

## A Note on Bearer-Uniqueness and Particularised Qualities

Benjamin Schnieder

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*Abstract:*

Many friends of the category of particularised qualities subscribe to the view that particularised qualities have a unique bearer in which they inhere; no such quality then can inhere in two different entities. But it seems that this idea is flawed, for there are apparent counterexamples. An apple's redness is identical with the redness of its skin, though the apple is distinct from its skin. So it seems that a principle of bearer-uniqueness has to be modified, maybe by excluding certain unwanted cases.

However, I argue that the need of a modification is *not* a direct consequence of the supposed counterexamples. Their dangerous potential for the principle arises if one takes the genitive in expressions of the form "a's *F*-ness" to signify the relation of inherence. I propose an alternative view: The genitive signifies a relation which is indeed closely related to inherence, but which is, contrary to inherence itself, *partitive*. That is, it may hold between a particularised quality and another entity *because* it holds between the quality and a *part* of the entity. If one regards the ontologically interesting relation of inherence as non-partitive, one can still adhere to an unrestricted principle of bearer-uniqueness.

(1)

The idea of particularised qualities (or: tropes, quality instances, unit properties, individual moments, individual accidents, individual qualities, etc.) is venerable and can be found in many writings of the great figures of the history of philosophy as well as contemporary metaphysicians. Among those who sympathise with this category, many subscribe to a certain principle which should hold of particularised qualities. Stated informally, it says that a particularised quality has a unique object to which it belongs, its bearer (in this paper I will limit my interests to *monadic* particularised qualities; those who want to acknowledge *polyadic* particularised qualities (instances of relations) as well will have to modify several of my formulations to make them applicable to such relational tropes). This principle can be distinguished from the stronger claim that particularised qualities are *individuated* via their bearers. While this latter claim postulates a certain ontological priority of the bearers of particularised qualities, the former is neutral upon this question. Uniqueness of the bearer might be compatible, for example, with things being bundles of particularised qualities, and thus with a view that regards particularised qualities as forming the primary ontological category.

I will remain silent on questions of priority here and focus only on the principle of bearer-uniqueness. Often assumed and seldom discussed, this principle seems to be prone to rather simple counterexamples: The first who drew attention to those was (to my knowledge) Jerrold Levinson in his 1980 paper “The Particularisation of Attributes”; later on Keith Lehrer and Van McGee provided similar examples in their 1992 “Particulars, Individual Qualities, and Universals”.<sup>1</sup> I will first introduce the principle, the counter-examples, and the consequences which Levinson, Lehrer, and McGee draw. Their consequences, I maintain, are rather unwelcome to the ontological idea of particularised qualities. I will then show an alternative reaction to the examples, which manages to save the spirit of the principle. For this task I show that the counterexamples work only on the grounds of an implicit premise about the meaning of certain natural language expressions referring to particularised qualities. This premise however can be disputed with good reasons.

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<sup>1</sup> Furthermore Montse Bordes (1998: 8) use similar examples.

(2)

Now for the principle and its problems. One can state the principle of bearer-uniqueness straightforwardly as follows:

(BU) For all particularised qualities  $a, b$  and all objects  $x, y$ :

$$(a \text{ is a quality of } x \ \& \ b \text{ is a quality of } y \ \& \ x \neq y) \rightarrow a \neq b^2$$

Adherents of particularised qualities and the idea of bearer-uniqueness might want to have a modally strengthened version of (BU). A modification can be brought in at two places: First of all, not only has every *actual* particularised quality a unique bearer, there also could not have been any particularised quality not having one. So we could put the whole of (BU) inside the scope of a necessity operator. Secondly, many a philosopher will hold that particularised qualities have their bearers *essentially*; they can not have one bearer in one possible world and another in a different world. This demands another operator inside the formula (within the scope of the variables “ $x$ ” and “ $y$ ”, ranging over bearers). So, a plausible stronger version of (BU) would be:

(BU – Nec)      $\Box$  For all particularised qualities  $a, b$  and all objects  $x, y$ :

$$a \text{ is a quality of } x \rightarrow \Box [(b \text{ is a quality of } y \ \& \ x \neq y) \rightarrow a \neq b]^3.$$

But let us stick to the weaker (BU) for the moment, mainly because it is handier.

