

Identity and Persons

We noted that, if we take the term “universal” in a broad and minimal sense, there is no controversy over whether universals exist. The only controversial issues are over the *nature* of universals. Are they merely words? Are they mental concepts? Are they entities that are neither mental nor linguistic? Even a nominalist could agree that there are universals, if that just means that there are useful linguistic frameworks containing predicate expressions.

Similarly, allowing any distinction between particulars and universals is also bound to raise issues not so much about the existence of particulars as about the *nature of particulars*.

Our working (aristotelian) definition of a particular is: that of which something can be predicated but which cannot be predicated of anything. Under this definition of a particular, Socrates would count as a particular but neither his skin color nor the shape of his nose nor his curiosity would count as particulars because all of the latter three are predicable of him or of some of his parts.

But there is also something else that makes Socrates a particular according to the aristotelian way we have been thinking about particulars so far. Since he is neither present in nor predicable of anything, he can’t be repeated. There can be no natural recurrence of Socrates, whereas other things might have his same skin color, noses of the same shape as his or the same personality trait of curiosity. One particular cannot exist in two places simultaneously, nor can a particular have many instances over a period of time. For now, we have left open the question of whether two numerically non-identical particulars could be qualitatively identical. Some philosophers have denied this possibility. Some have maintained that being in a location is a quality, so two particulars could not be qualitatively identical, simply because they are *two* particulars. Non-identity of location is guaranteed for any two particulars because unshared location at a given time is *essential* to any particular.

But is location essential to particulars? Consider the blue spot that appears to our prisoner in the dark room. We said it was a visual hallucination. Is it a particular? It seems to be a particular because we agreed that, if the particular man had not been in the room at the time it appeared, it would never have appeared to anyone. Perhaps we should say that it is something that exists for him alone, but is it located somewhere? We might try saying that, since it is something that exists only for the man, it belongs to him; so, it is wherever he is. But this is not at all clear. Is the blue spot somewhere on his skin? On his liver? In his left retina? On the left side of his visual cortex? The problem becomes even more obvious if we change the hallucination from a visual one to an auditory one. Suppose he seems to hear someone saying his name but no sound is really going on in his environment. Where is this sound that he seems to hear? Mental events like these are hard to assign any spatial location. Some philosophers have said that mental events don’t have any location.

Some events are physical particulars. Collisions, explosions, skids, births, etc. are good examples. Perhaps these are easier to assign locations but in general it seems we should say of particulars like events, processes, actions, states or conditions that they all occur at times or go on during periods of time. So, it seems that all particulars exist either in certain locations or at certain times or both.

We could also say that, whereas it is clear only with regard to physical particulars that they have spatial parts, all particulars have temporal parts. Thus, if a certain sound, like a siren, goes on for some period of time, it has a beginning half and a most recent half. Of course, anything that exists for a while could be said to have temporal parts, too. Thus, Socrates' boyhood is one of his temporal parts, his military career is another of his temporal parts.

Now if one of a thing's temporal parts is brief enough, it will have to be classified as a particular of a sort we have not so far considered. We may say that the same person may change from being short to being tall or the same siren-sound may change from being loud to being soft. But may there not be events that don't last for any length of time, instantaneous events? Perhaps a flash of a strobe light or one tick of an atomic clock would serve as examples. If these are not brief enough, we could think of examples like the event of Jones' becoming thirty years old or the first contact of a human artifact with the surface of the Moon. One point we can make about such instantaneous events is that, unlike some other particulars, they cannot undergo changes. A changeable particular must endure long enough to survive a change. Let us call particulars which are capable of enduring and surviving changes continuants.

The most familiar example of a continuant would be the sort of particular Aristotle called a primary substance. Not only can a primary substance like Socrates or a certain stone endure through time, it can have incompatible qualities at different times. The white stone becomes black. Socrates, the short boy, becomes tall after some years. The stone that was white is numerically identical with the one that is now black. The man who was short is numerically identical with the man who is now tall.

Aristotle thought that what made change possible was that there must be that which exists before during and after a change. In cases like the stone turning black after having been white it seems easy to grasp what this means. Some thing of the same essential form (a certain type of mineral) exists before, during and after the change. It was a stone before and it (the numerically identical thing) still is a stone. It doesn't turn into a non-stone just by changing color. This type of change Aristotle called accidental.

