Macalester Journal of Philosophy

Volume 11
Issue 1 *Spring 2002*

Article 16

3-10-2011

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Few metaphysical issues have perennially plagued philosophers like the problem of universals. Although the origin of the problem is generally associated with Plato, problems of sameness and difference reach back to the pre-Socratics, to Parmenides and Heraclitus in particular. The historical prominence that the problem of universals has enjoyed, however, is in contrast with the dearth of attention afforded to it in contemporary philosophical literature. Indeed, metaphysical problems in general seem to be relegated to the backburner, if even allowed on the stovetop of philosophical concern. The denigration of metaphysical concerns, although historically manifesting itself in a variety of forms, has an epistemological impetus at its root. In this paper, I will explore the link between epistemology and the possibility of metaphysics through an examination of the problem of universals. After providing a sufficient formulation to the problem of universals, I will address the following two questions: 1) What constitutes a metaphysical problem? and 2) What constitutes an epistemologically palatable solution to a metaphysical problem? I will approach both of these questions through a discussion of the appearance/reality distinction. After addressing these general concerns, I will return to the problem of universals, arguing that nominalism is not a viable solution to this problem. I will argue that a thorough understanding of the dialectic leaves the ontologist with two options when faced with the problem of universals: realism towards the existence of universals or agnosticism towards the problem's solution.

Historically, the problem of universals is intimately tied up with linguistic considerations. (The fact that "nominalism" is a proposed solution to the problem connotes the strength of this connection.) A

popular formulation of the problem of universals focuses on subject-predicate sentences and the fact that the *same* predicate terms are (truly) applied to *different* subject terms. Consider the following two propositions:

1) Socrates is wise.
2) Plato is wise.

The *same* predicate term ('wise') is truly applied to *different* subject terms ('Socrates' and 'Plato'). The problem of universals, approached in this manner, becomes a problem of reference. Disputants argue over the referents of subject terms, predicate terms, and the copula. Although such a formulation has its advantages, it also has a serious drawback in that it is liable to mislead in at least three ways.

Firstly, in focusing on the referents of the different parts of subject-predicate sentences, the above formulation of the problem seems to rely on the so-called "picture theory" of language that many philosophers have followed the "later" Wittgenstein in rejecting. A linguistic formulation, therefore, is liable to give such philosophers the mistaken impression that the problem of universals is solved or "dissolved" when language is correctly conceived. That this is not so will be clearly seen in a moment.

Secondly, the above formulation implies that the relevant discussion is over whether or not sameness is merely nominal. The problem of universals appears to be a debate over whether there is sameness beyond language. This conception of the problem of universals is confused. Literal nominalism, the position that the objects of our experience only have words in common, exhibits a misunderstanding of the problem. That sameness is also extra-linguistic

becomes apparent as soon as one looks at the world around him or her. In addition to *describing* different individuals with the same words, we also *experience* different individuals as being the same in certain respects.

Finally, the linguistic formulation of the problem of universals is liable to give the unfortunate impression that the realist's argument for the existence of universals is *a priori*, that the realist argues from the sameness of predicates to an ontological sameness, bypassing experience altogether. Such an argument for the existence of universals is not only empirically false (consider, as Wittgenstein once did, the general term "game"), but methodologically wrongheaded. If metaphysics is to be an epistemologically palatable enterprise, it must be an *a posteriori* enterprise.

For these reasons, I will approach the problem of universals empirically, through an examination of our experience. Doing so will not only avoid the potential misunderstandings mentioned above, but it will also capture everything that the linguistic formulation has to offer. After all, if any world can be accessed through the analysis of language, that world is the world of our experience.

The objects of our experience consist of parts. Some of these parts are spatio-temporal; others are not. Consider, for example, the chair I am sitting on while I write this paper. This chair has legs, a seat, and a backrest. These are all spatio-temporal parts of the chair. They could, with enough muscle, be physically separated from the spatio-temporal whole that is my chair. In addition to these physically separable parts, my chair also has a different sort of parts. It has a shape; it has

colors. My chair's shape and colors cannot be spatio-temporally separated from the chair. Nor is this due to a lack of muscle. I cannot even imagine what it would be like for shapes and colors to exist without being *something's* shape and color. They are parts that cannot exist apart from their spatio-temporal wholes. Let us call spatio-temporal wholes "individuals" and their spatio-temporally inseparable parts "properties." The existence of properties, then, is *dependent* on the existence of individuals that have those properties. Some philosophers, especially those in the Aristotelian tradition, have seen the dependent existence of properties as reason to deny them ontological status. The maxim that guides this move is: what exists exists independently. However, in the same sense that properties are "dependent" upon their individuals, individuals seem to be "dependent" upon their properties. A property-less individual is just as difficult to imagine as an individual-less property. The sense in which a property and its individual are dependent upon each other, although difficult to articulate, is not problematic; it is presented to us every time we perceive that a certain individual has a certain property. If individuals (or their spatio-temporal parts) are granted ontological status, it is not clear how one can justifiably withhold such status from properties. Granting properties ontological status is not equivalent to granting them *ante rem* existence; the *in rebus* existence of properties does not preclude their ontological status.

