

Defending Modal Platonism: reply to Builes

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Abstract

In a recent article, David Builes (forthcoming, *Analysis*) argues that one should not try to combine a Platonic account of properties with the recently popular grounding theory of powers, as proposed in Tugby's *Putting Properties First*. According to Builes, Aristotelian or nominalist theories of properties are better placed to meet the explanatory demands of the grounding theory of powers. In this reply, I cast doubt on Builes's argument.

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1. Platonism and the grounding theory of powers

The grounding theory of powers is a metaphysical view about the relationship between properties and dispositions, such as the property of sphericity and the disposition to roll.¹ As the name suggests, the grounding theory says that the relationship between properties and dispositions is one of metaphysical grounding, whereby properties ground dispositions. Grounding is an asymmetric metaphysical relationship of determination such that the existence of a grounded entity is explained and necessitated by the entity (or entities) that ground it. However, according to the grounding theory of powers, if properties are to explain the dispositions of things, then properties had better not *themselves* have a dispositional essence, as they do within the rival 'pure powers' theory. And it had also better not be the case that properties are so-called 'bare quiddities',² for then it would be mysterious as to why certain properties ground the dispositions that they do. The upshot is that grounding theorists typically view properties as having a non-dispositional, *qualitative* essence.³ Qualitative properties are often said to be 'thick', in the sense that there is more to their identity than their distinctness from other

1 In what follows I use the terms 'power' and 'disposition' interchangeably.

2 Bare quiddities are analogous to bare particulars. If a property is a bare quiddity, then all that can be said about its identity is that it is identical with itself and distinct from all other properties.

3 A clarification: in metaphysics the notion of a qualitative property is sometimes contrasted with that of a quantitative property. But that is not how the terms are being used in the current context. Both quantitative properties and, say, mental qualia could count as qualities, insofar as they are non-dispositional.

properties. Grounding theorists thus regard properties as non-bare qualities that metaphysically explain the dispositions of their possessors.

What about Platonism? This is a form of realism about properties that treats them as universals.⁴ Moreover, Platonism maintains that universals are abstract, non-spatiotemporal entities that exist independently of their concrete instantiations. The Platonic thesis by itself is neutral as to whether universals have a qualitative, dispositional or bare essence. However, in a recent book-length work (Tugby 2022), I argue for a combination of Platonism and the grounding theory of powers, and therefore favour a qualitative conception of universals.

According to my theory of properties (Tugby 2022), Platonism and the grounding theory of powers are both attractive because of the work they can do in providing metaphysical foundations for various kinds of modality. Amongst other things, Platonism provides the resources to account for unmanifested dispositions, uninstantiated laws and so-called ‘alien’ properties, whilst the grounding theory of powers provides an explanatory theory of natural modality that avoids various problems facing rival accounts. It is for these reasons that I advocate for the combination of Platonism and the grounding theory of powers – a theory I call *Modal Platonism*. According to this view, the dispositions of concrete things metaphysically depend on the Platonic qualities that those things instantiate.

However, one might wonder whether the apparent benefits of Modal Platonism are too good to be true. Builes (forthcoming) argues that Platonism and the grounding theory of powers do not work well together. Hence Builes thinks that grounding theorists should adopt either an Aristotelian or nominalist approach to properties, whilst (presumably) Platonists should avoid the grounding theory of powers.

2. Builes’s core argument

Builes’s main argument is that the common motivating examples offered by grounding theorists do not sit well with Platonism. For example, the structural property of sphericity is often used as an example of a non-dispositional quality that helps to metaphysically explain the disposition to roll that is had by, say, a billiard ball. This is a motivating example because it seems we can intuitively grasp that certain structural properties constrain certain dispositions for movement (Johansson 1997, Kimpton-Nye 2018, Tugby 2022). According to my analysis, what we are grasping in such cases is the fact that the relevant properties necessarily stand in certain modal relations (Tugby 2022: chs. 3, 10).⁵

However, if sphericity is ultimately an abstract, non-spatiotemporal entity, as Platonism maintains, how exactly is the explanation from qualities

4 Unless stated otherwise, the terms ‘property’ and ‘universal’ will be used interchangeably.

5 Other modal relations in Modal Platonism include relations of compatibility, incompatibility and necessitation (Tugby 2022: ch. 10).

to dispositions supposed to work? The problem, according to Builes, is that ‘Not only is the Platonic property of *Sphericity* not spherical, it has *no geometrical properties at all*, because it is entirely non-spatial’ (Builes forthcoming). Similarly, when discussing a person’s being in pain and the associated pain-avoidance dispositions, Builes remarks that

We can easily understand why that person would want to engage in avoidance behaviours if *they* are in pain, but clearly the abstract Platonic property of *Painfulness* is not in pain! (Builes forthcoming)

If such qualities are abstract and non-spatiotemporal, and do not *themselves* have qualities, how are we to make sense of their explanatory roles?

