Relations and Idealism:
On Some Arguments of Hochberg against Trope Nominalism

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ABSTRACT

In a recent article, Herbert Hochberg portrays my ontological position, that of a trope nominalist who is sceptical about relational tropes, as deviating into idealism. Since there are few philosophical views I find more repugnant than idealism, I must either resist the accusation or recant. I choose to resist, by showing how relational tropes are not needed as truth-makers for a wide range of truths, and raising the real possibility that they may not be needed at all, without lapsing into either monism or idealism.

Ludwig van Beethoven

1. The Abyss

Herbert Hochberg is an ontologist. So am I. Like his admired Moore and Russell, he is a staunch realist and a pluralist. So am I. By ‘realism’ I understand the view that at least one thing exists independently of any minds. By ‘pluralism’ I understand the view that there are at least two things that exist in metaphysical independence from one another. He considers himself a logical atomist, or close to one, or I think he does. So do I. It was reading his 1978 book Thought, Fact and Reference: the Origins and Ontology of Logical Atomism† that first convinced me that logical atomism need not be regarded as a museum ontology but as a living option. He considers it important to understand how one’s ontology fits into a systematic theory of thinking, truth, reference and predication. So do I. He considers any form of idealism as a more or less unmitigated cognitive evil. So do I. I would give up practically any theoretical position rather than be pushed into the abyss of accepting idealism.

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† Hochberg 1978.
So it comes as something of a shock to find a recent paper of his, ‘Nominalism and Idealism’, contending that my long-time adherence to trope nominalism, alongside my more recent and relatively sceptical views on real relations, push me into or at least close to the idealist camp, either the monistic absolute idealism of Bradley, or maybe the even worse subjective idealism of Berkeley or transcendental idealism of Kant. If the price of nominalism is really idealism, of any sort, it is too high, and I will willingly row back. But I am not (yet) convinced, and will try to explain why his criticisms do not (yet) seem to force me into such an unpalatable position.

2. Alternative Ontological Assays

Let’s work with a simple example: a single instance of the famous opening four-note motif of Beethoven’s fifth symphony, played very precisely on a piano in the octave above middle C: three quaver Gs followed by a minim E♭ with fermata. The score of these two bars is this paper’s motto. Call the four actual sounds produced n1, n2, n3 and n4. It does not particularly matter whether we consider the physical sounds or the phenomenal sounds as perceived, I’ll just talk of the four notes. Here are some salient truths about them. They are four events.

They together take about 3 seconds from the onset of n1 to the dying away of n4. n1 is before n2, this before n3, and this before n4. The time interval between the onsets of n1 and n2 is the same as that between the onsets of n2 and n3, and n3 and n4. The final note n4 lasts (let us say) six times longer than the other three. The first three are alike in pitch or frequency (c. 392 Hz at concert pitch) as well as timbre and volume, the last is a major third lower in pitch than the others (c. 311 Hz), but the same in volume, let us assume.

Here is how Hochberg accounts for these kinds of truths. There are four particulars, the four notes. Each is a unique individual with a location in time (and space, but we will not consider the spatial aspect). Each has a number of universal properties: the first three are G4 in pitch, the last E♭4, they have determinate volumes, timbres, and durations. They stand in several universal relations: n1 is before n2, that before n3 and so on. n4 is six times longer than the other three. Since the properties and relations are universal, they need to be linked to the particulars by exemplification in the case of the properties, and by something like ordered exemplification in the case of the relations. These links give rise to a number of facts: the fact that n1 is a G4, the fact that n2 is a G4, that n4 is after n2, that n4 is six times longer than n1,

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2 Hochberg 2013.
3 Hochberg contends (2013, 231 f.) that the case for relational truth-makers is more compelling in the case of experience than in the case of “external reality”, but I am afraid I fail to see why.
that n1 is a major third higher than n4, and so on. There are also other more logico-
philosophical facts, such as that n1 is distinct from n2, that n3 exists (occurs), that n2 and n3
are equal in pitch, that n1 and n4 are unequal in pitch, and so on.

