

Is the realist's notion of universals incoherent?

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the alleged incoherency derivable from a *realistic* analysis of universals. In doing so, it is necessary to define the main elements that determine the ontological framework of the account in question.

Indeed, the whole problem of the theory of universals, as posed by the nominalist account, can be summarized by the fact that it presupposes a two-category ontology, constituted by abstract and concrete entities, while its counterpart is intended to determine the possibility of a valid framework based on one-category ontology, i.e. constituted by mere concrete particulars.

The whole problem can be described in its general form by referring to an aspect that relates the two metaphysical views: the necessity of preferring the simplest theory over any other possible one that introduces irrelevant entities that play no explanatory role.

However, before defining what entities are involved and how realists seem to rely on incoherent justifications in order to support their account, a proper analysis of the structure of such account is required.

A theory which purports universals is based on the possibility of understanding qualities and relations by referring to a *general schema* which states that:

“a number of certain objects $a...n$ agree in the attribute θ and the relation R such that each of $a...n$ bears R to θ ”¹

we can determine that given an object, it *instantiates* a defined property.

As stated before, such theory establishes the possibility of a two-category ontology constituted by *universals* (repeatable entities) and *particulars* (non-repeatable entities) and their nature can be of two main forms: *monadic* (or one-place) so that particulars instantiate them one by one; or *polyadic* (or many-place) which is the case of *relations* and can be subdivided in *symmetrical* and *asymmetrical* relations.

Therefore the instantiation represents the necessary fact that ties particulars and their properties. However, behind this simple assumption relies a more complex structure which brings to a first objection: the process of instantiation, in order to be justified, needs to be subject to degrees such that particulars can exemplify different sorts of universals of *varying degrees of generality* and universals themselves can agree in exemplifying further universals.

But then, when we consider sentences of the form:

Red is closer to orange than blue

¹ M.J.Loux, *Metaphysics, a contemporary introduction*, p.18

we can perceive a first risk of regress, for we then always need to rely to further universals in order to determine the previous one.

In any case, with this framework, several ontological problems seem to find their valid solution. The main ones are recognize under the categories of:

subject-predicate discourse;

abstract references;

so by defining the structure of a sentence constituted by *subject terms* and *predicate terms* we can determine the possibility of three types of subject-predicate sentences defining properties; kinds; dyadic/polyadic relations.

The realist account tries to justify the way sentences can be true by establishing a connection between what is assumed to be *linguistic* and what is there in the world: it is every time we obtain a correspondence between these two structures that a truth condition of a given sentence is satisfied.

With this picture then, we can summarize by saying that: universals are referent for predicates, and whenever the subject predicate of a sentence instantiates the same universals to which the predicate term refers, then the requirement for that sentence to be true is satisfied.

However clear this picture can be, it still needs to be supported by further clarifications, such as, the possibility of tying predicates with universals. This is an important question, for it remarks the main distinction between Nominalist and Realist, for the former limits his view to the possibility that objects are simply identified by the predicate as member of a set; while the latter defines the predicate term as a *medium* who identifies the universal so to represent the set to which the object belongs to. But in order to maintain this position a particular translation that can show this instantiation is required. So when we have sentences of the form:

a is F

by paraphrasing it we obtain:

a exemplifies F-ness

In this way we obtain an ontological equality between the universals instantiated by the predicate term and the one instantiated by the referent of the subject term.

Before introducing one of the most helpful aspects offered by the realist theory (which concerns cases of *abstract reference*) it is useful to introduce briefly some objections aroused by nominalists which seem, at first glance, to give us an answer to the main question: *Is the realist's notion of universals incoherent?*

In determining the necessity of a one-category ontology, the first of the main accusations to the realists account is based on the incoherency of numerically different particulars instantiating the same universal. While the second and more important one involves the fact that the account lacks in offering a proper definition of the *identity condition for universals*. Indeed, the same object can exemplify different particulars; but in order to describe how they differ we are forced to refer to further universals. Now, while the first objection can be answered by appealing to a *platonian view* that implies the *necessity* of a location out of space and time, where all universals rely (with implications that will be discussed below), the second objection offers a valid *input* to introduce the main *problema* for the realist account.

