The Bearers of Psychological Properties

RODERICK M. CHISHOLM

RESUMEN

La ejemplificación de una propiedad psicológica implica lógicamente que hay una sustancia individual que posee esa propiedad. El «sujeto de experiencia» de Kant y la teoría de la sustancia como «haz de percepciones» de Hume son dos modos de enfocar la cuestión. Pero, una vez analizadas en detalle, aparecen serios inconvenientes para su aceptación. Como alternativa, en lugar de insistir en el concepto de «sustancia», el autor pone el énfasis en la noción de «propiedad» —un concepto difícilmente prescindible en la relación mente-cuerpo—, considerando fuera de duda que el hecho de la intencionalidad presupone la existencia de sustancias individuales.

DO PSYCHOLOGICAL PROPERTIES HAVE BEARERS?

Consider any conscious property — say, sensing, judging, wondering, wishing, or hoping. What kinds of thing could have such a property? If we can grasp the nature of such properties, and it is quite clear that we can, then we can see that they are properties that can be exemplified only by individual things. Judging, wondering, wishing, hoping cannot possibly be properties of states of things, or of processes. And they cannot be properties of abstract objects — of such things as properties, numbers, and relations. You can hope for rain, but no state or process or number or property or relation can hope for rain.

In other words, the fact that a certain psychological property is exemplified — the fact, say, that the property of hoping for rain is exemplified — logically implies that there is an individual substance that has that property. This is a fact about the property
itself: the property of hoping for rain is necessarily such that the only things that can
have it are individual things. And analogously for other psychological properties.

It was typical of British empiricism, particularly that of Hume, to suppose that
consciousness is essentially sensible. The objects of consciousness were thought to be
primarily such objects as sensations and their imagined or dreamed counterparts. In the
Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt, Brentano makes clear that intentional pheno-
mena need not be sensible.¹ He is aware that, even if intentional phenomena are
always accompanied by sensible or sensational phenomena, they are not themselves
sensational or sensible phenomena. And the presence of certain intentional attitudes is
at least as certain and indubitable for us as is the presence of our sensations. If I make
a certain judgment or ask myself a certain question, then I can know directly and
immediately that I make that judgment or ask that question. (This is not to say, of
course, that every intentional attitude may be the object of such certainty. Perhaps there
is a sense in which you may be said to like or to dislike a certain thing without realizing
that you like or dislike that thing.)

If I can know directly and immediately that I am making a certain judgment, then,
I can know what it is to make such a judgment. And if I know what it is to make a
judgment, then, in making the judgment I can know directly and immediately that there
is a certain individual thing – namely, the one who makes the judgment. And I, of
course, am the one who makes my judgments and does my thinking. The same is true,
obviously, of my other intentional activities – such activities as wondering, fearing,
hoping, desiring, considering, liking and disliking.

We may single out three different phases of this situation: (1) I can know that I hope
for rain; (2) as a rational being, I can conceive what it is to hope for rain; and (3), in so
doing, I can see that the only type of entity that can have the property of hoping for rain
is an individual thing or substance.

Why should anyone deny this?

KANT ON THE SUBJECT OF EXPERIENCE

Let us recall what Kant says about the subject of experience.

In discussing «the first paralogism» (the paralogism of «substantiality»), he uses
this premise:

I, as a thinking being, am the absolute subject of all my possible judgments,
and this representation of myself cannot be employed as predicate of any
other thing.²

¹ Franz Brentano, Psychologie vom empirischen Standpunkt, Band I (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Ver-
p. 88ff. This material was first published in 1874.
(The conclusion of the paralogism, which is the next sentence is: «Therefore I, as thinking being (soul), am substance.») In criticizing this reasoning, Kant says:

The 'I' is indeed in all thoughts, but there is not in this representation the least trace of intuition, distinguishing the ‘I’ from other objects of intuition 3.

Kant’s reasoning may be put this way:

1. If we have no concept of a thinking subject, then the existence of such a subject cannot be inferred from our consciousness.
2. We have a concept of a given type of thing only if we have an empirical or sensory concept of that type of thing.
3. But we have no empirical or sensory concept of the thinking subject.
4. Therefore the existence of a thinking subject cannot be inferred from our consciousness.

I have put this objection as an argument having premises and a conclusion.

Let us consider the second premise. We may call it Kant’s empirical premise. It was taken for granted by those philosophers whom we think of as being primarily «empiricists»—for example, by Hume and Mach and by the members of the Vienna Circle prior to the turn to «physicalism.»

One could, of course, object to this argument by saying that, since the conclusion is false, therefore at least one of the premises is false. But we need not beg the question in this way. For we may give an independent reason for saying that the second premise, the empirical premise, is false.

