

The Importance of 'Being Earnest'

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Abstract:

Reference to properties is normally achieved by the use of nominalizations of predicative expressions. The article examines the relation between different kinds of such nominalizations: while traditionally, the terms 'wisdom' and 'the property of being wise' were thought to be coreferential, there are certain contexts in which they do not seem to be interchangeable *salva veritate*. Based on this observation, Friederike Moltmann recently developed a theory according to which abstract nouns such as 'wisdom' do not refer to properties. It is argued that her theory is flawed and that the existence of the problematic contexts should be explained in non-referential terms.

This paper examines aspects of the ontology of properties employed in ordinary discourse. For the purpose of talking about properties, natural languages allow to generate designators of properties by the means of *nominalization*. In section 1, I shall give a survey about different sorts of such nominalized property designators and formulate the *Uniformity Thesis*, according to which the different sorts of nominalization are merely linguistic variants to talk about the same things. While the *Uniformity Thesis* had been the standard view for quite a time, Friederike Moltmann recently attacked it on the basis of some intriguing linguistic data. After introducing her relevant claims in section 2, I argue in section 3 that they are mistaken, and I offer an alternative explanation of Moltmann's data in section 4.

A note in advance: as to avoid the danger of contaminating my own linguistic data with any of my prevalent philosophical (mis)conceptions, I collected examples from the prose of those who mastered the English language far better than myself. These are not data invented to prove a philosophical point, but data about how non-philosophers actually talk, when they talk about properties.¹

¹ For most of the literary quotations I rely on a database of English prose from the fourteenth to the early twentieth century (*The Digital Library of English and American Literature*, Frankfurt a.M.: Zweitausendseins, 2004).

1. Nominalizations as Property Designators

a. *A Survey of Property Designators*

Philosophers most often use one of two kinds of expression when they intend to refer to properties: abstract nouns, such as 'wisdom', and complex phrases of the form 'the property of being *F*'. But it is instructive to realize that there is a bigger variety of expressions that are apt for identifying reference to properties.² In general, if we can combine a term *t* with the predicate 'is a property' (or: 'is an attribute', 'is a quality', etc.) such as to produce a true statement, then *t* has at least *one* use in which it designates a property. Thus, the truth of the following statements leads to the recognition of three different kinds of property designators, namely abstract nouns, gerunds, and 'to'-plus-infinitive phrases:

- (1) Wisdom is a property.
- (2) Being wise is a property.
- (3) To be wise is a property.

We can discover two further kinds of property designators by realising that we may combine the grammatical subjects of (1) and (2) with either a formal prefix (e.g. 'the quality of' or 'the property of') or an appropriate material prefix (e.g. 'the virtue of'), such that the resulting expressions qualify as property designators themselves:

- (4) The virtue of wisdom is a property.
- (5) The quality of being wise is a property.

What is often overseen is that we can also use a *that*-clause to designate a property, as in:

- (6) He hath this property of an honest man that his hand is as good as his word.
(Thomas Fuller: *The holy state / The profane state*)³

Last but not least, we can use ordinary definite descriptions to denote properties, as in:

- (7) The property Socrates was most famous for is a property (*to wit*, it is wisdom).

² As e.g. Strawson once pointed out; see p. 129 of his *Subject and Predicate in Logic and Grammar* (London: Methuen & Co, 1974).

³ Another example of this kind would be:

It is one of the properties of a triangle that the three interior angles taken together are equal to two right angles. (J. Norman Lockyer: *Elementary Lessons in Astronomy*)

Both quotations can be found under the entry for 'property' in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd edition, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).

Let me add two remarks on the introduced test and its results:

Firstly, I should point out that although terms of the mentioned classes *can* be used as property designators, they are not *always* so used. Most of them exhibit also other uses. This is particularly obvious in the case of gerunds, that-clauses and 'to'-plus-infinitives: whatever role they play in the following sentences

Being the morose kind of guy, he used to live on his own,

He wanted her *to be a saint*,

He always thought *that he would never marry*,

it is certainly not that of a property-designator. But the same is also true for at least some abstract nouns: 'wisdom' and 'beauty' are not used as property designators in the sentences 'That modesty is rewarding is an old wisdom' and 'A beauty appeared at my window'; instead, they are used as general terms applying to wise thoughts and beautiful people respectively. When I will nevertheless speak as if certain *terms* (instead of: *terms* in certain *uses*) could be classified as property designators, it is only for the sake of brevity.