3. *The details: formulating Modal Platonism*

Builes’s complaints arise from his formulation of Modal Platonism, which is applied to the property of *Sphericity*:

S is disposed to roll *because* (i) S instantiates the Platonic property of *Sphericity* and (iii) the Platonic property of *Sphericity* stands in the relation of dispositional directedness to the Platonic property of *Rolling*. Furthermore, (iii) holds *because* (ii) the Platonic property of *Sphericity* is Q. (Builes forthcoming)

It should be acknowledged, firstly, that some Platonists would question Builes’s example if they thought that properties such as *Sphericity* are not genuine universals. As I have previously acknowledged, Modal Platonism is consistent with a very sparse conception of properties, one that commits only to the sorts of properties that arise, or could arise, in fundamental physics (Tugby 2022: 5). Perhaps the physical world will turn out to be like a Lewisian mosaic: there are instantiations of fundamental point-sized qualities, arranged in certain way, and nothing else. In that case, there would be no structurally complex universals to account for.

Nonetheless, it is true that other notable Platonists, such as Berman (2020), accept a wide range of properties at different scales. According to Berman (2020: ch. 6) properties at different scales are structures or parameters that can aptly be described by the differential equations of science. This suggests one possible way of understanding the ‘thick’ nature of sphericity in Platonic terms, namely, that it is an abstract structure that is best described in quantitative terms by the following equation: with radius r and centre point (x_0, y_0, z_0) , a sphere is the locus of points (x, y, z) whereby $(x - x_0)^2 + (y - y_0)^2 + (z - z_0)^2 = r^2$. I do not have the space to articulate and defend Berman’s version of Platonism here,⁶ but clearly it would be beneficial if Modal Platonism

6 For further discussion of Berman’s scientific brand of Platonism, see Marmodoro 2023 and Berman 2023.

were compatible with both abundant and sparse approaches to properties. Let us therefore grant Builes's example and take a closer look at his interpretation of Modal Platonism.

The main source of the problem posed by Builes is condition (ii) in the quotation, where the qualitativity of *Sphericity* comes into play. Something like condition (ii) is needed because, as we saw earlier, it is important that Platonic properties are qualitative (rather than, say, bare), so that the proposed explanation of dispositional directedness can get off the ground. However, it is not clear how to interpret (ii) as formulated by Builes. In natural language, the term 'is' is ambiguous between the 'is' of predication and the 'is' of identity. When expressing the complaints described above, Builes appears to assume that (ii) must be predicative, expressing a further property 'Q' that *Sphericity* 'possesses'. Hence, Builes says: 'The only obvious candidate is that "Q" should be "spherical"'. In other words, the relevant quality possessed by *Sphericity* is that it is spherical' ([forthcoming](#)). In short, Builes assumes that a Modal Platonist needs to be able to say that (for example) *Sphericity* is spherical in order for it to ground the relevant dispositional relations, and then criticizes the theory on the grounds that such a claim is implausible within a Platonic context.

Builes is surely right that it does not make much sense to say that *Sphericity* is itself spherical. If Modal Platonism had to rely on such a claim, then it would not be very plausible, and not only for the reasons that Builes provides. Platonists of any stripe should be reluctant to accept that some universal *F* is *F*, or that *F* is *G*, in the sense of *predication*. This idea of 'self-predication', as many Plato commentators call it, lies at the heart of the Third Man regress argument found in *Parmenides* and elsewhere.⁷ According to [Taylor \(1916\)](#) and others, the core lesson to be learnt from the Third Man argument is that 'though we may say that a white surface *has* whiteness, we must not say that white colour, or whiteness, *has* white colour or whiteness' ([Taylor 1916](#): 254). Instead, a statement such as '*F* is *F*' or '*F* is *G*' should be interpreted in terms of the 'is' of identity: 'White *has* not itself a colour; it *is* a colour' ([Taylor 1916](#): 254).

Taking this on board, we should read condition (ii) above as an identity claim: the universal *Sphericity* is quality Q (i.e., a certain type of structure, as described above), in the sense of identity. And then the core idea of Modal Platonism is that it is in virtue of this identity, of *what Sphericity is*, that it is able to ground the relevant modal relations. If this is the most plausible reading of condition (ii), as I believe it is, then Builes's objection rests on a faulty interpretation of Modal Platonism.

