

Handout 3: properties and particulars

Socrates is a philosopher, is snub-nosed, is the teacher of Plato, is a corrupter of youth, and is the teacher of Plato. In other words, his *properties* (or *qualities* or *features* or *attributes*) include the property of being a philosopher, the property of being snub-nosed, the property of being a corrupter of youth, the property of being the teacher of Plato.

These properties -- the property of being a philosopher, and so on -- are *instantiated in or exemplified by* Socrates (this is just another way of saying that Socrates has these properties). Socrates himself is not instantiated in anything -- he is a *particular*, or an *individual*, not a *property*.

Properties themselves, as well as particulars, have properties. For example, *being in pain* has the property of being a mental property, *being a fairy* has the property of not being instantiated.

Stated in the terminology just explained, *substance* dualism is the view that minds or selves are non-physical particulars. Thus the substance dualist (e.g., Descartes) must deny that minds are, for example, brains of a certain kind. But the *attribute* or *property* dualist (see handout 4 on dualism) need not deny this. According to her, the mental properties exemplified by minds are not physical properties. And that is consistent with the view that minds just are brains.

The sorts of properties mentioned so far are *monadic* properties: they only need one thing to be instantiated. But there are also polyadic (e.g. dyadic, triadic, etc.) properties, sometimes called *relations*. Socrates and Plato jointly exemplify various relations, for example the relation *being a student of*, or *being born earlier than* (Plato is a student of Socrates and Socrates was born earlier than Plato).

A property P is an *essential* property of *x* just in case it is impossible for *x* to exist without having P. So, for example, *being a philosopher* is not an essential property of Socrates, because he could have existed without being a philosopher (he might have been a plumber). However, *being odd* is an essential property of the number seven, *being trilateral* is an essential property of all triangles, and (somewhat controversially) *being human* is an essential property of Socrates.

A property P is an *intrinsic* property just in case: if an object *x* has P, then necessarily any *perfect duplicate* of *x* has P. (A perfect duplicate of your copy of *Mind: A Brief Introduction* is a "molecule-for-molecule replica" of your copy.) If property P is not intrinsic it is *extrinsic*. Being red, having mass 1kg, being square, being in pain are plausibly intrinsic; being Fred's copy of *Mind: A Brief Introduction*, having weight 1kg, being a student at MIT, being a parent, are extrinsic. Putnam's "twin earth" thought experiment is often thought to show that properties like believing that water is wet are extrinsic (see Chalmers 3C, and Searle, 126-7; we will come to this later). (For an indication of how complicated the discussion of the intrinsic/extrinsic distinction has become, see the Stanford Encyclopedia entry on [Intrinsic vs. Extrinsic Properties](#).)

In fact, the very existence of properties is a matter of philosophical dispute. Those who hold that there are no properties (or other abstract objects) are called *nominalists*. (A famous paper defending nominalism is "[Steps toward a constructive nominalism](#)", by Nelson Goodman and W. V. Quine (*Journal of Symbolic Logic*, 1947).) Fortunately, for the purposes of this course we can just speak with the vulgar and assume that properties do exist.