Secondly, I admit that some of the test statements I presented, namely those in which the predicate is the bare 'is a property', sound somewhat awkward and shallow; an example in question is sentence (3). But we should not conclude that such sentences are semantically *defective* and that the contained nominalizations are *not* property designators after all. Rather, the awkwardness of such sentences can largely be explained by the fact that they are highly *uninformative*. The reason is that in many cases, the knowledge that a given term (in a certain use) denotes a property seems to be a condition of being a competent user of that term (in that use). This feature of a term (which we may call its *categorial transparency*) is in particular exhibited by the kinds of property designator used in statements (1) to (6). Ordinary definite descriptions of properties, however, may or may not possess it; while some descriptions – see (7) – incorporate information about the ontological category of the entity that is denoted, some others stay silent on this issue, as the description used in:

(8) What I am thinking about at the moment is a property.

The categorial transparency of property designators contributes to the awkwardness of the statements (1)–(5) and (7), as the contrast between them and the informative (6) and (8) shows. Anyway, we can easily generate less shallow variants of the test sentences (1)–(5) and (7): we can enrich the predicates by some modifier and use the more informative result, such as 'is an interesting/nice/useful etc. property' or 'is a

property shared by all philosophers'. In fact, many smooth examples of such predications can be found, as for instance the following ones:

Nay; children, to be null is merely a negative property [...] (James F. Cooper: *The Prairie*)

It is the quality of reason to be invariable and constant [...] (James Boswell: *Life of Johnson*)

But the correct applicability of predicates such as 'is an interesting/nice/negative etc. property' to some subject term *t* obviously justifies the classification of *t* as a property designator. So, the above test works in spite of a certain awkwardness of some cases (which could be avoided by modifying the test a little bit, although I see no need to actually do that).

b. *The Uniformity Thesis*

The property designators used in (1)–(3) and (6) are *derived* terms that are generated by some form of *nominalization* from either

- (i) a general term (the designator in (1) derives from 'wise'), or
- (ii) a predicate (the designators in (2) and (3) derive from the predicate 'is wise'),
or
- (iii) a whole sentence (the that-clause in (6) derives from the sentence 'his hand is as good as his word').

Furthermore, the property designators in (4) and (5) are also nominalizations, but enriched with an additional prefix that adds some classification of the referents of the terms. Such prefixes are best understood as a kind of *appositive* constructions comparable to 'the number' in 'the number 7' or 'the poet' in 'the poet Burns'.⁴

Although the pure nominalizations 'wisdom', 'being wise' or 'to be wise', and 'that she is wise' are naturally construed as being derived from terms of different syntactic categories, these terms have nevertheless something important in common: the expressions 'wise', 'is wise', and 'she is wise' contain the same descriptive material and differ *only* in their syntactic category, which is due to the presence of the copula and/or the pronoun. It seems plausible to suppose that designators being thus

⁴ On this view cp. N. Wolterstorff, *On Universals* (Univ. of Chicago Press, 1970), pp. 70ff.; J. Levinson, 'Properties and Related Entities', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 39 (1978), pp. 1–22, at pp. 9f.; D. Wiggins, 'The Sense and Reference of Predicates: A Running Repair to Frege's Doctrine and a Plea for the Copula', *Philosophical Quarterly*, 34 (1984), pp. 311–328, at p. 320; B. Schnieder, 'Canonical Property Designators', forthcoming in *American Philosophical Quarterly*.

derived from the same descriptive material are just different devices for talking about the same things. Let us call this supposition the

(Uniformity Thesis) Any two property designators that are derived from the same descriptive material (in the same use), refer to the same object.

It should be noted that the *Uniformity Thesis* asserts only sameness of *reference* of two property designators with the same origin, but not sameness of *sense*. The latter is certainly not given between pure nominalizations and those with a material prefix ('wisdom' versus 'the virtue of wisdom') because the prefix adds its sense to the sense of the complex phrase, albeit not affecting its reference – unless, I hasten to add, the prefix is ill-chosen for the prefixed term, which would render the whole phrase empty ('the vice of wisdom' arguably lacks a referent and therefore it is not coreferential with 'wisdom', nor with 'the virtue of wisdom'); I henceforth concentrate on more ordinary cases where the prefix does apply to the referent of the prefixed phrase. Having realized that a material prefix affects the sense of the whole phrase, it may – for an analogous reason – also be doubted whether a pure nominalization and a nominalization with a *formal* prefix have the same sense: the sense of 'property' obviously enters into the sense of 'the property of wisdom'; but it is at least debatable whether it also enters into the sense of 'wisdom' itself.⁵

2. Moltmann's Charge Against the Uniformity Thesis

Although the *Uniformity Thesis* is attractive and widely held, it has recently been attacked by Friederike Moltmann in a series of papers.⁶ Three pivotal theses of Moltmann are (I will not discuss every aspect of her overall account, but concentrate on those of her theses which I take to be mistaken):

(M1) Abstract nouns (e.g. 'wisdom') do not refer to properties.

