

The Problem of Universals in Contemporary Philosophy

Pisa – July 5-7, 2010

I was very excited when I heard about the conference entitled ‘The Problem of Universals in Contemporary Philosophy’, to be held in Pisa, July 5-7, 2010, not only because a conference on one of the most fundamental metaphysical problems was long overdue, and because it promised to gather in one spot some of the leading experts in the field, but also because it gave me an excuse to visit Italy again.

Pisa turned out to be a beautiful and intimate setting for the conference, which was rendered all the more enjoyable thanks to the warm hospitality and excellent organization of our Italian hosts, Gabrielle Galluzzo and professor Massimo Mugnai, as well as the research fellows and graduate students of Scuola Normale Superiore of Pisa.

The goal of the conference was to present and assess new developments in the contemporary debate on the problem of universals. The problem of universals is a problem that arises in an attempt to explain the phenomenon of resemblance amongst different particulars. We continuously observe numerous cases of resemblance – for instance, this table resembles that bookcase in respect of shape (rectangular), colour (brown) and material (wood); Socrates resembles Plato in being human and wise; and so on. But what are these facts of resemblance due to? Realists argue that different particular things resemble each other in virtue of there being literally something they have in common, something that all of them share, and that this something is a universal. Universals are thus envisioned as entities that ground resemblance amongst different particulars by being multiply instantiated (present in each and every resembling particular), and one and the same in each of those instantiations. This capacity for multiple instantiation of universals has puzzled many philosophers and perhaps even given the problem of universals its name (thus indicating that there is something problematic with such entities). As a result, nominalists and trope theorists have tried to come up with ontologies that dispense with universals, offering constructions out of particulars and/or tropes instead.

The problem of universals arises from but is not limited to the problem of accounting for the phenomenon of resemblance. In fact, it is often taken to refer also to the problem of predication, the more general problem of providing an ontological account of properties and relations, the problem of the unity of particular and universal, and so on. The most prominent contemporary ontological theories such as David Lewis’s and David Armstrong’s attempt to provide a coherent answer to

the entire cluster of problems that constitute the problem of universals. Not only that, but with their chosen ontological building blocks they then go on to construe entire metaphysical systems – with theories of modality, thought and language, mind, laws and causation, persistence and time, metaphysics of mathematics, etc. No wonder then that the so-called ‘problem of universals’ has been seen to play such a central role in metaphysics for almost two and a half thousand years.

The papers presented at the conference reflected well the wide variety of issues and positions that the problem of universals has come to encompass. Given that problem of universals has had a very long and enlightening history of attempts at its solution, it is only natural that theories of some of the most prominent philosophers from the past are reassessed in the new contemporary context. At the conference this was expertly done by Gonzalo Rodriguez-Pereyra with his paper on ‘Leibniz on individual accidents’ as well as Gabrielle Galluzzo’s paper which argued in favour of an Aristotelian understanding of kinds and properties. Also inspired by Aristotle’s *Categories* was E. J. Lowe’s four-category ontology with its division of universals into two types: substantial universals (substantial kinds such as *horse*) and property universals (attributes such as *whiteness*). Lowe presented three arguments in favour of this division and in defence of substantial universals and while I found his arguments convincing, I worried about the possible circularity in the way these categories were characterized. Namely, he relies on three formal internal relations – relation of instantiation, relation of characterization, and relation of exemplification – to distinguish between the four categories in his ontology, but these very relations are internal and thus supervenient on the natures of the very entities they are introduced to characterize and distinguish amongst one another.

John Heil seemed to find himself in considerable agreement with E. J. Lowe’s ontology, though remaining firmly on the trope theorist’s side of the fence. He himself adheres to the substance/attribute version of trope theory and, in his paper entitled ‘Universals in a World of Particulars’, Heil explored the possibility of admitting universals but at no real ontological cost. If I understand him correctly, his thought is as follows: we have a particular and grounded in a particular is its generalized ‘way of being’ – the universal. But the universal is nothing over and above the particular it is present in, in fact it is construed so thinly that it is not even really there – it supervenes and is manifested by the natures of particulars that are similar in the same ‘generalized’ way. If this is in fact how Heil understands his ‘universals,’ they turn out to be too insubstantial for the role they were elected by realists to play – namely, to ground resemblance amongst particulars. Nonetheless, I found this proposal interesting, especially Heil’s examination of it in the works of Santayana and D. C. Williams.

