

Universals and Particulars:

The problem of the one over the many

1. Introduction

Ontology: the study of 'being' or what exists.

- Do properties 'exist' in a different way from particulars? Some philosophers think of properties as 'universals'. The existence and nature of universals has been a matter of debate since the ancient Greeks.
- When we consider the particular things in the world, we find things that are the same shape, size, colour, etc. But what does it mean to say that two things are the same in any sense?
- In *Parmenides*, Socrates claims that when two things have something in common, there is some thing in which they both 'partake'. The thing in which they both partake is the *form*.
- Parmenides asks Socrates whether 'the form as a whole – one thing – is in each of the many'. We will discuss problems arising from this question.
- The usual realist view is that a universal can exist as a whole in more than one place at a time. This is in contrast to particulars, which can only exist as wholes in one place at a time. (Crane and Farkas, 2004, pp.217-18).

2. Plato

- The question of what forms are and how we can know them was one of Plato's main preoccupations in *The Republic*.
- Plato's theory of forms holds that when particulars have something in common, they have something in common because they are instances of a universal idea.
- Take beauty as an example. We can think of particular instances of beauty. Say, a flower, a sunset, and a beautiful face. All these are particulars. But they all participate in the Idea of Beauty or the Form of Beauty.
- Take, as another example, three human beings. All are different, all have different characteristics and features, different personal histories, and so forth, but all are human, all are particular examples of human beings. Thus, Plato argues that all three are connected somehow in virtue of the fact that they are all instances of the Idea 'Human'. What links them together is the notion of the human itself.
- Plato's forms are a metaphysical idea. He aims to give us an understanding of the ultimate reality which lies beyond that which we confront in sensory experience. This understanding is not itself based on sensory experience, but on rational insight.

3. Aristotle

- Universals are not transcendent but 'immanent'. For e.g., the form of a cat resides in each particular cat.

- Aristotle defines universals as that which pertains to many things: ‘the substance of each thing is something that is peculiar to each thing, not pertaining to anything else, whereas the universal is something in common. Indeed, a thing is said to be universal just in virtue of the fact that its nature is to pertain to a plurality of things’ (*Metaphysics*, Bk. Z, p.216). ‘To pertain’ means to belong to or be a part of. The universals are ontologically characterised by Aristotle in terms of the notion of belonging to many things.
- On Aristotle’s position, we do not have to think of a separate realm of the forms that contains universals. Rather, we can see a universal’s existence with the things that instantiate it.
- The difference between Plato and Aristotle with reference to the forms can be seen in the question of what is most fundamentally real. Does the ultimate reality of the world lie within the ordinary world of experience, or does it transcend this world? Aristotle and Plato provide us with two very different views to this question. Their views are still being discussed today.

4. Modern-day approaches

(a) Realist positions

- Realists about universals claim that universals are real.
- D. M. Armstrong:
 - Universals are within the world of experience.
 - The world consists of ‘states of affairs’: objects instantiating properties, or to put it another way, particulars instantiating universals (2004 [1989], p.243).

- It is not enough to simply recognise particulars and universals. We also need to recognise states of affairs. His argument for this rests on what he calls the ‘truth-maker principle’: that for every contingent truth there ‘must be something in the world which makes it true’ (ibid., p.243).

- Realist positions face problems to do with how universals and particulars relate to each other.

(b) Nominalist positions

- Nominalists claim that only particulars exist in any meaningful sense.

- Resemblance nominalism:

- There are blue things, but ‘blue’ itself doesn’t exist. Because a number of particulars resemble each other in a certain way, we call them all ‘blue’.

- One criticism comes from Bertrand Russell:

‘If we wish to avoid the universals *whiteness* and *triangularity*; we shall choose some particular patch of white or some particular triangle, and say that anything is white or a triangle if it has the right sort of resemblance to our chosen particular. But then the resemblance required will have to be a universal. Since there are many white things, the resemblances must hold between many pairs of white things; and this is the characteristic of a universal. It will be useless to say that there is a different resemblance for each pair, for then we shall have to say that these resemblances resemble each other, and thus at last we shall be forced to admit resemblance as a

universal. The relation of resemblance, therefore, must be a true universal' (1967, p.55).

- Class nominalism:

- Properties are classes of things. The property of 'being blue' is the class of blue things.

- Some problems:

- Seems counterintuitive. Is there not something more to being blue than simply being in the class of blue things?
- Different properties may be coextensive, and this may be seen to cause a problem. Consider: all creatures with hearts (cordates) are also creatures with kidneys (renates). Therefore, the class of cordates will be identical with the class of renates, since they have the same members. This means that the property of being a renate is the same property as the property of being a cordate. But there seems to be something wrong with saying that the properties 'being a renate' and 'being a cordate' are the same. This problem is outlined by David Lewis:
'The usual objection to taking properties as sets is that different properties may happen to be coextensive. All and only the creatures with hearts are the creatures with kidneys; all and only the talking donkeys are flying pigs, since there are none of either. But the property of having a heart is different from the property of having a kidney, since there could have been an animal with a heart but no kidneys. Likewise the property of being a talking donkey is different from the property of being a flying pig' (Lewis, 1986, p.51).

Bibliography

- Lewis, *On the Plurality of Worlds* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).
- Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (Oxford and NY: OUP, 1967).
- Aristotle, *The Metaphysics*.
- Plato, *Parmenides*.
- Plato, *The Republic*.
- Tim Crane and Katalin Farkas, *Metaphysics: a guide and anthology* (Oxford: OUP, 2004).
- D. M. Armstrong, 'Selection from *Universals: An Opinionated Introduction*' (Westview, 1989), in Crane and Farkas, *Metaphysics: a guide and anthology* (OUP, 2004), pp.235-48.

Reading for students

- John W. Carroll and Ned Markosian, *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), Ch.9, 'Properties'.
- Plato, *The Republic*, Bk. 5, Part 7.
- Aristotle, *The Metaphysics*, Bk. Zeta.
- Russell, op.cit, Ch.9.