(M2) Abstract nouns refer to kinds of tropes.

(M3) Kinds of tropes are not properties.

⁵ Cp. vol. II, §136, p. 51, of B. Bolzano, *Wissenschaftslehre* (Sulzbach: Seidel, 1837; repr. as vols I.11–I.14 of: *Gesamtausgabe*, Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1985–...).

⁶ While she already argued against the *Uniformity Thesis* in her 'Nominalizing Quantifiers', *Journal of Philosophical Logic*, 32 (2003), pp. 445–481, at pp. 457–461, she did so at greater length in 'Properties and Kinds of Tropes: New Linguistic Facts and Old Philosophical Insights', *Mind*, 113 (2004), pp. 1–41. Cp. furthermore her 'Two Kinds of Universals and Two Kinds of Collections', *Linguistics and Philosophy*, 27 (2005), pp. 739–776.

Moltmann argues for this controversial triad of claims on the basis of some intriguing linguistic observations concerning the use of a variety of nominalizations.⁷ In the remainder of this paper, I will make a case for the denial of thesis (M1) and defend the *Uniformity Thesis* against Moltmann's charge. With my denial of (M1), I do not intend to repudiate (M2) as well; this thesis can be held independently of (M1), by denying (M3) and regarding properties *as* kinds of tropes.⁸ I will henceforth concentrate on a discussion of (M1), leaving aside questions about tropes.

Before I challenge Moltmann's account, let me give a short description of how she arrives at her position: Moltmann points out that there is a contrast between many statements which differ only in that one of them has an abstract noun as its grammatical subject, while the other has the corresponding gerund *plus* categorial prefix as its subject. Some examples of the kind with which Moltmann illustrates this claim are (they are but three of a whole number of similar cases that Moltmann came up with):

- (9) Shyness is nice.
- (9*) The property of being shy is nice.
- (10) Earnestness is important.
- (10*) The property of being earnest is important.
- (11) Wisdom is rare.
- (11*) The property of being wise is rare.

Sentence (9) amounts, roughly, to the claim that shy behaviour or shy attitudes are nice (or perhaps that shy people are nice, as far as their shyness is considered). But (9*), Moltmann holds, is not an appropriate vehicle for the same claim.⁹ It might, at best, be understood as a claim that probably only philosophers would make; one could, for example, think that the said property is nice because of its formal structure, or perhaps because of certain relations that it bears to other abstract objects. Similarly

⁷ Because of similar linguistic data, Levinson defended theses akin to (M1)–(M3): abstract nouns, he argued, refer to qualities (e.g. wisdom), conceived of as abstract *stuff* that can be portioned into *particularised* qualities. Properties such as *being wise*, on the other hand, have the character of *conditions* that can only be fulfilled or not. See his 'Properties and Related Entities', p. 10, and 'The Particularisation of Attributes', *The Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 58 (1980), pp. 102–115, at pp. 106ff.

⁸ Philosophers who endorse *both* (M2) and the *Uniformity Thesis* include Strawson and Wolterstorff; for relevant passages see P.F. Strawson, *Individuals* (London, New York: Routledge, 1959), p. 168, *Subject and Predicate*, pp. 129–132, and Wolterstorff's *On Universals*, pp. 78f. and 130–139.

⁹ See 'Properties and Kinds of Tropes', pp. 7f., and cp. 'Two Kinds of Universals', pp. 745ff.

for (10) and (10*): while the first of them is naturally understood as saying, roughly, that earnest behaviour is important, the latter of them presumably makes sense only as the tenet of some philosopher. Perhaps, someone working on ontology might utter it, because he uses the property of being earnest as his standard example of a property (and cannot think of using a different one). Things are even worse with the third case: sentence (11*), Moltmann holds, could not even be used to express some strange philosophical claim, because instance-distributing predicates such as 'is rare' are not acceptable in combination with explicit property-referring terms.¹⁰

Now, Moltmann thinks that the differences between sentences of the cited pairs are best explained as differences in what entities the statements are about. Their subject terms refer to different entities, and indeed, to entities about a different sort. Since expressions such as 'the property of being shy' evidently refer to properties, abstract nouns do not. They rather refer to *kinds* whose instances are denoted by complex phrases such as 'Jean's courage' or 'Oscar's shyness' – things which have been called *individual moments*, *tropes*, or *modes* (to name just some of a broad variety of technical terms employed for such entities).