(BU) goes conform with simple standard examples of particularised qualities; Joan’s courage is distinct from Socrates’ courage, since Socrates and Joan are different persons, and the redness of this rose is to be distinguished from the redness of the rose over there, because we are confronted with *two* roses.

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<sup>2</sup> An alternative formulation of the principle which might be slightly easier to comprehend would be the following (which is strictly equivalent to (BU)):

$$\forall a \ \forall x \ \forall y \ ( (a \text{ is a particularised quality of } x \ \& \ a \text{ is a particularised quality of } y) \rightarrow x = y )$$

For certain reasons of presentation, however, I prefer the version given in the main text. Notice furthermore that (BU) does not incorporate a clause which demands that every particular quality indeed *has* a bearer, and thus its truth would be compatible with there being bearerless particularised qualities. I omitted such a condition simply for sake of simplicity of the formula and I assume that there is a bearer for every particular quality.

<sup>3</sup> Similar principles (varying in the scope and number of the modal operators) can be found for example in Butcharov 1979: 185, Künne 1998: 238; Landesman 1973: 330 (he makes use of a variant of the principle to characterise Stout’s view on qualities); Mertz 1996: 10; Stout 1923: 114, Wolterstorff 1970: 134.

But then there are the equally simple counter-examples I have promised. There is the sharpness of my butter-knife, and there is the sharpness of its blade. It seems crazy to deny that they are just one and the same sharpness, however it seems equally mad to declare the knife and its blade to be identical. Thus, the butter-knife defeats (BU). Analogous examples come in legion; the redness of this delicious apple is identical with the redness of its skin, but the skin is not the apple.<sup>4</sup>

There are furthermore some examples based on metaphysically more controversial claims.<sup>5</sup> The lump of clay over there, some philosophers would hold, is not identical with the statue occupying the same place. Whoever agrees on this should notice that nevertheless the weight of the statue surely is just the same as the weight of the lump, and thus provides another example against (BU). Equally for a person's strength and the strength of her body etc.

How could one handle these cases?

(3)

I will in this section introduce two promising ways in which one could try to improve on (BU). Though promising, the first of them will prove to be flawed after reflection; the second, however, remains as a genuine option.

Now for the first attempt: The examples we have looked at so far share a feature which might prove to be essential to all possible counter examples to (BU). In each case the two different entities that are said to be the bearer of the same particularised quality do not only stand in an interesting (mereological or constitutional) relation to each other. They are picked out by different sortals. We had the pairs of a *knife* and a *blade*, an *apple* and its *skin*, a *statue* and a *lump of clay*, a *person* and a *body*. On the other hand the standard examples with which

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<sup>4</sup> The knife is Levinson's example (1980: 114), Lehrer and McGee use a grapefruit and its yellowness (1992: 43). I prefer the apple, since a grapefruit sometimes tends to be yellow not only at its skin. As I said before, also Bordes (1998: 8) argues in the same direction as Lehrer, Levinson and McGee. However, he somehow misses the point of his own example since he seems to overlook the fact that the top half of a cube is not identical with the cube itself. Anyway, in a footnote he also uses a red apple to illustrate the discussed problem.

<sup>5</sup> As Levinson notes (1980: 114 f.). Lowe (1998: 79) also provides an example based on the relation of constitution. Lowe, however, does not relate the example explicitly to a principle like (BU) but rather argues on its basis that particularised qualities do not possess determinate identity-conditions. I find his arguments very doubtful but cannot discuss them here in detail.

(BU) is usually introduced involve the same sortal twice: One *person's* wisdom cannot be another *person's* wisdom, one *rose's* redness cannot be the redness of another *rose*.