The problem of universals arises when properties of different individuals, considered in and of themselves, are phenomenologically indistinguishable from one another. That this sometimes happens is a phenomenological fact. Consider again my chair. The seat of my chair

and its backrest are both blue. Not only are they both blue, they are both the same *shade* of blue. Their colors, considered in and of themselves, are phenomenologically indistinguishable from one another. If my chair's seat and its backrest were somehow to suddenly exchange colors, it would make no phenomenological difference to my perceptual experience. Similar considerations apply to the two pennies in my pocket. There is no phenomenological difference between their shapes, considered in and of themselves.

Let us now take experienced sameness to the extreme. Imagine two red rubber balls that are phenomenologically indistinguishable in all of their properties. We experience them as being the same shade of red, the same size, the same shape, etc. When presented together, these two balls can be distinguished from one another in virtue of their spatial relations to each other and other individuals. If, however, I were to take the two balls away and then later show you one of them, you would be unable to tell me which of the two balls it was or, indeed, whether it was not a third ball of phenomenologically indistinguishable size, shape, color, etc. Although the two balls are clearly two, there is no qualitative difference that can be used to distinguish one from the other. Accounting for the difference in this situation is a philosophical problem in its own right; it has been called "the problem of individuation." A solution to this problem is especially perplexing if a realistic solution to the problem of universals is embraced. I must, however, delay an inquiry into this problem until a later paper. In this paper, we are concerned with the problem of universals; we are concerned with the experienced sameness that the two red rubber balls exhibit. A solution to the problem of

universals provides a metaphysical explanation of their phenomenological sameness.

Heretofore, my explication of the problem of universals has not left the realm of appearance. Any disagreement at this point is a disagreement over the phenomenological facts of the matter. These disagreements can, at least in principle, be resolved empirically, through an appeal to our experience. This is not to say, however, that the problem of universals is an empirical problem. Although arising in appearance, the problem of universals is a problem concerning reality. The problem, stated in these terms, is: What, if anything, in reality accounts for the sameness in appearance? One job of ontology is to seek the ultimate constituents of reality. The problem of universals, then, is an ontological one. Ontologically formulated, the question is: What ontological kinds account for the sameness that each of us experiences? Does phenomenological sameness (sameness in appearance) denote the existence of universals (sameness in reality)? The realist answers this question in the affirmative; the nominalist gives a negative response. At this point in our inquiry, it will be beneficial to examine the appearance/reality dichotomy in some depth, for the relationship between appearance and reality is at the epistemological heart of providing a solution to the problem of universals and the possibility of metaphysical solutions in general.

The world of our experience, the world of round tables and red chairs, is the world as it appears to us; it the world of appearance. Some philosophers have contrasted this world with the "real" world, "reality." The proverbial man in the street makes no such distinction. To him,

appearance is reality. All philosophers are, at minimum, in behavioral agreement with the man in the street. However, metaphysical beliefs cannot be inferred from a philosopher's non-verbal behavior.

To acknowledge a distinction between appearance and reality that extends beyond perceptual error and correction is to claim that we do not experience the world as it exists in itself. It is to claim that the world "looks" different when no one is looking at it. Philosophers have embraced the appearance/reality dichotomy to different degrees. While some philosophers have restricted "appearance" to certain parts of our phenomenological experience (e.g., "secondary qualities"), others (e.g., Kant) have contrasted our phenomenological experience as a whole with the reality that stands behind it. To the extent that metaphysics is concerned with the world, it is concerned with the world in itself. Further, to the extent that the existence of "platonic realms" is forced upon us by certain features of the world, our knowledge of their existence (or non-existence) is dependent on our knowledge of the world in itself. It is of the utmost importance to the metaphysical enterprise, then, that the world in itself is an epistemologically accessible world.

The possibility of coming to "solve" metaphysical problems depends on the relationship between appearance and reality. More specifically, the possibility of epistemologically palatable solutions to metaphysical problems requires that reality can be accessed through appearance. That appearance is our only epistemological link to reality is an expression of empiricism. In an effort to guard against epistemological concerns with the metaphysical enterprise, let us simply take empiricism for granted at this point. If reality can be accessed

through appearance, then one of two scenarios must be true. Either 1) reality can be directly accessed through appearance (appearance is reality) or 2) reality can be indirectly accessed through appearance (reality can be inferred from appearance). If reality is not appearance and cannot be inferred from appearance, it seems that we must throw our hands up into the air and claim agnosticism towards metaphysical solutions, for reality would then be beyond the limits of human knowledge. It should be noted that, even if reality and hence metaphysical solutions are epistemologically inaccessible, the reality of metaphysical problems is secured.