This way of looking at the four notes and what holds of them is as close to ontological
orthodoxy as anything is in the contentious environment of analytic metaphysics. Minor
matters aside, it is shared by many metaphysicians, so I shall call it the Standard View.
Semantically, the four ontological categories of things, properties, relations (together:
attributes) and facts correspond roughly to the four syntactic categories respectively of
(singular) terms, monadic and polyadic predicates, and (true) sentences. Terms denote things,
predicates indicate attributes, sentences signify and are made true or false by facts. Predicates
are truly saturated by terms when the things denoted by the terms exemplify the attributes
indicated by the predicates. The details may vary slightly, but that is the general picture, and
a very neat and satisfying one it is. For a logical atomist, this picture applies only at the level
of atomic sentences: logically complex sentences get to be true or false in a way derivative
from the atomic cases. Some philosophers, such as Russell and Hochberg, think you need
negative facts to account for the truth of some negative sentences, some, such as Russell and
Armstrong, think you need general facts to account for the truth of some general sentences.
Accepting negative facts may at a pinch count as logical atomism; accepting general facts
constitutes a derogation.

There is a well-known metaphysical conundrum facing this picture, which is the
Bradley regress. If exemplification is treated as a regular relation alongside the others, a
vicious infinite regress results. Proponents of the Standard View typically counter this by
denying that exemplification is a regular or normal relation: it is a nexus or tie, which ties
entities without requiring an additional supernexus to tie it to its terms. I accept the
legitimacy of this kind of move, in some version or other. The principal reason is that any
ontology which gets down to fundamentals will face the threat of regresses, and there will
have to be some pattern-disrupting and regress-blocking move of a similar nature somewhere,
whether it consists in an anomalous special case like exemplification, or a refusal to let a
certain kind of statement count as genuinely significant.

Now I will give my own ontological assay of the Beethoven example, as far as it
goes. Disregarding the general dependence of sounds on a physical medium, the notes are
complex individuals composed of a number of successive shorter parts or phases, each of
which is itself constituted as what it is by a number of factors which exist together by virtue
of a nexus which for now we will call compresence. Each of these factors is a trope, a
metaphysically slight individual incapable of existence except in company with others. There are tropes of pitch, volume and timbre. Physically speaking, these are not simple, but we will ignore that so as not to get bogged down in unnecessary complications. On a first level of analysis, we can say a note is made up of tropes of volume, pitch, timbre and duration, tied together as compresent. The tropes are interdependent: each one needs the others, so that even though they are distinct, they are not “wholly distinct”. Together, these interdependent tropes either comprise the whole note, or they comprise a metaphysical kernel, nucleus or essence of the note, to which attach more externally other tropes jointly sufficient to constitute the whole note. The note is a two-stage trope bundle held together by nexus of dependence.\(^4\) Let the pitch, volume, timbre and duration tropes of each note be named, \(P(n1)\), \(V(n1)\), \(T(n1)\), \(D(n1)\) and so on for the others. Leaving smaller parts and their tropes aside, this gives us sixteen individuals in addition to the four notes. Each trope is like some tropes and unlike others, so \(P(n1)\), \(P(n2)\) and \(P(n3)\) are alike but each is unlike \(P(n4)\). \(D(n4)\) is six times as long as \(D(n1)\), and so on. It is the tropes which ground or make true certain monadic predications about the notes: \(P(n1)\) make it true that \(n1\) is a G4, \(P(n4)\) that \(n4\) is an E♭4, \(D(n4)\) makes it true that \(n4\) lasts for two seconds, and so on. That takes care of several crucial true monadic predications: relational ones require more preparation and will come up anon.

3. First Comparison

Of the two views, prima facie the Trope View requires fewer basic categories than the Standard View. It has tropes, the Standard View has things, attributes and facts. Where facts are the truth-makers in the Standard View, tropes do that job on Trope View.\(^5\) Because tropes are particulars, they are not shared across different instances or cases as universals are, and so do not need to be inserted into facts or states of affairs to provide truth-makers. Things (roughly, but only roughly, substances on the Aristotelian view) are obtained from tropes by bundling, using a nexus, and dispensing with a bare particular or substrate as we find in Locke or Bergmann. Each view has one nexus, exemplification in the case of the Standard View, foundation or rigid ontological dependence in the Trope View.

