

The Problem of Universals from a Contemporary perspective

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Abstract

The difference inherent in every existing 'thing' is so overwhelming and yet we find a way of categorizing them. The question, "What is a tree?" might seem pseudo prima facie, but in an attempt to proffer a laudable answer to this question, one is immediately confronted with myriads of difficulties. The name 'tree' refers to a tall perennial woody plant having a main trunk and branches forming a distinct elevated crown. Now, does this phenomenal description bring to light a plant that serves as a quintessence for categorizing all others that possess the same properties or, these properties summing up to a single 'thing' are mere concepts without factual existence? If they possess factual existence, where do these quintessential 'things' reside? If we presume that their existence is not real, how do we account for the epiphenomenal representation of multifarious things in the world understood within the confines of a single concept? From the foregoing, it is evident that regardless of the fact that the alias of the problem of universals is the problem of one and many, the problem of Universals is not just one problem but many. Consequently, in this paper, I shall try to beam light on the problem by attempting to state the problem in clear terms, then engender into a phenomenological exposé of the problem, thereof, I shall strive to illuminate the arguments proffered on the subject.

Keywords

Problem of Universals• Phenomenology of Universals• Property Realism

Introduction

The term universal, derived from the Latin Universalism signifies a unity with reference to some plurality. The controversy over universals is a metaphysical discussion concerning the objective, ontological status of essences that are perceived universally by the intellect and that are seen to exist in many individuals. In a broad sense, universals are taken to mean any intellectual concept obtained by abstraction – Abstraction may be said to be a mental separation of things not, or at least not necessarily, separated in reality. It is however attributed to Plato to be the one who enunciated a theory that gave birth to this controversy that seems evergreen in contemporary times. Plato's theory of forms is his most significant Philosophical contribution [1]. The fundamental tenet of the theory of forms as postulated by Plato holds in its nucleus and axis that the forms are those changeless, eternal, and nonmaterial essence or patterns of which the actual visible objects we see are only poor copies. A beautiful young lady is thus just a copy of Beauty itself. Succinctly put, she is just an instantiation of the form of beauty which exists in its pure state in the world of forms. Little wonder then in his Symposium, Plato, states that we normally apprehend beauty first of all in particular objects of persons and through a gradual ascent, we

move from the beauty of individual persons and things to the form of beauty itself.

Literature Review

However, in his work Parmenides he stated in clear terms his argument on the existence of this world of forms and universals therein, a conversation between the characters of Socrates and Parmenides justifies this, Socrates but, Parmenides, the best I can make of the matter is this: that these Forms are as it were patterns fixed in the nature of things; the other things are made in their image and are likenesses, and this participation they come to have in the Forms is nothing but their being made in their image.

- Parmenides: Well, if a thing is made in the image of the Form, can that Form fail to be like the image of it, in so far as the image was made in its likeness? If a thing is like, must it not be like something that is like it?
- Socrates: It must.
- Parmenides: And must not the thing which is like share with the thing that is like it one and the same thing (character)?
- Socrates: Yes.

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- Parmenides: And will not that in which the like things share, so as to be alike, be just the Form itself that you spoke of?
- Socrates: Certainly.
- Parmenides: If so, nothing can be like the Form, nor can the Form be like anything. Otherwise a second Form will always make its appearance over and above the first Form; and if that second Form is like anything, yet a third; and there will be no end to this emergence of fresh Forms, if the Form is to be like the thing that partakes of it.
- Socrates: Quite true.
- Parmenides: It follows that the other things do not partake of Forms by being like them; we must look for some other means by which they partake.
- Socrates: So it seems.

Inherent in the pericope above is the statement of the problem of universals as well as one of the subsequent criticisms Aristotle had proffered of the Platonic conception of the existence of universals independent of their particular instantiation which has been named as the "Third Man" argument.

The problem of Universals can thus be structurally formed as such:

- Do properties exist?
- If properties exist, are they universals or particulars?
- If properties are universals, are they abstract objects?
- What is the relationship between a property and the thing that has it? Is the property in what has it and, if so, what sort of "in" is this (spatial, non-spatial)?
- If properties exist, can they exist even if no particulars exemplify them?
- In addition to properties and concrete particulars (roughly, individual things like balls and baboons), are there property instances? If so, are they simple or complex entities?
- If properties are universals, what account can be given of the individuation of two entities that have all their pure properties in common?
- Phenomenology of Universals

