Review of Ehring, D., *Tropes – Properties, Objects and Mental Causation*

In this thought-provoking monograph, Douglas Ehring continues the project, initiated in *Causation & Persistence* (2007), of explicating and defending his own particular brand of the so-called Trope Theory. In *Tropes*, some of the views defended in his previous book (such as the view that tropes persist by enduring, that trope-persistence plays an essential role in our understanding of singular causation, and the view that, for these reasons (among others) the world is most likely (at least partly) constituted by tropes) are brought together with views developed and defended in numerous articles since then.

The book is divided into two parts. In its first part – *Tropes* – some central issues concerning the nature, individuation, and justification of tropes are handled. In its second part – *Natural Class Trope Nominalism* – Ehring’s own, and rather original, version of the theory is defended.

The book begins with a chapter in which Ehring tries to pinpoint an acceptable distinction between universals and particulars that is likewise a distinction between universals and tropes (and which, thereby, avoids question-beggingly equating ‘being a universal’ with ‘being a property’). After quickly dismissing three instantiation-based characterizations of the distinction, Ehring considers what he takes to be the two main-contenders: the spatiotemporal view, according to which universals, but not particulars (including tropes) can exist in more than one place in space at each moment in time, and the similarity view, according to which universals, but not particulars (including tropes), are such that their exact inherent similarity is sufficient for identity. Of the two, Ehring thinks we ought to prefer the similarity view. For, he argues, there is reason to think that spatially extended yet spatially partless as well as time-travelling and enduring tropes are possible, which means that at least some multiply located particulars would in any case have to be admitted.

The book’s next chapter considers what reasons one might have for believing that there are tropes. The main-part of this chapter is devoted to setting out Ehring’s own argument for the existence of tropes – or, more precisely, for the existence of enduring tropes – from the phenomenon of what he calls non-salient qualitative change, especially as exemplified in the case of the spinning sphere.

To make sense of property persistence, Ehring points out, is not merely to make sense of a situation where e.g. a green apple at t₁ does not change color, and so is still green at t₂. For, he suggests, even though the apple remains green throughout this time-period, which means that this is a case of property type persistence, this is no guarantee that no qualitative change has occurred. For,
the greenness of the apple at \( t_1 \) could have been replaced by another property of the same type, during the period between \( t_1 \) and \( t_2 \), which means that, although a case of property type persistence, this is nevertheless not a case of property persistence, period. The distinction between property type persistence and property persistence (period) is moreover one that even a universal realist needs to account for, a fact that Ehring convincingly demonstrates with the help of a number of thought experiments. But, he goes on to argue, the universal realist will fail to provide a satisfactory account of the required kind and, therefore, the phenomenon of property persistence becomes the tie-breaker between universal realism and trope theory.

This is an unusually strong and convincing argument for the existence of tropes. The problem is that more or less the exact same argument was set out already in Ehring’s 1997. Not so, says Ehring, for, whereas the earlier argument “turned on the contention that enduring tropes are required to give an analysis of property persistence as contrasted with nonsalient qualitative change... the argument to be developed in detail in this chapter revolves around the claim that enduring tropes are required to account for the difference between two cases of property persistence, one of which involves a stationary property and the other of which involves a moving property” (48-49). But if there is supposed to be this major difference between the two arguments, then the way the argument is now presented faces at least the pedagogical charge of failing to make this clear, and the fact remains that at some points the argument from his previous book is here repeated almost verbatim.

Chapter three deals with the individuation of tropes. Here Ehring argues that trope individuation is primitive, lacking any further reduction or analysis. This is not an unusual view among trope theorists – in fact it is probably the most common view. Ehring does however manage to offer an unusually vigorous defense of the view. First, by showing that an argument often formulated in favor or its foremost rival, the spatiotemporal view – that it rules out trope swapping – if suitably modified works just as well in favor of the primitivist view. Second, and I believe more interestingly, by arguing that, in the end, not all kinds of swapping could or should be ruled out.

In the next chapter, Ehring defends his own version of the bundle theory, i.e., the view that concrete particulars are wholly constituted by bundles of compresent tropes. The main-focus of this chapter are the well-known regress objections that this sort of view faces, objections meant to demonstrate that no distinct entities (i.e. tropes) can, after all, form a unity (i.e. the bundle) because any attempt to so unite them leads to a vicious infinite regress.

Ehring criticizes some of the existing solutions to the regress problem available in the literature. Unfortunately, his critique often fails to convince as it seems to rest on the assumption that the criticized claims are considerably stronger than what they actually are. Therefore, Ehring seems to think, by showing either that
their truth cannot be irrefutably demonstrated, or by pointing out that alternative solutions are likewise possible, the suggestions will thereby have been refuted. However, as the arguments put forth in favor of the great majority of these suggestions are more of the kind “inference to the best explanation”, their truth cannot be touched by this sort of reasoning.