Kant exaggerated the importance of sensory content—or, if you prefer, he exaggerated the importance of the empirical. Like most other philosophers of his time, he assumed that one is aware of a thing only if one has an empirical or sensory concept of that thing. He noted that we have no empirical or sensory concept of ourselves. And therefore he concluded that we are not aware of ourselves.

He was right in saying that «our experience of the self is not accompanied by any sensible intuition of the self.» And so we may accept the first premise of his argument. He failed to notice, however, that what he says about the self can be said about other familiar concepts. It can be said, in particular, of every intentional concept. There is no sensible intuition of judging; there is no sensory intuition of wondering or doubting or hoping or questioning. I may hope that certain steps will be taken soon to improve the environment, and it may be that, in having this hope now, I have a certain set of sensory images. But these images need not be the ones that I have had at other times when I had such a hope and they need not be the ones that I have next time I have such a hope. We

3 Kemp Smith, p. 334; A350.
may say, then, of judging, wondering, hoping and questioning exactly what Kant had
said about the self. For example: «Our awareness of judging is not accompanied by any
sensory intuition of judging.» And so, too, for the other intentional phenomena. Our
awareness of intentional phenomena need not be sensory – even if such awareness is
always accompanied by some sensory experience or other.

If Kant’s reasoning about the self were sound, it would justify us in saying that there
aren’t any intentional phenomena – which is, of course, absurd. The fact of intentiona-
licity, then, provides us with this refutation of the empirical premise in Kant’s argument:

(1) We are able to conceive what it is to judge, wonder, hope, question.
(2) We have no empirical or sensory concept of what it is to judge, hope,
    wonder, question.

Therefore (3) to have a concept of a type of thing need not be to have an
empirical or sensory concept of that type of thing.

We may conclude, therefore, that Kant’s reasoning is fallacious.
But «the bundle theory of substance» still survives.

THE BUNDLE THEORY OF SUBSTANCE

The following quotation is from Hume’s Treatise of Human Nature:

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always
stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade,
love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without
a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception... I may
venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or
collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an incon-
ceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement.  

One familiar criticism of this passage goes this way: «Hume uses the substantive ‘I’
to report his findings and thus seems to presuppose the existence, not only of the
‘perceptions’ to which he refers, but also of the individual subject that has those
perceptions. Therefore, in citing his data, he gives his case away.»

A possible reply to this objection is to say that Hume didn’t really need to refer to
himself in reporting his findings. One says: «He could have said, more simply, ‘There
are only impressions,’ for what he found was no more than that.»

But – was that what he found? There are two objections to this way of reporting his
findings. They are, if you like, «phenomenological objections.»

4 A Treatise of Human Nature, Book I, Part IV, Section vi («Of Personal Identity»).
One objection is that some of his findings are negative; Hume reports what it is that he does not find. «I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception.»

One cannot report this negative finding by saying merely, «There are only perceptions.» For that is not what is found. It's one thing to say «I don't perceive any electrons»; it is quite another thing to say, «There aren't any electrons.»

The other objection is that Hume leaves out are the intentional phenomena to which we have already referred. When, as he puts it, I «enter most intimately into what I call myself,» I stumble upon believings, hopings, desirings, and other such intentional acts. And, as just emphasized, I can know by reflections that these are properties that only individuals or substances can have.

These considerations may seem enough to finish off «the bundle theory of the self. But what was originally a theory about the self has come to be generalized as a theory about individual substance.

There are many who say that the concept of an individual substance is superfluous and may be replaced by the concept of a «bundle of properties.» The concept of a «bundle of properties» is thought to remove the need for supposing that there are things that are «bearers» of properties. According to «the bundle theory,» at least as some have put it, no properties have bearers; that is to say, there are no things that have properties. This, of course, does not seem very clear. And it turns out to be somewhat difficult to formulate the bundle theory coherently.

One must do more, of course, than just say that individuals or substances are bundles of properties. How, then, is one to show – or to give good reasons for believing – that the concept of an individual thing or substance is superfluous?

No one has ever suggested a way of reducing statements that are ostensibly about individual things to statements that refer to bundles of properties. Nor has anyone even suggested a way of deciding just what bundle of properties is to do duty for any particular individual thing. Indeed, it would seem to be impossible to do this without making clandestine use of the concept of an individual thing. One could not just say «The bundle of properties that constitutes that thing is just that set of properties that the thing happens to have.» For this would be to explicate the concept of a bundle in terms of that of an individual thing. But the point of the bundle theory is to do things the other way around.

Our present interest is in the contrast between the bundle theory and what we might call substantialism – the view according to which there is an irreducible distinction between things and their properties. According to the bundle theorist, things are no more than «bundles» of properties.