So on a first run through, it looks as though trope nominalism is ontologically leaner than the Standard View, other things being equal. However, in the light of the question of relational truths, other things are probably far from equal. Comparison of rival ontological assays is often a swings-and-roundabouts affair, a balance of considerations. One view

\(^4\) Vide Simons 1994.
\(^5\) Mulligan, Simons and Smith 1984 advances the case for tropes as truth-makers.
clearly wins out over another if the inferior view can be shown to be inconsistent, or give rise to an insoluble vicious infinite regress. That is rare. If of two views one fails to adequately account for facts the other does account for, then in that regard the former is relatively worse off. So far the Trope View looks better off, but its ontological leanness may come at a price, that of inadequacy or inability to account for certain facts. Among those are relational truths, which need more consideration. Recall that Ockham’s Razor (in its Irish formulation)⁶ is not an absolute maxim: it says that entities are not to be multiplied beyond necessity. If disjoint kinds of entity E and F (adequately) explain phenomena P then if E alone explain P then posit E but do not posit F. Conversely, Chatton’s Anti-Razor⁷ says that entities are to be multiplied where necessary. If E and F explain P but E do not, then posit F in addition to E. If the Trope View cannot adequately explain the relational truths about our example, then it needs to be augmented or abandoned. If the Trope View entails idealism, then I regard that as precluding explanatory adequacy. It is not contradictory or regressive, but dire nonetheless, and on that I totally agree with Hochberg.

4. Similarity: the Only A and B Problem
Trope theorists account for the similarities among things not by invoking a universal which they commonly exemplify but by adverting to similarity among tropes. Since complex things can be similar in some ways and dissimilar in others, the most straightforward way to account for this as a nominalist is to posit tropes alongside the complex things. Attempts to do without tropes and explain criss-crossing similarities solely by means of similarities among the concrete things (resemblance nominalism) invariably fall short of adequacy or end up invoking nominalistically unacceptable entities such as sets and/or possible worlds.⁸

There is an argument, made famous by Russell, but formulated earlier by Moore and before him by Husserl, to the effect that trying to use similarity in place of universals is futile, because either one has to recognize similarity as a universal, or if one attempts to replace similarity the universal relation by a congeries of similarity tropes, it starts an infinite regress because these tropes have themselves to be similar. It has been claimed the regress exists but is not vicious.⁹ However my own view is that in general the best way to stop regresses is to not to let them start, and in this case that means not positing relational tropes of similarity.

⁶ The first known published formulation of the classic non sunt multiplicanda entia sine necessitate is due to the Irishman John Punch (1629); its appellation as ‘Ockham’s Razor’ is due to the Irishman William Rowan Hamilton (1852). Vide Thorburn 1918.
⁷ Keele 2014.
⁸ As in Rodriguez-Pereyra 2002.
⁹ Küng 1967, 68 ff.
What then accounts for the (exact) similarity between two similar tropes, say A and B, of whatever kind? Hochberg would say: the facts of each exemplifying one and the same property. I say, the mere existence of A and B. Since A and B are tropes, they are ontologically “thin” and they are how they are essentially. Contrast a “thick” or substantial particular, which in many respects is as it is not essentially but accidentally, and that by virtue of happening to have a certain trope inhere in it. This tomato is red because a certain redness trope inhere in it. It could have been and indeed once was green, but over time the bundle constituting the tomato lost some tropes and gained others. Returning to the tropes, in truth-maker terms, the truth-maker for ‘A is exactly similar to B’ is the pair, A and B. Their existence (being the individuals they are) suffices for that truth, because given that they both exist, they cannot not be similar. Two dissimilar tropes would not be A and B. Their existence suffices for the truth of the predication, so they are (jointly, between them) its plural truth-maker. We do not need an additional relational trope of similarity holding between A and B, nor should we have one, as it would set us off on Russell’s regress. Importantly however for present purposes, A and B are similar and would be similar whether or not any person or language designated them and predicated similarity of them. That much is mind-independent. There is no additional entity, the similarity of A and B, besides A and B: none is needed and none is wanted.