Another remarkable paper came from Sophie Gibb, who argued that trope-based theories *can* accommodate the generality of laws *contra* Armstrong’s and Forrest’s arguments to the contrary. If she is right, then trope theories appear all the more attractive for it. However, things started to look bleak for trope theorists from a different angle. Namely, Robert Garcia presented a very interesting paper that shed light on a distinction that is often overlooked in the current literature on

tropes. The distinction was first introduced by Micheal Loux and it marks a difference between *tropes* – understood as particularized *properties* such as the brownness and woodenness of this chair; and *tropers* – understood as thin *individuals* like this individual brown thing and this individual wooden thing. If this is indeed a valid distinction, trope theorists have a lot of disambiguating to do, as well as face up to numerous challenges Garcia lays out to each of these underlying views.

I must admit that I was quite disappointed that Anna-Sofia Maurin was unable to attend the conference in Pisa, as she was slated to present a paper on states of affairs and exemplification regress – a topic that has received quite a bit of interest in the past few years. However, Fraser MacBride helped bridge this gap with his thought-provoking paper on relations, truth-makers, and Bradley's regress. In his talk MacBride warned against the dangers of an indiscriminate use of truth-making as a guide to our most fundamental ontological categories, and in particular, against the use of a truth-making criterion in the case of relations. The latter seems to lead to an apparent disappearance of external asymmetrical relations, with internal relations taking their place. MacBride further illustrated how such strategy did not help at all with solving Bradley's regress, as some trope theorists like Peter Simons would have us believe.

Given the lack of space, I must limit myself to a mere mention of Alex Oliver's excellent paper, 'Plurals, Predicates, Properties,' in which he discusses and promotes the ideas of plural term, plural predication and plural property and argues against predicative analysis of plurality that aims to reduce first-level plural predication to second-level singular predication. Similarly, I found Dean Zimmerman's paper on temporary intrinsics, relations to times, and the A-theory of time to be very clear and well-argued.

Finally, I need to mention the two talks that opened the conference on the problem of universals – Michael Loux's talk in favor of an Aristotelian variant of a constituent ontology and Peter van Inwagen's talk on relational vs. constituent ontologies. Both of these prominent metaphysicians from the University of Notre Dame seemed to find obvious a distinction that I found quite new – that is, the distinction between relational and constituent ontologies. The broadest classification of ontologies, says van Inwagen, is according to the number of categories they postulate – thus we have ontologies that admit only one type of category – the *monocategorical* ontologies – and the ones that admit two or more ontological categories – the *polycategorical* ontologies. So far so good. Now within polycategorical ontologies we have the relational and constituent ontologies, based on whether the entities they admit are structured or not. Constituent ontologies thus ascribe an 'ontological structure' to each ordinary object. Examples of such ontologies are a bundle theory of tropes (where ordinary objects are constituted entirely out of bundles of tropes); a bundle theory of universals (where ordinary objects are constituted entirely out of bundles of universals); and any theory that takes ordinary objects to have non-mereological constituents such as immanent universals or tropes together with a substratum or a bare particular. Relational ontologies, on the other hand, are those according to which ordinary objects' possession of properties is analysed in a way that does not include properties as *constituents* of

the objects that have them. Instead, objects stand in a relation to those properties. Relational ontologists would, according to this definition, be transcendent realists and class nominalists who, instead of structured ordinary particulars, have structure-less ‘blobs’ who stand in external relation of ‘having’ or ‘being a member of’ their properties.

Now, whereas I think I understand the way the distinction between these two types of ontologies is drawn, I couldn’t help but wonder whether it marked a *genuine* distinction – as someone pointed out at the conference, a class nominalist account of properties (supposedly a relational ontology) takes them to be sets of all the particulars that ‘have them’, this way making particulars members/parts of properties. Isn’t this relation a form of constitution? Similarly, with transcendent universals – aren’t particulars somehow parts of such universals? Or take the typical example of the so-called ‘constituent ontology’ – the bundle trope theory: isn’t the bundle constituted thanks to the *relation* of compresence, or some such? Perhaps I am here only having trouble with the terms chosen to mark a distinction that is real but not very well-named. I suppose, that with this as with many other ontological distinctions, only time will tell.

I have had a hard and thankless task of presenting a quick and inevitably superficial overview of a conference that had a lot to offer on one of the most central philosophical problems. I can only hope that those who are sufficiently intrigued by the topics covered by the conference in Pisa will look up the collection of papers that should come out of this conference in a year’s time.

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