# Universals

PHI-202- Western Metaphysics

M.A. in Philosophy. Semester – 2. Topic: Universals

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Instructor: Dr. Sreejith K. K.

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# Universals

- Problem of universals – one of the most important problems in metaphysics.

- Dates back to Plato and Aristotle.

- Properties and relations

- Property realists: Philosophers who hold that we must appeal to universals to in order to explain the nature of properties and relations.

- Those who deny this are called nominalists (anti-realists).

# Kinds of realism and nominalism

- **Kinds of realism**:

(1)Platonic;

(2) Aristotalian, and

(3) Russelian.

- **Kinds of Nominalism:**

(1) Predicate nominalism,

(2) class nominalism,

(3) resemblance nominalism, and

(4) trope theory.

# Platonic and Aristotelian views of Universals

- On the platonic view, universals are transcendent. That is, they exist outside space and time.

- They are changeless abstract objects.

- Aristotle: universals are immanent. They do not exist outside space and time. They are located where their instances are located.

- **Existence of unicorns**

- Plato: the universal exists though there are no unicorns.

- Aristotle: universal of unicorn does not exists since universals cannot exist uninstantiated.

- Many of Plato's considerations where driven by geometry.

- Ideal geometric shapes were the model for his universals (forms).

- E.g. Pythagora's theorem is true whether or not they have any concrete instances.

- Aristotle's model for universals was drawn from that of species in Biology.

- Aristotle's line of thinking: If it makes no sense to think that a species might exist which never has any members, then it will seem to make no sense that a universal might exist without having any instances.

- The essence of traditional property realism is reasonably clear: objects (particulars or 'individual substances' in the more traditional vocabulary) have, i.e., instantiate, 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 motivation for property realism, and certainly one of Plato's motivations, stems from considerations to do with the meaning of general terms. Suppose we begin by assuming a referential theory of meaning, according to which the meaning of a word is an entity, the entity referred to by the word. In the case of singular terms, e.g., ordinary proper names such as 'Socrates',

- 'Red Rum' and 'Edinburgh' there is little difficulty identifying the entities which, according to the referential theory, are the meanings of these words: the man Socrates, the horse Red Rum and the city Edinburgh, respectively. But what of general terms such as 'horse' and 'city' (i.e., terms which apply to many entities)? What entities do these words refer to? They do not refer to one particular horse or to one particular city (for why that horse or that city?). That is why they are called general terms: they apply quite generally to all horses and all cities, respectively. Hence, thought Plato, if general terms don't name particulars, they must name universals (such as *cityhood* and *horseness*).

- Few philosophers now accept this semantic argument for universals.

- First, the argument assumes that, if 'horse' refers, it refers either to a particular horse or to the universal *horseness*. But this assumption can be questioned: why not see 'horse' as referring to each horse? A defender of the semantic argument must rule this out if his argument is to succeed.

- Second, and more fundament- ally, why should we accept the underlying assumption that the meaning of a word is some entity the word stands for?

- Names such as 'Santa Claus' and 'Odysseus', for example, are perfectly meaningful, yet there is no one to whom they refer (they are empty names). Rather than think of meaning as reference, maybe we do better to think of the meaning of a word as a function of its uses within some linguistic community. On such a view, the referent of a word, if it has one, is irrelevant to its meaning.

- However, there is another, <u>metaphysical argument</u> for universals. It runs as follows:

- Consider two exactly similar red spheres. They have the same colour (amongst other similarities). That is, the colour of one sphere is literally the same as, i.e., **numerically identical** to, the colour in the other. What is present in one is also present in the other. Particulars cannot be (wholly) in two places at the same time, but universals can. No particular (such as a man or a horse) can be wholly present in two places at once. Of course, one part of a horse (e.g., its left front leg) can be, and will be, in a different place from another part (e.g., its right front leg). But the horse cannot be, in its entirety, in two places at once. In contrast, the essence of a universal is its repeatability: it can be wholly present in different places at the same time. Thus, in order to explain the truism that different objects can have the same property, wholly present in each object, we must appeal to universals.

- Difficulties:

- The problem with this argument is that not every use of 'same' expresses strict numerical identity. Some uses do: e.g., when we say of two children that they 'have the same mother'. In such a case, we really do mean that the mother of one child is literally, numerically, the same as the mother of the other.

- But consider the use of 'same' in 'he has the same eyes as his father'. Here the word 'same' expresses **qualitative identity** (i.e., striking similarity), not numerical identity. The sense of 'same' in 'they have the same mother' is quite different from its sense in 'they have the same eyes'.

- This observation has the potential to frustrate the metaphysical argument for universals. From the fact that X is the same F as Y it does not follow that there is some property of X which is numerically identical to (as opposed to merely similar to) some property of Y. The defender of the metaphysical argument will need to make out a case that the use of 'same F' in question expresses numerical identity. Such a case may be plausible with regard to substantive general terms (such as 'man' or 'horse'), but less plausible with regard to qualitative general terms (such as 'red' or 'round').

# OBJECTIONS TO TRADITIONAL PROPERTY REALISM

- It offers no account of the connection between a particular (e.g., Socrates) and his properties. A particular is said to instantiate various universals. But what is instantiation? Is it a relation? Is it primitive and unanalysable? It is not clear.

- Second, 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' purports to demonstrate that Plato's theory of forms leads to an infinite regress.

- Third man argument:

Proceeding on the assumption that the form of F is itself an F (the self- predication assumption), the third man argument runs as follows. Plato attempts to explain what all individual men have in common, that in virtue of which they fall under the general term 'man', by citing a relation ('participation' or 'imitation') that each man stands in to the form Man. But if the form Man itself falls under the general term 'man', then we will need to postulate a further form Man1 in order to explain what all individual men and the form Man have in common. But if form Man1 is also a man then we will need to postulate a third form Man2 in order to explain why individual men, form Man and form Man1 are all men. And so on, *ad infinitum*. The regress is vicious since in order to explain commonalities at any one level we are forced up to the next level, and thus no genuine explanation is ever achieved.

- Although Aristotle's third man argument was directed against Plato's theory of forms, many have thought that it yields an argument against all theories of universals.