Now consider the different truth that A is different from B, A ≠ B, A and B are two. Once again I claim that the mere existence of A and B suffices for this. Hochberg considers this is illegitimate, because ‘A exists and B exists’ does not logically entail ‘A ≠ B’, so the existence of A and of B can only suffice for the truth of ‘A ≠ B’ if it is presupposed that A ≠ B, which is self-defeating or question-begging. I agree that ‘A ≠ B’ does not follow logically from ‘A exists and B exists’, because there are counterinstances: ‘Eric Blair exists and George Orwell exists’ is true, but ‘Eric Blair ≠ George Orwell’ is false. But I never claimed that ‘A ≠ B’ follows logically from ‘A exists and B exists’. The point turns not on logical form but on what the singular terms ‘A’ and ‘B’ actually denote. Were they to denote one and the same individual that individual would clearly not make it true that A ≠ B. I agree that it is because they denote different things that ‘A ≠ B’ is true. But I do not think it is circular or question-begging. It is no more than an application of Aristotle’s wise dictum that things are not so because it is true that they are so, but that it is true that they are so because they are so.10 The directionality of the ‘because’ goes beyond the mere Tarski-equivalence of ‘A ≠ B’

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10 “It is not because we think truly that you are pale, that you are pale, but because you are pale we who say this have the truth.” *Metaphysics* Book 9, ch. 10, 1051 b 6–9.
and ‘“A ≠ B” is true’ and is a cornerstone of the realism inherent in my theory of truth-making. One point about truth-making is that it does not coincide with truth-conditions. The truth-conditions of a statement have to do with its meaning, but its truth-makers by and large do not. The truth-makers for ‘John has a cold’ are opaque to a competent English-speaker in a way the truth-conditions are not, and concern the presence of rhinoviruses in John’s upper respiratory tract, causing the familiar symptoms by which we identify colds, but having no part in that term’s meaning. In the case of the admittedly two objects A and B, we need no further objects to make it true that they are different than they themselves. What that difference consists in logically may be a logical matter – their being discernible in some respect – but that too is a matter of truth-conditions, assuming Leibniz’s Laws to hold (as I think they do).

It needs to be emphasized that the search for truth-makers for truths is not linguistic or conceptual analysis, nor is it a search for truth-conditions, nor is it a form of reduction. If I say as in this case that ‘A ≠ B’ is true because A exists and B exists, this is not an analysis of ‘A ≠ B’ as meaning or reducible to or equivalent to or paraphrasable as ‘A exists and B exists’. There is a quick knock-down proof that this is not the enterprise. Take a true singular existential proposition ‘A exists’. What makes it true is A. It is because A exists that ‘A exists’ is true (Aristotle again). But the sentence ‘A exists’ is not in any way equivalent to the singular term ‘A’, obviously. The object A is still the truth-maker for ‘A exists’: that is the peculiarity of singular existential sentences. So while in some cases (as here, as in sentences of difference, similarity, and a few others) we can get enough of a clue from the sentence to work out what its truth-makers must be, that is the exception rather than the rule, and it is so because these are in one or another way “formal” sentences, either formal-logical or formal-ontological. Picking up on a key insight of the young Wittgenstein, the logical constants do not represent,\(^{11}\) and nor, we might add, do ontological constants: identity, part–whole, dependence, (exact) similarity. But because these are the few exceptions, in general truth-maker theory is not a continuation or refinement of the linguistic turn in analytic philosophy: it is a rejection of the linguistic turn.

Hochberg holds it to be a weakness of tropist truth-making that the very same entities, A and B, make true not only that A and B exist and that A and B are different (distinct, not identical), but also that (in the case envisaged) A and B are similar. How can the very same entities make logically independent propositions like ‘A ≠ B’ and ‘A is similar to B’ true? I

\(^{11}\) Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus 4.0312, 4.441, 5.5.
hold this fact on the contrary to be a strength of truth-making, underlining the point of the previous paragraph. Because A and B exist and are as they are independently of us and the propositions we propone, it is to be expected that they may make numerous propositions true, some indeed logically independent of one another. Truth-making weakens the one-to-one correspondence idea of classical correspondence theory. Classically, each true proposition corresponded one-to-one to its own personal truth-maker, typically a fact or state of affairs. Truth-making weakens this so a proposition may have several truth-makers. ‘Someone in this room is smoking cannabis’ may be made true by the actions of more than one person, any one of whose actions would suffice to render it true. And the same truth-maker may make many propositions true: John’s smoking cannabis now makes true not only that John is smoking cannabis, it makes true ‘Someone in this room is smoking cannabis’, ‘Someone is smoking’, it makes true tomorrow’s utterance of ‘Someone was smoking cannabis in this room yesterday’, and much more. There are logical connections in these cases, but there are also propositions which do not follow logically which the same actions make true. Suppose that as it happens John is both the tallest and the youngest person in the room. Then his actions also make true ‘The tallest person in this room is smoking cannabis’ and ‘The youngest person in this room is smoking cannabis’, and these are logically independent of one another.

