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## “Real constituents of the world”

### 1. A BASIS FOR PREDICATION

Although the notion of particular is in need of some refinement, it can perhaps be accepted that the basic idea of a particular is familiar and not controversial. Certainly anyone today who wished to deny that there are particulars would have a lot of explaining to do. It is different with universals. The immanent realists’ notion of universal is a metaphysician’s idea, which not everyone regards as intuitively acceptable. But if, with Russell and Moore, we regard universals as “real constituents of the world”, along with particulars, we shall have to give an account of the notion of universal. It will have to be an account that brings out the way in which a universal is a real thing, something ontologically significant.

Frege notes that fundamental notions such as “concept”, and we may add “universal”, cannot have proper definitions. With such fundamental notions, “there is nothing for it but to lead the reader or hearer, by means of hints, to understand the words as intended”.<sup>1</sup> What can be said about fundamental notions Frege calls an ‘explanation’; alternatively, it could be called a ‘characterization’. Our first aim, then, is to discuss a number of ways of characterizing the notion of universal that bring out the way in which a universal is a real constituent of the world.

It is not the aim of this book to show directly that the immanent realist theory of universals is correct. It will be assumed that others, such as Armstrong, have done that.<sup>2</sup> We shall, however, in the course of our discussion have occasion to compare it with its most

1 Frege, “On Concept and Object”, p. 183.

2 D. M. Armstrong, *Universals and Scientific Realism*, Volumes I & II, and *Universals, An Opinionated Introduction*; see also James Porter Moreland, *Universals, Qualities and Quality-Instances: A Defence of Realism*.

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serious rivals such as Platonism, particularism, and extreme nominalism, and we shall take the occasion to show the merits of immanent realism.

In order to explain the fact that there are statements that contain relational terms, which are true and can be understood by us, Russell suggested that there really are such things as relations.<sup>3</sup> Russell's thought is that there must be some basis in reality for predication:

Russell's argument requires only a narrower principle, which I shall henceforth call 'the Realist Principle'; namely, that primitive predicates occurring non-redundantly in the propositions denote real things, or, as Moore liked to say, 'real constituents of the world'. It is plain why Russell and Moore adhered to this principle. They could not conceive of how otherwise propositions containing primitive predicates could state facts about the world.<sup>4</sup>

As Donagan notes, it is not necessary to hold that all relational terms or all predicates correspond to universals. It is possible that a statement containing a certain predicate be true, not in virtue of a single universal corresponding directly to the predicate, but in virtue of the particular possessing a number of universals, none of which corresponds directly to the predicate. Donagan uses the term 'primitive predicate' for the predicates that do correspond directly to universals, while Russell calls predicates that do not, 'defined predicates'.

There are also predicates that are logical connectives, and predicates that signify what Wittgenstein called 'formal concepts'. The logical connectives could be understood in a truth-functional way, following Wittgenstein, which avoids regarding them as corresponding to something real. But however it is that formal concepts such as "individual", "particular", or "universal" are to be understood, it seems very difficult to regard them as elements of reality.

The doctrine that some predicates correspond to universals that are real constituents of the world is a version of realism. It is a form of immanent realism if it understands a universal as existing in a particular (i.e. as "inhering" in it), as opposed to transcendent realism, or Platonism, which understands a universal as having a singular, object-like existence in another realm.

It also seems intuitively plausible that there must be some basis in a particular for saying that a predicate is true of it. So the plausibility of realism derives partly from the problems associated with denying

3 Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, pp. 89–90.

4 Alan Donagan, "Universals and Metaphysical Realism", p. 133.

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it: “If the ultimate non-logical and non-formal constituents of true propositions refer to nothing in the world, in what can the truth of such propositions consist?”<sup>5</sup> It is not possible to form sentences by joining together the names of particulars. There must always be some element in a sentence that is predicative and general. Therefore if there is to be some basis in the world (that is, in reality) for a sentence being true, there must be features of reality to which some predicates correspond.<sup>6</sup> Of course we never do regard particulars as devoid of features that make sentences true. They really do have shape and mass and so on. If there is anything unusual in drawing attention to these features, it is in making a metaphysical issue out of it.

Immanent realism also gains plausibility by contrast with its main rivals, extreme nominalism and transcendent realism. Extreme nominalists can hardly deny that particulars have features – that would sound too bizarre. What they have to deny is that those features have any ontological significance; they have to deny that such features are in any sense real constituents of the world. In order to do this extreme nominalists have to insist that it is only particulars that have any ontological significance. They have to say that there is only one way of being ontologically significant, and that is to be real in the way a particular is real. This position gains such plausibility as it has by focussing on the difficulties associated with the idea of a universal as an element of reality, since it is indeed difficult to conceive of something that can occur in many places at the same time.