7 To illustrate the regress: if object *a* is white and whiteness is also white, then by the Theory of Forms' own logic, there must be some further universal that *a* and whiteness have in common. And if that further universal is also white (or has some other property), we are committed to yet another universal, and so on ad infinitum.

Admittedly in previous work I have sometimes spoken of universals *having* a qualitative essence.⁸ And one might naturally think of essences as further properties. However, it would be a mistake to interpret essence claims in this way, not least because of the Aristotelian Essence Regress argument. If we suppose that the essences of entities are further properties, then presumably those properties will themselves have to have essences, which commits us to further properties, and so on ad infinitum. The faulty assumption here is that essence is a property. The essence of an entity is not some further property but is simply *what the entity is*, in the sense of identity (see e.g. [Marmodoro 2009](#) and [Lowe 2013](#): 144–45).

4. Aristotelian quibbles

There is also a sense in which, if Builes's objection holds, it would prove too much as far as Aristotelian grounding theories are concerned. [Builes \(forthcoming\)](#) rightly acknowledges that Aristotelianism is a broad church. However, the problem is that most of the well-known versions of Aristotelianism are likely to face Builes's objection. Builes complains that a Platonic universal cannot play the relevant grounding role because it cannot itself have a quality like that of being spherical. But the same could be said of various kinds of Aristotelian property. For example, so-called *modes*, which are particularized properties of substances, arguably do not have a spatial location. For it does not seem grammatically correct to say that, for example, something's weight or beauty is 'at', 'on', or 'in' that thing (see [Moltmann forthcoming](#): §2). Moreover, there are good reasons for denying that Aristotelian *universals* have a spatial location ([Lowe 1998](#): ch.7, 2006: ch. 6). For instance, if universal *F* is located where its possessor *a* is, and *F* is also located where its possessor *b* is, it follows under some seemingly uncontroversial assumptions about co-location that *a* must be located where *b* is, which is absurd ([Lowe 2006](#): 99). But if, as Lowe urges, Aristotelian universals are not located, then such universals will not be the kinds of things that can themselves be spherical. Thus Platonism and well-known forms of Aristotelianism are in the same boat in this regard. To say of any mode or Aristotelian universal that it is (say) spherical is, very plausibly, to commit a metaphysical error.

5. A note about nominalism

What about nominalist versions of the grounding theory of powers? Nominalist versions of the grounding theory of powers are largely unexplored

8 For example, when introducing the notion of qualitativity in my book [Tugby 2022](#): §1.2.2, I opened by saying 'According to Modal Platonism, universals have a qualitative rather than dispositional essence' (2022: 7).

as far as I know, and I welcome further work on them.⁹ An obvious advantage of a nominalist approach is that it will have less ontological baggage than Modal Platonism. However, for current purposes I will merely note that it is far from clear that nominalist frameworks have the resources to provide substantial metaphysical explanations for the dispositions of things, and therefore it is far from clear that they could deliver a genuine grounding theory. Elsewhere I have pointed out some of the difficulties that various forms of nominalism are going to face when it comes to explaining the dispositions of things (Tugby 2021: §8). For example, it is difficult to see how merely being the member of a particular set (as in set nominalism), or resembling certain other particulars (as in resemblance nominalism), can provide an adequate metaphysical explanation for why an object is disposed to behave in a certain way (Tugby 2021: 141–42).

What this might suggest is that nominalist grounding theorists should adopt ‘ostrich’ nominalism, according to which some predicative facts are primitive (Builes forthcoming: n. 8). However, it is again difficult to see how an ‘ostrich’ grounding theory of powers is going to work. As I and many other theorists interpret grounding, it is a *worldly* relationship between *entities*. But, for the ostrich nominalists, *properties are not entities*. Moreover, it is difficult to see how dispositions can be metaphysically grounded by the mere existence of the objects that bear them; for in cases where the dispositions are contingent, those dispositions will not be metaphysically necessitated by the existence of their bearers.

In response, ostrich nominalists might try to develop a more lightweight notion of grounding, such as one that can hold contingently or one that concerns only the explanatory relationships between *propositions* expressing properties and dispositions. Fair enough. But one cannot help thinking that metaphysically lightweight theories like these will be so different to the existing grounding theories of powers that they hardly deserve the same name. And it is not even clear why an ostrich nominalist should want to provide any kind of grounding theory of dispositions or powers in the first place. As noted above, the hallmark of ostrich nominalism is that many predicative facts are taken to be metaphysically primitive. So it is surely an available option for ostrich nominalists to simply accept that at least some dispositional predicative facts are metaphysically primitive. Indeed, one would have thought that this view of disposition facts is more in line with the ‘ostrich’ ethos.¹⁰

9 Other notable nominalist approaches to powers include those of Whittle (2009) and Vogt (2022).

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