

Part II, Paper 1, Question 4, 'There is no basis in reality or language for the traditional distinction between universals and particulars'. Discuss.

(1) Introduction

I will argue in agreement with the statement that there is no basis in reality or language for the traditional distinction between universals and particulars. I therefore support MacBride in 'Universals: The Contemporary Debate' when he notes he is 'sceptical of the assumption... that there is a fundamental distinction to be drawn between particulars and universals (MacBride 2009, p.284).

A basis in reality, I take it, would look at the metaphysical distinction, taking universals to have an abstract existence whilst particulars have a concrete existence. I will argue against this distinction in §3 on the grounds that no sense can be made of the concrete-abstract distinction. Meanwhile, in §4 I employ Ramsey's arguments to show that language cannot make sense of the distinction in terms of subjects and predicates.

(2) Preliminary remarks

In §3 I follow Lewis's analysis in 'On the Plurality of Words' critiquing each of the ways of defining 'abstract'. I do not discuss the ways of conflation at length, as this is refuted in §4 by Ramsey's arguments in 'Universals'.

My argument is essentially incomplete, as there may be another basis for the particular universal distinction not considered. However, I discuss bases in reality and language, and it is up to my opponent to offer a new basis as an alternative to those considered.

(3) A Basis in Reality – the concrete-abstract distinction

The argument is that we understand universals as metaphysically abstract and particulars as concrete. If this is to work, the concrete-abstract distinction must itself be grounded in reality. I argue that it is not, on the grounds that 'abstract' cannot be sensibly defined - there is no sense to be made of the distinction.

In opposition to this, Burgess & Rosen in 'A Subject with No Object' argue that we understand 'abstract' through the Way of Example. We understand how to classify entities as abstract through the giving of paradigmatic examples: such as, perhaps, Platonic Forms.

We should not dismiss the Way of Example on the grounds that it does not express a given 'essence of abstract'. Wittgenstein argues convincingly in the 'Philosophical Investigations' that some words are family resemblance concepts, and that if a word is used consistently, we can assume it is meaningful, even if its essence cannot be given (Wittgenstein gives the famous examples of 'game'). The problem, however, is that it does not seem that we use 'abstract' with this level of consistency.

For example, consider possible worlds in a realist sense. Are possible worlds concrete or abstract? Lewis suggests that they are concrete, but notes he is 'also inclined to think that a world is more like a raven than a writing-desk; and is ping rather than pong' (Lewis 1986, p.83). Similarly, I have no strong intuitions. We need more guidance than the Way of Example provides.

In response, then, we can consider the Way of Abstraction. Abstract entities are those abstracted from other entities. We can link this to universals; in 'On Our Knowledge of Universals', Russell notes that our knowledge of universals comes via abstraction.

My criticism matches that of Mellor & Oliver in "Properties": the method of abstraction is too vague. Taken in the usual sense, it seems I can abstract my hand from the rest of my body, but clearly my hand is not abstract (or a universal). Lewis notes we can also abstract our surnames from ourselves: but we would not want to be committed to those surnames being entities at all.

The Way of Abstraction, then, is deeply problematic. This threatens the notion of 'abstract', threatening the notion of 'universals' as based in metaphysical reality. However, the Way of Negation has more promise. This states that abstract entities are those which have no spatiotemporal location and have no causal power.

The problem with this proposal is that it seems to admit of intuitive counterexamples. In 'Abstract Objectifs' Hale gives the example of languages, which seem to begin and end (and so have a temporal location).

Yet this simply requires modification. Instead, take abstract objects to be those that can exist wholly in different spatial locations at once. Unfortunately, there are still counterexamples. Numbers cannot exist in spatial locations at all, but are still abstract. Quantum particles seem concrete, but exist wholly in different places at once. 'The tallest philosopher' seems to be a universal (and thus abstract) but only exists at one spatial location.

Further modification is required. Noonan notes that conditions of identity for an entity F are given by equivalence relations R that normally range over Gs other than F. For examples: 'the father of x = the father of y iff x and y are siblings or (x and y are step-siblings and the mother of x ≠ the mother of y)'. Abstract entities are those in which the Gs are spatially separated.