This is a sketch of the reasoning behind Moltmann's theses (M1) to (M3). Before discussing these central tenets of Moltmann's account, let me briefly remark on a further but related aspect of it that rather baffles me. If somebody takes the difference between (9) and (9*) to be indicative of a difference in reference (of their subject terms), it is just fair to demand of her an account of what the different referents are and what distinguishes them. Moltmann's account of this difference is expressed in the following thesis:¹¹

(M4) Referents of abstract nouns are kinds of tropes. Such entities are not *objects*, i.e. they do not *have* properties.

But this strikes me as rather mysterious. It seems to me a plain truism that whatever there is, must have some properties. Moltmann would apparently deny this; but her position raises many questions to which there seem to be no answers: why are some entities unable to exemplify properties? what is it about their nature that deprives them of this rather basic capacity?

What is worse, Moltmann's position seems to be self-undermining: she accepts that expressions of the form 'the property of being *F*' refer to properties (which is only reasonable because she is concerned with the very abundant ontology of properties manifested in ordinary language, not with sparse philosophical conceptions such as Armstrong's). Now, according to Moltmann, non-objects are unable to have

¹⁰ 'Properties and Kinds of Tropes', p. 21.

¹¹ Cp. 'Properties and Kinds of Tropes', pp. 1f., 24, *et passim*.

properties. But then, they should have at least the following property: that of being unable to have properties. But so, every non-object would have to both lack properties and yet possess one. This seems to be a *reductio* of Moltmann's thesis.

I may add that Moltmann wavers between different formulations of thesis (M4). She sometimes uses a formulation that sounds weaker than (M4), when she says that non-objects must *inherit* their properties from other entities;¹² this claim seems incompatible with (M4), because if something inherits a property *P*, it certainly *has P*. Anyway, a variant of my criticism applies also to the weaker claim; if an entity *x* only possesses properties that it inherits from other entities, this should also be true of its property of possessing only inherited properties. But this property is obviously *not* inherited itself.

Be this as it may, I will, in what follows, argue for the *Uniformity Thesis*, both by direct reasoning and by undermining Moltmann's arguments to its denial. Thus, I will make a case against (M1); since (M4) only assists (M1), I can avoid further discussion of (M4).

3. Against Moltmann's Position

a. *An Argument and Moltmann's Retreat*

In order to explain the differences between (9) and (9*) and the like, Moltmann assumes that abstract nouns (such as 'shyness') and abstract nouns *cum* categorial prefix (such as 'the property of being shy') refer to different entities. But there is a straightforward argument against her thesis:¹³ we can talk not only of *shyness*, but also of the *property of shyness*. Since the following claim is true by any ordinary standards:

(12) Shyness is a property,

the following identity statement is hardly deniable:

(=1) Shyness = the property of shyness.

But since 'the property of shyness' and 'the property of being shy' have exactly the same uses and do not give rise to any such differences as those obtaining between (9) and (9*), we should accept that:

(=2) The property of shyness = the property of being shy.

By transitivity of identity, we immediately arrive at:

¹² 'Properties and Kinds of Tropes', p. 2.

¹³ Cp. Wolterstorff, *On Universals*, pp. 78f.

(=3) Shyness = the property of being shy.

However, in her proposal Moltmann provides the material for a response to this argument. She realises that we can build true statements by combining abstract nouns with predicates like 'is a property'. While this seems to show that abstract nouns denote properties, Moltmann rather concludes that 'is a property' is a *reference shifting predicate*:¹⁴ as employed in

(9) Shyness is nice,

the term 'shyness' refers to shyness. But it does not do so as employed in

(12) Shyness is a property.

Here, it refers to the property of shyness. So, Moltmann supplements her theses with the following claim:

(M5) In combination with abstract nouns, the predicate 'is a property' generates a shift of reference (such that abstract nouns *then* refer to properties, contrary to what they do outside the scope of such a predicate).¹⁵

This treatment, ingenious as it is, strikes me as rather artificial; what is worse, it suffers from some lethal deficiencies which I shall now propound.

b. *Against the Shift-of-Reference Thesis*

If a certain phrase *p* generates a reference-shifting context for some term *t* (a context in which *t* has a different reference than in its default reading), then the concatenation of *p* and *t* should not accept all the complements which *t* accepts. Let us look at an example which illustrates this claim: Zeno Vendler (1967) prominently argued that some of the terms he calls *perfect nominals*, terms such as 'the collapse of the Germans', are ambiguous; while in their default reading they denote *events*, they can be combined with some operators, such as 'is a fact', which shift their reference to a *fact*. His thesis is well supported by the observation that there are many complements a perfect nominal normally accepts, which are not accepted by the term 'fact'.

