yet, as a matter of fact, nothing in the world actually instantiates them. Pautz's main argument for this claim is what he calls the "argument from structure." The basic point is that, if we try to identify colors with reflectance properties—for instance, identifying the color red with the property of reflecting light at 700nm—we see that they don't instantiate the structure that color properties essentially do. For instance, that it's essential to the property of being red that it is closer in hue to purple than it is to green, but the wavelengths of light reflected purple things are around 400nm and those reflected by green things are around 550nm, so, by this identification, green should be closer to red than purple. I won't rehearse the details of this argument here. The point I want to make is just that there are some compelling theoretical reasons to think that the

⁴I take it that this basic epistemological claim is the one underlying Sellars's rejection of traditional sense-data theories in the beginning of *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*. Now, the claim that knowledge of such properties as the property of being blue is not perceptually acquired needs to be qualified, since, clearly, I can learn what color mauve is by . The point is that knowledge properties cannot be *merely* perceptually acquired. Perception must be part of the . Of course, we can acquire knowledge of *some* properties perceptually, but as Wittgenstein says, this requires "linguistic stage setting," such that the *place* of the concept of that property is already set by knowledge of other properties to which

external objects that appear to instantiate color properties in fact fail to instantiate them. Moreover, insofar as color properties are essentially instantiated by these objects if they're instantiated by anything at all, this gives us compelling reasons to think that color properties are uninstantiated *tout court*. Thus, it would be a mistake (a category mistake, I take it) to, in response to this argument, come to the conclusion that it must really be sensory experiences and not external objects that are themselves colored red or green. If *anything* is red or green, it must be such things as raspberries and limes. Now, one can debate about the metaphysics of color, but whatever the metaphysical status of color is, it seems that the debate should be settled by specific considerations pertaining to that debate, not by one's general theory of properties. All things being equal, a general theory of properties ought not rule out an otherwise plausible view of the status of this specific class of properties from the outset.

Now, though it's less obvious in this case, it seems to me that we can make the same point we did above regarding sparse theories, at least insofar as we consider just the properties attributed to objects in our fundamental physical theories. There is no special epistemological problem associated with our knowledge of these properties beyond just the general epistemology of science. We learn acquire a grip on properties of charge, mass, spin, and so on, at least in large part, by *doing mathematical physics*. By actually *manipulating* symbols expressing these quantities in accordance with the rules of mathematics and the equations governing them according to physical theories, one acquires a determinate grip on the properties actually expressed by the symbols. Note also that this explanation of our knowledge of theoretical properties can apply just as well even if the theory ultimately turns out to be *wrong*, and, thus, the theoretical properties expressed by symbols that figure in various mathematical equations are in fact uninstantiated. Now, of course the account of our knowledge of basic perceptible properties like those of color and shape is going to be different than our knowledge of theoretical

properties like charge, mass and spin. However, I want to ultimately claim that our knowledge of properties is *more* like this than is widely assumed. I'll get to that story shortly. First, however, let me spell out the basic metaphysical picture of what I take properties to be.

3 Properties as Modal Profiles

What is it for something to be round? Well it is for something to be shaped in a certain way. *Which* way? One is inclined to say, in response to this question: *round!* But that, of course, is not a very informative answer. One might shrug one's shoulders at that fact and just maintain that no informative answer to the question of what it is for something to be round to be given. I take it, however, that if one has nothing satisfying to say in response to questions about *particular* properties such as the property of being round, then one's account of properties *in general* is going to be unsatisfying as well. Fortunately, I take it that we *can* in fact give an informative answer to the question of what it is for something to be round. Something's being round is its being shaped in such a way that, if something is circular or spherical, then, necessarily, it's shaped this way; if something's shaped this way then, necessarily there is some central point from which surface points are (relatively) equidistant; if something's shaped this way, then it can't possibly be square or a triangle; if an object under the effect of gravity is shaped this way and placed on an incline, it will generally roll down that incline; and so on. That is, we say what it is for something to be round by articulating how something's being this way modally relates to its being certain other ways, necessitating that it is certain other ways, precluding it from possibly being certain other ways, and so on. If we take this articulation of what it is for something to be round to be a genuine answer to this question, as I think we should, then we might simply identify the property of being round with a certain modal profile that things may have. That's what I propose we do.