Referring to the problem of instantiation Russell describes a paradox related to the impossibility of instantiating predicates of the form "...*doesn't instantiate itself*"; for by validating the condition that an object needs not to exemplify any property in order to exemplify itself, *either* we can have a thing that exemplifies a property (but then it doesn't exemplify itself) *or* doesn't exemplify itself (which would turn to be exemplifying itself for it exemplifies the property of 'not exemplifying itself').

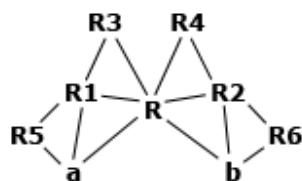
This form of regress is represented under another form described by Bradley², where three seem to be the requirements for *a* to be *F*:

a must exist

F-ness must exist

a exemplifies *F*-ness

Now, the latest is a *relational fact*, that means that it is a universal itself, and only by referring to further universal we can determine its validity. This further universal can belong to a *higher-level* category; however we are involved in a *vicious* regress as shown below:



This brings the realists account to a further limitation: the reduction of exemplification to its *primitive* status, which makes it unanalyzable. So that we obtain a new form of restricted realist theory where relation itself is still possible by links of exemplifications; but exemplification doesn't require any further link. In other words, the *general schema* doesn't apply to the notion of instantiation.

However, if we attempt to get any further in defining any possible incoherence into the realist account, other problems arise. Two in particular capture the attention of the nominalists: the problem of undefined descriptions and the problem of uninstantiated universals. Here a little regression on the concept of *abstract reference* is required.

Sentences very often offer reference to abstract entities such as 'wisdom', 'triangularity', etc... Therefore, in sentences like:

Courage is a moral virtue

the realists insist that only their account can justify such sentences. It is said that their referential role is of the most straightforward sort. They are in a way *names of universals*. And if this is so, then the existence of them represents a further proof of the existence of universals. But this is not the only case; as seen before in fact, every sentence involving properties, qualities and relations is a manifestation of the existence of such abstract entities. By referring to Occam's Razor then, the intuitiveness of this account represents a valid way for its acceptance, for no particular theory of predication is then required: intuitively, we obtain a claim about entities other than familiar concrete particulars.

Returning to our problem, whenever we define properties of any kind, in many cases we notice the necessity to refer to further universals. As noted above, there is a fundamental lack in the realist theory for what concerns the *identity condition for universals*. This explains another restriction applied by some realists: the possibility of two main categories of predicates: *defined predicates* which are defined by primitive ones; and *undefined predicates* which are unanalyzable and directly connected to universals. So is the case of predicates like 'bachelor' which is *necessary* defined by qualities like *being male*, *being human being*, *being unmarried* (which is in itself the negation of another quality, adding a further problem) we can only be forced to define those primary qualities which are primitive and distinguishable from the defined one. However, the first problem concerns the possibility that such division can only be arbitrary, for philosophical justifications like the one based on epistemological basis (which establish only universals like colors, shape, sound etc..) can only have further higher objections. One of the most plausible views is

² Bradly (1930: 17-18)

defined by Armstrong, where the scientific enquiry can offer the criterion for an understanding of what there is.

The second of the problems concerns the possibility of uninstantiated universals. Such view describes a framework constituted by three different entities in contraposition to concrete particulars:

exemplified universals (already instantiated)

contingently unexemplified universals (not yet instantiated)

necessarily unexemplified universals (never being instantiated)

The first sort of entity is supported by an aristotelian view where universals are considered *in rebus*; while the second and the third are fundamental entities for a theory of platonic conception, where universals are considered to be *ante rem*.

The two views bring with them different consequences, and in an analysis of the incoherence in the realist account the platonic one can offer better possibilities. Briefly we can state that with this view, universals must be situated over any spatiotemporal relation so that their unexemplification can be justified. But if so, then any *false* subject-predicate sentence can be analyzed by the *general schema*. And the platonic view tries to justify it by declaring that we utter sentences that can be false and we do it in the same way as it were true; with the consequence that *F* can be predicate necessarily true of nothing. We can derive from it then, that universals are *necessarily beings* and their non-existence is in any ways not possible.