It is not clear how the relationship between appearance and reality can be established. It is clear, however, that if metaphysics is to be an epistemologically palatable enterprise (assuming empiricism), then reality must conform to one of the two pictures outlined above. If metaphysics is possible, then either appearance is reality or reality is inferable from appearance. In confining our solutions to these two conceptions of reality, we are doing metaphysics, if it can be done at all. Let us now return to the problem of universals.

If phenomenologically indistinguishable properties are, in reality, non-identical, their intrinsic distinctness is not presented to us in our experience of those properties. To deny the literal sameness of phenomenologically indistinguishable properties, then, is to claim that there are differences in reality that do not manifest themselves in appearance. It follows that, if appearance is reality, then phenomenologically indistinguishable properties are ones *in* the many; they are *in rebus* universals. The perceived sameness of properties

would then be ontologically grounded in the literal sameness of the properties themselves.

There are compelling reasons, however, to deny that appearance is reality. This should not be surprising. After all, it seems doubtful that the blind forces behind natural selection had metaphysical pursuits in mind when they shaped the human senses. Consider the property "shape." From five feet away, two rocks may have phenomenologically indistinguishable shapes. However, if we were to position these same rocks right in front of our nose, there is a good chance that their shapes would "become" distinguishable. While the first perception revealed a sameness, the second perception does not. Even if this particular discrepancy is chalked up to perceptual error, the general concern is not yet mollified. Consider two rocks whose shapes are, to the most careful "unaided" perceptions, phenomenologically indistinguishable. Now place these rocks under a magnification device. Once magnified, it is very likely that the rocks' shapes will "become" distinguishable. These two rocks, then, are both experienced as having phenomenologically indistinguishable shapes and as having phenomenologically distinguishable shapes. It is not clear how this multiplicity of appearances can be reconciled with the singularity that it seems reality must have. If priority is given to "aided perception", then it becomes a serious question whether any two properties are, to the most sophisticated measuring devices, measurably indistinguishable. Also, to acknowledge the significance of measurable differences that do not manifest themselves in phenomenological experience is to concede that appearance is not reality. These considerations seem to undermine the

identification of appearance with reality. Although the existence of *in rebus* universals is not dependent on this identification, their existence is no longer forced upon us when the appearance/reality dichotomy is acknowledged.

If reality can be inferred from appearance in any kind of systematic fashion, then some sort of structural similarity must be preserved in the translation. Reality must be something like appearance. If reality is anything like appearance, then our two red rubber balls, which we experience as being intrinsically the same as one another, are, in reality, *similar* to each other. Our two red rubber balls are more similar to each other than either is to a lump of mud, for example. A reality in which this claim is denied is nothing like appearance. If reality is anything like appearance, then this minimal similarity is preserved. How is it preserved? If the two red rubber balls, in reality, have nothing *literally* in common, then similarity cannot be intrinsically grounded. Their similarity must be grounded extrinsically, either in a relationship they share with each other or in a relationship they both share with a third entity (either a "Form" or a more arbitrarily designated paradigm case). Historically, philosophers have been averse to embracing (external) relations as furniture in their worlds. It was virtually unheard of until Russell and Moore broke from the Monist (idealist) tradition. However, if the similarity between our two rubber balls exists in reality and this similarity is not intrinsic, then (some) relations must be granted ontological status. The similarity between our two rubber balls could be relationally grounded. At first appraisal, this move seems to ontologically ground the perceived sameness of our red rubber balls

without appealing to universal entities. In extrinsically grounding perceived sameness (through an appeal to relations), the universality of properties can be denied. However, when we consider a third red rubber ball, identical to the other two in all of its (phenomenologically experienced) properties, it is revealed that this move to ground apparent sameness through real similarity is incompatible with nominalism towards the existence of universals. The relations that relate our three red rubber balls, either to each other or to a further entity, must either be the same or else similar to each other. If they literally have something in common, then universals are embraced. If they are only extrinsically similar, then these relations are similar in virtue of further relations. But then the similarity of these further relations requires an ontological grounding, etc. Denying that (some) similarity relations are universals leads to an unpalatable vicious regress. The regress is vicious because the ontological grounding of perceived sameness, which is the purported purpose of the regress, is not achieved until the regress is brought to a halt. Therefore, if reality is anything like appearance, then universals exist. The nominalist only has one option: to deny that reality is anything like appearance.

If reality is nothing like appearance, then the ontological status of universal entities is not forced upon us. However, if reality is nothing like appearance, then it is unclear how we can have any knowledge of reality whatsoever. If reality is to be inferred from appearance, then it must be something like appearance. When this minimal similarity is lost, lost also is our epistemological link to reality. Without epistemological access to reality, agnosticism towards metaphysical solutions is forced

upon us. Therefore, the sort of reality that nominalism requires is an epistemologically inaccessible reality. Nominalism, then, is not a viable solution to the problem of universals. When the dialectic is properly understood, it is realized that the ontologist is faced with two options when confronted the problem of universals: realism towards the existence of universals or agnosticism towards the problem's solution.