Nominalism itself seems implausible, however, when we realize that what is being said is that there are no ontologically significant features of a particular in virtue of which sentences about the particular are true. It also seems implausible when we think about causality, for the nominalist is saying that particulars do not have ontologically significant features in virtue of which they interact causally with other particulars. Nominalism also has the related problem of explaining measurement. If objects do not have objective, ontologically significant features, then there is no explanation for measurements being objective.<sup>7</sup>

5 Ibid.

6 This argument does not imply that every element of a sentence corresponds to a feature of reality, or that some predicate in every sentence corresponds to a feature of reality. Cf. Peter Geach, *Mental Acts*, p. 39.

7 Cf. Chris Swoyer, “The Metaphysics of Measurement”.

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The Platonist, or transcendent realist, is apparently impressed by the fact that a universal is independent of whether any particular exemplifies it or not. The existence of any particular is a contingent matter, and therefore whether a universal is instanced by it, or instanced at all, is also a contingent matter. On the other hand, it seems that whether there is a certain universal or not is an issue of a different order from whether it is exemplified or not. The Platonist is also impressed by the way a universal appears to be something singular and unique. Indeed, in language, terms that signify universals very often behave exactly like proper names. And it may be that it is linguistic considerations that really underlie Platonism.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, there remains for the Platonist the same problem of what it is about a particular that makes it right to assert a certain predicate of it. If universals are singular and unique in the way that particulars are singular and unique, they cannot be inhabitants of this world. If it is also the case that to say that there is a certain universal is to make an ontologically significant statement, then we must “locate” universals in a world other than this one. But “locating” universals in another world leads to a very odd view of particulars. A particular would be merely “a meeting place of a variety of insubstantial, ghostly projections of other objects”<sup>9</sup> – the other objects being what the Platonist calls Forms. A Platonist, therefore, needs to give some account of how it is that a Form “projects into” a particular, since particular and Form must be related in some way. There must be some basis in the particular for saying that it participates in the Form.

Interpreters of Plato understand him as believing that the properties that exist in particulars are themselves particulars – in other words, that as far as the actual features of particulars go he holds to the doctrine Armstrong calls ‘particularism’:<sup>10</sup> “As a logical consequence of such participation a sensible particular thereby possesses (comes to have ‘in it’) an immanent character that is one particularization out of many of the Form participated in, and whose existence depends on that particular so participating (*Phaedo* 102a10–103a2).”<sup>11</sup> It seems that a Platonist needs a second theory of univer-

8 Cf. M. J. Loux, *Substance and Attribute*.

9 Mark L. McPherran, “Plato’s Particulars”, p. 528.

10 See Armstrong, Volume I, Chapter 8.

11 McPherran, “Plato’s Particulars”, p. 534.

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sals to account for the actual features of particulars! Besides this difficulty there are the well-known problems associated with explaining the connection between the transcendent Forms and the immanent characters. These are the problems traditionally dealt with under the headings 'Separation' and 'Participation'.<sup>12</sup>

Particularism without Platonism is itself one of the main rivals of immanent realism. Like Platonism it also needs a second theory of universals to go with it. If the instances of universals are themselves particulars, then what is it about those secondary particulars, or "tropes", that makes us group them together in classes each corresponding to a predicate? "It seems that the full range of answers to this problem is open to the Particularist. Predicate, Concept, Class, Mereological and Resemblance Nominalism, Transcendent Forms and Aristotelian (Immanent) Realism, all seem to be *prima facie* answers."<sup>13</sup> The original problem was to explain what it was about ordinary particulars that makes it right to assert the same predicate of them. Particularists displace this problem without any real gain. They have to explain what it is about tropes that makes it right to assert the same predicate of the particulars that possess them.

It seems that the motivation behind particularism is essentially nominalist. Particularists seem to think the only way something can be ontologically significant is if it is a particular. They therefore face serious difficulties explaining what it is about a trope that makes a predicate apply to the particular it belongs to. If a trope is itself a particular, does it have features, and if it does have features, are those features ontologically significant? Whichever route is taken there are difficulties.<sup>14</sup>

## 2. THE NOTION OF PARTICULAR AND THE NOTION OF UNIVERSAL

So far our discussion has focussed on the notion of reality. The terms 'element of reality' and 'ontological significance' have been used,

12 For criticism of Platonism see Armstrong, Volume 1, Chapter 7.

13 Armstrong, Volume 1, p. 83.

14 For further criticism of particularism see Chapter 4, Section 4, Chapter 5, Section 2, Chapter 6, Section 1, and Chapter 9, Section 5. See also Armstrong, Volume 1, Chapter 8; G. E. Moore, "Are the Characteristics of Particular Things Universal or Particular?"; and Moreland, *Universals, Qualities and Quality-Instances*. For a recent defence of particularism see Keith Campbell, *Abstract Particulars*, and for recent sympathy, Armstrong, *Universals, an Opinionated Introduction*.

