

PHIL 420: Metaphysics

Handout 3

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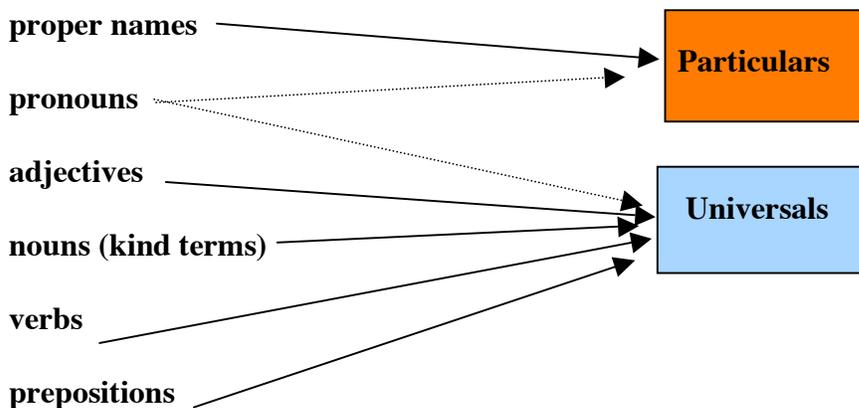
§ Russell's Theory of Universals (*a la* Plato)

[Russell's first argument for universals]: (p. 45)

1. All just acts must all, in some sense, partake of a common nature, which will be found in whatever is just and in nothing else.
2. This common nature, in virtue of which they are all just, will be justice itself, the pure essence the admixture of which with facts of ordinary life produces the multiplicity of just acts.
3. Therefore, there is a universal of JUSTICE, which is shared by all particular just acts (and just people).
4. Therefore, universals must all exist on their own.

* Language and Reality

Words *denote* things in the world, and these things are divided into particulars and universals.



1. No sentence can be made up without at least one word which denotes a universal.
2. Even verbs denote universals, e.g., 'like'.
3. Thus all truths involve universals, and all knowledge of truths involves acquaintance with universals.

Russell: "Seeing that nearly all the words to be found in the dictionary stand for universals, it is strange that hardly anybody except students of philosophy ever realizes that there are such entities as universals.... We feel such words to be incomplete and insubstantial; they seem to demand a context before anything can be

done with them. Hence we succeed in avoiding all notice of universals as such, until the study of philosophy forces them upon our attention.”

“Even among philosophers, ... those [universals] named by verbs and prepositions have been usually overlooked.”

— *Q*: Do you think verbs and prepositions denote universals?

[Russell’s second argument for universals (as relations)]: (p. 48)

1. If we begin with a particular shape such as triangle or a particular color such as ‘white’, and we want to learn how to apply this term to another shape, we must see that the other shape resemble this particular triangle or whiteness.
2. We must therefore specify the right sort of resemblance to use in our comparison.
3. Since there are many white things, the resemblance must hold between many pairs of particular white things.
4. If *resemblance* holds between many pairs of particular things, then there must be a universal RESEMBLANCE.
5. Therefore, there must be some true universals such as RESEMBLANCE.

[Russell’s third argument for universals (as non-mental)]: (p. 49)

1. When we apprehend a truth, we do not cause of the truth of the proposition by coming to know it.
2. In the example, ‘Edinburgh is north of London,’ the part of the earth’s surface where Edinburgh stands would be north of the part where London stands, even if there were no human being to know about north and south, and even if there were no minds at all in the universe.
3. The truth contains a universal relation ‘is north of.’
4. If the truth is not mental, then the universal cannot be mental either.
5. Therefore, universals are not mere mental creations; they are not dependent on thought.
6. Therefore, universals must belong to the independent world which thought apprehends but does not create.

§ Summary: [Russell’s definition of ‘universal’]

1. A universal is the pure essence which all particular things have in common; it is the pure essence or the common nature of particular things. It is what Plato calls an ‘idea’ or ‘form’.
2. A universal cannot exist in the world of sense; it is not fleeting or changeable like the things of sense: it is eternally itself, immutable and indestructible.
3. A universal cannot be given to us in sensation, since whatever is given in sensations is a *particular*.
4. A universal is not merely mental; whatever being belongs to them is independent of their being thought of or in any way apprehended by minds.
5. A universal is neither in space nor in time, neither material nor mental; yet it is something.

6. Thoughts and feelings, minds and physical objects *exist*; but universals do not exist in this sense. We shall say that they *subsist* or *have being*, where 'being' is opposed to 'existence' as being timeless.
7. Therefore, the world of universals may also be described as the world of being.
8. The world of being is unchangeable, rigid, exact, whereas the world of existence is fleeting, vague, fuzzy, without any clear plan or arrangement.
9. Both worlds are real and both are important to the metaphysician.

§ Russell's View of Our Knowledge of Universals

[three kinds of knowledge]

- a) knowledge by acquaintance
- b) knowledge by description only
- c) knowledge by both acquaintance and description

* knowledge by acquaintance of universals

___ sense data: white, red, black, sweet, sour, loud, hard, etc.

___ relations of space and time (of which we may be immediately aware) such as 'to the left of'; resemblance; similarity, etc. (Our knowledge of such relations, though it requires more power of abstraction than is required for perceiving the qualities of sense-data, appears to be equally immediate, and equally indubitable.)

Q: How do we know if our knowledge is true?

___ (p. 53) **Discuss:** "As soon as we see what the proposition means, even if we do not yet know whether it is true or false, it is evident that we must have acquaintance with whatever is really dealt with by the proposition. By applying this test, it appears that many propositions which might seem to be concerned with particulars are really concerned only with universals."