5. Relations, Again

At the core of Hochberg’s contention that trope nominalism leads to idealism is the claim that because trope nominalism finds difficulties, perhaps insuperable ones, with the idea of independently existing relational tropes, it is tantamount to denying that the world is relational, and this leads to an idealistic monism of the sort endorsed by Bradley. Before facing this challenge, let me note that Bradleyan monism is not inevitably idealistic, in that The One need not be ideal or spiritual in Hegelian fashion. My problem with monism is that it is monistic! As a pluralist I deny that there is only one independent object.

The occasion for Hochberg’s concern that trope nominalism may well lead to monism is my reticence about the idea of relational tropes. Earlier I had been very happy with relational tropes, citing the collision between two bodies as a clear instance of something (an event) that depends for its existence on two distinct objects, and makes true any statement to the effect that they collide. That example I still find convincing as far as it goes. Let A and

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12 Simons 2010.
13 Simons 2002/3.
B be two bodies which have no part in common and C a collision between them. A collision is an event which cannot occur unless the collidants exist (at the time of onset of collision – one or both may be destroyed by it), so in metaphysical terms it is a dependent particular, and being dependent on two or more things, a relational trope, making it true that A and B collide. I am assuming that it is contingent that A and B do collide, and so this apparently atomic proposition, if true, stands in need of a truth-maker.

However the most prominent kind of external relationships are spatiotemporal ones, and they prove a headache for trope nominalists. Take a contingently true proposition about the distance apart of two bodies at a certain time. Say bodies A and B are d metres apart at time t. As it is a contingent truth there needs to be an account of how it gets to be true. A universalist has little problem: there is the fact that A and B are d metres apart at t, and that’s it. The fact itself is an abstract entity, not in time and space, but universalists are not fazed by entities outwith space and time like nominalists are. If a trope nominalist look for a relational trope to ground the truth, such an item appears to be either not in space at all, or to be implausibly related to space, either ubiquitous, or somehow localized to A and B, or strung out between them. There are ways to get around this, though they are also not palatable. One is to consider a substantivalist spacetime whose parts are essentially or internally related one to another, then to take being located at as a formal relation between an object and its locations. But that seems wrong at least for bodies, whose spatial locations are contingent, assuming we reject determinism.

For events and processes there may be a more promising story. The parts and the spatiotemporal location of an event and its spatiotemporal extent may be considered essential to it. I actually think that is true, though it is hard to convince sceptics. It helps with some of the relational propositions of our Beethoven example: that n1 is before n2, that n4 lasts six times as long as n3, and the like, turn out to be made true by their terms alone on this account. Given that these events occur, they could not have occurred in a different order or at a different time or with different relative durations. Of course n3 did not have to be followed by n4: it could, had the pianist accidentally twitched or for some other reason, have been followed by a different note n5, or none at all if the pianist had been interrupted. It needs both n4 and n3 to occur for the internally true relational propositions about them to be true. For some objects to be internally related is for it to be such that they cannot all exist and yet fail to be so to one another. Their joint existence is not the same as their being so to one another, but their being so to one another does not require an additional relational entity beyond themselves. In this it is unlike the collision case.
This locational and mereological essentialism about events can be portrayed as absurd, and examples can seem convincing. My great-uncle Jack Clarkson was killed in action on the Western front on 31 December 1917. Suppose he had not been. Then the event that we designate as ‘the First World War’ would not have happened. Ridiculous! How could such a relatively (not for him or his family of course) minor variation in the Kriegsgeschehen have as result that the First World War did not take place?