¹⁴ 'Properties and Kinds of Tropes', pp. 28f.

¹⁵ Surprisingly, Moltmann thinks that, contrary to the predicate 'is a property', the predicate 'is a quality' is *not* reference shifting (see 'Properties and Kinds of Tropes', pp. 24f.). However, English dictionaries treat 'quality' and 'property' as interchangeable; the OED, for instance, characterises 'property' as follows: 'An attribute or quality belonging to a thing or a person.' There may, of course, nevertheless be certain minor differences between the usage of 'property' and 'quality', but it is doubtful that these could entail any ontological distinction. Anyway, to avoid these issues, I will henceforth focus on uses of 'property' (I shall briefly come back to this issue in section 4.b.).

Accordingly, we can observe the failure of certain inferences, which would be valid if no reference shift had been invoked. If, for instance, the collapse of the Germans was gradual and bloody, it does not follow from the truth of 'The collapse of the Germans is a fact' that there was a gradual and bloody fact.¹⁶

However, things are different in the present case. If Moltmann's (M5) was correct, we should expect that the alleged reference-shifting contexts, such as 'is a property', do not combine with expressions such as 'nice', 'rare', 'peculiar' etc., which combine with abstract nouns in their default reading; or that such contexts at least trigger significantly different readings of these expressions, which would parallel the differences between (9) and (9*). But contrary to what should be predicted on the grounds of Moltmann's thesis, these phrases combine well with the alleged reference-shifters, and without change in sense. Indeed, the categorial term 'property' is very often combined with such adjectives as 'nice', 'rare', 'peculiar' etc. To wit, take a look at the following quotations:

[E]very package belonging to that lady had the inconvenient property of requiring to be put in a boot by itself [...]. (Charles Dickens: *The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit*)

There is nothing in which our Species so far surpasses all others, than in the Capacity of acquiring the Faculty of Thinking and Speaking well: That this is a peculiar Property belonging to our Nature is very certain [...]. (Bernard de Mandeville: *The Fable of the Bees*)

Then crush this herb into Lysander's eye whose liquor hath this virtuous property, to take from thence all error with his might, and make his eyeballs roll with wonted sight. (William Shakespeare: *A Midsummer Night's Dream*)

He recognized me with evident pleasure; for my rare properties as a patient listener invariably make me a favorite with elderly gentlemen and ladies, of narrative propensities. (Nathaniel Hawthorne: *Twice-Told Tales*)

These quotations show that properties (even if explicitly specified by gerunds or 'to'-plus-infinitives) can be said to be *inconvenient*, *peculiar*, and *virtuous*. Now certainly, in the quoted contexts these latter phrases do not trigger any kind of deviant reading but have exactly the same reading as in 'earnestness is inconvenient' etc. Furthermore, we see that, *pace* Moltmann, the instance-distributing predicate 'is rare' *is* after all combinable with the term 'property'. So, you can say about properties that they are rare.

Now, our use of phrases such as 'nice property' licenses all kinds of inferences which Moltmann, on the basis of (M5), should expect to be invalid: whoever asserts

¹⁶ Cp. Z. Vendler, 'Facts and Events', in his *Linguistics in Philosophy* (Cornell UP, 1967), pp. 122–146, at p. 142.

'Socrates had the nice property of wisdom,' is obviously committed to the claim that wisdom is nice; from 'Socrates had wisdom' and 'Wisdom is nice' we are, on the other hand, entitled to infer 'Socrates had a nice property.' Similarly, if wisdom is desirable, then from 'Wisdom is a property' it follows, on any ordinary standards, that there is a desirable property, and equally it then follows from 'Wisdom was the virtue that Socrates was most famous for' that the virtue that Socrates was most famous for is desirable.

All this shows a deep misconception in Moltmann's account: what we say about the referents of abstract nouns *can, in the very same sense*, be said about properties. The alleged difference between properties and kinds of tropes, consisting in the circumstance that some predicates only apply in different ways to them while others apply only to the latter, breaks down in light of the above quotations.

