

## *Universals*

There is a problem with the way in which we talk about and conceptualise reality. We seem to pick out distinct objects in our environment, such as trees and animals, and even vaguer entities such as the sky or the ground. When we ponder or discuss them, though, we talk about the features of the things, as well as the whole objects. We can do this because we see the same features in different objects, so we see that one thing is tall, another blue, and another soft. We also see that some objects are of the same type, such as the trees or the rabbits. The problem arises when philosophers try to understand this 'resemblance', and this 'sharing' of features. If two objects are indistinguishable in their colour, we say they have the 'same' colour, even though the colours are in two different locations, or occur at two different times. If we deny that these two instances of colour are in any way the same thing, our words and reasoning no longer seem to make sense. We even talk about colours (and other features) independently from objects, when we compare features, or design new objects.

These words or concepts referring to similar features found in many objects are called 'universals'. The existence of universals is uncontroversial, because we use them all the time, but the problem is to understand their nature. We first notice that they are varied in character. The terms 'cat' and 'dog' employ single terms to apply to many objects, and these are 'substantial' universals, because they pick out the whole object, and classify it. Both of these universals fall under the universal 'animal', so there is a hierarchy of substantial universals. Then there are universals for parts of such objects, such as 'furry' or 'female', and for behaviours of the objects, such as 'fast' or 'nervous', and for qualities such as 'brown' or 'noisy'. We can call all of these the 'properties' of the object, but this raises problems about the scope of that term. Is 'being a dog' a property, or 'being my pet', or being beautiful? However we describe these phenomena, they all have the characteristic of universals – that a single term refers (unlike a name) to many different things. A further division can be made by looking at parts of speech, such as nouns, verbs and adjectives. This draws attention to prepositions, such as 'near' or 'before' or 'between', and we see that relations are also universals.

We also note some variety in the uses we make of universals. We need them to compare our sense impressions, where they identify the respects in which things seem 'the same'. Universals are needed if we say that two words have the same meaning, and also to explain how two words differ in meaning. Scientists use universals to express their generalisations and the laws of nature. Logicians need stable universals for their chains of reasoning. Our ideals, such as happiness, success or health, all have a universal form. The most obvious use of universals is in our classifications, where many items fall under one concept.

The key issue is whether to accept universals as simply integral aspects of objects or words, or to treat them as having some sort of existence of their own. The first approach would be more economical, and closer to common sense, but the temptation to ascribe separate existence to universals is that we can then explain how we seem to refer to the same thing among many instances, and how we can discuss and compare the universals with no reference at all to objects. Those who believe universals exist independently are called 'realists', and those who deny them are called 'nominalists'. A compromise view says that universals are indeed real, but that they can only exist when 'instantiated' in some object. Critics would then say that the latter are just 'modes' of objects, with no special existence of their own, but that loses the power of universals to explain the sameness among things.

The boldest approach says that uninstantiated universals really exist. This conjures up a separate realm of existence, containing pure non-physical ideas. An ancient view ('platonism') talked of these as the 'Forms', which are an array of ideal features and objects, which function as the underlying blueprints for reality. Thus the Form of 'circularity' is an eternal and pure ideal of that property, and roughly circular things in the real world are its 'instantiations'. This theory was controversial from the start. The two big questions were what we should take a Form to be, if it is different from its occurrences in the world, and what the relation of 'instantiation' (or 'partaking') consists of.

We can talk of a Form as an 'ideal', which sounds right for the perfect circle, but it is not clear what ideal brownness looks like. We can talk of a Form as a 'blueprint', which might do for a leopard, but is unclear for 'success'. A key question is whether the Form of a property embodies that property (given that the blueprint for a car is not a car). It is tempting to say that the Form of circularity is perfectly circular, and the Form of beauty achieves the ideal of beauty. We would certainly be shocked to learn that the Form of beauty was ugly. However we will then be puzzled as to what the beautiful Form of beauty could possibly look like. The most notorious puzzle (the 'Third Man' problem) is how you could tell that the Form of beauty was beautiful, without some further Form to make the comparison (which leads to a regress of Forms). It seems best to say that Forms do not apply to themselves (they are not 'self-predicating'), but we are then very unclear about the nature of the Forms.

The relation of 'instantiation' is also a puzzle. If a flower is beautiful because it instantiates the Form of beauty, critics asked how the flower would change if the Form did not exist. If the Form is not self-predicating, then the beautiful flower can't copy or resemble the Form, so the relationship becomes too vague to explain anything. It is also observed that if Forms are timeless and non-physical then they must lack causal powers, but then it is unclear how we could ever come to know them.

If we reject uninstantiated universals, we either say they must be instantiated, or we reject them entirely. The nominalist rejection of universals usually says that they only exist as concepts in our minds, as the result of selective mental abstraction, or our capacity to idealise, or our innate tendency to classify. The idea that universals exist but are always instantiated seems a promising compromise, as it allows that we are encountering one thing in many locations, which thus explains the phenomenon of 'sameness'. Nominalists must either devote a lot of effort to explaining resemblance (without mentioning universals), or say that resemblance is a primitive concept in their ontology, despite its very human and complex appearance. If, on the other hand, we say that universals are always instantiated, this brings them closer to experienced reality, but they still have the weird feature of multiple existence.