Proposal Abstract

Abstract:

My summer project is to complete the first part of a larger research program. The aim of the larger project is to build fruitful interdisciplinary connections between two areas of scholarly inquiry: metaphysics and environmental ethics. Although part-whole theorizing plays an important role in both of these discussions, they have rarely, if ever, been put into contact. This summer I will elucidate a prominent view (trope theory) about the metaphysics of parts and wholes, and draw out its relevance for the moral significance of our relationship to the natural world. This work will culminate in several articles and, ultimately, a book. My work will directly bear on issues concerning the metaphysical and moral significance of human beings and the natural world. Because of this, completing my summer project would enable me to be a competitive applicant for several sources of external funding.

Key words: Metaphysics, Tropes, Parts, Wholes, Environmental Ethics
Proposal Description

My goal for Summer 2010 is to complete the first stage of a three-stage, multi-year research project. Let me begin by describing the larger project. In broad terms, it involves drawing new and constructive connections between (a) the part/whole theorizing found in contemporary metaphysics, and especially trope theory, and (b) the part/whole theorizing found in contemporary views about how human beings relate to the environment. (I’ll say more about these views below.) The larger project is inherently interdisciplinary, as it involves putting two different scholarly discourses into conversation with each other. Although these areas of theoretical inquiry are of significant relevance to each other, they have rarely, if ever, been put into intricate and symbiotic contact. There is vital work to be done here, and fruitful links to be made—many of which bear directly on urgent moral issues, such as those concerning how we ought to think about and interact with non-human animals, inanimate life, ecosystems, and the natural world more generally. Some environmental ethicists, for example, have argued that we cannot understand our own moral significance as individuals unless we understand the way in which we are parts of a larger, ecological whole.

As the first stage in my larger project, my work this summer will consist in elucidating the metaphysics of parts and wholes, and drawing out its relevance for environmental ethics. This work will culminate in a comprehensive monograph on a prominent view within contemporary metaphysics. This view, trope theory, is a widely influential attempt to solve a number of perennial philosophical problems. These problems are metaphysical in scope and can be expressed by questions like the following: Is reality fundamentally interconnected or unified? What is the relationship between a thing and its properties (e.g., an electron and its charge)? What sorts of things are capable of surviving change? Are there “emergent” objects—that is, objects that are not merely reducible to their parts? Is a human person an emergent entity? Trope theory is an innovated attempt to answer these questions in a unified way. Very briefly, the theory says that the relationship between a concrete object and its properties is to be understood in terms of the relationship between a whole and its parts. The properties of an object are, in some special sense, parts of the object. For example, an apple is red in virtue of having redness as a part. However, on this view, each red object has its very own redness. That is, there is a unique redness property for every red object. In terms of the history of philosophy, this view is aligned with Aristotle and in opposition to Plato. Crucially, however, trope theory offers a well-developed account of parts and wholes—an account that is relevant to the underdeveloped part-whole theories that underwrite certain views in environmental ethics.

I am currently teaching a graduate seminar on trope theory. I am using this opportunity to do some initial writing for what will later become journal articles and book chapters. With the aid of PESCA funding, I would like to devote my time this summer to bringing this writing project to fruition in a manuscript on trope theory. During the Fall semester, I will solicit feedback on the manuscript. This will involve sending parts of it to conferences and journals, as well as having it read by colleagues. By early 2011, I will send a polished manuscript to Cambridge University Press’s series Cambridge Studies in Philosophy, edited by Sydney Shoemaker.
The book on tropes will culminate the first stage of my larger project. Although this book will stand on its own, it will also serve as a prelude for the second-stage of my larger project. It will serve this purpose in two ways. First, completing the summer project will put me in a position to compete for external funding to support the rest of my larger project. (I’ll say more about this below.) Second, the scholarly outcome of my summer work will be a detailed metaphysical framework that I will then build upon in the second stage. In particular, the second stage will involve research and writing on metaphysical issues that arise within the context of environmental ethics. This will also culminate in a book. In fact, I have been invited to submit a manuscript on this topic by the series editor for Oxford University Press’s series on *Environmental Ethics & Science Policy*. Building upon the second stage, the third stage will involve research on issues concerning food ethics. The aim of this project will be to situate (i) ethical issues concerning the production, distribution and consumption of food within (ii) a broader framework of environmental ethics (and especially within the metaphysically enhanced perspective which I will develop in the second-stage). This will also culminate in a book—one which I have been asked to write for the Oxford University Press’s *Philosophy in Action* series, edited by Walter Sinnott-Armstrong.

I anticipate that my research during the grant period in Summer 2010 will result in several important outcomes—conference presentations, articles and ultimately a book. I expect this work to be of interest not only to scholars working in metaphysics, but also to those who work in environmental ethics. I also expect the articles and book to have a significant impact on my field—contemporary metaphysics—in which there is a recent resurgence of interest in trope theory. This interest is evidenced by recent and upcoming conferences where trope theory was or will be a central issue.¹ Despite all this interest, however, there is no recent book-length treatment of trope theory. To date, there are only three monographs on trope theory, published in 1990, 1995, and 2002.² None of these is comprehensive in scope. None addresses recent developments in metaphysics. And none makes trope theory relevant to environmental ethics. Because my book will do these things, it is likely to become a watershed, setting the stage for future discussions of trope theory and starting new and pivotal discussions about the bearing of trope theory on environmental issues.

I am confident that I have the capability and credibility to succeed in my aims for this summer. My confidence is based on several factors. First, I recently wrote my dissertation on trope

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theory, and did so under the advisement of Michael Loux and Peter van Inwagen, who are recognized authorities on the topic. Both have spoken highly of my work and its impact potential. Second, I have been invited to present my work on trope theory at the upcoming Second International Workshop on the Problem of Universals, Pisa, Italy, July 2010. Third, I have been asked to edit a book on an intimately related topic—substance—which will include new contributions by leading figures in my field. And fourth, on the basis of my expertise and previous work, I have been personally asked to submit manuscripts to Oxford University Press, one for each of the last two stages of my larger project.

PESCA summer funding will free me to devote myself exclusively to working on trope theory and its bearing on environmental ethics. Because of this, PESCA support will put me in a position to submit competitive applications for several external grants in the Fall semester. I would be in a competitive position to apply for an American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) Fellowship, a National Endowment for Humanities (NEH) Research Grant, a National Humanities Center Fellowship, a Fellowship at the Center for Philosophy of Religion at the University of Notre Dame, and a research grant from the John Templeton Foundation.

Beginning in August, for example, the Templeton Foundation will begin accepting funding proposals for research on the theme of “The Science and Significance of Complexity”. This theme is a 2010 Funding Priority for Templeton, the purpose of which is to “encourage researchers who are focused on specific levels of the natural hierarchy—from quantum mechanics to...ecosystems...”. My proposed project for this summer bears directly and exactly on the metaphysical status of ecosystems. Thus, completing my summer project would enable me submit a competitive application to the Templeton Foundation, as well as the other agencies noted above. In sum, I’m confident that PESCA funding will bear significant fruit, not only this summer, but also in the years to come.

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3 Both have written letters of recommendation for me (for employment purposes). I would be happy to request copies of these for your consideration.

4 Redacted

5 For details, please see http://www.templeton.org/what_we_fund/2010_funding_priorities/the_science_and_significance_of_complexity/index.html