Universals and particulars

INTRODUCING UNIVERSALS AND PARTICULARS

One branch of metaphysics is ontology, the study of ‘being’ or what exists. We can classify what sorts of things exist. Start, for example, with whales, which are mammals, which are animals, which are living things. Each whale is an individual thing, a ‘particular’. Each class – of whales, animals, and so on – contains many particular things, but we usually suppose that each of these classifications has ‘internal unity’, i.e. that the class is not formed by some arbitrary imposition. (Compare the class of ‘pets’ – what’s in and what’s out?) Living things are examples of physical things, which are all ‘particular things’.

What each class has in common – ‘being a whale’, ‘being a mammal’, etc. – identifies a property or quality of particular things: all whales have the property of being a whale in common, while whales and elephants have in common that they are mammals. Our language commonly identifies particular things as subjects and properties by predicates: x is a whale; whales are mammals.

Predicates indicate (at least) two types of property – qualities, which we’ve been looking at; but also relations, e.g. ‘to the north of’, ‘larger than’ and so on, e.g. ‘whales are larger than mice’. These relations are also something particular things have in common, but now in ordered pairs: <whales, mice> and <elephants, mice> both exemplify the relation ‘are larger than’.

Can we say that properties (qualities and relations) ‘exist’, though obviously in a different way from particulars? ‘Being a mammal’ and ‘is larger than’ don’t sound like they refer to ‘things’ – they aren’t nouns. However, we do have nouns that don’t refer to particular things, but to what they can have in common: ‘size’, ‘blue’, ‘honesty’, ‘rarity’, and so on. So it seems that there are two sorts of thing – particulars and properties. Some philosophers think of properties as ‘universals’. Words and phrases that refer to universals apply generally, to more than one thing; words that refer to particular things pick out just that one thing.

NOMINALISM: GENERAL TERMS AS MIND-DEPENDENT CLASSIFICATORY SCHEMES

A ‘nominalist’ is someone who argues that only particulars exist in any meaningful sense. Universals do not exist separately or independently from particulars. Words for ‘universals’ do not refer to any distinct thing. There is no (one and the same) thing, e.g. ‘blue’, ‘being a whale’, that is exemplified by two different particulars. Instead, the particulars simply resemble each other, and we pick this up in thought and language. Certainly, there are blue things – the sky, blueberries; these exist. But ‘blue’ itself doesn’t exist. Because a number of particulars resemble each other in a certain way, we call them all ‘blue’. William of Ockham, Berkeley and Hume all argued for this position.
The meaning of general terms

If we adopt nominalism, what do general terms mean? If universals don’t exist, do they refer to nothing at all? But then how do they get their meaning? There are two popular options.

The first is that general terms mean the set of all those particular things to which they apply, e.g. ‘blue’ means ‘all blue things’. But there are three objections to this claim. First, many general terms such as ‘honesty’, are often used in ways that doesn’t allow us to substitute ‘all honest people’, e.g. ‘honesty is the best policy’ has not successfully been paraphrased in a way that refers only to sets of particular honest people. Surely it is simpler to say that ‘honesty’ refer to the universal, honesty. Second, which things are blue can change – so the set of all blue things can change. But this doesn’t change the meaning of ‘blue’. So the meaning can’t just be the set. Third, two predicates, e.g. ‘has a shape’ and ‘has a size’, can apply to exactly the same set of things, but have different meanings.

The second option avoids these objections: general terms mean the concept, the abstract idea. We notice the resemblance between two or more particulars in our sense experience (e.g. in the way they look to us); we then abstract from our experience to form an abstract idea (blue (of no particular shade)), and this gives the general term its meaning.

Consider: are we to suppose that all general terms get their meaning by referring to universals? What about terms that aren’t true of anything, e.g. ‘is a witch’? Should we think that the property of being a witch exists, even though nothing is or ever has been a witch? That the term ‘witch’ stands for the idea of a witch seems more plausible than saying either that it means ‘all those things that are witches’ or ‘the property of being a witch’.

Generalizing this account, nominalists argue that ‘universals’ are nothing but mind-dependent classification systems; they simply reflect how we think.

Resemblance and explanation

However, this solution leaves us wondering where our classification system came from. What makes blue things blue? If it is just that we apply the term ‘blue’ to them, then what explains our concept? If there is nothing in virtue of which blue things are blue, our concept is completely arbitrary.

The obvious answer is that blue things are blue because they resemble other blue things. What we have picked out with the term ‘blue’ is a pattern of resemblance. This pattern explains our concept. However, we should try to not explain this pattern of resemblance by appealing to a universal that those particulars share. There is no universal ‘blue’ in virtue of which blue things resemble each other. Their resembling each other is metaphysically fundamental.

Bertrand Russell objected that nominalism ends up contradicting itself (Problems of Philosophy, p. 96). The resemblance between particulars (e.g. the similarity in colour) is a universal. Nominalists have focused too much on qualities, and forgotten relations! Resemblance is not a quality like ‘being blue’; it is a relation between particulars (x resembles y). But relations are just as much universals as qualities; the relation of ‘looks the same colour as’ holds between many particular blue things.
Can nominalists argue that the relation is just an abstract idea? Not on the account given so far, because they argue that we form the abstract idea by noticing the resemblance – so the resemblance must be real and comes before the idea. So we are bound to accept the reality of at least certain types of universal, viz. those relations that are resemblances.

Nominalists respond that when two things resemble each other, the only things that exist are the two things that resemble each other. There is no third thing, ‘resemblance’, in addition. But take two pairs of blue things. We want to say the first pair resemble each other in the same way as the second pair. The resemblances are the same (or, at least, resemble each other). So we have to talk about resemblances.

