

Knowledge and Reality B: Lecture Five

1. Against Realism: The location of universals

Any given thing is either located in space and time or not. If universals exist, then they are either located in space and time or not. Universals that are *not* located in space and time are said to be *Platonic*. Universals that *are* located in space and time are said to be *Immanent* (or, sometimes, Aristotelian).

Plato thought universal existed, and called them 'Forms'. The idea is that things like you and me are mere imitations of the Platonic Forms. They exist in 'Platonic Heaven'. Introduced to explain how we recognise things as being some way or other. So Plato believed there was the Form of the Perfect Man. Some debate about whether there are only a handful of Forms (Justice, Harmony, Beauty etc.) or *lots* of Forms – one for every general term.

We fall under terms by 'participating' in these Forms. And we recognise what things were because we'd seen them all before (when we were dead). Totally nuts. But the idea that these things existed in 'Platonic Heaven' has been retained (even if the whacky theology has been dropped).

So Platonic Universals aren't located *anywhere*. They *exist*, but not in space and time. Characterise them by saying that they are *abstract*. Whereas things in space and time can be said to be *concrete*.

The existence of abstracta (and therefore Platonic universals) offends numerous (very similar) intuitions.

Intuition One: "You're all barking mad" objections.

You might think all talk of things existing, when those things *aren't* material objects is just meaningless gibberish.

Intuition two: Offends naturalist intuitions.

Naturalism is the thesis that spacetime and its contents is all there is. No ghosts, no gods, no universals, no sets, no numbers etc. So you may admit it makes *sense* to say things exist outside spacetime, but that it is nonetheless false.

Intuition Three: Offends empiricist intuitions that everything that exists can be discovered to exist scientifically – via some empirical method.

Universals, and other abstracta, are beyond spacetime and cannot be studied. Moreover, they are (usually) said to be causally powerless So how would we *know* about them?

So let's turn to the alternative: the Universals are located somewhere in spacetime. But where? It can't just be any old location.

Example: Blue is located in Croydon, *Black* is located in a mine shaft deep in Surbiton and *Purple* orbits a star in a far off galaxy...

Plainly stupid. Instead, locate them where their *instances* are located. So *being a human* is located where I am. And where you are. And where every other human is. On this theory universals are somehow 'in' you. When I look at you, I see your universals for they are before me.

But are they *partly* located where their instances are, or *entirely* located there? Most people who believe in immanent universals opt for the latter: they are *entirely* located in their instances. The alternative is that only *part* of the universal is instantiated where I am. But then I only instantiate *part* of *being a man*. And Brad Pitt instantiates a *different* part (which is located where he is). So he's got *his* part and I've got *my* part, and they're *different*. So me and Brad don't *genuinely* share something (the universal *being a man*) at all. Instead, we've each got *bits* of something. I'll leave you to read Conee's chapter to see that argument in more depth, and leave you to wonder whether it is convincing.

If we go with the standard claim that universals are, instead, *entirely* located where their instances are, we have another problem. Universals have multiple instances.

Example: Me and Brad!

So apparently it's entirely located in (at least!) two different places. How can something entirely be located in one place and entirely located in another? **What bit of 'entirely' didn't you understand?!**

So, that's the first problem with universals being located. Another problem is what to say about universals with *no* instances. For instance, *perfect circularity* is a property that, presumably, has no instances. There aren't any perfect circles. So there are no instances for it to be located at. So where is *perfect circularity* then? At this stage, most realists deny that the universal exists. That is, a universal *only* exists if it is instantiated by something. But this might well run into problems.

Take the sentence 'Blue is a colour'. Isn't that sentence true even if there are no blue things? Isn't it true even if there are no physical objects? The realist who thinks a universal exists only if it's instantiated will have either deny that it's true (which is weird) or say that it can be true without those properties existing. What's the problem with that second bit meant to be? We'll come back to that later.

2. Nominalism

What problems lie ahead for the nominalist? Firstly, they seem to deny the obvious – that there are properties! Secondly, they don't offer any metaphysical explanation of why objects fall under the predicates that they do. Thirdly, how do they explain genuine resemblance? Let's look at them (but not in turn).