The term "universal" has been associated with myriads of concepts which enhance its elucidation. Of these various concepts, three of them shall be brought to the fore consequent upon the crucial part they play in the logic of the term as highlighted by Raja Bahlul. They include the notion of "suchness" (the idea of being "thus and so"), the notion of multiplicity (the idea of many things being thus and so), and, finally, the notion of possibility. Aristotle in criticizing the Platonic Theory of forms emphasized on the first part. For him, the "form" means the "such," and is not a this—a definite thing; but the artist makes, or the father begets, a "such" out of a "this"; and when it has been begotten, it is a "this such." And the whole "this," Callas or Socrates, is analogous to "this brazen sphere," but "man" and "animal" to "brazen sphere" in general. Succinctly put, the "such" refers to the properties that Plato has opined to exist in the world of forms. However, such cannot exist in isolation; it ought to be a "this such". For example, let us take "Black" as such. "Black" cannot be in isolation, opines Aristotle, it must be a "black something". Consequently, Aristotle dismisses the possibility of universals existing independent of particulars. For him therefore, if there ought

to be a 'such' (id est, the universal), it ought to be instantiated in a 'this' (id est, the particular) which will necessarily result to a 'this such'. Aristotle was not alone in emphasizing the essentially predicative character of universals. Aquinas, a later dedicated Aristotelian, believed that wisdom is always wisdom-of, which is to say that it is an "of-something" (entis), as opposed to being itself a "something". But among modern philosophers, one might say that it was probably Frege, more than anyone else, who emphasized the predicative character of universals; in fact, he insisted that the only capacity in which "the concept" (universals) could be employed was predicative.

The idea that it belongs to the nature of a universal to be a quality of something (how something is, or what something is) must be distinguished from the question of whether there are instances of the universal in question. Some philosophers are strongly of the opinion that it requires a universal to actually have at least one instance to validate its existence [2]. That is, we cannot say that a unicorn exists as a universal without having an instance of a unicorn or a spatio-temporal manifestation of a unicorn. This is the view which Armstrong holds, believing that if there are no particles which travel faster than light, then there is no such thing as the property of traveling faster than light. But other philosophers do not share this view. It is enough, they think, for it to be possible that there are instances of the universal in question; thus, their argument is based on the "possibility" rather than the verified existence of existent conceptual universals. According to Newman, for example when we say that there is such a universal as regular chiliagon-shaped we mean that there is such a shape. If we agree that there is such a shape, we are not agreeing that there has been at least one instance of a regular chiliagon. Avicenna, medieval Islamic philosopher, greatly criticized Plato on his postulation of the existence of form outside of particular things. He purports that the universal does not exist insofar as it is some one thing which is shared by particulars. Otherwise the one "humanity" would be attended by contradictory qualities. Avicenna's theory is cast in terms of a tripartite distinction between different types of existence which the quiddity may enjoy. As translated in Avicenna's doctrine is this: The quiddities of things may exist in the real instances of things or in conception. They will thus have three aspects: a consideration of the quiddity inasmuch as it is that quiddity, without being related to either of existence, and what attaches to it inasmuch as it is such; a consideration thereof inasmuch as it is in external reality, where there will then attach to it accidents proper to this existence which it has; and a consideration thereof inasmuch as it is in conception, where there will then attach to it accidents proper to this existence, for example, being a subject, predication, universality and particularity in predication, essentiality and accidentally in predication, and other things that you will learn. Compactly put, Avicenna's tripartite distinction brings to the fore the fact that existence possess first, what makes them what they are Second, accidents by which things in existence can be identified; third, conceptual existence of these existents.

Boethius was also consumed with this problem, his major pre-occupation was the possibility of the relation that exists between, these particulars and the universals. The central issue for him thus, was how to relate the objects of human thought and the objects that exist outside them. Objects outside the mind are individual and many, whereas objects in the mind are single or universal achieved through abstraction [3]. Consequently, saying that universals are abstracted from individuals led Boethius to conclude that genera exist