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perhaps inevitably, without any detailed explanation of what they mean. In order to explain what it is about particulars that makes sentences true, it has been argued that they possess features that are ontologically significant, but not in the way a particular itself is ontologically significant. It is sufficient for the present, however, that those arguments show there are other things besides particulars that are ontologically significant. They show, for example, that the nominalists' naive conception of reality needs to be replaced by something more sophisticated.

Unlike particulars, universals can be ontologically significant in two different ways. A universal can be ontologically significant if it is exemplified by some particular, and a universal can be ontologically significant if it is true to say that there is such a universal. It should be clear that each of these modes is of ontological significance and that each must be understood on its own terms. Unfortunately, ordinary language is of little help to someone who wants to talk about universals. Sometimes it seems best suited to the nominalist, though I do not think that fact is evidence for nominalism. Throughout this book I shall try to stick to certain locutions. I shall mainly talk about a universal as occurring, and sometimes as being instanced or exemplified; and I shall usually say that "there is a certain universal", rather than that a universal "subsists" or "has being", as Russell put it.<sup>15</sup>

The reason for separating these two ways in which a universal can be ontologically significant is the possibility of unexemplified universals. It is possible for a sentence to be true even though it contains a predicate which signifies an unexemplified universal. It is possible, for example, that there is a relation,  $R$ , such that  $\neg(\exists x)(\exists y)xRy$ .<sup>16</sup> Not only is it possible for such sentences to be true, but it is possible for us to understand them, even if the universal never has been and never will be instanced. For example, we know what is being said when it is denied that a certain particular is regular chiliagon-shaped, even though that shape probably never has been instanced and probably never will be. There is such a universal as regular chiliagon-shaped; it is merely that it is not in-

15 See Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, p. 100, where he sometimes appears to be a Platonist.

16 For a discussion of Russell's attempt to escape from this problem using the principle of acquaintance, see Donagan, "Universals and Metaphysical Realism", pp. 134–5.

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stanced. The issue of what it is to say that there is a certain universal will be taken up in Chapter 3.

Although there may be some difficulty in explaining what is meant by saying that there is a certain universal, it seems, at first sight, that there are no such difficulties associated with saying there is a certain particular. This is probably true if we confine ourselves to material objects. Everyone is supposed to know what it is for a material object to exist, since material objects are the paradigm case of existence: “Material bodies must be the basic particulars”, as Strawson put it in a somewhat different context.<sup>17</sup> Material objects are not, however, the only things that are particulars. Sets, events, and parcels of matter are also particulars, though the ontological status of these sorts of particulars is not clear. A consideration of the ontological status of these different sorts of particulars will help us make a start on the notion of ontological significance in general.

Although the criterion of identity for sets is clear, it is not clear what a set is. A set of material objects can be formed by choosing material objects at random. The principle of unity of such a randomly chosen set is whatever it is that makes those randomly chosen things to be a single thing – namely, a set. It seems clear that such a set has an arbitrary principle of unity. Even if the members of a set are all the individuals that fall under a certain concept, the set as a set still has an arbitrary principle of unity, since the principle of unity must be the same for all sets. We may understand what it is for a material object to exist, but it is not at all clear what sort of ontological commitment is involved in saying that a set of material objects exists. And the matter becomes even more difficult when we consider sets whose members are not material objects.<sup>18</sup>

An event is something that happens, and sometimes the state of something at a certain time is also taken to be an event. To specify a point event we have to specify an object, a time, and the properties of the object that we have chosen to highlight. To specify an event that is a change of properties we have to specify an object, an interval of time, and the initial and final properties that are related to the change we are interested in. If we follow Strawson in thinking there are bare events (that is, events without an object that possesses

17 P. F. Strawson, *Individuals*, p. 39.

18 For further discussion of sets see Chapter 9, Section 1. If you think sets are abstract objects and not particulars, think of collections or aggregates of material objects.

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the properties concerned), then we need to specify a space–time region and the properties which we are interested in.<sup>19</sup> There are many who think events are ontologically significant, on account of their supposed involvement in causality, for example, but whatever sort of ontological significance they may possess it is not the same as that of material objects.<sup>20</sup>

If a gold coin is melted down and the gold from the coin made into a gold ring, then the matter, which remains the same matter throughout the transformation, is called a parcel of matter. The identity of a material object through time involves its maintaining something like the same shape. But the identity of a parcel of matter through time is independent of any shape it might assume. It merely depends on whether it is the same matter or not, so that matter itself is seen as having a type of identity through time.