This proposal may remind the reader of the causal structuralist account of properties mentioned above, and, of course, it is very much in the same spirit. The modal profile account of properties might be understood as a generalization of the causal profile account. A causal profile is a specific sort of modal profile. In articulating the causal profile of being negatively charged, we specify various circumstances in which a negatively charged thing such as an electron might find itself, and we specify what can, must, and cannot happen in those circumstances, given the laws of nature. So, the modality involved in the modal profile here is specifically *nomological* modality. Insofar as the modal profile of being negatively charged can be specified entirely in these terms, this is the reason that we might think of the property of being negatively charged as a *natural* property. But not all properties are articulable purely in terms of nomological modalities. Consider, for instance, an uninstantiated property such as the property of being a vampire. On the modal profile view, this property exists in the sense that there is a way to be such that something's being that way would constitute its being vampire. To be a vampire is to be suck blood, to be immortal in the sense that one will not die of natural causes, to be such that if one goes into direct sunlight, one will burn, and so on. This is an articulation, in modal terms, of the property of being a vampire. There is nothing in the world, however, that instantiates this property; nothing has this modal profile. That is just to say, there are no vampires in the world; no things such that they suck blood, are immortal, and so on. On this account, uninstantiated properties such as being a vampire exist, but they exist as modal profiles that no things in the world actually have.

Not only does this account accommodate uninstantiated properties, but it also straightforwardly accommodates necessarily uninstantiated—that is, impossible—properties. Consider the property of being a square circle. Not only it is the case that nothing instantiates this property, but, moreover, nothing could *possibly* instantiate this property. After all, if

something's a square, it can't possibly be a circle. Nevertheless, it is straightforward to articulate the modal profile with which this property is identified on this account; we simply combine the modal profile of being a square with the modal profile of being a circle. Of course, it's part of the modal profile of being a square that something which is a square can't possibly be a circle, and vice versa, and so it will be part of what it is for something to instantiate the property of being a square circle that, if something does instantiate it, it can't be the way that it is, but that seems like precisely what we should say about properties that are impossible for anything to instantiate! Given the aim of accommodating all the properties that might be appealed to in explanations of human thought, speech, and action, it's clearly a good thing for an account to extend to impossible properties. For instance, suppose someone, perhaps under the influence of some potent psychedelic drugs, represents something as being a square circle. Though something's actually being a square circle is surely an impossible state of affairs, someone's representing something as being a square circle seems possible, and it seems that we might appeal to the fact that they are so representing things in order to explain why they say what they say and do what they do.

Additionally, this account makes straightforward sense of logically complex properties. Consider the property of not being round. What is it for something to instantiate this property? Well, minimally, it is to be a way such that, if something's this way, then it's being this way excludes its being round. Thus, for any way for something to be such that it's being that way necessitates its being round, its being that way excludes its not being round, and, likewise, for any way for something to be such that its being that way excludes its being round, its being that way necessitates its not being round. In general, the property of *not being F* is the property that's minimally incompatible with that property; the property entailed by every property incompatible with being *F* and incompatible

with every property entailed by F .⁵ Or consider the property of being a primary color which is plausibly analyzed as disjunctive property of being red or blue or yellow. We can say that, if something's primary colored, and being colored the way that it is rules out it's being red and also rules out its being yellow, then, necessarily it's blue. In general, the property of *being F or G* is the property such that, if something is this way and its being the way that it is rules out it's being F , then it's necessarily G , and, if it is this way and it's being the way it is rules out its being G , then it's necessarily F . In this way, by appealing to entailment and incompatibility relations—relations of something's instantiating one property's necessarily following from its instantiating another property or something's instantiating property precluding it from possibly instantiating another property—it is straightforward to recursively define the modal profile of any logically complex property in terms of the modal profiles of simple properties.⁶

This is, by all standard definitions, a platonist theory of properties. Modal profiles are abstract rather than concrete. If one gets hit the face by a baseball, one is getting hit in the face by something that has the modal profile of being round, but it makes no sense to speak of one as getting hit in the face by this modal profile itself. They're general. Mickey Mantel's 500th home run ball, Neptune, and the Sun are different in many ways, but there is some general way in which they are all the same: they're all spheres. That is, they are all such that they're round, they can't possibly be square, and so on. Moreover, there are at least some things such that their having the modal profiles that they do in no way depends upon our

⁵An account of formal negation along these lines has been proposed by Brandom (2008).