But what if a particular changes so drastically that the same *type* of thing doesn't exist after the change? Suppose a tree is vaporized by a super-powerful laser beam. This is an example of what Aristotle called *substantial* change. What's left is not a tree but just a cloud of particles of, say, carbon, water, etc. Yet this is enough for Aristotle to still be right in saying that change requires that something exist before, during and after the change. A tree may not be left after the change but something is -- a cloud of material particles. The absolutely essential thing that must exist in order for change to happen, according to Aristotle, is matter. It is matter which can take on or lose accidental or essential qualities. Being composed of some sorts of matter is an essential part of what it is to be what Aristotle called a primary substance. The other factor essential to the existence of a primary substance is the possession of some form. What is capable of undergoing change must be something of some definite type or form. The particles left after the tree is destroyed are not a tree but each of them is of some type or form, such as water or carbon.

Further examples of non-continuant particulars are moments of time. Let us simply use the term 'moment' to refer to whatever is the shortest unit of time. For the time being, I will not deal with the question of whether moments have some duration or no duration. Whatever their magnitude, it is obvious that moments cannot endure the passage of time. Whatever is left after the moment of change, it cannot be the moment at which the change occurred. The same thing seems to be true of periods of time. Changes can happen to things during some period of time but a period of time can't change. The same period of time couldn't remain after any given time had gone by. Periods of time keep on lapsing into the past. Parts of time are prime examples of non-continuant particulars.

Are there any continuant particulars which are not aristotelian primary substances? The answer would be "yes" if there are any non-material continuants capable of changing some of their qualities or states. Whether there actually are any such things is philosophically controversial, so I will just give some examples of continuant non-material particulars that some philosophers have claimed actually exist.

According to some, there is a supreme being on which all finite things depend for their existence. This being is often referred to by the name "God". Those who claim that this being exists commonly say that God is a spirit having no material aspect or features. It is evident that these philosophers think of this being as a particular since they ascribe various attributes to it such as power and knowledge and they describe this being as enduring throughout eternity. It is controversial among these philosophers whether this being is capable of changing in any way.

Another example of a non-material continuant which many philosophers have claimed actually exists are minds or souls. The main example of a mind or soul given by these philosophers is the human mind or soul. They say it is something which persists, numerically identical, through time but definitely undergoes changes of various sorts. It may be ignorant at one time and knowledgeable at another time; happy at one time, sad at another.

Although there may be a very close union between a mind and a body, some philosophers have argued that the one is not the other and the one may exist without the other. Some philosophers have claimed that non-human creatures, such as monkeys or dolphins or even mice or insects also have minds. Others have denied this claim.

One other class of continuants have been suggested by some philosophers. These are particulars which are not substances but which depend on substances or on relations between substances. Physical substances have surfaces, corners and edges. These are as particular as the substances that have them. On any surface of a physical particular there are many points. Any two of these points determines a line. Any three or more points determines a figure. Four or more points not on a common surface determine a three-dimensional figure. Each of these are as particular as the particulars on which they exist. They seem to be capable of undergoing change, of moving from one place to another or of being distorted along with distortions in their surfaces. Yet many philosophers would argue that they cannot exist independently of the particulars on which they exist.

A shadow may be an example of a continuant particular which is dependent on relations between physical particulars for its existence. Perhaps spots of light on a wall or even the blue spot that appears to the man in the dark would be an example of a dependent particular, but we should be cautious about whether we are willing to say that such things can endure changes.

Here are some principles to bear in mind as we consider the nature of particulars. Besides our familiar principles of *numerical identity* (**N**), *qualitative identity* (**Q**) and *extensional identity* (**E**):

(N) $(X=Y)$ - X is none other than Y and conversely

(Q) - Every quality of X is a quality of Y and conversely

(E) - The set of Xs is the set of Ys and conversely

Two other principles are:

(L) Leibniz's Law: $X=Y$. iff. Whatever is true of X is true of Y and conversely

and

(M) X is mereologically identical with Y . iff. Whatever is a part of x is a part of Y and conversely