The bundle theory may seem to have the advantage of being extraordinarily parsimonious ontologically. «After all,» one may argue, «it requires only that we say that there are properties. To be sure, it says that individual things are no more than bundles of properties. But bundles are merely classes, or sets. And classes or sets, as Russell showed, are reducible to properties.» But the matter is not quite so simple.
Consider a chair and a table and the two relevant bundles of properties, T and C:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>T</th>
<th>C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>being brown</td>
<td>being red</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>being a table</td>
<td>being a chair</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>having 4 legs</td>
<td>having 4 legs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>weighing 100 pounds</td>
<td>weighing 5 pounds</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The bundle theorist may now say: «Here we have just two sets of properties, T and C. We don't need to appeal to any entities other than to properties and to sets of properties. Bundle T» (he will continue) will do duty for what we think of as the table and bundle C for what we think of as the chair.»

Suppose, however, that we are concerned just with the one table T and the one chair C. The bundle theorist will say that the situation involves two relevant bundles. But it is not the case that the situation involves just two sets of properties. If we consider only the four table properties we have explicitly listed and the four chair properties, the situation we are considering involves sixty-four sets of properties. One such, set, for example is this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>D</th>
<th>E</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>being brown</td>
<td>being red</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>being a chair</td>
<td>being a table</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>weighing 100 pounds</td>
<td>weighing 5 pounds</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Perhaps one will reply that T and S are genuine bundles and that D and E are defective bundles. Not every bundle of physical properties, therefore, constitutes an individual thing. For clearly defective bundles such as D and C do not constitute physical things. What, then, is the distinction between the genuine bundles and the defective ones? The problem for the bundle-theorist is to draw this distinction without falling back upon the concept of an individual thing.

The substantivalist would say: «What makes T and C genuine bundles is the fact that each is a set of properties all belonging to the same thing.» But this answer is not available to the bundle theorist.

Shall we say that a bundle is a set of properties all occupying the same place? Then we will have given up the simple ontology with which the bundle theorist had hoped to begin. We will be saying that, in addition to properties, there are also places and that properties may be located in these places. We will have replaced the substantival concept of individual thing with the substantival concept of place. (And we will not be
able to carry out the empirical program of reducing space to the spatial relations that obtain among individual things).

What of properties themselves? Consider the property being green. It, too, is a thing that has properties. Thus it has the following properties among others: being a 1-place property; being necessarily such that it can be exemplified only if the property of being colored is exemplified. Should we say, then, that any given property is a superfluous entity that may be replaced by the bundle of its properties?

If there is no need to distinguish an individual thing from the bundle of its properties, then why must we distinguish a property from the bundle of its properties? But if we do not distinguish a property from the bundle of its properties, then shall we say that a first order property (a property of individual things) is merely a bundle of second-order properties (of properties of first-order properties)? And then shall we go on to say that third-order properties are merely bundles of second-order properties, ... and so on, ad indefinitum? What becomes, then, of our ontology?

Why would one suppose that we cannot validly distinguish a thing from its properties?

Ernst Haeckel had referred, in this connection, to what he called «the riddle of substance.» 5 Christian von Ehrenfels discusses this riddle in detail, in his Gedanken über die Religion der Zukunft (1929). 6 He seems to believe that, once we free ourselves from our linguistic prejudices, we will no longer be substantialists.

He sets forth this strikingly contemporary thought experiment:

Consider two people, Hans and Peter, who are both in a dreamless sleep. Suppose now that a person possessed with supernatural powers enters the place where they are sleeping and that without awakening them he switches their soul-substances. He sends the soul of Hans to the body of Peter, with the result that the soul of Hans now has all the properties, dispositions and memories of Peter; and analogously for the soul of Peter and the body of Hans. The two awake and neither of them notices anything different.

The supposition has the absurd consequence that «Hans is now the person who is falsely named ‘Peter.’»

To see that the presuppositions are at least questionable, we can construct a similar thought experiment for whatever entity that the anti-substantialist may countenance. Let his category be that of property.

Consider two properties, red and blue. A magician endowed with supernatu-

---

5 Ernst Haeckel, Die Welträtsel (Bonn: 1899).
eral powers switches their properties. He does this in such a way that the
original property red remains but with all the properties of the original pro-
erty blue; and in such a way that blue remains but with all the properties of
the original property red. In such a case, the property red would become the
property blue and would be falsely called «red»; and analogously for blue.

One cannot reply to this second argument without, ipso facto, undermining the first.
Properties, after all, have properties. The property red, for example, has such properties
as: being a property; being other than blue; being exemplified only in what is colored;
and being the color of ripe strawberries. The puzzle has to do, not with the concept of
substance, but with the concept of a property — a concept we can hardly dispense with
if we are concerned with the relation between mind and body.

It would seem to be clear, therefore, that the fact of intentionality presupposes the
existence of individual substances.

Roderick Chisholm
Professor of Humanities
Brown University
Providence
RHODE ISLAND 02912
(ESTADOS UNIDOS)