According to Ehring, the regress problem is solved as soon as one realizes that compresence is a “self-relating” relation. For then, as a self-relating relation is one that can take itself as one or more of its arguments, “[a]s we move up the supposed regress ladder, we do not find ourselves with new compresence tropes, and, hence, there is no infinite regress at all” (p. 128). It is however unclear how, even provided that we can make ontological sense of these self-relating tropes, this solves the problem. For, even if the self-relating relation does not give rise to an infinite regress, the regress is a problem only because it prevents the tropes in the would-be bundle to unite. Therefore, only if the self-relating relation not only stops the regress, but also unites the original tropes, is the problem solved. But why should we suppose that adding (self-relating) compresence to trope1 and trope2 makes trope1 compresent with trope2? Ehring does not really answer this question and his suggestion therefore arguably fails to meet the explanatory challenge set by the regress argument(s).

In chapter five, Ehring discusses the role tropes could play in accounts of mental causation – both as causal relata and as causally relevant properties in mental-physical causal transactions. This is a topic that has been much discussed in the last few years, by Ehring himself, but also by fellow trope theorists, such as e.g., D. Robb and J. Heil. Here those discussions are nicely summarized. After carefully investigating the available alternatives, Ehring opts for a view according to which the causal relata of mental physical causal transactions are mental and physical tropes (where mental tropes are identical with physical tropes), and where mental tropes (which are identical with physical tropes) are (sometimes) causally relevant in virtue of being of the mental type, because the mental type to which they belong (which is the same as the class of (mentally) functionally equivalent tropes) includes the physically relevant type as a part. This concludes the first part of the book.

In part two of the book, Ehring puts forth his particular brand of the trope theory: Natural Class Trope Nominalism (NCTN). This is a view that has for a long time been considered dead and Ehring is, at least to my knowledge, the only contemporary trope theorist to defend it. This makes the current defense so much more interesting. To understand what the view entails, one should consider it in relation to its primary rivals. On the one hand, there is the “standard view”, according to which the nature of a trope is identical to its particularity, and membership in natural classes is determined by the nature of the trope and not the other way around. On the other hand, we have the “resemblance view”, according to which the nature of a trope is determined by
its resemblance to other tropes, as is its membership in natural classes of tropes. In comparison, NCTN is the view that the nature of tropes is determined by their membership in natural classes of tropes, where this membership is not in turn determined by resemblance among tropes but is, rather, primitive. According to Ehring, NCTN is preferable to the standard view because the standard view, in holding that the trope is a particular and a quality and simple, is incoherent. Ehring is not the first to argue for this point. His discussion does however manage to make it unusually clear that this is an argument that proponents of the standard view (such as myself) needs to take very seriously.

Ehring next sets out his reasons for preferring NCTN over the resemblance view, as well as for why tropes, given NCTN, and appearances perhaps to the contrary, do not collapse into either bare particulars or unstructured objects. The book ends with a defense of NCTN in light what Ehring takes to be the most common objections to the view, objections which, he argues, can explain the view’s current impopularity. In each case the objection is answered by adopting a counterpart theory of properties.

The main problem I have with Ehring’s defense of NCTN, is that it does not really address what I think is the real reason why the view is by most considered dead and buried. This is the fact that, given NCTN, explanation is implausibly turned on its head. That this is the real problem – or, at least that it is a problem that warrants serious discussion – seems to be held also by the book’s referees. Judging from comments found in the footnotes (where all of the referee comments are discussed, a fact I find generally problematic), the referees have repeatedly tried to drive this point home. So, for instance, does one referee (fn. 1, p. 203) raise what he or she calls a “worry about priority”, i.e., a worry concerning the curious fact that, given NCTN, tropes get sorted into natural classes not in virtue of their nature but, rather, that they have the nature they do because they belong to this or that natural class. Similarly, (fn. 33, p. 221), a referee points out that, given NCTN, either the trope plays a role in determining its own nature – in which case the basic tenets of NCTN are violated – or it plays no such role, which would make it hard to see what does determine which classes the trope in question is a member of. Had these worries been given a fuller treatment (and had they been handled in the main text rather than in the footnotes) Ehring’s defense of NCTN would have become considerably stronger.

This is a fascinating book written by an interesting and courageous philosopher. It is, however, no easy read. To be able to fully appreciate its many subtleties, a rather substantial knowledge of the field is probably necessary. I recommend anyone interested in trope theory or, for that matter, in issues in analytic ontology generally, to read this book. It identifies and addresses issues that are still not much discussed in the relevant literature (and manages to make a convincing case for why they nevertheless ought to be) and presents often new and thought-provoking perspectives on those that are. All in all, Ehring’s book
therefore constitutes an original, and very welcome, addition to the still not very large literature on tropes and trope theory.