* *a priori* knowledge

___ The difference between an *a priori* general proposition and an empirical generalization does not come in the *meaning* of the proposition, it comes in the nature of the *evidence* for it. In the empirical case, the evidence consists in the particular instances. All *a priori* knowledge deals exclusively with relations of universals. (e.g. 'All men are morals' – empirical or *a priori*?)

* Knowledge of physical objects

___ Knowledge of physical objects, as opposed to sense-data, is only obtained by an inference.

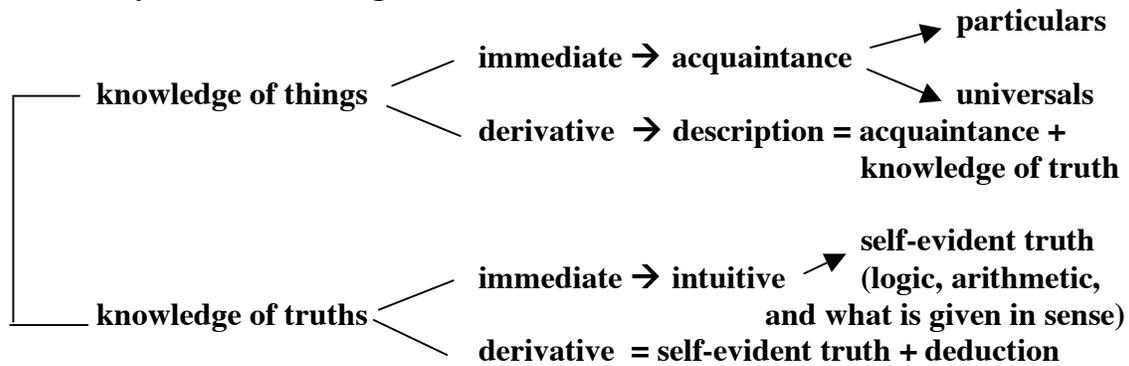
___ We do *not* have direct acquaintance with physical objects themselves.

___ Hence we cannot give instances of the actual physical objects; we can only give instances of the associated sense-data.

___ Hence our knowledge as to physical objects depends throughout upon this possibility of general knowledge where no instance can be given.

___ The same applies to our knowledge of other minds, etc.

§ A Survey of our Knowledge



All our knowledge of truth depends upon our intuitive knowledge. Knowledge of things, on the other hand, depends on knowledge by acquaintance.

___ (p. 56) Discuss: “But knowledge of truths raises a further problem, which does not arise in regard to knowledge of things, namely the problem of error. Some of our beliefs turn out to be erroneous, and therefore it becomes necessary to consider how we can distinguish knowledge from error. This problem does not arise with regard to knowledge by acquaintance, for whatever may be the object of acquaintance, even in dreams and hallucinations, there is no error involved so long as we do not go beyond the immediate object: error can only arise when we regard the immediate object, i.e., the sense-datum, as the mark of some physical object. Thus the problems connected with knowledge of truths are more difficult than those connected with knowledge of things.”

§ Ramsey’s Critique of Russell

Russell assumes a distinction between universals and particulars, but such a distinction is due to mistaking for a fundamental characteristic of reality what is merely a characteristic of language.

It is hard to see any ground for making the distinction between universals and particulars.

(p. 63) Discuss: Wittgenstein: “the thing is independent, in so far as it can occur in all possible circumstances, but this form of independence is a form of connection with the atomic fact, a form of dependence. (It is impossible for words to occur in two different ways, alone and in the proposition.)”

Q: Is it because there is a distinction in reality between particulars and universals that we introduce the grammatical distinction between subjects and predicates, or is

it because we have such a grammatical distinction that we come to make a distinction between universals and particulars?

e. g. :‘Socrates’ and ‘wise’ are not the names of objects but incomplete symbols.

§ Ramsey’s Argument

1. ‘Socrates is wise’ and ‘Wisdom is a characteristic of Socrates’ are but two ways to assert the same fact, express the same proposition.
2. In one sentence, ‘Socrates’ is the subject while ‘wise’ is the predicate; in the other, ‘wisdom’ is the subject while ‘Socrates’ is the predicate.
3. But the distinction is only a matter for grammarians; it has nothing to do with the logical nature of Socrates or wisdom.
4. Hence, there is no fundamental classification of objects on the basis of the distinction between subjects and predicates.

(p. 73) Discuss: “...this difference between Socrates and wise is illusory, because it can be shown to be theoretically possible to make a similar narrower range for Socrates.... Once this fact is observed, the difference between Socrates and wise lapses, and we begin, like Whitehead, to call Socrates an adjective.”

§ Ramsey’s Conclusion

The mistake of Russell is to miss the distinction between functions: some are used as names and some are used as incomplete symbols. The failure to make this distinction has led to these functional symbols, some of which are names and some incomplete, being treated all alike as names of incomplete objects or properties, and is responsible for that great muddle the theory of universals.

Review Questions:

1. **How does Russell argue that there are universals both for properties and for relations, and that these universals can be named either by adjectives or by verbs and prepositions? Give your evaluations of his arguments for universals.**
2. **What is Russell’s view on our knowledge of physical objects? How is it connected to his theory of universals?**
3. **How does Ramsey criticize Russell’s distinction between universals and particulars? Do you agree with Ramsey that there is no fundamental metaphysical distinction between the two, and all there is are simply distinctions we make in grammar?**

§ Study Questions for Essay 3:

1. What does Armstrong mean by the principle of instantiation? Under this principle, what is his theory of universals?
2. What does Armstrong mean by “states of affairs”? Try to use your own words to explain it.
3. Read only sections #1 and 2 in Daly: What are the definitions of “trope” (Daly, section #2)? What is a trope in your understanding (after reading the section)?