The Problem of Universals: A case for Realism
By Anja Segmüller

The Problem of Universals is fundamentally a debate about our ability to describe the world around us and the way we frame our opinions about it, originating in Plato's realist position. However, it is difficult to provide an uncontroversial definition of what the Problem of Universals is. This arises from the fact that it intersects with many philosophical areas, like metaphysics, semantics, philosophy of mathematics and epistemology. I will discuss the Problem of Universals using a metaphysical approach assuming it is mainly an ontological issue concerned with how many categories we should introduce to our experience of the world. Is it confined exclusively to particulars or is it necessary to include a category of universal entities as well for an appropriate description? In the following paragraphs I will discuss the realist, nominalist and conceptualist position towards universals, with a focus on Platonic Realism and objections to it.

The Problem of Universals is a bundle of historically variable questions, ultimately connected to the issue of universal cognition of particular entities. Particulars are singular objects only ever existing in one place at a time with properties that can vary over time. For example, an apple that ripens and changes its colour from green to red. Most philosophers would agree that the apple exists. But what about entities such as redness and greenness? Are they 'real' entities? Universals enable us to grasp an underlying, permanent order behind our conception of changing experience. It is described to be the kind of thing which can be present in different particulars simultaneously.

The formulation of the problem can be traced back to the works of Plato and Aristotle. Plato looked to mathematics and geometry to find the ideal model for his universals, which he calls Forms: they are grasped by the intellect and are only reflected imperfectly in the world of the senses. Regularity in the variety of different particulars in our world should be understood as transcended beings, ante rem, meaning that the existence of the universal is not dependent on the particular that instantiated it. Aristotle, on the other hand, looked to biology. He described universals as immanent entities, in rebus: there can only be universals as long as there are particulars in which they are instantiated. Similarly, there can only be a species if there are animals of that species.

In the medieval debates, the classification of Realism, Conceptualism and Nominalism emerged based on what the authors regarded as the 'primary, really existing universals': the universal feature of singular or particular things, their universal concepts or their universal name. Realism (or Platonism) argues that universals have a real, objective, mind-independent existence that determines the proper application of the concept in any possible instance. Conceptualism is the position that holds that universals are entities of the mind and only come into existence because of our shared human experience (or culturally shaped and educated natures). They are dependent on our minds and responses. Nominalism, on the other hand, suggests that there are no real entities behind universals - just human beings with the disposition to apply a given word or set of words. There is no real 'correctness' or objectivity behind them. If people diverge from the herd in their application, however, they often find themselves being called wrong. To a realist, Conceptualism and Nominalism 'open the door to idealist pit'.

The oldest form of Realism was Plato's theory of the Forms. He describes the Forms as another entity existing besides the particulars. If two apples are red, this is due to the fact that the Form of Red manifests itself in both those apples or because both apples take part in the Form of Red. Forms are immaterial, outside space and time and wholly abstract. The relationship between the Form of

Red, which is red itself, and the apples is participation. However, his theory of the Forms is often criticised for being too mystical and difficult to grasp.

Ironically, Plato himself formulated one of the most important objections to the theory of Forms, known as the Third Man Argument. If we ask, "What explains the red of the Form of Red, which itself, as we said, is red?", we will fall into infinite regress. Wanting to explain the redness of the apple and other particulars, we referred to the Form of Red. But once this is established, the Platonic realist has to explain the redness of the Form of Red itself. The fundamental principle of the theory of Forms is that any possession of a property always results from the participation in a Form. Therefore, the red Form of Red must be participating in a Form itself - in a sort of higher-order Form. But it explains the redness of the Form of Red only if the higher-order Form is a red Form of Red itself. It becomes clear that this will end in an infinite regress and it seems impossible to explain the nature of the Form of Red.

However, the Third Man Argument only threatens Platonic Realism. Strong Realism, that does not rely on independently existing Forms to explain properties of particulars, is not threatened. Strong Realism is generally thought to be inspired by Aristotle and rejects the necessity of Forms. If there is a particular with a property, then that is all there is; no third, independent entity is necessary to ground the possession of the property. The universal is just the property this particular apple and any other qualitatively identical particular has. But while it is not independent and distinct from the particular, it can still exist in several places at once at the same time. This position is not vulnerable to the Third Man Argument and reduces the mystical strangeness of Realism. There are no immaterial, abstract Forms outside space and time needed to explain property relations like in Plato's theory of Forms. Another position that avoids the mysteries of Platonism is Neutralised Realism: a theory that holds that universals do exist independently of the particulars, but argues that through evolutionary processes our minds have been shaped in response to these properties.

Returning to the more general debate of Realism, several problems seem to emerge. To ground relationships of identity and resemblance, universals must be able to be in several places at once, or multi-exemplifiable. Redness or beauty can identify several particulars simultaneously. Here it becomes appreciable that many philosophers deny the existence of universals. Assuming we would destroy a red apple or a beautiful painting, would there be a diminishment of redness or beauty? It does not seem to make sense to talk about universals in the same quantifiable way as we do about particulars; redness and beauty seem to be an entity in their own right. Therefore, a universal must be wholly present in each particular, but its existence in one place is unrelated to its existence in another. But how can a universal be wholly present in several places at once? It seems to follow that universals cannot be material, which then creates a problem concerning causation. The more questions we ask, the more puzzling their nature and their relation to our world and our minds become. With low tolerance for the strangeness of their nature, many philosophers see these as sufficient reasons to dismiss them entirely. One of these arguments is Ockham's razor: the claim that 'entities should not be multiplied unnecessarily, which is interpreted as requiring that explanations of unknown phenomena be sought first in terms of known quantities'. It is argued that for everything that is described with universals, it is possible to describe it without universals just as well.

However, we can compare the debate of the existence of universals to the scientific enterprise that often considers unobservable, seemingly strange entities, like neutrinos or black holes, too. These entities are themselves controversial, but they might provide the best explanation for observable

phenomena when studied. Therefore, despite being difficult to conceive of with the human mind, universals could serve as the best explanation for observable phenomena. And, after all, universals have the potential to solve philosophical problems. For example, what gives terms such as 'red' or 'beautiful' meaning? In the Platonic tradition, we can argue that in order to know about something, there must be something unchanging our minds can refer to. Material things (particulars), however, are subject to change - take the example of the ripening apple. Therefore, there must be some kind of thing that does not change and is suitable as the object of genuine knowledge. Universals would fulfil this condition.

In conclusion, after having discussed the origin of the Problem of Universals and the different positions within the debate, I would still argue that Realism seems to be necessary to explain the difference between particulars and universals. While Plato's famous theory of Forms has a certain appeal, it might not be able to hold against some of the objections. Therefore, a position such as Strong Realism or a more contemporary version, Neutralised Realism, might be more appropriate.

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