This may give rise to the idea that a qualification by introducing talk of sortals could help, and immunity to counter examples could be found by modifying (BU) along the following line.<sup>6</sup>

(BU – Sortal-Restricted)

For all particularised qualities  $a$ ,  $b$  and all objects  $x$ ,  $y$ :

( $a$  is a quality of  $x$  &  $b$  is a quality of  $y$  &  $x \neq y$  & there is a sortal  $F$  such that both  $x$  and  $y$  are  $F$ s)  $\rightarrow a \neq b$

Much more would have to be said about sortals if one went for (BU – Sortal-Restricted) – but there are reasons not to do it in the first place. I take it to be a contingent feature of the examples that they involve bearers characterised by different sortals. Though contingent, this feature turns out to be widespread and other examples are not immediately found. This however seems to result from the fact that most of the objects we are confronted with in normal situations are not composed of parts which belong to the same sort. But some objects are like that: Arcimboldo's famous paintings of faces composed of fruits and vegetables could of course also work if the painted faces were composed of painted faces. A dance of an ensemble is composed of the dances of its members, and a futuristic building might be composed of smaller buildings. Having realised that there are examples of this sort, we can also find cases which provide counterexamples to (BU – Sortal-Restricted):

(i) Two couples are quarrelling; the two women start beating each other quite brutally while the men rather exercise the volume of their voices. Here we can say that there is one quarrel between the women which is bloody, another quarrel between the men which is noisy, and the quarrel between the two couples which is both noisy and bloody. Now the bloodiness of the couple's quarrel *is* the bloodiness

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<sup>6</sup> The idea that bearer-uniqueness is restricted to entities falling under some common sortal seems to be present in the following quotation from Strawson's *Individuals* (Strawson uses "attributive tie" for the relation holding between an object and its particularised qualities): "[...] the particular smile and the particular oration cannot, by the attributive tie, collect any other particulars of the same kind as Socrates." (1959: 170, my emphasis) I should add that Strawson does not relate the restriction to our current problem; so of course he is not to blame if the restriction fails to be helpful. However, it is hard to see for what purposes he introduces the restriction at all, and as long as there are no good reasons for accepting it, we should not adopt it.

of the women's quarrel and the noisiness of the big quarrel *is* the noisiness of the men's quarrel. (Here of course "quarrel" is the sortal in question.)

(ii) Imagine a mobile (since times are changing, maybe I should add that I do not mean a portable telephone but a hanging structure for means of decoration) composed of three smaller mobiles; one of them is tremendously kitschy, and though the two others are relatively harmless everyone agrees that the whole mobile is kitschy. Now its kitschiness *is* the kitschiness of the smaller kitschy mobile. (And the sortal in question is "mobile".)

So we are still in need of an appropriate reaction to the threat of counterexamples to (BU), since the option discussed failed to be helpful. But there is a straightforward alternative: A very usual way to cope with counterexamples consists in modifying the principle in question by limiting its scope. This could be done as in (with "|" signifying the relation of disjointness):<sup>7</sup>

(BU\*) For all particularised qualities  $a, b$  and all objects  $x, y$ :

$$(a \text{ is a quality of } x \ \& \ b \text{ is a quality of } y \ \& \ x | y) \rightarrow a \neq b$$

Philosophers who take constitution to be different from identity will not be satisfied with this because of the statue's weight, which is the same particularised quality as the weight of its material. So they will plead for a further step (depending on their stance towards the (possible) disjointedness of a constituting thing and what is constituted by it) and replace (BU\*) by the following principle:

(BU\*\*) For all particularised qualities  $a, b$  and all objects  $x, y$ :

$$(a \text{ is a quality of } x \ \& \ b \text{ is a quality of } y \ \& \ x | y \ \& \ x \text{ does not constitute } y \text{ nor vice versa}) \rightarrow a \neq b$$

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<sup>7</sup> Indeed Lehrer and McGee take this to be the way out and replace their pendant to (BU) by a formula equivalent to (BU\*) (1992: 43). Notice that the examples considered so far do not force upon us the restriction to disjoint entities, but only to those not standing in a part-whole relation to each other. However, there are others that demand the further restriction: The white of the two left thirds of the tricolour over there is the same as the white of the two right thirds of it. Now the two left and the two right thirds do not relate as part and whole, but only overlap. To cope with examples like this we have to demand disjointness in the modification of (BU).

(4)

(BU) is intended as a principle of ontology, dealing with particularised qualities. The examples that raise doubts about its correctness are formulated in everyday language. The crucial expressions which are taken to refer to particularised qualities are constructions in which a quality term is specified by a genitive phrase; if we take “*F*-ness” to be representative for quality terms in general,<sup>8</sup> we can say that the expressions in question exhibit the form

(PQ) *x*'s *F*-ness.<sup>9</sup>

That the examples are apt to defeat (BU) depends on the question whether the genitive in expressions of the form (PQ) is taken to signify the ontological relation that is at issue in (BU). Particularised qualities have bearers, they belong to them, or to use a rather arcane term, they *inhere* in them. It might be natural to identify the relation of inherence with the relation signified by the genitive in expressions of the form (PQ), so that the following holds:

(TR) ' The particularised quality *q*, to which we refer by “*x*'s *F*-ness”, is a quality which inheres in *x*.