The point I made can be illustrated with the kind of sentence on which Moltmann primarily relies:

(13) Shyness is a nice property.

is not only perfectly acceptable, but in its natural reading it amounts to whatever the natural reading of (9), 'Shyness is nice', amounts to; indeed, (13) is ordinarily recognised as nothing but a stylistic variant of (9). But then, no reference shift has been invoked by 'is a property'; in the context of (13), 'shyness' refers to whatever it refers to in (9): *viz.* shyness. And since this is correctly said to be a *nice property*, it is correctly said to be a property.

4. Revisiting Moltmann's Data

a. Aspectival Predicates

Hitherto, I have argued that Moltmann's denial of the *Uniformity Thesis* is a failure. I presented a direct argument to the conclusion that shyness is identical to the property of being shy; Moltmann's retreat to (M5), the claim that 'is a property' generates a reference-shifting context, has proven unsatisfactory, because it does not square with the possibility of combining the term 'property' with exactly those adjectives that Moltmann holds cannot characterise properties (at least not in their ordinary understanding).

Moltmann's crucial theses (M1) and (M5) are mistaken. But yet, something remains to be explained: the linguistic observations with which Moltmann motivated her proposal. After all, there certainly is a difference between

(9) Shyness is nice,

and

(9*) The property of being shy is nice.

In this section, I shall argue that the difference is not to be explained, as Moltmann suggested, as a difference in *reference* (and ontological commitment). In the next section, I shall show how it can be accounted for in other terms.

I agree with what Moltmann says about the natural interpretation of (9): it amounts to the claim that shy people, gestures etc. are nice (with respect to their shyness). But is the natural interpretation the only available one? To prepare for an answer, we should notice that to be nice is a matter of degree and aspect: something can be nice for some reason (in some respect etc.) while not for some other. We may say that *being nice* is an *aspectival trait*. Now, if a *property* is said to possess some aspectival trait, such as *being shy*, *interesting*, or *helpful*, while the relevant aspect is not specified, there seems to be a default assumption that the aspect meant is closely related to the *characteristic relation* in which properties stand to things: things *have* (or: possess etc.) or *lack* properties (or: are bereft of them etc.). In fact, our understanding of what a property is seems to be intimately connected to our grasp of this relation. Now, if a property is said to be interesting, while no aspect of interest is specified, then the default assumption is: the speaker means that things *having* this property are interesting (for having it). If a property is said to be helpful, then the default assumption is: the speaker means that *having* the property is helpful (for certain purposes), and so on.

That there are default assumptions about non-specified aspects in which aspectival predicates apply to some kind of object can also be seen from other kinds of discourse. An utterance of 'English beer is nice', in its natural interpretation, amounts to the claim that English beer is something nice *to drink*. But such a default assumption can be wrong in a particular case. One *can* find English beer nice for some other reason, its colour for example, or because it is associated with some nice memories: 'English beer is nice; not that I like to *drink* it, mind you. But it always reminds me of some nice summer night in Brighton.' And equally, the default assumption can be wrong in the property case: I may find a property interesting, nice etc. for different reasons than the standard one. This is why we *could* use (9) to say something different from what (9) is normally taken to say. Imagine the following dialogue:

NN: Shyness is nice.

FM: You mean, you really like shy people, shy behaviour etc.?

NN: No, that's not what I meant; I just think that shyness is nice, but not because it is nice to *have* shyness. (Indeed, I rather dislike shy people, at least *for their shyness*.) But to think of shyness makes me think of Morrissey's music.

This dialogue is a little strange, for sure. But it is neither *incomprehensible*, nor *contradictory*. Whatever shyness might be (a kind of tropes, a property, a set of its instances, or what have you), you *could* find it nice for certain philosophical, aesthetic or just silly reason, without generally liking its instances, without thinking that it is nice to have shyness etc. That is, you could find shyness nice for some unusual reason, without agreeing to 'shyness is nice' *in its natural reading*, which carries the implicature that you like shyness for the *default* reason, i.e. for liking its instances.

Thus, (9) allows for the very reading which Moltmann offers for (9*). But to explain how the two readings of (9) arise, we do *not* have to resort to different readings of 'shyness', and in particular we do not have to attribute different *referents* to 'shyness'. Accordingly, the differences between (9) and (9*), which parallel the two readings of (9), should not be explained in referential terms. They are compatible with the assumption that shyness is a property (namely that of being shy).