**REALISM: THE REFERENTS OF GENERAL TERMS EXIST**

**Plato and realism**

Plato argued that since more than one thing can be beautiful, beauty is a property beautiful things share in common. Beauty manifests itself in all the different things, in all the different ways, we call ‘beautiful’. (The Republic, Book V (476f.).) But beauty itself is not a particular thing, and Plato argued that it must be something distinct from particular things. For instance, all particular beautiful things could also be destroyed, yet that won’t destroy beauty itself. Universals, therefore, exist independently of particulars, outside space, time, and the changing world of sense experience.

While many realists about universals don’t accept Plato’s arguments or his claim that they exist completely independently of particular things, they do accept two points:

1. ‘one-over-many’: universals are general, so that many particulars can exhibit the same universal;
2. ‘instantiation’: what the particulars have in common is the universal – what makes all the things that are whales whales is the property of ‘being a whale’; the universal explains, is, what they have in common.

The most popular argument in favour of realism: without universals, we cannot explain or understand our abilities to recognise, categorise and generalise about particulars. Our classifications are not arbitrary, yet particulars, of course, are particular, individual – for similarities we therefore need universals. Similarity is a matter of two (or more) particulars exemplifying one and the same property.

This explains the ability to recognise new examples. If someone has never encountered this particular (e.g. this banana), how can they identify its properties (e.g. yellow)? Because they have encountered these very properties before, in other particulars.

We should not say that part of a universal (e.g. yellow) exists in one object and a different part in another object. First, it is odd to think that yellow has parts. Second, we want to say that the same universal is exemplified by the two objects – referring to parts would undermine this. So we should say that yellow exists wholly in each yellow thing.

**Two problems with realism**

On the realist account, it seems a particular must either have a universal or not – something is or isn’t a banana, is or isn’t yellow, and so on. But psychologists have recently argued that this ‘either is or isn’t’ judgment isn’t how our concepts work. Are plantain bananas or not? More or less? When does yellow become orange or green? Is a
shark a fish? Many concepts seem to work by comparison with a *prototype*, a defining example (yellow, fish, banana), and other things are judged to be more or less similar to it – which is what a nominalist would say.

Realism also faces two problems with how particulars and universals relate to each other. First, Aristotle argued that Plato’s realism faces an infinite regress. Plato claims that particulars instantiate universals. ‘Instantiation’ is therefore a relation between the particular and the universal. But relations are universals. So the particular and the universal are both related to another universal, ‘instantiation’. Whatever this relation is will also be a universal. And so on. One response is to deny that instantiation is a universal (just as nominalists answered Russell by denying that ‘resemblance’ is a relation).

Second, *how* do particulars ‘instantiate’ universals? How does a whale ‘have’ or ‘exemplify’ the property of ‘being a whale’? This seems particularly challenging for Plato’s theory, because universals are outside space and time. Other realist theories claim that universals are part of the spatio-temporal world (see below), though this doesn’t tell us what instantiation is.

**Explanation**

We use general terms in explanations all the time. Realism argues that if they were dependent on our minds, rather than referring to universals, the explanations wouldn’t work. Take change: when a particular changes, the particular persists; it is the same thing, but it has changed. So what has changed? The obvious answer is a universal – e.g. it had the property ‘being blue’ and now has the property ‘being red’. The nominalist alternative, to say simply that it resembled blue things and now resembles red things, only describes the change; it doesn’t explain it.

When we explain *why* something changed, here too we refer to universals. For example, the weight of the particular thing placed on the scales causes the needle to move, to indicate ‘1 kg’. ‘Being a weight of 1 kg’ is a universal. And to explain a false measurement, we have to say that its real weight is different from what we measured; we measured inaccurately. So ‘being of a certain weight, x’ is independent of us and our measurement. (Yes, the system of measurement we invented; but we don’t create the lengths of things themselves. Being a weight of 1 kg is the same weight as being a weight of 2.2 lbs.)

Again, nominalism seems weaker. Two particulars never have the same weight, just exactly similar weights. So an explanation that refers to the weight of one particular is a different explanation from an explanation that refers to the weight of the other, because it refers to a different thing. ‘The needle moved to indicate “1 kg” because I put a 1-kg weight on the scale’ would have to be changed to ‘the needle moved to indicate “1 kg” because I put this 1-kg weight on the scale’; and this explanation wouldn’t apply if I used a different 1-kg weight (I would have to give another, exactly similar, explanation).

The place of universals in explanation provides the realist with answers to two common objections:

1. Do all predicates refer to universals? No, only those universals that appear in explanations (or perhaps ‘causal explanations’) exist; other predicates (such as ‘witch’) are ‘merely’ ideas.
2. How do we know about universals? Empirically, through experience – via the particulars that instantiate them, they affect us.

**What is a universal?**
If realism is true, and universals exist, then we should be able to say something about what it is for a universal to exist. This is a very problematic question. Plato argued that universals are Forms. They exist completely independently of all particulars, and therefore outside space and time. This led to the problems of instantiation discussed above.

Aristotle argued that exist only in and through the particulars that exemplify them.

(Metaphysics Z) There is no redness independent of all red things. So universals exist in space and time – but at many points in space at the same time. The argument from explanation above develops this idea, using science to establish what universals exist.

However, we can object that it is a little peculiar to say that, if two red things are ten feet apart, then redness exists ten feet away from itself! Second, there are some universals that are not (currently) instantiated, e.g. ‘being 250,000 miles long’. Do they exist? We could argue that a universal exists if it is instantiated at some time. Otherwise, we have to say that universals come in and out of existence – which is peculiar, given the role they play in explanations.