⁶I will not provide a formal specification of the profiles of logically complex properties here, as I hope I've said enough to show that it can be done, and making formal choices to actually do it would only distract from main point. For some formal inferentialist frameworks in which such a thing is done (in various different ways) see, for instance, Kaplan (2017), Hlobil (2022) and Hlobil and Brandom (2024), and Simonelli (forthcoming).

cognitive and linguistic activities. The Sun, for instance, was a sphere long before any human beings came on the scene, and this is understood, on this account, in terms of its being how it is, modally speaking, long before human beings came into existence. Additionally, there are at least some modal profiles that nothing at all has, such as that of being a vampire. So, this account is a platonist one. However, though this account is platonist, I'll argue that it's plagued by none of the traditional metaphysical and epistemological problems traditionally associated with platonism. Towards the end of this paper, I'll return to explicitly address the metaphysical problems, but the main aim of what follows will be to articulate a satisfying epistemology of our knowledge of properties and their relations. The key thought is that, while the account of properties is, by all standard definitions *metaphysically platonist*, it is nevertheless *epistemologically nominalist*. Let me explain.

4 Epistemological Nominalism

Let me start by distinguishing between *metaphysical* and *epistemological* platonism. Metaphysical platonism is the idea that, independent of human thought and speech, there exist abstract general things that particular things instantiate. I have just proposed such a metaphysical position. Epistemological platonism, on the other hand, is the idea that a speaker's knowledge of such abstract general things explains their ability to correctly use predicates. For instance, on the epistemological platonist picture, a speaker's ability to correctly use the word "round"—to apply "round" to things like baseballs, planets, and so on, to not apply "round" to anything square, or triangular, and so on—is explained by their knowledge of the property of being round. Epistemological platonism, I take it, is often regarded as one of the main reasons for adopting a metaphysically platonist position. I'll argue, however, that this is precisely what one must reject in order to arrive at a satisfying theory of properties.

In opposition to epistemological platonism, I'll call the epistemological view that I'll put forward here *epistemological nominalism*.⁷ Metaphysical nominalism (in the classical sense in which the term "nominalism" is not a complete misnomer) is the view that there are really no properties, just predicates. On a metaphysical nominalist picture, there might *seem* to be such things as properties, but such appearances are really no more than "shadows" caused by the use of predicates. Epistemological nominalism, on the other hand, is the view that one acquires knowledge of properties through mastering the rules governing the use of predicates. Epistemological nominalism is often taken to go hand in hand with metaphysical nominalism. However, and, though it seems that one must be an epistemological nominalist in order to be a metaphysical nominalist (one surely can't be a metaphysical nominalist if one's an epistemological platonist), the converse doesn't hold; epistemological nominalism, though obviously incompatible with *epistemological* platonism, is perfectly compatible with *metaphysical* platonism. It is this combination of views—epistemological nominalism and metaphysical platonism—that I am suggesting we adopt here.

Given the conception of properties as modal profiles that I've articulated here, epistemological nominalism is actually not completely foreign to the contemporary metaphysical landscape. In her recent book *Norms and Necessity*, Amie Thomasson (2020) gives account of metaphysically modalized statements like "If something's spherical, then necessarily it's round" as expressing semantic rules. She calls this view "modal normativism," and she claims that "the most important advantage of the normativist view" is that it provides a satisfactory epistemology of our knowledge of metaphysical modalities. On this account, our knowledge of metaphysical modal relations such as the fact that something's being spherical necessitates its being round is understood in terms of our mas-

⁷I take this view to be identical to what Sellars terms "psychological nominalism." I believe "epistemological" is a slightly better qualifier here.