What I said directly carries over to many of Moltmann's examples. But they are even relevant to those that do not contain aspectival predicates but predicates such as 'encounter', 'look for' etc. Typical applications of such predicates are concrete, material objects. What we mean when we apply them to properties or particularised properties is not immediately settled by the central uses of these predicates, but requires some kind of cognitive transfer. Usually, we will bring our knowledge about what is characteristic for properties, i.e. that they are possessed, to bear upon this transfer. Thus, to look for some property, in the natural understanding of this phrase, is to look for things exhibiting it, etc. But as above, there is room for alternative treatments, which explains the possibility of understanding them in deviant ways, while this explanation is free from any ontological import.

b. *Brute Linguistic Facts*

One thing, however, remains to be explained: if shyness equals the property of being shy, why are (9) and (9*) nevertheless not equally apt for expressing the thought that shyness is nice (and similarly for the other examples)? Sentence (9*) does seem awkward and would not naturally be accepted as a good paraphrase of (9). But why? My bold diagnosis is this: sentences (9) and (9*) differ with respect to their natural interpretation, just because (9*) has *no* natural interpretation. It is a kind of sentence without any *established use* in the ordinary English language (in this respect, it differs both from (9) *and* from sentences such as 'being shy is a nice property/only a pose etc.'). This may possibly be overlooked by philosophers who got used to producing sentences such as (9*) for semi-technical purposes. But in doing this, they left the field where clear and stable intuitions about ordinary language could be invoked to interpret their statements.

Now, since (9*) has no established use, we may, being confronted with it, tend to seek for an interpretation in which what it says differs from what is said by (9). This is at least partly justified by some *conversational maxims*. If somebody utters (9*) instead of (9), and we do *not* question his linguistic competence or think he just has a very bad style, then we expect him to have a *reason* for his choice of words; he flouted a Gricean maxim of rational discourse: avoid obscurity of expression!¹⁷ Thus, we expect that by choosing this odd form of words he wanted to say something different from what he would have said by uttering (9), and we may welcome Moltmann's reading of (9*) then.

But why is (9*) such an unnatural expression? This is an empirical question about the usage of some phrases. The answer may be a brute fact about English usage and grammar without any philosophical import. A relevant point is this: where we deal with a property for which an abstract noun is available, we will use this instead of the cumbersome phrase 'the property of being *F*'. This latter phrase naturally comes into play where a *complex* expression is nominalized, because abstract nouns are generally derived from *adjectives* (seldom, they derive from nouns, while they never derive from complex phrases). But apart from those qualities that are salient enough for our interests as to deserve their own single adjective, there are many more qualities that we are able to recognise and that we can ascribe only by means of complex predicates. It is crucial for our ability to refer to those latter qualities to have nominalizations at our disposal which can be generated in a wholly systematic way from complex phrases (i.e. the availability of gerunds, 'to'-plus-infinitives, and that-clauses).

Here it is instructive to note a peculiarity of *anaphoric reference* to properties: such reference to properties is not only possible where the anaphoric phrase has a proper antecedent in form of a singular term ('Shyness is nice, but *it* can stop you from doing all the things you'd really like to'), but also in some cases in which there is *no* antecedent singular term to which the anaphoric phrase could hark back. This is illustrated by the following quotations:

'I am not industrious myself, gents both,' said the head, 'but I know how to appreciate that quality in others.' (Charles Dickens: *The Life and Adventures of Martin Chuzzlewit*)

'Man', said the mother, 'is the only beast who kills that which he does not devour, and this quality makes him so much a benefactor to our species.' (Samuel Johnson: *Essays of "The Idler"*)

We easily understand these sentences, even though there is no singular term that the phrases 'that quality' or 'this quality' could pick up. However, there is the material to

¹⁷ See p. 27 of P. Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words* (Harvard UP, 1989).

build such terms by the means of nominalization. Having realized which predicative part is relevant, we can tacitly derive a singular term that gives us the reference of the anaphoric phrases: the quality that Dickens's character refers to is the quality of *being industrious*, while Johnson's character talks about the quality of *being a beast who kills that which does not devour*. As we can see from examples like the latter, the availability of complex nominalizations (as opposed to abstract nouns) is vital to our understanding of the cited phenomenon. Analogous remarks apply, by the way, to the "converse" possibility of citing *predicates* where a list of properties is announced (and where we may therefore expect a sequence of property designators), as illustrated in:

The properties of ink are peculiar and contradictory: it may be used to make reputations and unmake them; to blacken them and to make them white [...]
(Bierce: *The Cynic's Word Book*).

What are the properties of ink alluded to here? Answer: that it may be used to make repudiations etc. (alternatively: being usable to make repudiations etc.).