The notion of parcel of matter leads to a fairly obvious difficulty. Where we thought we had one particular it now seems that we have two particulars with different identity conditions, a material object and a parcel of matter.<sup>21</sup> Whatever solutions to this problem we come up with, or whatever form of words we adopt to describe this situation, it cannot be the case that the material object and the parcel of matter have the same ontological significance.<sup>22</sup>

We have, then, three different sorts of particulars in addition to material objects, namely, sets, events, and parcels of matter. They differ from each other in ontological status, and they all differ from material objects in ontological status. Therefore to say that something is a particular does not carry with it a great deal of ontological commitment. What they share with material objects is a certain sort of uniqueness. Sets, events, and parcels of matter are like material objects in that they can occur only once for a given instant of time. Although none of these has the same ontological status as material objects, they do have the same sort of uniqueness that material objects have.

To say that a particular can occur only once is not a definition of a particular, since definitions are ruled out, but it is an important part of the characterization of the notion of particular. The word ‘occur’ does not mean “exist” in the sense in which a material object

19 Cf. Strawson, *Individuals*, p. 46.

20 For further discussion of events see Chapter 7, Sections 1–3.

21 Cf. Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, II, xxvii, 3.

22 For further discussion of parcels of matter see Chapter 9, Section 2.



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exists. Something occurs if it is to be found in the familiar spatio-temporal world. The word 'occur' is a primitive term that covers the modes of occurrence of all the sorts of particulars we have considered.

We can now turn to universals and say that a universal can occur many times for a given instant of time. This likewise is not a definition of a universal, since definitions are ruled out, but it is a central part of the characterization of the notion of universal. As with particulars the use of the word 'occur' does not by itself carry a great deal of ontological commitment.

The phenomenon of the multiple occurrence of universals is a familiar one. The shape one object possesses can be possessed by another object, or indeed any number of objects. We are only too happy to say that they all have the same shape, or that the same shape is to be found in many places. This is really all there is to something occurring many times.

Two objects are qualitatively identical if they are the same in a certain respect. The notion of qualitative identity is merely another way of looking at the notion of multiple occurrence; it is the reverse side of the coin. For nominalists the notion of qualitative identity is incoherent, since for them the only sort of identity that makes any sense is numerical identity. On the other hand, it is true that qualitative identity is "literally inexplicable, in the sense that it cannot be further explained. But that does not make it incoherent. Identity in nature entails that the universe is unified in a way that the Nominalist finds unintuitive. But I take that to be simply the fault of the Nominalists' intuitions."<sup>23</sup> To show that the notion of qualitative identity is incoherent it would have to be shown that it led to a contradiction. The most obvious way of doing this would be to try to show that there was something contradictory in the very notion of something, that is one thing, that can occur many times. The point would be that a universal is a unity and at the same time not a unity. For this argument to work it would have to be maintained that the immanent realist is trying to say that a universal can occur only once and also can occur many times. In this way it could perhaps be argued that there is a strict contradiction.

One answer to this objection would be to say that a universal occurs once in one way, and many times in another way, and since the

23 Armstrong, Volume I, p. 109.

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two modes of occurrence are different there is no contradiction. It is difficult to assess this answer without knowing something about the ontological significance of the two modes of occurrence proposed. On the surface, however, it looks like a form of Platonism where the universal occurs once as a Form, and occurs many times as instances of that Form.<sup>24</sup> There would indeed be something very odd about a universal occurring once as a unity, in the same world as, and alongside, its multiple occurrences, so Platonists suggest that a universal occurs once as a unity in a world totally different and separate from this one. But this move itself suggests that there is something wrong with the notion of two sorts of occurrence.

The immanent realist, however, does not believe that a universal occurs in two different ways. A universal occurs in only one way and that is the way in which it is found in particulars. In this way the immanent realist avoids Platonism and contradictions. A universal may be a unity in a sense, but it is not a unity in the sense that it occurs once in the way a particular does. What an immanent realist is maintaining is that a universal is *one thing that can occur many times*, and that there is nothing contradictory or incoherent about such a notion. Like the notion of qualitative identity it cannot be explained any further.

It is true that there are predicates that can only apply to one individual, but whether universals correspond to them is another issue altogether. For instance, the predicate 'is identical with Socrates' seems to correspond to something predicative, which by its very nature can occur only once. It is not at all clear, however, that the predicate does in fact correspond to a universal, or real constituent of the world. In fact, Morris and Armstrong argue strongly that it does not.<sup>25</sup>

Predicates such as the 'being the smallest planet' are complicated, involving a kind term and an adjective, quite apart from the supposition of uniqueness that has to be built into the logical form. My strategy, however, will be to start with simple attributes that will function as a base. In the first place the characterization of *can occur only once* applies to them. If it could be shown that these unique application predicates correspond to universals, then I would have to

<sup>24</sup> See McPherran, "Plato's Particulars".

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Thomas V. Morris, *Understanding Identity Statements*, Chapter 1, and Armstrong, Volume II, p. 11.