Natural though this may be, we can ask for alternatives.

Many predicates in natural language have a certain usage which we might call *partitive*. Basically I call the use of a predicate *F* in a true statement “*x* is *F*” partitive, if it satisfies the scheme:

(Partitive Predication)

*x* is *F*, and it is so *because* there is a (prominent) part *y* of *x*, such that *y* is *F*.

Some apples are red, we are inclined to say. They are red despite of the fact that of course most parts of them (their whole insides) are not red at all. They are red, *because their skin is so*. Thus, “is red” as applied to standard red apples is used partitively in the way described. The same holds for “is sharp”, when we are talking about my butter-knife. The knife is sharp, true, although many of its parts are not. But it is nevertheless, *because its blade is so*.

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<sup>8</sup> This should not, however, make us overlook that property terms indeed come in a large variety of forms. While prototypical examples are derived from adjectives by adding an appropriate suffix (as for example: -ty, -ness, -dom), some are actually less complex than the corresponding adjective (as “courage” and “courageous”), and others lack a corresponding adjective (as “animosity”).

<sup>9</sup> Or alternatively, “the *F*-ness of *x*”.

To acknowledge the partitive usage of many verbs should not lead to the wrong conclusion that many things that we call, e. g., red, are *not really* red. To say that some thing  $x$  is *not really*  $\phi$  suggests that (i) given a literal, non-conniving use of “is  $\phi$ ”, it is false that  $x$  is  $\phi$ , and (ii) there is a conniving use of “is  $\phi$ ”, in which it is true to say that  $x$  is  $\phi$ . But this is not the case with “is red”. This delicious apple is red, and it is *really* red; to say that something is red just does not mean saying that it is *wholly* red, or that all of its parts are red. Now this is not a conniving use of the predicate “is red”, it is its central, actual use.

In general there are many predicates having partitive uses, such that there is no corresponding non-partitive use of the predicate (or an equivalent predicate). We could of course invent a predicate “is NP-red”, such that an object  $x$  is NP-red only if it is red and it is not the case, that  $x$  is red because a part of it is red. But this is a predicate which has no equivalent in common English and there is no special usage of “is red” in which it is synonymous with “is NP-red”.

Apart from partitive usages of predicates we can also talk of partitive properties or relations, by which we mean properties and relations signified by a verb partitively used (such that *being red* would be an example of a partitive property, and *kissing* or *being sharper than* examples of partitive relations).<sup>10</sup>

If we now consider cases of *constitution*, as material constitution, we see that *if* constituted objects are different from the constituting ones, then a similar phenomenon to partitive predication can be made out: if for example a statue is to be distinguished from the lump of clay which constitutes it, then it will be correct to say that the statue weighs, say, 200 pounds, *because* the lump of clay constituting it weighs 200 pounds. So we can call the use of a predicate  $F$  in a true statement “ $x$  is  $F$ ” constitutive, if it satisfies the scheme:

(Constitutive Predication)

$x$  is  $F$ , and it is so *because* there is an object  $y$  which constitutes  $x$ , such that  $y$  is  $F$ .

To have a term which covers both kinds of predication I have talked about, I shall use “derivative” (as should be clear from what I have said above, I do not want to suggest that if someone uses a predicate for a derivative predication, she uses it somewhat connivingly or non-literally, or even worse, that she abuses it).

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<sup>10</sup> There might be relations which are partitive only in respect to one of their arguments, but I don’t know of a convincing example for such.



(5)

Now back to our apparent counter-examples to (BU). From them it can easily be seen that genitive-constructions of the form (PQ) often involve a derivative use of the genitive. This redness is the apple's redness, because there is a part of the apple, its skin, such that this redness is *its* redness. This sharpness is the knife's one, because there is its blade and the sharpness is *its* sharpness. But now a possibility opens for handling these examples without giving up (BU). For why not say that the relation of *inherence*, which (BU) is meant to be concerned with, is *not* derivative? It might be that there is no common expression signifying this relation. But this is because detailed ontological distinctions do not play a role important enough to be always mirrored by linguistic conventions.