Coming back to the difference between (9) and (9*) now, we have discovered one factor that partly explains why (9*) is unnatural: in general, where abstract nouns are available they are preferred to more complex nominalizations (though these latter are indispensable when properties are to be denoted for which no adjective is available to ascribe them). Hence, the use of the cumbersome 'the property of'-phrase in (9*) is unnecessary, since the natural formulation, i.e. (9), makes use of the available abstract noun.

This is, however, certainly not the whole story. Moltmann holds, for example, that (9**) The quality of being shy is nice,

is acceptable as a paraphrase of (9);¹⁸ and though I doubt we would ever come across (9**) either, it does indeed, for what it is worth, sound better to my ears than (9*).

Again, this may be explained by some brute facts about the usage of the words 'property' and 'quality', some facts that do not reflect any ontological convictions, and that do not even belong to the *semantics* of these words. A hint at such an explanation is the following: 'property', in the meaning of 'attribute', is just not as often used as 'quality', which appears at a much higher frequency. In particular it can be seen that the relevant usage of 'property' is significantly more widespread in the *plural* than in the *singular*. There may be different factors contributing to these statistical facts. For example, the term 'property' has a different *history* than 'quality'. The usage in which these words are strictly interchangeable is not that old. Thus, because he was aware of a certain tradition to use 'property' only for *essential* attributes, Quine preferred the

¹⁸ 'Properties and Kinds of Tropes', p. 24.

term 'attribute' to the term 'property'.¹⁹ The OED confirms Quine's observation; under the entry for 'property', it reads: 'in earlier use sometimes, an essential, special, or distinctive quality, a peculiarity; in later use often, a quality or characteristic in general (without reference to its essentialness or distinctiveness).' And the difference between the frequencies in which 'property' appears in *singular* and *plural* forms may, for instance, be related to the ambiguity of 'property' that is less relevant to its plural usage, and which is not exhibited by 'quality'. If we have an unambiguous expression at hand, we may prefer it to the ambiguous one.

Of course, these are only suggestions. I do not know whether the mentioned facts actually affected the frequency in which 'property' is used in the sense of 'attribute' (though I reckon it likely that they do). The important point is that explanations *of this kind*, which have no particular philosophical bearing, are relevant to our data. A general lesson of my reasoning is that descriptive metaphysicians need to be highly sensitive to the question which linguistic data are, and which are not, relevant to metaphysical issues. Natural languages have evolved over a long time, being subject to a variety of different sources of influence, not all of which (and perhaps not even the majority of which) are the right kind of source to result in ontologically important phenomena. Many peculiarities of grammar and of idiomatic expression are much too frail and arbitrary to bear the weight of ontological distinctions.

In summary, the following is a reasonable stance towards (9) and (9*): sentences such as (9*), whose grammatical subjects are designators of the form 'the property of being *F*', where '*F*' is replaced by an adjective, are seldom, if ever, met. This explains *firstly* why they seem awkward, and this may *secondly* explain why, being confronted with them, we seek for an understanding in which they are not just an indication of the bad linguistic style of its producer. Thus, we may welcome the reading offered by Moltmann. But this could in principle also be given to (9). The differences between these sentences are not to be explained by ontology, but by interpretative maxims and linguistic theories.

5. Conclusion

As I said earlier, my discussion was not directed against Moltmann's theory of properties and the like *as a whole*, but against her denial of the *Uniformity Thesis*. Those aspects of her proposal that do not depend upon this denial remain untouched by my argument, while some other aspects, although actually interwoven with that

¹⁹ See W. V. O. Quine, 'Responding to Armstrong', in his *Theories and Things*, (Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1981), pp. 182–184, at p. 183.

denial, may be reconciled with the *Uniformity Thesis*: for instance, many of Moltmann's views on tropes seem promising to me, and you can consistently adhere to them and to the *Uniformity Thesis*, if only we regard properties *as* kinds of tropes.

What I meant to do was defend the *Uniformity Thesis* against Moltmann's rival position; thus, I have firstly shown that her positive account is metaphysically dubious (that kinds of tropes cannot have properties seems self-refuting). Secondly I gave a direct argument for the conclusion that wisdom is identical to the property of being wise; the only way to defend her account from this argument was to resort to the *shift-of-reference* thesis. So, thirdly, I presented linguistic data that are inconsistent with that thesis (it cannot accommodate constructions such as 'is a rare property'); finally I have shown how Moltmann's original data can be explained in non-referential terms. Thus, the *Uniformity Thesis* is not refuted by Moltmann's reasoning. She unsuccessfully attempted to belittle, what should not be belittled: the vital importance of 'being earnest'.