This kind of objection to locational and mereological essentialism about events seems to me to turn on a failure to make a clear distinction between modally rigid and modally flaccid designators. One can truly say “the fourth note of the Beethoven sequence could have been eight times as long as the third”, but ‘the fourth note of the Beethoven sequence’ would then denote a different event, a counterpart to our n4, not n4 itself, and indeed because our Beethoven sequence is made up of n1 to n4, ‘the Beethoven sequence’ would then designate not our sequence but a counterpart sequence, even if it shared the first three notes with ours. Returning to the bigger example, I said “the event that we designate by ‘the First World War’”, and not “the First World War” did not take place. In a close possible world, to use the jargon, Pte 77876 John Edward Clarkson survives the war, but little else is different. There is a different huge war that in that world is rightly there designated as ‘the First World War’. It is very like ours, and shares nearly all its parts. But not quite all. And that is enough for them to be numerically and not just qualitatively and mereologically different.

With this in mind, it appears that some spatiotemporal relational truths among the occupants of spacetime can be taken as made true by the mere existence (in this case, occurrence) of said occupants. That is not to deny that the things in question are thus and so disposed to one another, and that independently of us. It explains why they are thus and so disposed. It is realism on a tight budget. The truths in question are not explained away, or reduced, or paraphrased, but accepted.

However, the same argument does not work for occupants which have their locations accidentally, such as bodies. This is after all why the collision example needs a truth-maker other than the collidands. They need not have collided, so their mere existence does not necessitate their colliding. Are we then back to square one, still in need of ethereal and mysterious relational tropes for spatiotemporal relationships?

Perhaps not. I happen to agree with Whitehead that events and processes are ontologically more basic than continuant objects like bodies. It is not that I think bodies etc. are processes, as some do, but that they are invariants founded on processes. 14 The

contingencies of a body’s state and position enter in via the contingency of those processes which happen to found it. Today I am in Dublin. Tomorrow I may be in Belfast, or London. Either way, it would still be me that is there, and not some counterpart. But the processes that constitute me in case I am in Belfast could not be and could not have been in London. I get my location via the processes that happen to constitute me, and because it is contingent that these processes constitute me, that location is contingent. Therefore the spatial and spatiotemporal relationships among bodies and other things contingently located rest on non-contingently located processes that contingently constitute them. What, if anything, makes it true that this continuant object is constituted at this time by just these occurrent processes is not something on which I have a settled opinion. But the upshot is that our nice collision trope is not at an ontological basic level, since the terms on which it depends are not.

6. Relatedness without Relations, Sometimes

In a number of ontologically salient cases, I simply see no need for relational tropes to render relational propositions true. This goes for difference, for mereological and locational relations among events and processes, for exact similarity, and I think it also goes for causation and dependence. It may or may not go for the relation between continuants and the occurr- ents that constitute or sustain them – I don’t know. That does make the world more tightly interconnected than on a Russellian view that all relations are external (and so stand in need of truth-makers of some sort). But whether or not there are metaphysically fundamental relational tropes – on which I am agnostic – I do not think it forces me either to endorse monism or to embrace idealism. That there is no special relational entity accounting for the difference between Mars and Venus does not mean they are not two wholly distinct bodies, either of which could have existed without the other, and so witnesses to pluralism. Also since each of them could well have existed without any minds (and did so for a long time), they are also witnesses to realism. They are related – in many, many ways. Quite a few of those ways depend on matters of the two of them: Mars has its mass, Venus has its, and these masses, the actual tropes (if there are such, maybe they are somehow aggregative) are necessarily such that the one is greater than the other, so Venus is more massive than Mars, but contingently so, because each could have had other mass tropes than the ones they in fact have. The mass tropes, in other words, belong not to the nucleus but the periphery of those that hang around their respective bearers.

In this case I am prepared to say that the relatedness of the two planets turns on their respective non-relational properties, but that does not mean this is an automatic or universal
recipe for “reducing” relations to properties, as Hochberg imputes to me. The glory and the
misery of truth-maker theory is that there are no universal recipes, but that cases must be
taken on their merits. This may be disappointing for those who like armchair or a priori
metaphysics: tant pis pour eux. My position is on independently existing relational tropes is
frankly still not fully determinate, but it is definitely neither that of Bradley nor that of
Leibniz. It may indeed end up being close to Aristotle, Abelard, or Ockham, slouches none,
and none of whom is either a monist or an idealist. Nor am I.

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