tery of the rules governing the use of expressions such as “sphere” and “round” These rules might be articulated with the use of the normative vocabulary developed by Robert Brandom (1994). We might say, for instance, that uttering a sentence of the form “*x* is a sphere” *commits one* to “*x* is round,” *precludes one from being entitled* to “*x* is square,” and so on. A systematic articulation of these semantic rules is just what a normative inferentialist theory of meaning of the sort proposed by Brandom provides. The epistemological nominalist thought is that knowledge of properties is acquired through mastery of the rules articulated by such a theory. For instance, knowledge of the property of being round—knowledge of the modal profile articulated in the previous section (the way for something to be such that, if something’s a sphere, then necessarily it’s this way, and if something’s this way then it can’t possibly be square, and so on)—is acquired through mastery of the rules governing predicates such as “sphere,” “round,” “square,” and so on.

In spelling out the epistemological nominalist picture, we must take to heart a lesson from Wittgenstein: when one learns to follow the rules, one does so *blindly*. That is, one does not begin following the rule that “round” is to be applied to round things by coming up with some interpretation of the rule governing the use of “round” that fits all of the use cases that one has encountered thus far. The rules for using a word such as “round” and “blue” extend beyond any particular instances of the use of the word that one will encounter, and there are an indefinite number of interpretations that could fit the data, so no interpretation could do the justificatory work that one would want an interpretation to do. Fortunately, one doesn’t need to come up with an interpretation in order to follow the rules. Rather, *one just starts following the rules*. This is the crucial Wittgensteinian idea in the epistemology of language learning. Now, we might ask how it happens, as a matter of empirical fact, that one comes to follow the various rules governing the use of words, and, of course, there is a story to be told here, but, crucially, on the Wittgensteinian story, we can draw

a distinction between between the *causal explanatory* question of *how*, as a matter of empirical fact, one comes to follow the rules, and the *epistemological* question of *why*, as a matter of justification, one is correct doing what one does when one follows the rules.⁸ The epistemological platonist takes it that an appeal to one's cognitive relation to a property—something that stands behind the use—must to figure in an answer to the latter question. The crucial point of epistemological nominalism is that the only answer to the latter question that can be or need be provided is *this is how these words are used*. That is, in the case of words like “round” and “blue,” nothing beyond the use of the predicates is or needs to be appealed to in order to justify that use. The epistemological story simply bottoms out in mastery of the rules of use, which one comes to acquire through linguistic training.

Given knowledge of the rules governing the use of the predicates such as “round” and “blue,” the account of knowledge of the properties of being red and being blue is straightforward. The property of being round is the way some object *x* must be such that, it's being that way makes correct the use of a sentence of the form “*x* is round.” Thus, given that “*x* is sphere,” commits one to “*x* is round,” and given that “*x* is round” precludes one from being entitled to “*x* is square,” and so on, this way for something to be must be such that, if something's a sphere, then necessarily it's this way, if something's this way, then it can't possibly be a square, and so on. That is, of course, just the sort of account of the property of being round articulated in the previous section. On the epistemological nominalist view, we are capable of articulating

⁸This distinction is explicit in Wittgenstein:

“How am I able to follow a rule?” — If this is not a question about causes, then it is about the justification for my acting in *this* way in complying with the rule.

Wittgenstein is clear here that the “rule-following problem” is not a problem concerning *causally explains* our following the rules, going on as we do, but, rather, what *justifies* our going on as we do.

an account of properties in terms of modal profiles in virtue of having mastered the rules governing the use of predicates. We articulate the properties whose instantiation by objects makes correct the application of those predicates to objects simply by transposing the rules governing their use from normative vocabulary to alethic modal vocabulary. The epistemological story here bottoms out in our knowledge of the rules governing the use of predicates. Of course, for certain properties, such as the property of being a primary color, we can articulate what they are in terms of more basic properties, such as being red, being yellow, and being blue, but at a certain point, as Wittgenstein says, we reach "bedrock." Our bedrock knowledge it seems, must include knowledge of such things as that something's being blue excludes its being red, that something blue is to be closer in color to something purple as than it is to something yellow, and so on. Whereas epistemological platonists will say that our knowledge of such things is grounded in our knowledge of the individual essences of these simple properties, on this epistemological nominalist account, epistemological story simply bottoms out in mastery of the rules governing the use of predicates such as "blue," "red," "closer in color," and so on.