Such framework is what Nominalists put under attack, for the platonic view seems to be forced to introduce entities that can be put aside as being unnecessary. It seems obvious then that a brief view of their position is now indispensable. If such objections (as determined by them) are sufficient, we are then able to admit the incoherency of the realist account. On the other hand, if their postulations require further analysis that overtake Occam's limitation, then there would be no justification for considering the universal theory as less valid than a nominalistic one. I shall consider two well distinct accounts: the *austere nominalists* and the *Trope theory*.

As determined above, two are the main objections advanced by nominalists in relation to the realists theory (the impossibility of numerically different concrete entities exemplifying the same universal; the problem of the identity condition for universals). But for these objections to be valid a new ontological framework must be introduced. The *Austere Nominalists* rely on a system constituted only by concrete particulars. They show resemblance and qualities by appealing to an agreement in attribute whose nature is in a metaphysical sense primitive. With such framework a first attack is then proposed to be against the validity of the realist's general schema; for they define it as illusory, a simple way of giving a sentence a new *linguistic clothing*. But then, for *a* is *F* to be true it is only required to *a* to be *F*: its validity is then determined by the fact that things out in the world are just the way they are.

But if things need only to be the way they are, a deep lack of explanation is encumbered whenever we consider sentences referring to abstract entities. The nominalist answer at this point is that by uttering sentences constituted by abstract singular terms we do think that they refer to some sort of universal, but in reality it is only a disguised way of talking about *familiar* concrete particulars. And indeed for every sentence of the form:

a exemplifies *F*-ness

we can assume by appealing to this framework that in reality it can be translated as:

a is *F*

for *F*-ness itself it is not a *genuinely singular term* and therefore it names nothing. But as we can notice this is applicable only for sentences whose subject

term does define a concrete particular (such as is *a*). But what about sentences like:

Red is a color

In this case we would attempt to translate it as ‘Red objects are colored objects’ which is absurd for the translation can be false even though the sentence is true. There are two solutions proposed by Nominalists: the *ceteris paribus* solution whose translation generates sentences of the form ‘other things being equal...’; the usage of *adverbs*. But even if we force our analysis in accepting such devices to be unanalyzable, how coherent is a view that refuse the possibility of paraphrasing sentences but still relies on the same method in order to offer a proper explanation? And also, how sure we are that our language has enough predicates so to make the translation effective?

Our second analysis is referred to a more moderate possibility of accepting only *concrete particulars*. The *Trope theory* is based on the assumption that even though only particulars exist, but given the fact that we do refer to abstract terms, a possible solution is by introducing into the ontological framework a new entity: the *abstract particular*. With such conclusion it is clear that the first objection cited above (on the incoherency of numerically different particulars exemplifying the same universal) can be solved; indeed now we see attributes as particulars and only possessed by just one object. In addition, whenever we imagine the possibility of exact similarity in attributes, this doesn’t imply the possibility of numerical identity of attributes. But some valid objections can be proposed against the theory. First of all, it is necessary to clarify that by using abstract singular terms, tropes theorists agree that what we name are not universals, but *sets of resembling tropes* and the main difference within the two (from a logical point of view) is that sets are identical iff all its members are identical. This is not the case of universals, for different objects can exemplify the same universal. Then it is clear that a set view has a more straightforward identity condition and clearly the second objection (about the identity condition of universals) is solved. In addition, also the *austere nominalist* problem of how we can justify collections of qualities within the same particular as different, is solved, as easily understandable.

However, the set condition implies negative consequences: first of all the possibility that non-existent entities (like ‘Pegasus’ or the ‘present king of France’) would belong to the same set (for the set condition accepts that all its members must be identical), and by being every non-existent entity member of the *null set* and being possible to have only one of this set, then non-existent entities would be all of the same kind. A second objection still related to the set conception is the impossibility of overdetermined conditions: the set theory excludes the possibility of including other members contingently. The consequences are clear enough and do not need any further discussion.

As cleared so far, we identify possible objections however we choose to sustain any of the frameworks discussed until now. From my prospective it is possible to conclude that in so far as we can object to some of the realist conclusions, no better alternative can be said to be discovered as of yet, and the possibility of incoherency of any of the theory becomes just a matter of relativity in the judgment. Or as Ramsey stated (not referring of course to the Trope Theory): “[...] none of these arguments are really decisive [...] the truth lies [...] in some third possibility which has not yet been thought of [...]”³.

³ Ramsey, *Universals*, Mind 1925.

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