Knowledge and Reality B: Lecture Four

1. Ontology

Ontology is the study of what things there are. Ontology concerns categories broader than what material objects exist. Do *numbers* exist e.g. is there something that exists that is the number 7? Do *events* exist e.g. is there something that exists that is World War II. Do *holes* exist e.g. are there things that exist which are the holes in a piece of Edam?

So, as you can see, ontology concerns itself with pretty abstract questions. The test case we'll look at in this lecture and the next is whether *properties* exist. The *realists* think the properties *do* exist. They usually call those properties *universals*. The *nominalists* do not think that properties exist.

2. Arguments for Nominalism

Argument one: The intuition that only material objects exist.
Argument two: As we shall see, realism runs into problems. So you might accept nominalism because of this.

3. The Obviousness Argument for Realism

Realism is obviously true! Imagine there are two electrons:

- ☐ Both electrons are negatively charged.
- ☐ So there is something they have in common.
- ☐ So there is a property (*negative charge*) that they have in common.
- ☐ So there exists a property that they have in common.
- ☐ So properties exist (and realism is true).

So according to this argument, we just look at what we say about the world and draw conclusions about what exists.

Other examples:

- ☐ I like the colour blue; so there is a colour that I like; so *blueness* exists; so realism is true!
- ☐ Being hot is better than being cold; so there is something that is better than being cold; so there is a property *being hot* (that is better than the property of being cold); so realism is true!

4. The 'Problems of Universals' Argument for Realism

Everyone this is poorly named. It's not a *problem about* universals at all! It's meant to be an *argument* for universals i.e. an argument for properties. (*NB:* It's sometimes called the One Over Many). Worse, whilst everyone agrees the name is a bad one, not everyone agrees about *what the argument is meant to be*! Each philosopher puts it differently. Each has their own interpretation. We'll look at two versions.

Version One

When we say '*x* is *F*' (for instance, 'Nikk is a man'; 'Brad Pitt is a man'; 'The car is blue' etc.) we need some *explanation* for why this is true. So the realist says we need to conscript in properties for this task. They say the explanation is that the property *Fness* (e.g. *being a man, blueness* etc.) and the object *x* (e.g. me, Brad, the car etc.) stands in a relation to that object. They call that relation *instantiation* or *exemplification.*

Version Two

The argument from resemblance. Universals explain (or 'ground', or 'analyse') how two things can have something in common. We might also take this to mean how things can *resemble* one another. So, we arrange things into similarity classes.

Example: All the blue things are similar; all the purple things; all the men; all the women.

Some classes aren't similarity classes.

Example: A class with you, me, a Burmese farmer, the left hands of the entire cast of Eastenders, Brad Pitt's toilet, and the black hole Cygnus X-1.

Allegedly, we need universals/properties to explain this as it's not enough that things fall under the same predicate to be similar.

Example: I'm a man; that table is a table; define '_ is a huble' as applying to anything that is either a man or a table.

Both me and the table are therefore hubles – but we don't *really* have anything in common even though we fall under that same predicate. It's not a *real* resemblance. If it did count as resemblance then then there are *infinitely* many ways in which I am similar, or dissimilar to anything you care to mention.

Universals would come to our rescue if not every predicate corresponded to a property i.e. if there was a property *being a man* and *being a table* but <u>not</u> *being a huble*. So whilst two objects both fall under the predicate '__is a huble' they may not resemble as they may still fail to have properties in common. Things would then resemble one another in virtue of instantiating the same properties.

5. Against Realism: The Paradox of Non-Self Exemplification

Assume that properties exist. It turns out that some properties will instantiate/exemplify themselves, and others do not.

> *Example: Being a universal* self-exemplifies; *not being a goat* self-exemplifies.
> *Example: Owning a house in Mongolia* does not itself own a house in Mongolia; *being happy* is not itself happy.

So with that in mind we can say that the universal *being a goat* isn't self-exemplifying. That's true because some thing (*being a goat*) instantiates some other universal (*non self-exemplification*) So there is a property of *non-self exemplification.*
Now it's a truism that everything is either F or it isn't (I'm either man, or I'm not; I'm either tall, or I'm not etc.) So the property *non-self exemplification* either exemplifies itself or it doesn't. Either option, however, leads to contradiction.

Option one
Imagine *non-self exemplification* <u>does</u> exemplify itself.
Now, in the same way that objects that exemplify *redness* are red, anything that exemplifies *non-self exemplification* won't exemplify itself.
So it must be the case that it <u>doesn't</u> exemplify itself.
Contradiction!

Option two
Say that it <u>doesn't</u> exemplify itself.
But then in the same way that *being happy* doesn't exemplify itself, and therefore exemplifies *non-self exemplification*…
…since *non-self exemplification* doesn't exemplify itself then it must exemplify *non-self exemplification.*
So it <u>does</u> exemplify itself.
Contradiction!

So if the universal *non-self exemplification* existed, we'd have a contradiction. Ergo, it cannot be the case that it exists. However, the arguments that realists use to believe in universals *prima facie* commit us to it.

6. Against Realism: The Regress Argument

Relations will be universals just as properties will be:

> *Example:* Nikk is fifteen metres away from the door. So Nikk and the door jointly instantiate *being fifteen metres from.*
> *Example:* Isaac is the son of Walden. So Isaac and Walden jointly instantiate *being the son of.*

When we say that *x* instantiates *Fness*, we're relating the two. So instantiation will be a relation, and be a universal too. This leads us to a regress.

Take me being a man. I instantiate the universal *being a man.* So I stand in the *instantiation* relation to that universal. In the same way that me being 15m from the door means that myself and the door jointly instantiate *being fifteen metres from*, myself and the universal *being a man* jointly instantiate the universal of *instantiation.*

So if me and *being a man* jointly instantiate *instantiation* then all three things (me, *being a man, instantiation*) jointly instantiate the *instantiation* relation. And we know what that means. We have to keep going!

So now *four* things (me, *being a human*, the *instantiation* relation between those two things and the *instantiation* relation between the former three things) all jointly instantiate the *instantiation* relation. And so we keep going… This carries on forever – that's a regress!

We've seen regresses before, back in Knowledge and Reality A. Just as we did back there, we have to question whether the regress is vicious, and therefore a problem. Or is not vicious, and not a problem? As you'll find when (if?) you take this argument for your essays, it's an open question as to whether this regress of instantiation is vicious or not.