in the individual things and that they become universals when we think of them. In this way, universals are simultaneously in the object and in our minds – subsisting in the thing and thought about in the mind. In the final analysis, basing our conclusion on the phenomenal presentation of the problem of universals, while some philosophers are of the opinion that universals do not exist, others purport that universals have independent existence instantiated or un-instantiated, others still, opine that unless there is an instance of a universal, whatever we say of them as mere theoretical construct devoid of concomitant praxis is pseudo. I shall now delve into the various conceptions of the problem of universals bringing to the fore their basic tenets. These various conceptions or theories have been broadly categorized and named as property realism and Nominalism. Prior to engendering proper into the discuss of the basic belief of the property realist, it is incumbent on us to first note two quite different conceptions of universals, namely: Platonic and Aristotelian. On the Platonic view, universals are transcendent. That is, they exist outside space and time. They are changeless abstract objects. On the Aristotelian view, universals are immanent. They do not exist outside space and time. They are located where their instances are located and nowhere else. Since the existence of abstract entities, outside space and time, does not depend on the existence of concrete entities in space and time, a consequence of the transcendent conception is that universals can exist un-instantiated. Thus, the universal ‘unicorn’ exists, on the Platonic view, even though there are no particular or instantiated unicorns. In contrast, on the Aristotelian view, universals cannot exist un-instantiated. That distinction been made, we can thus bring to the fore the fact that the essence of traditional property realism is that objects (id est, particulars or ‘individual substances’ in the more traditional vocabulary) have properties; two (or more) objects can, quite literally, have one and the same property; hence properties are universals, which can be wholly present in two or more places at the same time. One objection to traditional property realism is that it offers no account of the connection between a particular and his properties. A particular is said to instantiate various universals. For example, a young lady can be both “wise” and “beautiful”. But how do we account for their relationship? What sort of “inness” is the universal in the particular as redness is the quality of a book? Is it a substantial “inness” where the property gives the thing its identity, that is, its haecceity? Lastly, explaining commonality in terms of instantiation of the same universal leads to an infinite regress. Aristotle pressed this objection against the Platonic, transcendent conception of universals. His ‘third man argument’ (as had been observed in the explication of the problem of universals) purports to demonstrate that Plato’s theory of forms leads to an infinite regress.

Nominalism came as an objection to the existence of universals as proposed by the realists. the most important among them is William of Ockham’s Nominalism. For Ockham, “there are two kinds of signs: natural and conventiona [4]. Natural signs occur whenever an object signifies its cause. For example, smoke is a sign of fire. Another kind of natural sign is produced by perception when a particular object creates an image or mental picture within us. This kind of sign has some degree of universality because the image will be the same for all people with similar experiences (ibid). Thus, some terms are signs of specific individuals, such as “plato”. Other terms are signs of many individuals, such as “human”. Ockham, therefore, concluded that universal statements are really a summary of the particular

judgments we make about individuals. That is, when we say, “all dogs have four legs”, we are simply implying that “Bingo the dog has four legs, Ruffy the dog has four legs, Defender the dog has four legs et al.” Consequently, there are no such things as universals existing in themselves. However, as a result of the myriads of their level of rejection, Nominalists have further been subdivided. According to predicate nominalism, for x to be F is for the predicate ‘F’ to apply to, or be true of, x. What makes it true that x and y are both F is that ‘F’ applies to both x and y. succinctly put, for my watch to be black implies that blackness has to apply to my watch. What makes it true therefore that my watch and my phone are both black is that blackness applies to both my watch and my phone. Thus, what makes my watch black is for the predicate ‘black’ to apply to my watch.

Another variety of the nominalism is the class nominalism [5]. The idea of class nominalism is that for x to be F is for x to belong to the class of Fs. What makes it true that x and y are both F is that x and y are members of the class of Fs. Thus, what it is for a sphere to be red is for the sphere to be a member of the class of red things (Ibid). According to resemblance nominalism, for x to be F is for x to be a member of a class of objects which resemble each other, where ‘resemblance’ is treated as a primitive, unanalysable relation. What makes it true that x and y are both F is that they resemble each other. A sphere is red because it is a member of a class of resembling objects (Ibid).

Conclusion

In all, for Plato and the absolute realist tradition, universal essences have, as such some kind of reality independent of the mind. For Aristotle and the tradition of moderate realism, essences exist as individuals in reality, but these individuals possess a real basis in reality for the intellectual perception of universality. For Nominalism, only words are universal, since one word can be applied to distinct individuals that appear to be similar, but have no ontological similarity in reality. One cannot dispute the fact that there are myriads of things in existence that share the same properties with other existents; and that one property can apply to more than one existent, accounting for different existents sharing the same property. However, the credibility of postulations such as the existence of universals existing in themselves un-instantiated seems rather naïve. What one ought to busy one’s mind with is the question of sameness and difference inherent in particular things in existence. What is the relationship between one black hat and another black hat? How do we account for their sameness and difference? How does one account for the quiddity or haecceity of two individual things that are the “same” and yet “different”? This work analyses the various conceptions on the problem of universals. It does not claim to have exhaustively presented this issue; however, this exposition lends [a subtle voice to the ongoing discuss.](#)

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How to cite this article: Augustine Okwa. "The Problem of Universals from a Contemporary perspective ". *Arts Social Sci J* (12): (7)(2021) :488