

The Problem of Universals

When Aristotle discussed the nature of predication (in *Categories* and in *Posterior Analytics*) he noted that what is predicable of a primary substance may be said not just of that one individual but may be said "according to the whole" of those things making up the species of which the substance is a member. Thus, "dog" applies to the whole species of dogs as well as to Fido. Aristotle's Greek term for "according to the whole" is "*to kathalou*". It is from this word that the modern term "catholic" is derived. When, Latin-speaking scholars tried to translate this Greek term, they invented the term "*universale*", meaning "that which is one, said of many".

When the term "universal" is understood according to its origins, it may be wondered how there could ever seem to be any problem about the existence of universals. It is just obvious that there are universals, if all that is meant is something that can be said in the same way of many things. It is obvious that there are common nouns, adjectives, verbs, adverbs, relational terms, etc. and these can be said in the same way of many things in common. So, universals exist just as surely as these parts of speech exist. Where is there a problem in this?

We may concede that there is no doubt about the existence of universals at least in the sense that there are universally applicable terms in the language we actually use in everyday speech and writing. If there is a problem about universals, it is not whether there are any. At the very least, there are words and phrases of language which are universal in the sense that they are universally applicable to any and all of many things.

The problems about universals, if there are any real problems, arise when we ask the question, what makes universal terms possible? What explains or accounts for the fact that terms like 'Socrates' or 'The Eiffel Tower' can only apply to exactly one thing whereas terms like 'red', 'square', 'trio', 'dog', 'walk', 'slowly', etc. can apply in exactly the same way to many things?

Philosophy begins with an examination of the most familiar, ordinary things, uncontroversial matters of common knowledge or experience and tries to make sense of them by asking how they are possible. We have just given one example of a piece of common knowledge; the distinction between singular terms (those that can apply only to exactly one thing) and general terms (those that can apply in the same way to many things). Philosophy asks what makes the use of both kinds of terms possible.

Common sense itself has a ready answer to this question. What makes both kinds of terms possible is that some things are different whereas others are the same. It is because some things are the same that one term can apply to them all. It is because some things are different that exactly one term can apply to any one of them.

The answer is easily given but not very helpful. Still, it is a starting point because it reflects some of the most familiar and undeniable facts of common experience and knowledge. There are recurrences and repetitions among things familiar to us. Many colors, shapes and sounds occur over and over again. Many things may be of a sort we have never known before (such as a platypus) but even these will have some qualities (having fur) that we have observed in other things. And they often turn out to be of the same kind as things we have encountered before, even though they may appear quite different from the others. We also often have no difficulty in grouping things according to quality, size, shape, etc., which means that we can easily distinguish between, say, color and shape, sound and flavor and so on. We can also easily distinguish between an individual thing and its qualities. We know that this leaf was green and is now yellow. The leaf still exists but it now has a quality it did not have yesterday.

I said Philosophy begins with things that are uncontroversial. The things I have just given as examples may seem to be not only uncontroversial but so patently obvious that no one in their right mind would ever be puzzled by them. No one would deny or doubt such things. Of course

there is recurrence and repetition. What is puzzling is how they are possible.

For the whole time that human beings have had experience of objects like stones, people were perfectly familiar with the fact that stones fall to the ground when unsupported. But they did not understand why such objects fall freely. No one doubted the fact of free fall of objects to the Earth. Most people feel no puzzlement about it. But free fall is something that stands in need of an explanation. People had to find what is puzzling about free fall before they realized that it needs an explanation. It was a long time after free fall was realized to be in need of explanation before anyone had anything close to the right explanation and even when it was found it was centuries before it was established as correct. It is the same with natural recurrence. It is only when we learn to reflect on familiar, ordinary things that we are able to find their problematical side.

Philosophy exists because we are often not satisfied with the explanations that common sense can provide. We use words like 'same' and 'different' all the time, rarely bothering to reflect on what they mean. In order to keep track of different meanings that may be concealed in the ordinary use of a single word or phrase, philosophers have invented some technical terms which are free of the ambiguity typical of many ordinary terms. In order to exhibit ambiguities in the ordinary use of 'same' and 'different', philosophers have invented the notion of *Identity* as a technical substitute for the commonsense notions of sameness and difference and they have tried to express three possible meanings for it, none of which is ambiguous. The hope is to avoid any problems that may be due to ambiguity alone.

X and Y are qualitatively identical

- partially : At least one quality of X is a quality of Y, and conversely.
- totally: Every quality of X is a quality of Y and conversely

X and Y are extensionally identical: The set of Xs is the set of Ys and conversely

X and Y are numerically identical: X is none other than Y and conversely (X=Y)

Notice that these attempts at precise definitions do not attempt to go *beyond* what common sense provides. They only attempt to make its various meanings explicit. At least partial qualitative identity is a familiar fact of experience. Two leaves can be of exactly the same shade of color. Extensional identity is also familiar. Every member of the set of creatures with hearts is a member of the set of creatures with backbones and conversely. Numerical identity is not only familiar but often a matter of great interest and concern. Jones knows who her best friend is and Jones may know that her spouse has a lover but Jones may not know that her best friend is (numerically identical with) her spouse's lover. Two leaves are obviously not numerically identical but may be at least partially qualitatively identical. The leaf that is yellow today may have been green yesterday while remaining numerically identical with the leaf that was green yesterday. All the things in the store that are on sale may be extensionally identical with the goldfish in the store even though the property of being a goldfish is not numerically identical with the property of being a sale item in the store.

Can the undoubted facts of natural recurrence and repetition, made more precise by the above definitions of identity, be explained if the only sort of universal that exists are the general terms of language?