Now, one might think that that this story is mysterious, and, indeed, it would be if it were pitched as a causal explanation of how it is, as a matter of empirical fact, that we follow the rules. If that were the question, saying *we just do* would, of course, be no answer at all. However, the crucial point here is that we must draw a distinction between the epistemological story of what *justifies* one's doing what one does when one follows the rules and the causal story of what *explains* one's doing what one does when one follows the rule. Though properties such as being round and being blue play no role in epistemological story regarding the justification of the use of predicates such as "round" and "blue," insofar as we're metaphysical platonists, the fact that certain things instantiate the property of being round may well figure in the causal explanation of how it is that speakers

come to use the word “round” in the way that they do. It’s worth being clear, however, that the properties on which one comes to have a grip through mastering the rules may not figure *at all* in the explanation of how it is that one comes to follow the rules. Consider again Pautz’s claim that, if one is a naturalist, one should maintain that color properties are uninstantiated—that is, nothing at all (neither external objects nor internal sensory states) are actually colored. This is perfectly compatible with the epistemological nominalist account put forward here. On this account, one acquires knowledge of these properties—understood as the modal profiles things *would* have if they were really colored—through mastering the norms governing the use of color vocabulary. The explanation of why these norms are structured as they are and how one comes to follow them will be a complex story involving all sorts of properties which *are* instantiated in the world, such as reflectance properties of objects and sensory states of perceivers. These properties bear various structural relations to color properties, but none of which are actually identifiable with colors. Though I will not tell this story in any detail here, I hope I’ve said enough to make it clear how it is that this account enables such a story, according to which speakers grasp color properties in virtue of mastering the use of color vocabulary even though nothing actually instantiates those properties, to be told.

5 Modest Metaphysical Platonism

I return now to the metaphysical problem, concerning the relation between particular things and the general properties that they instantiate. Let us start with sparse or natural properties. What is the Sun? Well, it’s a big ball of plasma, and something’s being a big ball of plasma means that it is round, it is hot, and so on. The Sun’s being the particular thing that it is is not distinct from its being the general sort of thing that it is. A particular big ball of plasma’s simply *being, existing* is, ipso facto, for

it to be such that it's round, hot, and so on, where saying these things is shorthand for spelling out the full modal profiles. In a slogan, to be is to be modally profiled. So there is simply no question about the relation between (what would otherwise be) "bare particulars" and the general properties that they instantiate. There are no bare particulars. The very thought of such things makes no sense. Insofar as something is anything at all, it is modally profiled, and thus, propertyed and related to other variously propertyed things. For instance, part of what it is for the Sun to be a massive ball of plasma is for it to be such that other nearby bodies will be gravitationally attracted to it. The fact that the Sun stands in this modal relation to other bodies is part of what it is for it to have the modal profile that it has simply in virtue of being the particular thing that it is: a particular big ball of plasma. So, fundamentally, for the Sun to have the modal profile that it does is not for it to stand in relation to some extrinsic thing. It is, rather, just for the Sun to be what it is. So, there ultimately is no relation problem because, ultimately, there are no separate things to be related. The particular things that there are, being just those things, have the modal profiles that they do.

The idea that particulars are essentially particulars of general sorts is an Aristotelian thought. Why, then, say this is a kind of platonism? Perhaps the most important reason is that, unlike standard versions of "Aristotelianism," according to this account, in addition to the instantiated properties I just mentioned, uninstantiated properties also exist. I have just discussed color properties as potential candidates for such properties, but let us consider a less controversial example of such a property, say, the property of being a vampire. I take it, along with almost everyone, that nothing instantiates this property.⁹ Now, to be clear, I mean this quantifier to scope unrestrictedly. That is, I do not believe that *anything at all* is a vampire. That commits me to saying, that the sentence "Edward Cullen