Yet the example given is a counterexample, as x and y are spatially separated and yet fathers are concrete. This leads Hale to modify and make use of grounding. R grounds F iff some R-statement is logically and sufficient for an identity statement linking F-denoting terms. Then, 'F is an abstract sortal iff, for any R that grounds F, either (i) R cannot hold between spatially located items at all or (ii) R can hold between things which are spatially, but not temporally, separated' (Hale 1987, p.61). The father example is just one R, but not all involve spatially separated objects.

I reject Noonan's criterion, however, on its reliance on identity in the world. I do not believe that there is this mind-independent notion of identity that can be used as a real basis for the particular-universal description. This will be outlined in more detail in my answer to question (9). As it is, though, it follows that the Way of Negation fails, we cannot make sense of the concrete-abstract distinction, and so it does not provide a basis in reality for a distinction between particulars and universals.

(4) A Basis in Language – the subject-predicate distinction

We might think that language instead provides a basis: Universals are predicates and particulars are subjects. My strategy is analogous to that in §3: to show that there is no essential predicate-subject distinction that can act as such a basis in language.

In “Universals” Ramsey considers the sentence ‘Socrates is Wise’. He notes that we can easily change this to the synonymous ‘wisdom characterizes Socrates’, in which the predicate ‘wise’ has become the subject ‘wisdom’. This shows that ‘there is no essential distinction between the subject of a proposition and its predicate, and no fundamental classification of objects can be based on such a distinction’ (Ramsey 1997, p.60). Furthermore, we would not want to say that ‘wisdom’ is traditionally a particular.

Yet this is more controversial than it might appear, as shown by Simons in “Ramsey, Particulars and Universals”. He shows the translation of ‘Socrates is wise’ to ‘wisdom characterizes Socrates’ in more detail:

- (1) Socrates is wise.
- (2) Socrates has wisdom. [nominalising ‘wise’ and replacing the copula with ‘has’]
- (3) Socrates is characterized by wisdom. [replacing the ‘has’ with ‘is characterized by’]
- (4) Wisdom characterizes Socrates. [minor terminological change, moving to active voice].

The controversial step is from (1) to (2). By nominalising on ‘wise’, we seem to imply an ontological commitment to an entity ‘wisdom’. As Simons remarks, ‘if it is dubious whether they make the same commitments, it is dubious whether they are synonymous’ (Simons 1993, p.152).

I take this point as correct, but Ramsey has a further argument. The alleged distinction between subjects and predicates is that predicates are incomplete: of the form ‘x is wise’. Ramsey distinguishes between sentences of the form ‘x is wise’ and sentences in which ‘wise’ simply occurs. Yet Ramsey notes that ‘Socrates’ seems equally incomplete. We can distinguish between sentences of the form ‘Socrates is q’ and sentences in which ‘Socrates’ simply occurs.

The incompleteness, then, does not offer a distinction. For complex predicates, it may be useful to have argument places so we can be clear as to what is related to what. But for simple predicates this is not necessary.

Simons criticizes that the argument of Ramsey’s ‘gets its plausibility from our readings to think that his prepositional form ‘Socrates is q’ marks off some natural class of cases (Simons 1993, p. 158). This prior plausibility is not logical but based on prior ontologies.

This shows that Ramsey cannot use this argument to prove that there is no particular-universal distinction, as he implicitly allows for non-logical bases for the distinction. However, this does not prevent Ramsey’s argument from showing that there is no obvious basis in language for the distinction between particulars and universals.

(5) Conclusion

There is no obvious basis in reality or language for the traditional distinction between universals and particulars. We cannot reply of the idea that universals are abstract and particulars are concrete, because there is no concrete-abstract distinction (see §3). We cannot rely on the predicate-subject distinction in language, as this does not exist either (see §4).

There may be other bases in reality of language for the universal-particular distinction not considered, and so my argument is incomplete. However, the pressure is now on my opponent to provide those alternative bases.

Comments

The answer is impressive in terms of both range and accuracy. It discusses a wide range of authors - e.g. Lewis, MacBride, Oliver and Mellor, Simons and Wittgenstein – and shows good knowledge of their views. All the discussions of these authors are relevant to the argument, which is clearly stated at the beginning of the work. The argument itself is divided into parts corresponding quite clearly to the parts of the question and is pursued systematically. The argument is well presented and plausible and the writing is clear. A clear first.