Look at the second problem. The nominalist generally denies any metaphysical explanation is required. The problem is meant to be filling out the RHS of 'x is F' iff _____. Realists say 'x is F' iff x instantiates Fness. The nominalist says 'x is F' iff x is F. There's nothing more to it! There's no explanation to be had! Got to finish explanations somewhere, and the nominalist finishes here.

Next, look at the third problem. There are a few ways that they can explain resemblance. I won't look at this in-depth (but go for your life in essays!). One way is to just take resemblance as unanalysable. So the realist analyses 'x resembles y' as 'x and y have the same properties'. The nominalist could just shrug their shoulders and say there is no analysis: 'x resembles y iff x resembles y' Is that convincing? Think back to the analyses we looked at of knowledge. For instance, the Tripartite analysis was:

x knows that P iff (i) x is justified in believing P (ii) x believes P and (iii) P is true.

We then had hordes of alternatives. Would it suffice to just say 'x knows that P iff x knows that P'? To just *refuse* to give an analysis? I leave that to you decide, because that is what the nominalist is doing here with resemblance. Although, I should note, some try other tactics to account for resemblance.

Finally, look at the first problem. This is where it gets more difficult for nominalists. Take again the sentence 'Blue is a colour' Doesn't that *obviously* commit you to colours? After all, you've just said *something* is a colour – namely blue! How can blue be a colour *if it doesn't exist*? For instance, if I said that 'The panda in this room is cute', what are you to say? There is no panda! Either my statement is meaningless, or false. Certainly it's not *true*! Similarly, if *blue* doesn't exist then how can 'Blue is a colour' be true?

Nominalists aren't done yet. They claim that the sentence

(1) Blue is a colour

is *true*, but it doesn't express what the realist thinks it expresses:

(2) There exists something, *blue*, and *blue* is a colour.

Instead (1) is a disguised way of expressing something about familiar concrete objects. For instance:

(3) Everything that is blue is coloured

(3) is said to be a *paraphrase* of (1). So for nominalists all sentences that seem to 'obviously' commit us to the existence of properties are, in fact, disguised ways of expressing their paraphrases. Where those paraphrases are sentences that *don't* commit to the existence of properties. So (3) only commits to the existence of *concrete objects* (which are blue, and coloured) *not* to the existence of *properties* which are colours.

3. Back to Immanent Universals

Now we can see what problem we have with denying that there are uninstantiated universals. If *blue* only exists if there are blue things, but 'Blue is a colour' is true even when there *aren't* any blue things, the immanent realist will have to explain *how* that sentence is true. So they'll find themselves in *exactly* the same boat as the nominalist. And one has to wonder what the point of being a realist was after all? That's not to say that there isn't any point. When you're studying and researching, do keep in mind *why* people believe the positions that they do. Not all the realists agree over what the motivation for realism is. And the objections you focus on may seem irrelevant to certain realists depending upon those motivations. So try and be explicit about what realist/nominalist position you are looking at; and what motivations you are assuming them to have. Don't consider all of the motivations! Remember, **depth** not **breadth** is all important.

4. Tropes

What's a trope? It's a *particular* instance of a property. So if I have a black jacket, and a black pen, they're both black. But they both have their own *particular* blacknesses. My jacket's instance of black is *distinct* from my pen's instance of black. Here are some examples that seem to demonstrate we already believe in tropes.

When we concentrate on an individual object we can concentrate on its particular properties. You can take in the beauty of blueness of the sky, you can focus specifically on how tall someone is, you can be scared of a noise's loud volume. In each case you're appreciating a blue trope, focusing on a tall trope and being scared of a loud trope. At least, according to this nominalist. You're not looking at blueness in general. Nor are you focusing on tallness in general, or loudness in general, as the realist says. You're focusing on the sky's blue, some particular person's tallness and a particular noise's loudness. They are *particulars*, not *universals*.

So that's what a trope is, just in case you were wondering. You can read in Conee, and the further readings, how they are supposed to help.