⁹Almost everyone thinks this, with the exception of

is a vampire,” at least if it is taken to play a descriptive role, is not true.¹⁰ That’s what I think we should say. That is, I do not believe this sentence is true because I do not believe that there is any such person as Edward Cullen. Edward Cullen does not exist. As we all learned from Quine, this is not to say that there is some person—Edward Cullen—and he does not exist, but, rather, to say that the name “Edward Cullen” doesn’t actually refer to anyone. It has a use, sure, but only in the context of the Twilight Saga, and various linguistic practices dependent upon that work. Rather than functioning to describe some person named “Edward Cullen,” saying such things as “Edward Cullen is a vampire” simply functions to express the rules governing the use of the name “Edward Cullen” in contexts related to the work of fiction in which it appears. Though I do not want to say that there is such a person as Edward Cullen, I *do* want to say that there is a way for something to be such that, if something were that way, it would be a vampire. After all, it seems that Stephenie Meyer had a clear conception of this way for something to be in writing the Twilight Saga.¹¹ That is, the property of being a vampire was part of the content of her many of her mental states through the process of writing the Twilight Saga, and this fact explains why she wrote as she did. So, the property of being a vampire exists. It’s just that nothing—nothing at all—instantiates this property. In that sense, this account is metaphysically platonist. However, though these properties exist, the question remains of how one wants to spell out the sense in which they do. There are different views here with respect to which this account is officially neutral.

One sort of view one might have, following Sellars (1963a, 1963b), is

¹⁰I take it that “true” might be used in a minimalist sense such that it can be correctly used with respect to statements that are taken expressively, and, in that sense, this sentence is true.

¹¹In fact, the technically correct thing to say here is that there are number of different properties that are the different types of vampires there might be. Twilight vampires, for instance, sparkle when they’re in the Sun rather than light up in flames, as traditional vampires do. We can ignore this complication for our purposes here.

what I'll call *reificationism*. This is to say that the property of being a vampire exists, but it exists solely as a reification of the norms governing the use of "vampire" (or any other predicate whose role is sufficiently functionally similar). It is, to use a widely-used metaphor, a "shadow" of the practice of using a predicate such as "vampire." In that case, it exists, but its existence is ontologically dependent on a linguistic practice such as ours in which there are norms governing the use of "vampire."¹² Such a line is available to someone who endorses this account of properties, but it's not the only line available to someone who endorses this account. One might object to this account along the following lines. It seems true, even before human beings came about and started writing books like *Twilight*, that there was a way for something to be, such that, if something in the world had actually been that way, it would have been a vampire, and this seems to require that the property of being a vampire existed before human beings started telling stories about vampires. On such a view, which I'll call *robust platonism*, the property of being a vampire in which it is simply a way for something to be. All the ways for things to be exist, and they all exist without ontological depending on how things actually are, since, for any way that things actually are, we can say that they might have been that way. The reificationist might, in response, make some sort of "true at" vs. "true in" distinction in order to be able to say that modal sentences involving vampires are true *at* a world in which there are no human beings but not true *in* such a world (since the "shadows" don't exist there).¹³ The robust platonist will presumably challenge the legitimacy of the appeal to that distinction in this context, and the debate will rage on.

The modest metaphysical platonism put forward here is neutral with respect to this metaphysical debate. It neither commits one to reificationism nor robust platonism, leaving open both options for the more

¹²See Kraut (2010) for a more recent development of a view of this sort.

¹³

nominalistically-inclined and platonistically-inclined philosophers. In this way, the old metaphysical debate re-emerges even after this account is put on the table. Alas, the account put forward here does not settle the traditional problem of universals. But of course, that is as it should be, as it's not at all clear that such a problem *can* be settled at all, much less in a single paper. After all, for many philosophers, their inclinations towards Platonism or nominalism are, as Quine and Goodman (1947) put it "based on a philosophical intuition that cannot be justified by appeal to anything more ultimate," (3). Given this fact, and given that the philosophical intuitions cut both ways, it's not at all clear how the traditional dispute can possibly be settled. No matter what one does, it seems that the old dispute will reemerge in new language. This does not mean that one cannot make progress, however. I take it that this account *suffices* for properties as they are appealed to in contemporary philosophy of mind and language. Thus, whether one wants to say that the properties that I've given an account of here are *really* real or not *really* real, work in contemporary philosophy of mind and language which appeals to properties as mental and semantic contents can proceed, without concern that its legitimacy will turn on the ultimate outcome of that debate (if, indeed, whether that debate will ever reach an ultimate outcome).

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