In effect, this strategy amounts to holding that

- (i) The relation of *inherence* that ontologists are interested in is non-derivative.
- (ii) Accordingly, the "is a quality of" in (BU) should be given a technical, non-derivative reading.
- (iii) The genitive in expressions of the form (PQ) signifies a *derivative* relation, and thus *not* the relation of *inherence*. What it signifies is rather a relation that holds between a particularised quality *x* and an object *y* roughly if either *x* inheres in *y*, or *x* inheres in a (prominent) part *y*, or *x* inheres in an object which constitutes *y*.

Very seldom then in everyday discourse do we really specify the *bearers* of qualities, in the sense of specifying what the qualities *inhere* in. Very often this might indeed be hard to do. But the metaphysician might be content with noticing that common people simply are not interested in exactly the same as what she is interested in. So she can stick to (BU) without having to limit its scope in any way, by denying a one-to-one correspondence between expressions of the kind (PQ) and her metaphysical vocabulary.

(6)

So far I have not argued that the alternative I described is preferable to the one that was first considered, namely modifying (BU) into a version with a limited scope. Probably there will be no compelling argument in favour of one of the options, and we have to choose one on considerations of aptness for our ontological tasks. My

money indeed is on the second option introduced in this paper. I will not quarrel about it here; but I shall list some aspects relevant for a decision.

(i) I have introduced a non-derivative relation of *inherence*. If we adopt this as a basic notion, we can not only stick to (BU), but also to a commonly held principle about the ontological dependence of particularised qualities:

(DPQ) For all particularised qualities  $a$  and all objects  $x$ :

$$a \text{ inheres in } x \rightarrow \Box \forall t (a \text{ exists at } t \rightarrow x \text{ exists at } t) \text{ }^{11}$$

We cannot subscribe to (DPQ), if we don't allow us to a non-derivative notion of inherence. For the redness of this apple can exist much longer than the apple, for example if we peel it and eat it up, saving the peel (and thus the redness). Just as one had to modify (BU), if one read it as employing a derivative notion of belonging, one then had to replace (DPQ) by a restricted version.<sup>12</sup>

(ii) There is the old scholastic proposition that *accidentia non migrant e substantiis in substantias* – accidents (particularised qualities) cannot migrate from one substance to another.<sup>13</sup> With a non-derivative notion of inherence we have:

(NW) For all particularised qualities  $a$  and all objects  $x, y$ :

$$(a \text{ inheres in } x \ \& \ y \neq x) \rightarrow \neg \Diamond a \text{ inheres in } y$$

(NW) follows from (BU – Nec); but we cannot have it, if we have a derivative notion of belonging. The redness of this flag may become the redness of another flag, if we cut out pieces of the first flag and sew them onto the second. The derivative relation of belonging can be contingent and is subject to changes in time.

(iii) Notice that accordingly the question of individuation, which I mentioned in the beginning, namely whether particular qualities are individuated via the entities to which they belong, need not be raised if we use a derivative notion of belonging. Things to which qualities belong in a derivative sense are in general not even candidates for individuating them, for they might come into existence long after the quality (as the flag in the example above). That surely contradicts the assumption that their identity should be prior to them.

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. for example Simons 1987: 306, Künne 1998: 237 (Principle (B)). Thomasson (1999: 30) uses exactly the problematic case of the redness of an apple as an example of a *constantly dependent* entity (dependent on the apple).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Lehrer and McGee 1992: 43f.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Kant, *Metaphysische Anfangsgründe* A 104. Compare for example Leibniz, *Monadology* § 7: “And accidents cannot detach themselves and stroll about outside of substances [...]”.

Maybe none of these consequences is such that swallowing it will give anyone an upset stomach. But they may have enough impact on one's ontological taste to make a decision easy. Employing a non-derivative notion of inherence allows for just the classic conception of particularised qualities that the above principles are cornerstones of. Rejecting it forces one to reconsider and reformulate many of them. Personally, I shy away from this effort. On the other hand I like the classic conception, and I hope to have shown how one may still adhere to it.<sup>14</sup>

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